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"I Don't See It That Way Anymore": A Qualitative Study of Significant Changes of Mind

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Abstract

The specific aim of the study is to explore the cognitive and emotional phenomena which accompany profound changes of perspective that people have. I would like to understand the change in a person's thinking and in what way the person experiences these changes, whether it is a change in belief or a worldview. I would also like to understand whether external factors such as that facilitate these profound changes. Using a phenomenological approach, I interviewed eight adult participants in depth regarding changes to their worldview. I examined three phases of change, namely pre-change phase, the change phase, and the post-change phase. The themes I identify and describe include: emotional comfort and quiescence, and the precipitating event in the pre-change phase; vacillation and emotional discomfort in the change phase; and a return to psychological comfort and resilience in the post-change phase. I discuss these changes using Terror Management Theory (TMT), the Meaning Making Model (MMM), and Kuhn's theory of scientific revolutions as useful lenses through which one can view these individual changes.

Keywords

worldview, change, qualitative research

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Background and Significance

How does a lifelong Republican come to accept a Democratic political platform? How does a scientist schooled in the materialist scientific worldview suddenly (or not so suddenly) adopt a Creationist stance? What leads a person who had always thought Jews to be evil eventually to join the Anti-defamation League? All of the preceding questions have in common a profound and life-altering change of worldview.

People are always changing their minds, and often for trivial reasons, for example, a change of font because it may look better than the original one. A person may change his mind about when to wash his car, choosing to go in the afternoon rather than morning because it happens to fit more conveniently into his schedule. Or a woman may change from a black handbag to a red one because it is a more eye-catching accessory. These kinds of mind-changes may or may not have much in common with the ones cited earlier, but one obvious difference is that unless one is pathologically obsessive, such changes come relatively easily without the expenditure of great emotional effort.

Howard Gardner (2004) has mentioned another kind of mind change that comes without effort. These are the changes that children undergo as they develop in their cognitive capabilities. Described by Piaget (1962) as "stages of the development of intelligence," these changes occur without effort on the part of the child, and apparently without benefit of instruction either. They involve qualitative changes in thinking, that cause children, at particular ages, to suddenly seem to show understanding regarding the integrity of objects, the conservation of quantity, or about making and testing hypotheses.

Neither of these "easy" kinds of mind changes is the central concern of this study. Rather, this study is concerned with the kinds of changes of the mind that may be inconvenient, take additional effort, and that change lives.

Gardner suggests that early in life, we develop theories to make sense of the world, and these theories become engraved in the mind. These theories seem to fit our naïve observations as we make public commitments and as we develop emotional resonance with them. These factors make them resistant to change even in the face of contrary evidence.

Although there have been various explanations for mind changes which have been surveyed in Gardner's 2004 book, *Changing Minds*, there seems to be a need to explore the particular kinds of non-trivial change mentioned in the opening paragraph above. In particular, I am interested in examining the cognitive and emotional processes that surround changes in personal philosophy or worldview, particularly those exemplified in religious conversions. It is also of interest to examine these changes as a part of "the lived experience" rather than as an objective positivistic enterprise.

Method

Research Design

This is a qualitative study. As an inquiry approach, I chose a qualitative design because I was addressing the research question in an exploratory and interpretive manner. As Denzin and Lincoln (1998) assert, "qualitative researchers attempt "to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p. 3). In carrying out the study, I was influenced by two qualitative traditions, as described by Creswell (2018). Firstly, in attempting to understand a "lived experience" through the perspective of the experiencing person, I have been influenced by a phenomenological framework. In this framework, "human experiences are examined through the detailed descriptions of the people being studied" (Creswell, 1994, p. 12).

Secondly, it is hoped that this preliminary study would lead through a Grounded Theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and with the examination of a more extensive data set of change narratives, to the derivation of a theory of change by looking for emergent themes, categorizing these themes, and seeking to discover how these categories and themes interrelate.

