Personal Accounts of Successful Versus Failed Attempts at Life Change

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Subjects (N = 119) wrote stories about successful or failed life change experiences. Stories reporting successful change attempts were more likely than stories reporting failed attempts to mention intense emotional experiences, external threats, and focal events that often culminated in crystallizations of dissonance. These events were related to revitalizations of goals and life meaning and increased motivation to change. Social support, attributions of external control, blaming internal events for failure, and the development of a new sense of identity that incorporated the changed behavior were strongly associated with reports of successful change. Failure narratives were more likely than success narratives to describe change in terms of self-power and to indicate an active participation in maintaining the status quo. These results provide a glimpse at the phenomenology of life change attempts.

Psychologists have long been interested in the processes people use to change behaviors, attitudes, or aspects of the self (Heatherton & Weinberger, 1984). Indeed, the very foundation of clinical psychology is the notion that people can and do change important aspects of their lives, and a variety of evidence indicates that people do change, both with and without therapy (Miller & Rollnick, 1991). Although basic personality traits tend to be relatively stable over the life course (Camp & Herbers, 1990; Costa & McCrae, 1990, 1994), individuals do manage to change or reevaluate important attributes, initiate desired behaviors, alter or quit problematic behaviors, or leave abusive relationships. However, change is usually perceived as difficult, and much more so than many theories imply (Mahroney, 1991). Numerous forces operate inside and outside the person to inhibit or encourage both stability and change, and people must constantly try to balance these contradictory forces (Ferrin, 1994).

This study looks at what forces people believe are important for maintaining or tipping this balance by analyzing the attributions people give for why they do or do not change. Thus, we are examining the phenomenology of attempts to make major life changes.

People go through many transitions in their lifetimes (see King, 1978; Levinson, 1978), yet as Baumeister (1995) found, "Reliable information about life change is hard to come by" (p. 266). Much of the literature on life change refers to life events and their relation to change (for reviews see Coan, 1988, or Curtis & Strickler, 1991; see also Stewart, Sokol, Healy, & Chester, 1986). Such research tends to focus on the stress that derives from life change rather than on what comes before change—the motives, meanings, and processes of change. Our specific interest was to determine how people account for their inability to make major life changes that they want to make and, in contrast, to discern which events and strategies people view as important for facilitating change.

This study used the micrornarrative technique (Baumeister, Strüthing, & Wimpf, 1990; Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Harvey, Weber, & Orthofer, 1990) to examine subjects' attributions about the change process. People's attributions are important for inhibiting, initiating, and maintaining, behavioral change (Sonne & Janoff, 1982; Weiner, 1985). For instance, Sonne and Janoff (1985) found that people in a weight loss treatment program who believed that they had been unable to change because of "bad luck" or chance attributions were more likely to return to their former levels of overweight than those who believed that they had failed to change because of personal failings or for reasons under their own control.

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program who believed they were responsible for, had control over, and made a contribution to their weight loss were more effective in maintaining their weight after the program was over than people who believed the program and the therapist were responsible for their weight loss.

Microprocesses are autobiographical stories that focus on specific events. They represent the person's subjective evaluation about the event. These stories may not be totally veridical, in that people often selectively construct, retrieve, and distort narratives to fit their self-concepts, but they do represent what the person believes is important (Baumeister et al., 1990). Microprocesses have become increasingly useful in studying motivation in topics that are difficult to test using conventional laboratory methods (Baumeister et al., 1990), goate (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994), in press), a termination of intimate relationships (Harvey Flanary, & Morgan, 1988; Harvey, Mcder, Gaban, Ruste, & Gurnick, 1986; Vaughn, 1986), and criminal and anti-social activity (Kies, 1988).

**HOW DO PEOPLE CHANGE?**

People change both inside and outside therapy, although the vast majority of people who do change do so without any professional treatment (Brough, Velicer, Guadagnoli, Rossi, & DiClemente, 1991). For instance, most individuals who give up smoking or curb problem drinking do so on their own, without formal treatment, with their own resources, including alcoholism and heroin addiction, are able to change their problematic behavior (Klingemann, 1991, Sobel, Sobel, & Tenenbaum 1991). Still, there is a surprising paucity of information about the factors that predict change in natural environments.

Klingemann (1991), Sobel, Sobel, & Tenenbaum (1991) found that there is a surprising paucity of information about the factors that predict change in natural environments. Klingemann (1991) studied autobiographical accounts of spontaneous remission by alcoholics and heroin addicts to determine what factors motivated change. The reasons given included changes in interactions with close significant others, pressure from colleagues, peers, and other referral groups; significant events; illness, and psychological causes. Approximately three quarters of the subjects reported a high level of stress (i.e., family tensions, health problems, feelings of aloneness, and insecurity, and negative social sanctions) and four positive events during the year prior to change. Before taking action to bring about change, three quarters felt they were isolated and believed that "nobody could be counted on," but during the maintenance stage, their social networks were reconstructed (p. 741).

