

Research Article

The Experience of Vocational Alignment in Midlife

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Abstract

This research was conducted to investigate the experiences of those adults who in their midlife identified and followed a new vocational path which better aligned their work with their passions, interests, and abilities. The data collection process followed the Interpretative Phenomenological Approach in-depth personal interviews. Eight adults between the ages of 40 and 55 (four men and four women) participated.

The phenomenological analysis is based on building a series of sub-themes and master themes from the analysis of each of the eight interviews. Five major themes were identified. The themes were: 1) the experience of "treadmill" of life and work; 2) internal and external triggers pushed the need for change; 3) time for reflection, self-awareness, and self-care; 4) change was difficult; and 5) new beginning. The analysis suggests that midlife work change is difficult but necessary when the current work situation is not satisfying or meaningful for a person anymore.

Keywords: Midlife and work; Work transition; Career switch; Finding vocation; Meaning and work; Mid-life change; Self-reflection in midlife; Joy; Fulfillment; Happiness at work

Introduction

This research aims to investigate the experiences of adults who in their midlife identified and followed a new vocational path which better aligned their work with their passions, interests, and abilities. This research explores the path that people went through to find greater fulfillment and meaning in their work.

The research question that frames this study is: What is the described experience of midlife adults who change their vocational path to work which has more meaning for them?

Sub-questions:

1. How does following a new vocational path in midlife affect one's overall quality of life?
2. What challenges do people have when they re-align their interests and abilities and choose to follow a new vocational path in midlife?
3. What motivates people to search out or pay attention to better aligning their vocational interests and abilities in midlife?
4. What aspects of life are affected the most when one does the re-alignment of career path in midlife?

This research has potential benefits for people in midlife who found themselves burned out, in transition, laid off, or unsatisfied in what they currently do. Midlife is a time of anxiety and inner turmoil for many adults. Since work takes up a significant amount of people's daily activities, in many cases adults start asking themselves questions about the work they do and its meaning. Therefore, this study contributes to the research on seeking fulfilling work in mid-life.

Literature review

Midlife and its relationship to work: Midlife stages and the

relationship to work have been gaining interest in recent years. Researchers have coined different terms for this stage such as "the third age," or "third chapter" [1]. In this third chapter, new possibilities are imagined and turned into opportunities. The notion of staying engaged longer opens up a new stage of life for pursuing new interests and passions. Others have described this period as "Act IV", or "a five-act course" [2]. This new Act IV lacks social benchmarks about what should be done and how with regard to work, sex, and relationships. In our modern era the mid-life career and the issue of having meaning in the workplace becomes more important. According to the Department of Health and Human Services [3] the average age of older population grows and expected to grow 19% by 2030. In the next 20 years, one out of four Americans will be over age 65.

Mid-life crisis: Midlife feels like a crisis to many [4-6]. Much of the phenomenon suggests that for some individuals the sense of crisis is greater than for others [7]. Some people face a crisis or wait for the crisis to come [8]. For others, midlife is the greatest period of life full of greater happiness, productivity, community involvement as well as increased feelings of well-being [9]. In fact, the upheaval may be an exception rather than the rule.

Levinson [10] said that midlife is a period when one starts questioning what was accomplished. Individuals in midlife start to question their contributions to society measured against society expectations and their own expectations for this period in their lives. Some individuals deal with the disparity between where they are and where they dreamed they would be. As a result, many people in midlife take stock of reappraising their life and restructuring some of these areas [11].

Midlife drives a sudden need to transition to something else [12-14]. Many adults in midlife have similar patterns of deceleration

and disengagement with present situations, which causes a shift in thinking and sense of being in mental transition. As a result, some people may suddenly feel burnt-out, depressed, and constricted on the job [15]. Mid-life transition is a time of both growth and confusion. It may also be a time to repair wounds of the soul, our inner life [8].

Ignoring inner needs in midlife: I have observed that people tend to avoid activities which prevent them from dealing with the deeper issues about their work in midlife. Sometimes people are reluctant about sharing the things which matter most. Some adults in midlife carry around the symbols of their self-worth in their consciousness [16]. The symbols like a big house, fancy car, or expensive clothes can give them an artificial sense of self-worth. Many adults in midlife, however, feel competent and satisfied in their work [17]. While they may not feel contented, they are challenged enough so that they are not driven to change by negative thoughts and emotions.

Once individuals experience failure in reaching their personal goals it is easy to have their self-worth damaged. If the fear of this failure is greater than change itself, it is possible that those individuals will not be able to make the required changes in midlife that are required for renewal and growth [18].