Participants

Both of the qualitative research traditions require prolonged engagement through in-depth interviewing, with a relatively small purposive sample of participants. Accordingly, eleven (11) participants volunteered to be interviewed, three (3) withdrew for various reasons, leaving eight (8) eventual participants. Participants volunteered by responding to a call for persons who had experienced a major change of belief or perspective. They were assured of confidentiality. Therefore, no real names are cited in this report. These participants were all located in a small college town in the Pacific Northwest, and all displayed some level of allegiance to the same conservative religious group. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Walla Walla University.

Procedure

I contacted each participant and arranged to meet them for an interview. At the beginning of the interview, I gave each participant a brief explanation of the study and

presented them with the informed consent form which they were asked to sign, consistent with American Psychological Association (APA) Code of Ethics (Standard 8.02).

The interviews then commenced as I posed a central question: "Describe as completely as you can, a major change of mind or change of perspective that you have experienced." This question was open-ended, consistent with the approach suggested by Creswell (2018). I then followed up with requests for explanation and expansion, always seeking to get at what the respondent is experiencing in the process of the phenomenon of a change of mind.

Data Collection

The interviews were audio taped and transcribed. In addition, field notes were taken to record elements of the interview that may not be reflected on the audio-recording, such as the demeanor of the participant, and any other information relevant to formulate a more complete record of the context of the interview.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe a number of procedures that can satisfy the need for trustworthiness in a qualitative study. They define trustworthiness as satisfying the following question: "How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of?" (p. 290). They then suggest that this involves issues of "truth value," applicability, consistency, and neutrality.

Satisfying this demand for trustworthiness required that the qualitative researcher carry out different procedures than is typical in a quantitative or statistical approach. These include prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation in the data-gathering process. Afterwards, it involves member checks, peer debriefing, and an external audit. Member checks and peer debriefing were carried out in this study. After the interviews were transcribed, the interview transcriptions were sent to the participants and they were invited to make observations and corrections based on their perspective of what they had originally shared. None of the participants indicated a desire to change their initial responses, though a few volunteered to elaborate and extend their remarks.

Analysis

As is common in qualitative studies of this sort, and as Glaser and Strauss (1967) describe as the *constant comparative method*, data collection and analysis were carried out simultaneously and a recursive manner. Accordingly, I had the audiotapes of the interviews converted to written transcripts. I then examined these transcripts along with the field notes to discover common themes that could be discerned across interview participants. I also looked for patterns in the development of change as described by each participant.

Results

Analysis of the transcripts suggest a number of themes situated within three phases of the decision process. These phases can be identified as the **pre-change phase**, the phase of change in process (or **change phase**), and the **post-change phase**. Different processes in each phase, or different levels or aspects of the same process are described.

Pre-Change Phase

This phase is characterized by **psychological comfort** and **emotional quiescence**. This is a state in which the individual is experiencing no emotional discomfort regarding their philosophical beliefs or religious stance. There are no conflicts or dilemmas in their overall

interior life. At this stage they have adopted the prevailing worldview explicitly through instruction, or implicitly through socialization within the dominant culture. The dominant culture here is the combination of influences that shaped the worldview, including the effects of church, school, parental guidance and tacit influence, the immediate social milieu such as the village or town, and the media to which the individual may be exposed. Since the changes were mostly from a highly religious culture, the church and religious environments were particularly salient. As Participant C says regarding the period before change in his political views: *"I was raised to be probably apathetic about politics, and conservative. That was my surroundings."*

The end of this period of quiescence is marked by a **precipitating event**. Such events are varied – a dream or other psychical experience, a change in status such as becoming a parent, events in the broader community, even the death of a loved one. Yet they all tended to result in a disruption of the quiescent state and the initiation of a period of emotional and mental turmoil – and trigger a period of questioning and weighing of options that constitutes the change phase.