Miller and C'hebica (1994) recently examined a phenomenon they refer to as quantum change. They define quantum change as a change that is "sudden and profound"—that is, it occurs rapidly, affects a wide range of behaviors by creating a "deep shift in core values, attitudes, or actions," and is enduring (p. 258). They found that their subjects were eager to describe their experiences and remembered them vividly, down to the date and time of the day when the change occurred. The quantum change experiences tended to be sudden and unexpected, often originating from some external source or event. During the year prior to change, most of the subjects experienced a high level of negative effect, but "the specific antecedents were amazingly varied" (p. 258) and ranged from taking a walk to eating a meal to having an abortion. These quantum changes emphasized that everything had changed: their temperament, perceptual styles, goals, and values were all different after the quantum change experience.

When Stall and Birovacki (1988) reviewed the literature on spontaneous behavioral change, they observed that a number of factors seemed to accompany successful change: Factors common to spontaneous remission from the problematic use of alcohol, food, tobacco, and opiate included health problems, social sanctions, comments from significant others, financial problems, significant accidents, management of cravings, positive reinforcement for quitting, internal psychic change/motivation, and changes in lifestyle.

Stall and Birovacki (1988) also noted that change frequently follows significant accidents or social events. Such events may serve as catalysts to change because they initiate an appraisal process that leads to a reevaluation of identity (Klingemann, 1991; Stewart, Frazer, & Layton, 1988). In addition, they found that change is often precipitated by repeated hassles, frustrations, and problems associated with the behavior that people want to change. That is, the perceived negative consequences associated with the behavior increase the motivation to change that behavior. Miller and Rollnick (1991) indicate that such cumulative frustration may change the "balance sheet" of costs and benefits associated with the problematic behavior.

Baumeister (1994) emphasizes that it is the subjective cost/benefit appraisal that is important. It is how people perceive the costs and benefits, not necessarily the actual costs and benefits, that is important. If people want to maintain the status quo, they will minimize the costs and exaggerate the benefits of their situation. Fetal events, however, often precipitate what Baumeister calls a crisis-utilization of discontent, in which "contradictory events link together to form a large pattern of negative, distant thought" (Baumeister, 1991, p. 304). Finding it difficult to ignore a pattern of events, people start to weigh the costs and benefits of the situation and begin thinking about making a life change. Once people decide to change, they start ignoring the positive aspects of the
situation and focus on the negative. They begin to discredit the former source of meaning and justify their change by emphasizing past difficulties and explaining away the good—just the opposite of what they had been doing.

Baumeister (1991) notes that life change seems to be easiest for people who have found new activities, changed their priorities, and established new relationships before making the change. These changes help to create a new sense of identity, one with altered sources of life meaning. Sull and Biermacki (1986) and Klingemann (1991) likewise found that a central feature of successful change involves renegotiating one’s public identity, so that one adopts and accepts a new, sanitized identity. The subjects in Miller and Chiriboga’s study (1994) also reported that their identities were transformed, that their perceptual styles, temperament, values, and goals were all suddenly changed for the better, and that their lives had taken on new meaning.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

A variety of evidence indicates that social support is an important component of life change (Clifford, Tan, & Gorsuch, 1991). For instance, social support has been found to be valuable for achieving and maintaining weight loss (Perel et al., 1998). Social support can increase people’s self-efficacy (Major et al., 1986) and their feeling of general well-being, and it has been shown to act as a buffer against the strain caused by high-stress life events (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Gentry & Kobasa, 1986). Relapse is commonly associated with perceived emotional distress (Broxwell, Marlatt, Lichtenstein, & Wilson, 1986), but significant others may be able to assure the individual of support, feedback, information, reinforcement, and direct assistance that a person involved in change frequently needs (Clifford et al., 1991; Marlatt, 1985).

However, some research has also shown that social support may interfere with motivation or behavioral change (Kelly, Zyman’s, & Altemagon, 1991). This may be due to the fact that people tend to associate with others who have similar ideas, personalities, and backgrounds (Caciq & Herbstener, 1990), which would tend to promote stability. But when people change, their ties with others change as well. It is therefore possible that others will actively hinder change, partly because they may feel threatened by the implications of potential changes. For example, spouses who wish to continue smoking may be unlikely to offer support and encouragement to their partner who is contemplating quitting smoking, as such advice would be dissonant with their own behavior. Social support is likely to be effective only when the spouse already values the attitudes and identity that the person is trying to adopt.