Theories of career development: Career theory in its development has focused on systematic methods to help people identify their vocational paths. Historical patterns helped contributing to modern day thinking about work in both positive and negative terms. Thus, it is important to examine what the major career influencing models were. Multiple views and perspectives drive present career theory. The most influential theories are Trait and Factor theory, Life Stage theory, Social Cognitive theory, Decision Making theory, developmental theories, and organizationally based theories. Trait and Factor theory [19-23] focuses on individual measurable traits, e.g. interests and abilities and matching them with similar occupation. Trait and Factor theory, similar to other career development process models, emerged from an early emphasis on multiple steps: analysis, syntheses, diagnosis, prognosis, and counseling.

Trait and Factor theory researchers suggested that each person had unique patterns and traits and therefore by closely matching them with vocations, productivity growth could be increased. They focused more on individual outputs vs. general happiness, fulfillment and greater meaning within the work environment. Many researchers thought that Trait and Factor theory was too rigid and no longer as viable as originally thought [20,22].

The lack of meaning at work: Many organizations confuse motivation with meaning and believe if their workers are motivated, then their work must have meaning [24]. Many workers are afraid of failure and continue to work harder at jobs which have no meaning [25]. This overemphasis on productivity and sense of doing things which are not personally rewarding contributes towards inner conflict [26-30]. Organizational life has been criticized for its failure to find ways to restore meaning and better align workers to their capabilities and individual needs and desires [18,31]. Cochrane [32] has defined work not as a means but as an end itself like an autotelic activity. A person can leave interesting work for another job, but one cannot leave the world of work without a radical change in personhood. Some of this thinking can be traced back to the turn of the century management practices [33] and other HR practices [34]

which are in conflict with values like independent work, creativity, and joy for workers.

Enjoyment of work: What are the factors that cause some people to enjoy their work and others simply to accept what they do? It was argued that scientific management principles from the turn of the century and even recent human resource techniques which are focused on efficiency and short term results are in conflict with values that consider dignity, creativity, and joy in the workplace [34]. HR practices which carry out performance appraisals rarely ask managers to be concerned about enjoyment and values for their workers as they do about competence [25]. Managers tend to reinforce these HR policies by focusing in a person's capacity to do a job. For some people, rarely, the attention is paid to will whether a person will enjoy and/or be proud of what he or she does [25]. Only through deep reflection where the individual who asks, "Is this job worth doing and will I enjoy it" vs. the inexperienced person who simply asks "Can I do it?" Many HR measurements of people success do not recognize positive enjoyment of one's job as a company might measure production or a health professional might measure calorie intake.

Fulfillment and meaning in midlife: When work is inner directed, vocation can become something one can spend your life doing [35]. Many authors suggested that work begins when one does not like what one is doing, and this suffering is the start to finding some greater meaning in one's work [36,37]. Still, some people often end up trading their authenticity for what we perceive as survival, terrified to swap security for what we truly desire [38]. As a result, the corrosive effects of avoidance also exact their toll on our emotional and physical lives. Other researchers have gone further to suggest that life is meaning making itself of which freedom is a key to meaningful work [39].

The new era of retirement and redefinition: The research suggests that there is a need to shift views of retirement in midlife and beyond to a new set of terms. Bateson (2010) described "Adulthood II" as the primary child-rearing and career building period. After this period of life follows a time of reflection and movement toward what a person would rather do, which usually is different from what he or she was doing before. There was once a well-known truism suggesting that in life there are no second acts [40]. This way of thinking is changing now as midlife adults pursue new activities after reflection.

In many ways, the idea of retirement is a new idea in American history as in the past people worked until they dropped [41]. While most have become familiar with the mid-life crisis as a point in life for re-examination, it's the time for punctuation, and a fresh new start [42].

Design and Methodology

Methodology-overview: This research utilized a qualitative process called Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA approach enables a deeper look at the experience and how people make sense of their life experiences [43]. In the IPA, the sample size is generally quite small to enable rich data to emerge which then can be compared and contrasted between a few similar cases. This study focused on the intense interpretative collaboration between participant and researcher with personal verbal material and observational reflection. The interviews with four men and four

Table 1: Group sub-themes and major master themes.

| S. No | Group summary | |
|-------|---|---|
| 1 | The experience of the "treadmill" of life and work | 1.1. Work did not bring satisfaction 1.2. Feeling disconnected with others 1.3. Work was endless and carried little meaning |
| 2 | Internal and External triggers pushed the need for change | 2.1. Divorce, layoff, death of a relative 2.2. Sudden realization of the need to change 2.3. Internal push for change |
| 3 | Time for reflection, self-awareness, and self-care | 3.1. Going through healing 3.2. Needed to step back and reflect 3.3. Exploring new opportunities |
| 4 | Change was difficult | 4.1. Unknown path 4.2. Loss of friends 4.3. Trial and Error 4.4. Financial hurdles |
| 5 | New beginning | 5.1. Better sense of self 5.2. Better relationship 5.3. Change was worth it |

women took place and were recorded and described below in the sample section.