For Participant A it was an apocalyptic dream that started her on a quest to rationalize her religious practices. For Participant C it was a question, *"well, why would you say that?"* posed by a fellow graduate student at a meal, that began to shake his political views. Still for others, a change in status, such as becoming a parent may have precipitated the need to find new answers. Participant L describes her experience of birthing as a "miracle" and explains the beginning of her search that ends in her embrace of a new faith:

> *it's just I knew I had experienced a miracle. I knew that God was involved. I knew I needed answers so that I could be secure in understanding my place in the world and that ultimately [my son] was gonna be asking me questions. I wanted to have good, solid answers for him.*

The precipitating event was not always a single discrete occurrence. For Participant D it was the combined influences of his freshman college year during a particularly turbulent time when antiwar protests, political assassinations and exposure to a politically active room-mate pierced his conservative shell. He says, *"I could go on for hours about the different things that hit me that year. . . It changed me. I mean I'm here now because of that one year."* Each of these cases are examples of **precipitating events** and illustrate how a variety of disparate experiences can disrupt emotional quiescence, and usher in the Change Phase.

Change Phase

This phase is marked by emotional turmoil, questioning, and decision-making. This process of change is slow, extending for a considerable time, often taking a period of years to complete. Yet it may be punctuated by bursts of insight resulting in rapid periods of change as well.

Two themes that characterize this phase of the change process are **vacillation** and **emotional discomfort. Vacillation** refers to periodic changes in view, uncertainty, and indecision regarding the path forward. **Emotional discomfort** is characterized by feelings of anxiety, unease or discomfiture. Both of these are captured in this description by Participant A*: "I actually explored different spiritual beliefs because I felt disconnected from what I had connected to all my life because I had this change of thinking. So I felt a sense of disconnect."* Here, the emotional discomfort is generated by disconnection from one's comfortable and familiar moorings. In other cases, it may be a result of conflict with loved ones or threats to cherished relationships. One participant (L) characterizes this **vacillation** during the phase of

change as *"flip-flopping."* Another (M) vigorously assented to the suggestion that it was *"a mental struggle."*

Other participants described the **emotional discomfort** associated with change. One participant (C) put said: *"It was upsetting. Yeah. That is why I say it's at the level of shock."* This discomfort reflects a shaking of the most fundamental values derived from early childhood experiences: *"to grow up with the idea that you can know and you can have certainty and then get to my age and not have that certainty, it is disorienting."* This is mirrored by other participants who reported a *"sense of disconnect"* (A) or *"Agonizing"* (CL).

That this process of change may extend for a considerable period of time is illustrated by the comments of several participants. Participant M said *"It was maybe four years. Three, four years. That was a long process."* For Participant CL, the process took six years and C described it as *"gradual."* The process could at times also be imperceptible. Participant D said, *"I was for an entire year off balance. I knew I was changing. I knew things were happening to me that I didn't recognize."*

Yet, in the midst of slow, sometimes imperceptible, change there can be periods of rapid adjustment. This is perhaps best described by C, who put it this way, *"well, I would say . . . it's been gradual. Some of the most fundamental things feel quite rapid and disconcerting, almost at the level of shock but over a period of at least several years."*

Post-Change Phase

As suggested above, a major change in worldview does not occur suddenly. Nor is there always a well-defined end to the process of change. Not all participants felt that the process of change had been complete, and for them, emotional turmoil was still a part of their experience. Yet, those who had passed a threshold eventually found a place of equilibrium characterized by increased **emotional comfort** and attenuated turmoil related to the issues that were the subject of the change process. This comes as a resolution to the emotional discomfort experienced in the Change Phase and is a return to the equilibrium of the Pre-Change Phase. Participant D reported that once the change occurred, *"I felt comfortable."* Participant L describes the change as *"the most focusing thing in my life."* For participant A, the vacillation that was a part of the change process was followed by *"feeling a sense of peace with what I believed"* as the change was complete.