In this study, we sought to understand what people consider important facilitators and inhibitors of change. Accordingly, we asked participants to provide narrative accounts of successful or failed attempts at life change. Although we thought both groups would mention day-to-day frustrations, hassles, and emotional experiences, we expected them to place a different emphasis on them. For instance, we expected the successful participants to contain more evidence of major suffering and more evidence that the extreme negative emotions were interfering with daily living. From the research of others (e.g., Baumeister, 1991, 1994; Klingemann, 1991; Sull & Biermacki, 1986), we expected the successful change stories to be more likely than the failure stories to contain references to focal or critical events. We also expected that an important component of successful change would be the establishment of a new identity that incorporates the changed behavior as part of the self. Finally, we expected the successful change stories to mention the importance of social support and social networks. In contrast, we expected the writers of failure stories to express more ambivalence about change, to feel they had less control over their behavior, and to believe they had less social support than the writers of successful change stories.

METHODOLOGY

Adult students from the Harvard Extension School served as volunteers in the current study. The 126 subjects ranged in age from 18 to 55, and 79 were female. Four persons given change questionnaires and five persons given want-to-change questionnaires wrote about the opposite condition. They made statements at the beginning of their narratives that indicated that they were deliberately writing about the opposite condition (e.g., “Well, I want to quit my job but I haven’t done so yet” and “I have already made a successful change”), and so they were included in the condition about which they wrote. Seven subjects wrote stories that were judged by the coders as extremely ambiguous or unclear or to life change—four in the change condition, three in the want-to-change condition. Results are reported for the 119 stories that were not ambiguous.

Subjects completed the experiment in one mass testing session. Subjects were randomly assigned to write a story either about an incident in which they had made a major and sudden change (N = 64) or about their inability to make a major and sudden change (N = 55). The instructions for the change story were:

There are times in our lives when we suddenly change. For example, people usually quit smoking, or they...
suddenly quit their jobs and start new careers, or they suddenly leave abusive relationships. Please try to recall if you have experienced such a sudden and drastic change in any aspect of your life, any time in your life.

If so, please describe this event as much detail as you can. Describe exactly what happened as well as why it happened. Again, provide as much detail as possible.

Subjects in the want-to-change condition were given the following instructions:

We all have things in our lives that we would like to change. For example, people would like to quit smoking, or would like to suddenly quit their jobs and start new careers, or would like to leave abusive relationships. Please try to recall if there is any aspect of your life that you would like to suddenly and dramatically change. If so, please describe the reasons that you believe you have prevented you from achieving the change. Provide as much detail as possible.

Content analysis was conducted using procedures similar to those used by Bauminger et al. (1980). Two raters independently coded all stories. Average interrater agreement (based on the percentage of agreement) was 90%, with equal agreement for change (89%) and no-change (90%) narratives. A third judge reviewed the discrepancies between the raters and made the final determination of coding. All dimensions were coded dichotomously so that they represented the presence or absence of the target feature. We chose the conservative approach because of the economic coding primarily because such a code was associated with higher reliabilities, which may occur because subjective judgments are required of the raters (see Bauminger et al., 1980).

In many cases, it would have been difficult to assess the degree to which a specific feature in the story was important, but it was quite easy to ascertain whether the dimension existed in the story. The stories were then compared to determine which factors were most likely to be mentioned in relation to successful change and which factors were mentioned as preventing change.

RESULTS

Description of Stories

For each story, the coders identified the central dimension that the subject said he or she had changed or wanted to change. The most common themes were changes/desired changes in career or education, relationships, addictive behaviors, health behaviors (including diet), and attitudes toward life (change in perspective or personality). These themes were divided fairly evenly between change and want-to-change stories, so that individuals who said they had changed were not simply writing about behaviors that were easier to change. For grammatical simplicity, we will refer to the subjects as "changeurs" or "nonchangeurs" although we have no proof that the people who said they had changed actually did so or that the people who said they had been unable to change actually had not (this will be discussed more fully later).

Attributes of Control

As can be seen in Table 1, changers reported more control over the specific behavior, χ²(1,N = 119) = 15.55, p < .0001, and greater self-control in general, χ²(1,N = 129) = 6.00, p < .01, than nonchangers. Nonchangers were less likely to take responsibility for having control over the ability to change, χ²(1,N = 119) = 11.04, p < .001, and were more likely to mention external barriers (i.e., outside forces, institutions, or circumstances that prevented them from having control) than changers, χ²(1,N = 119) = 5.45, p < .05. Although the majority of both groups reported that change was difficult, more nonchangers expressed the sentiment that they had not changed, χ²(1,N = 119) = 6.74, p < .05. This pattern of results is consistent with a self-serving bias (Baumeister, 1978) in that changers appeared to make internal attributions whereas nonchangers tended to make external attributions.

Focal Events

Change was frequently described as a response to external circumstances. Both groups mentioned external threats (i.e., threats to their health, happiness, or mental well-being); although changers were more likely to mention such threats in their narrative than nonchangers, χ²(1,N = 129) = 14.06, p < .0001. Changers were also more likely to report some sort of critical or focal event (i.e., something happening to someone else, life events, religious conversion, or change in health status, χ²(1,N = 119) = 32.4, p < .0001, and in each case the person attributed change at least partly to this focal event. Such events were often viewed as the "arrow that broke the camel’s back" in helping to effect change.

The role of important others was a central theme in many of the change stories. Often, the focal event that promoted change was something that happened to someone else, such as the death of illness of a loved one or the observation that someone else was able to make a successful life change. Changers were much more likely to report that something happened to someone else than nonchangers, χ²(1,N = 119) = 15.8, p < .001.

We coded mentions of life events independently of whether the person thought they were important to the ability of inability to change. We used the list of life events from the Social Readjustment Raising Scale (Holmes & Rahe, 1967) and recorded every mention of one of these events occurring. More than three times as many changers as nonchangers reported experiencing life events (23.2% vs. 14.88), χ²(1,N = 119) = 12.5, p < .0001. Hence, change seemed to be triggered.
We also coded the stories for mention of religious or spiritual conversions. Awakened spirituality is an important component of many treatment models (such as Alcoholic's Anonymous and related programs), and radical changes in religious perspective are often reported to lead to other major life changes (Baumeister, 1991, 1994). Although the overall number of religious conversion experiences reported was quite low, all of them were recounted by people who said they had changed, \( \chi^2(1, N=110) = 6.4, p < .05 \). In addition, six of the 11 reports (55%) described a new feeling of religious importance. Overall, the frequency of spiritual or religious change was significant, \( \chi^2(1, N=110) = 6.4, p < .05 \). The latter two groups did not differ in the extent to which they reported that others commented on the change they had had or wanted to have, \( \chi^2(1, N=110) = 3.20, p < .07 \). These comments appeared to be related to the other person's vested interest in the subject's change, and also to the amount of change that had occurred before the change, \( \chi^2(1, N=110) = 3.20, p < .07 \).
Methods of Change

About a third of both changers and non-changers reported making some preparations for change, χ²(1, N = 119) < 1. We therefore sought to examine the specific components of preparation for change. Although changers were slightly more likely to say they had sought out self-help or educational materials, χ²(1, N = 119) = 3.14, p < .08, the overall percentage of subjects who reported using this method was quite low. Similarly, very few people said they had considered alternative methods for making changes, and there were no significant differences between changers and non-changers in their reported use of this strategy, χ² = 1, n.s. Thus, the extent to which subjects reported using strategies to prepare for change was not related to report of successful change.

An important indicator of heightened commitment to the change process is a public declaration that one is going to change (Stall & Biersack, 1986). Although few individuals reported that they had made a public declaration, only changers did so, χ²(1, N = 119) = 5.43, p < .02. Commitment can also be indicated by the extent to which subjects report being ambivalent about changing (Miller & Rollnick, 1991), and indeed, non-changers were much more ambivalent about change than changers were, χ²(1, N = 119) = 25.6, p < .0001.

A variety of research has indicated that changing the immediate environment can promote successful behavioral change (e.g., Robin, Hibel, & Davis, 1979). We therefore expected to find in the successful change narratives evidence of attempts to change the immediate environment or, more dramatically, evidence that individuals had moved to affect change. We found some support for both strategies of altering the environment. Whereas 12.7% of changers mentioned the strategy of altering the immediate environment to support the change process, not one nonchanger mentioned such a strategy, χ²(1, N = 119) = 7.37, p < .01. In addition, 36.9% of the changers but only 12.7% of the non-changers mentioned that they had moved, χ²(1, N = 119) = 8.40, p < .004.

There were very few references to thought control techniques, such as self-distraction, meditation, relaxation, or substitute behaviors. Only 3.1% of the change narratives and 1.9% of the nonchange narratives included mentions of thought control methods, a difference that was not significant. The stories were also coded for any reports of self-effacement or self-reinforcement. The few subjects who mentioned using this strategy were all people who said they had changed, χ²(1, N = 119) = 5.43, p < .02.

The Role of Meaning and Identity

A variety of evidence indicates that changes in identity and life meaning are important determinants of life change (Baumeister, 1991, 1994; Stall & Biersack, 1986; Stewart et al., 1988). Whereas 1 in 3 changers said they had gained a new understanding of the situation through a sudden flash of insight into their behavior, none of the non-changers did, χ²(1, N = 119) = 12.59, p < .0005. Changers were also more likely than non-changers to report a crystallization of disconnected, χ²(1, N = 119) = 35.8, p < .0001. Many individuals in both groups reported that they had reorganized their goals in terms of deriving meaning, but such reorganizations were more often found in successful change stories, χ²(1, N = 119) = 11.05, p < .001.