Finally, an overarching theme of **Resilience** can be identified, in that all of the participants whose worldview change was associated with their religious beliefs continued to identify with their religious community, even in the face of significant deviation from their previously held religious tenets.

Discussion and Conclusion

What seems apparent as one examines these accounts is the consistent progression beginning with quiescence, followed by emotional upheaval as the change is initiated, and as it proceeds, and finally a period of quiescence once more as the process of change ends.

Terror management theory (TMT) has been proposed as a possible explanatory framework for existential questions. This theory asserts that the existential terror created by the realization of one's mortality mediates the establishment of a personal worldview and any threats to that worldview. (see, for example, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, & Maxfield, 2006). Proponents of this theory suggest that faith in an internalized worldview, and the self-esteem derived from living up to the standards associated with that worldview, both serve to attenuate this existential terror. Persons defend against external attacks on the worldview by disparaging, attempting to convert, or even killing those who may have divergent views. The

question then arises, what happens to this existential terror when the worldview comes under attack internally? The emotional discomfort experienced by all the participants as their worldview came under challenge during the Change Phase, seem consistent with the existential terror described by the proponents of TMT.

While the TMT appears to explain the resilience of the personal worldview, the origin of the worldview itself may be better explained from the perspective of the Meaning Maintenance Model proposed by Proulx and Heine (2006). Humans appear to have a natural inclination to construct mental representations of expected relations among the people, places, events and objects they encounter. In other words, every experience involves an attempt to make meaning. Rather than a means of reducing the anxiety of mortality, Proulx and Heine propose that people construct worldviews in order to make and maintain meaning. This insight is by no means novel. Rather, Proulx and Heine admit to standing on the shoulders of earlier thinkers. Whether expressed as a search for meaning (Frankl, 1946), as the development of schema to create memories (Bartlett, 1932), the process of equilibration through developing schemata (Piaget, 1960), or even the response to cognitive dissonance (Festinger, Reichen, & Schacter, 1956), all these ideas describe a unique human proclivity for making meaning. Thus the anxiety that accompanies the changing of worldviews can be seen as a parallel to Piaget's disequilibrium, and the emotional comfort that appears to follow during the post-change phase, as a resolution to that disequilibrium.

Elad-Strenger suggests that the Kuhnian theory of scientific change may be applicable to individual worldview change as well (Elad-Strenger, 2013). Kuhn (1962) presented a model of the structure of scientific revolutions, in which he suggests that scientific paradigms are usually able to withstand incremental or minor perturbations to established theory either by rejecting them as anomalies, or by making minor adjustments to the theory without changing the paradigm itself. However, when these small anomalies accumulate, or the discrepancies become too great, a new paradigm may be needed to replace the old one in what amounts to a scientific revolution. Gardner (1985) describes this sort of change in his account of the cognitive revolution. Likewise, changes within the psychoanalytic paradigm, specifically, the reluctance of theorists in self-psychology to distance themselves from the psychoanalytic community, are seen by Elad-Strenger as illustrative of a TMT application to Kuhnian paradigm change. In that regard, Elad-Strenger explains that one function of worldviews from a TMT perspective is to provide "symbolic immortality" (p. 49), which is more likely guaranteed by belonging to a long-standing paradigm than a novel one. This may explain the reluctance of participants in this study to disidentify with their larger religious fellowship, even though they admit significant deviance from the worldview.

It is evident that Terror Management Theory (TMT), Meaning Management Model (MMM), and Kuhnian paradigm change are all helpful lenses through which personal worldview change can be examined. All provide helpful insights on the various phenomena that people experience as they go through what can be a personally wrenching, and anxiety producing process of change, and the assaults to self-esteem that often accompany such changes. It would be valuable to explore these models further and in greater depth by observing additional participants who have experienced a broader range of existential change. The apparent realignment in political affiliation that appears to be in progress with current changes in the American political landscape presents an opportunity for further study of this phenomenon.

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