Changes were almost three times as likely to occur for nonchangers than for those who had made a new sense of self-knowledge and understanding, χ²(1, N = 119) = 23.8, p < .0001. Such insight was often tied to a new sense of identity. Non-changers were more inclined to be clinging to their current role or identity while changers were more likely to say they had accepted a new role, χ²(1, N = 119) = 6.00, p < .01.

Disclosure

Change is a complex process involving emotional, motivational, interpersonal, situational, and cognitive components. All these factors differed between the success and failure narratives in substantial and predictable ways. As expected, the successful change stories contained greater evidence of intense emotional experiences and external threats than the failure stories. For example, which often precipitated a crystallization of discontent, were related to a realisation of goals and life meaning and appeared to be related to increased motivation to change. The subjects wrote that various interpersonal processes were important in the initiation, process and maintenance of behavioral change; support was strongly associated with successful change. Associations of internal turmoil and blaming external events for failure appeared to enhance the probability of change. Moreover, it appeared that individuals felt they needed to develop a new sense of identity that incorporated the changed behavior; this change in identity was often facilitated by a change in environment.

To understand the implications of these findings, we need to consider the possible effects that influence narratives of life events. Narratives are personal accounts used by a person to make sense of one's life (Baumeister et al., 1990, Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Harvey et al., 1980; Weiner, 1992). They impose order and structure on life events in order to make sense of coherence and predictability. Additionally, individuals are generally motivated to tell the story so that it has the best possible light (Baumeister, Rozin, & Stillwell, 1993). For instance, consider the situation in which storytellers are describ-
ing an incident where they loved somebody who did not love them back. This scenario is inherently unfavourable for would-be lovers, because it implies that there must be something wrong with their physical or characterological makeup. Baumeister and Wotman (1992) found that those who experienced unrequited love portrayed themselves in their stories as people who were generally desirable, but just not by that specific rejector. Their stories contained specific esteem-restoring strategies to minimize the negative implications of being rejected. Rejectors, in contrast, were concerned with portraying themselves as unwitting targets of affection rather than as cold, heartless villains.

In this study, people who were asked to describe their difficulties with change were in the position of writing a story that reflected poorly on their ability to control their behavior. Hence, we expected that such accounts would contain specific self-protective and image-building references. Indeed, we found that failure narratives often referred to external (i.e., nonpersonal) factors that prevented successful change. Individuals wrote about financial difficulties, family pressures, and other situational barriers to change. Failure accounts also referred to the intrinsic difficulties with life change, implying that anyone would have had a difficult time in the same circumstances. These accounts also downplayed the negative aspects of the situation and expressed considerable ambivalence and uncertainty about whether change would produce meaningful relief from suffering. Although these subjects reported experiencing negative affect, they also emphasized their coping abilities and generally gave the impression that although things were bad, they were not particularly awful. In contrast, successful changers described the time before their change as unambiguous: "The ultimate reason that I eventually did it was that I knew I would be dead within a few weeks if I didn't make the change."

Gergen and Gergen (1988) differentiate between progressive narratives, where there is a positive change in self-evaluation, and stability narratives, where there is no change in self-evaluation. We expected our success stories to follow the basic structure of progressive narratives in that we expected the stories to be told in such a way as to evoke a sense of drama. We found that successful change stories described major potential threats and major suffering, which was followed by successful resolution of the major challenge facing the narrator (i.e., the protagonist). Indeed, many of our successful change stories followed the "happily-ever-after" myth described by Gergen and Gergen (1988), in which a happy ending results from the protagonist's overcoming major challenges and obstacles. The successful accounts made it clear this change was a result of personal effort and mastery over the environment. As such, success at life change led to increased self-esteem and overall life satisfaction.

Accuracy Versus Bias: The Role of Motives

A basic assumption underlying the interpretation of micronarratives is that people are trying to provide an accurate accounting of events (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). They tell the story the way they believe that it truly happened. That having been said, the differences found in this study may reflect actual differences in successful change processes, or they could reflect the way people retrospectively rationalize and interpret their efforts at change, and it is necessary to consider both possibilities in interpreting the results.

Escaping as a means of change. Life change may result from purposeful seeking and active volitional effort to alter one's situation, behavior, or personality, or change may be part of a necessary escape from an aversive situation or may occur as a reaction to a particular salient critical incident. Although the failure stories almost invariably were of the seeking kind (in that people were actively trying to induce the desired change), the successful change stories more often made reference to escaping an especially adverse situation, often by moving to a new environment. As stated by one subject, "I felt I would find it easier to quit [smoking] in a new environment which didn't have the usual cues and associations."

Often, the person reported that the prechange situation had become unbearable and was causing a variety of emotional and physical hardships. One subject wrote, "I loathed law school. I was physically ill for a good part of my first semester—all, I believe, stress-related. I was depressed as well. I found few friends in the law school environment—it was too competitive and cold for real friendship." Another wrote, "My job had become frustrating due to the economy and subsequent changes in the business, and I was constantly plagued with migraines or stomach trouble." Another summed it up this way: "My whole life was one of helplessness. In these more extreme cases, subjects often felt they had to move to new cities or even new countries to escape from their unpleasant circumstances."

The finding that subjects reported moving in order to change was not surprising, because changing environments has long been known to be an effective facilitator of change. For instance, Robins et al. (1975) found that many veterans of the Vietnam war who had become addicted to heroin while in Vietnam found it easy to abstain from heroin upon their return to the United States, a fact that was attributed to the dramatic change in the social milieu. Thus, it seems likely that moving is one way to induce major change. A new beginning in a novel setting allows a person to assume a new—and changed—identity.
Alternatively, it is possible that subjects misattributed change to the move when it was actually a coincidental event. For instance, it is possible that people moved for ordinary reasons such as to take a new job or to start school, but the move led them to a situation where they were more capable of producing change in other aspects of their lives. Baumrind (1991) notes that moving and changing one's roles are often associated with the attainment of new life meaning, which is generally a positive experience. "Many people embark on new occupations with high ambitions, favorable or idealistic expectations, and enthusiastic optimism. Even when one's occupation fails to meet one's hopes and difficulties, one often starts out with many positive feelings and attitudes—feelings of challenge, excitement, and adventure" (pp. 297-298).

Those positive affective changes, such as increased overall optimism, may have provided a needed boost in the ability to bring about change in other aspects of the person's life.

It is also possible that people were reinterpreting their previous circumstances as much worse than they really were. This notion is akin to the theory that people attain what they want by redefining what they had (Coxwray & Ross, 1984; Ross, 1995). Such a bias in recall could serve to motivate the person to maintain the changed situation or behavior. Just as new examiners often seem to have a need to procrastinate about the hazards of smoking, the recently changed may need to desist their previous circumstances as undesirable in order to sustain their motivation not to return to those circumstances. For example, dwelling on an ex-spouse's evil and vindictive ways may be more useful in avoiding a reconciliation than acknowledging that the spouse had some positive characteristics. Remembering our previous situation as intolerable effectively helps us to burn our bridges, precluding a return to the prechange state of affairs.

Thus, subjects might have portrayed their previous circumstances as particularly negative to justify escaping the situation and to mitigate any guilt they might have felt for abandoning previous jobs and social networks. Explaining that you lost a job because things were simply unbearable sounds better than saying you left because you had become bored or disinterested in your job. The severity of the negative emotion justifies the actions necessary to escape from the aversive situation. Failure accounts often mentioned the desirability of escaping from current circumstances, but they tended to downplay the severity of the situation, and they provided the myriad of reasons that prevented escape. One subject wrote: "First of all leaving my job, with the economy in the state it's in, seems rather risky because I have a lease and bills to pay I also have no solid plan as to what exactly I'd like to do when I do leave." Another wrote: "It has been easier to fall back on an old job than to suffer the rejection of a job search and the confusion and difficulty of deciding on one field."

To summarize, it appeared that escape from adverse circumstances was associated with successful life change. Getting away from painful social influences and avoiding previous cues and associations may have made life change easier. Moreover, the maintenance of change appeared to be fortified by a focus on the extremely negative aspects of the former situation.

Focal events. Many of the successful change stories contained evidence that change was induced or triggered by some critical incident or focal event, which led people to reevaluate how they behave in it with their overall self-perception. One woman who had been living a type of hippie existence experienced such a focal event when she discovered that she was pregnant. She wrote: "I became disillusioned with my life and decided I had had enough." This pregnancy led her to move back to her home town and assume a more traditional lifestyle. In general, the focal event led people to focus on the negative aspects of their lives. One woman described how taking a course on the psychology of women had created a crystallization of discontent: "It opened a Pandora's box...I realized my relationship with my husband was not satisfying to me...I could not tolerate the status quo any longer...I had changed in my core, I was ready to go it alone—whatever it meant to search of my own true independence and inner validity."

In a number of stories, the focal event we perceived as some form of external threat. For instance, one woman reported that the focal event was an argument with her husband over her cigarette smoking—her husband threatened to leave her if she continued to smoke. According to these stories, the external stress forced individuals to confront the behavior that was causing them distress. The subjects reported that the cumulative effects of the negative emotion and the perceived external threats associated with the behavior overwhelmed any possible benefits thereby motivating the desire to change.

Thus, it appears that focal events were often potent facilitators of change because they made impossible to ignore the negative or destructive consequences associated with specific behavior. One woman who had practiced a carefree lifestyle suddenly changed after a one-night affair with a stranger she met at a bar stop: "The biggest regret of this one impulsive incident of 'cause you and is my fear of a positive HIV result." This woman developed much greater self-control following this incident (she also changed colleges to get away from negative influences). One man experienced a focal event when he visited an elderly friend at a cancer ward in a hospital: "While I was visiting a young woman who was approximately my age entered the lobby—she was
walking with a walker. Although she was several yards from me I could hear every wheeze of her labored breathing. When she finally approached her friends, I heard her gasp, 'The doctors think I'm doing really well today.' Right then and there I decided to quit smoking. I guess I realized that it could happen to me. 'In each of these cases, the sudden realization of the extreme negative consequences associated with the behavior overrode any possible benefits. In contrast, failure narratives indicated ambivalence in that subjects saw both positive and negative consequences associated with the behavior. For instance, one woman who was trying unsuccessfully to give up use of drugs wrote, 'My biggest enemy to achieving this [abstinence] is the immediate pleasure I receive after ingesting one of these substances.' It is, of course, possible that subjects were giving more weight to the critical incident than was merited by actual events. As stated previously, an important motive for creating personal accounts is to make sense of important aspects of our lives. We may be especially motivated to make sense of life changes because they imply that we will have control in the future (Mahoney, 1991). The selective appeal of disconfirming a critical incident as the key ingredient in change may be that it increases the intensity of the motive to remain changed. For instance, consider one of our subjects who quit eating chocolate after her mother died of breast cancer. By linking the consummatory behavior to her mother's death, she created a very powerful reason to avoid chocolate. Compare this motive with that of avoiding chocolate only because it is bad for one's health (i.e., weight, complexion, etc.).

The former is much more powerful and salient—in the latter case, giving it to your desire for chocolate simply means that you are not paying attention to your health, but in the former case, it may indicate a lack of respect for your mother's memory. In the same way that dedicating one's athletic endeavors to a dying child increases the significance of performance, linking successful life change to an important critical event may increase the motivation for maintaining that change. Not all the critical incidents, however, were so powerful as losing a parent. Some subjects reported changing an important aspect of their lives following a touch of the flu, waking up with a sore throat, having their therapist raise the price of therapy, or getting a new boss. In these cases, it is possible that the focal incident was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. According to Baumeister (1981, 1994), trivial events may help create a crystallization of discontent, in which all the previous isolated negative aspects of the behavior become consolidated into an overall pattern of dissatisfaction. Once these events were linked together, they created a new perspective that emphasized the stability and permanence of the negative features associated with the behavior or situation. Whereas people had been able to ignore a single negative aspect of the behavior because it seemed like an isolated incident, a crystallization of discontent caused them to focus on the overall pattern of unhappiness.

To summarize, focal events appeared to serve as triggers for successful life change. The critical incident may have tipped the balance of costs and benefits such that the person perceived a pervasive and enduring pattern of dissatisfaction. This crystallization of discontent altered the person's perceptions about the desirability of his or her former role or former behavior, and therefore identification of focal events may have served as powerful reminders of the need to remain changed.

The importance of establishing a new identity. Many of the changers believed that the establishment of a new identity was critical for maintenance of their behavioral change. This change in identity incorporates the changed behavior so that the previous behavior is no longer viewed as part of the self (Stall & Kornacki, 1986). The changers in our study reported that their new identity formed after they had reevaluated their life goals and orientations (see Baumeister, 1991; Miller & C'reBaca, 1994). Many said they had experienced a flash of insight into their problematic behaviors and felt that they had developed a sense of wisdom about the factors that had prevented them from changing.

The new identity clearly helps the changed person sustain the motivation to change. Claiming to have undergone a complete change in identity enables the person to associate the changed behavior or situation with the previous version of self, not with the new version of self: The "old me" used to do this, but the "new me" doesn't. The person brackets off the behavior as reflective of the past and not predictive of the future. Thus, people may be motivated to describe changes in life meaning and identity because it distances them from their former, less desirable selves. However, it may also be that genuine and permanent life change was possible only if the person simultaneously experienced a change in identity. Indeed, those who failed to change were clearly clinging to their current role or identity and were therefore less committed to the change process and more ambivalent about the desirability of change. One man in our study, who reported that he had not been able to change said, 'When I do make the effort to overcome my shyness, I feel that it is not really me acting, that it is someone else.'

This ambivalence was typical of failure narratives. Often people wanted to change, but they were not sure about possible outcomes that might obtain. Subjects wrote statements such as 'Part of my difficulty in achieving this goal is that I cannot figure out what it is that I will enjoy—I have a lot of interests, but no one main
passion" and "It seems all my adult life I've been trying to figure out what I'd like to be when I grow up." Miller and Rollnick (1991) describe ambivalence as the key issue to be resolved for individuals giving up addictive behaviors: "They want to drink (or smoke, or purge or gamble), but they don't want to. They want to change, and they don't want to." (p. 57). Thus, a failure to attain a new sense of identity or new life meanings, often because of ambivalence over giving up their current attitudes or behaviors, seemed to prevent individuals from achieving major life change.

The Micronarratives Technique

Our findings are not without their limitations. As stated earlier, for grammatical simplicity we referred to the subjects as "change" or "no-change," but we have no proof that those who said they had changed actually did so or that the people who said they had been unable to change actually had not. It is also possible that the subjects invented their change or failure-to-change stories simply to satisfy the demands of the experiment. However, a reading of the narratives convinced us that the subjects were writing about real events; few of them were particularly dramatic, and at least a few indicated that they were unable to write a narrative in the condition to which they were assigned. Moreover, we informed the subjects that the research would be valuable only if they described actual events, and as Wheeler and Bis (1991) have noted, "we are proceeding precisely on the faith, based upon establishing a relationship conducive to honesty, that our subjects knew their real-life events as well as we do and are willing to disclose it..." For "to deny their reality would be to deny the methodology of self-revealing, effectively blinding us to most of those fascinating events of everyday life." (pp. 350-351).

As stated previously, change is a complex process involving a variety of motivational, cognitive, and situational factors, all of which may be simultaneously important in effecting change, and in many cases it may not be possible to establish which of these factors is most important for determining change. It also seems likely that there are interactions between these factors that may be impossible to quantify. Similarly, it may be impossible for people to ever really know exactly how they changed; it is likely that most individuals do not have access to the cognitive processes that cause change (Fried, 1964; 1964, Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). However, people do experience change, and they have personal theories to account for how or why they changed. Such personal theories may be biased, but they are likely to have a greater impact on future behavior than the true facts and events will. After all, to our subjects, these were the real reasons that they were able to or unable to change. These beliefs will have a powerful influence on future attitudes and behaviors, especially attitudes and behaviors aimed at trying to achieve or maintain life change.

Future Studies of Change

We found some basic answers about people's attributions for change, but we still need further information about who changes and what changes, when, where, how, and how much people change. Indeed, there are a number of important unanswered questions, such as: Are there consistent patterns to change? Why do some change and others not? Will we be able to accurately predict change? And, if we are someday able to produce specific change, will it be ethical to do so? (Miller & C'edelica, 1994).

The results of the current study will assist us in future prospective research. The various themes that emerged from these retrospective narratives can be assessed in advance of attempts at life change. Micronarrative accounts of change may therefore allow us to predict which individuals will succeed and which will fail. We are currently conducting research that examines whether the factors identified with successful change will predict those who are able to initiate and maintain major weight loss. Thus, the current results may provide a framework for our prospective examination of attempted life change.

SUMMARY

Recent research in psychology has emphasized the stability of personality, attitudes, and habitual behavior. At the same time, many individuals believe considerable energy trying to change—whether self-help groups, self-help books, anger therapy, and struggle with themselves and others in their efforts to change. Our research has shown that people subjectively believe that they can and do make major life changes and that they can describe their personal attributions about experiences of change.

The narratives in our study provided a number of elements that seemed to be important facilitators or inhibitors of change. If we examine these sources at face value, it appears that change is most likely to occur in response to intense and enduring negative affect. A common strategy for achieving and maintaining life change was not to move to the new location where previous cats and associations had less influence over behavior. It also appeared that these events led people to reevaluate the stability of their roles and behaviors, a process that culminated in a new perspective that emphasized the magnitude and stability of their unhappiness, thereby increasing the motivation to change, incongru-
ruled the change into a new identity also seemed to be an essential ingredient for change; people may need to experience a fundamental change in their core sense of self in order to maintain important life changes. It is also possible that differences between the success and failure narratives may have been due to narratives constructed from processes and interpersonally biased. The failure accounts may have emphasized the difficulties inherent in change, such as describing obstacles and other barriers, for example, lack of time. This may also explain why subject's emphasized the potential benefits of change and why they indicated ambivalence about the desirability of change. Thus, failure accounts seemed to rationalize and justify a lack of change in order to deflect potential criticisms. In contrast, successful change stories may have emphasized the intensity of previous unhappiness in order to bolster the motivation to remain changed. This focus may have helped people to justify abandoning family, friends, and employers in their efforts to bring about change. Finally, the emphasis on the development of a new identity may have served to distance individuals from their former roles and previous behaviors, thereby facilitating maintenance of change. The attributions that people make about the change process, whether biased or not, are certain to have a powerful influence on their future efforts and the strategies they use to achieve or maintain major life change.

REFERENCES