Candidates were recruited through a variety of ways including inquiries from posting on Internet bulletin boards, Craig’s List, relevant baby boomer’s sites, and referrals. Through the analysis of the interviews, I made an attempt to bring coherence and meaning to the research. As a result of this analysis, I gained an understanding and insight about the experiences of the participants and described common patterns of experiences which the participants went through as well as possible differences.

Results

The participants

Names used as pseudonyms.

Cate, 45 year old white middle class female, lives in the Pacific Northwest, and transitioned from working for large organizations in human resources for twenty years to her new work as a non-profit executive in the health industry.

Kevin, a 55 year old white middle class male, lives in Northern California, and spent a long career working in sales roles in large organizations before getting laid off. Now he works as a college instructor.

Ana, a 55 year old white middle class female, lives in Midwest, and spent many years in an administrative job after raising her children. Today, she describes her work as the owner of her own marketing and writing Internet business.

Hilton, a 46 year old, Hispanic middle class male, lives in Northern California, and spent many years as a manager in the banking system in the East Coast before getting laid off. Now he is an entrepreneur.

Anu, a 43year old Indian middle class female, lives in Northern California, and spent many years in the High Tech industry as a Ph.D. engineer and then decided to leave. Today, she describes her work as a technical consultant and a teacher in the healing arts, teaching physics to healers.

Craig, a 50 year old white middle class male, lives in the Southwest, and spent many years in sales before his divorce lead him to a new work. He owns a real estate investment company now.

Mark, a 55 year old white middle class male, lives in the Southwest,

and after many years working as a cosmetic dentist quit after his father died. Today, he works as a writer, healer, teacher and speaker.

Suzanne, a 55 year old white middle class female, lives in the Pacific Northwest, and spent many years as a hair dresser and stay at home mom. Today, she works as an advisor helping people to make money from home, and she runs her own Internet business.

Analysis of the group sub-themes and major master themes

This Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the transcribed data produced 5 Major Master Themes and 16 Group Sub-themes showing the participants’ experience of work and life transition (as presented in the Table 1). These descriptions told the experience of feeling stuck at work, the triggers which brought change, the need for self-reflection, the challenges in changing and the more satisfied new beginning which followed later.

The experience of the “treadmill” of life and work

The participants described their life situations and their previous work environments in different ways which as a result of analysis emerged in three sub-themes.

Work did not bring satisfaction: Most participants described that they had long-term careers in a variety of fields such as sales, human resources, banking, administration, technology, medicine, and beauty care. Despite the types of work they were doing were different, the participants were not satisfied with their work.

Craig: Uh, highly stressful, um, mainly a lot of anxiety, um, although – [Laughs] It was uh, my life was uh, very stressful, a lot of anxiety, um, um, money worries, we, we always had enough money. We always made good money but for some reason, I still harbored a lot of internal fear because uh, it just wasn’t, I just didn’t feel stable.

The participants experienced a lot of work anxiety that didn’t seem that much different for the four men and four women in the study. They experienced a feeling of angst about their work, tiredness from the routine, wanting something more, but not being sure what.

Feeling disconnected with others: Some participants felt alone, some disconnected with others. Hilton, who was working at the bank as a manager, described himself as feeling like an alien on a different planet. Anu, who was working in the high tech industry after putting in long hours and long days felt like she no longer fit.

Anu: I thought I had put all this effort into adding creativity into my work and being – doing a big contribution that I thought was creative, a creative way to contribute just – and I had tried to work with, um, you know, the organizational development people and the human resources people and all that to make –the work life better and, uh, ranking and rating came along, and I was – so it looked like I was gonna be demoted.

And that seemed – it just seemed like I didn't fit the situation, and I didn't want to play anymore.

There were, however, differences between participants. Suzanne, a stay at home mom, for many years felt it was natural to feel disconnected from others in her role. In her case, it was a natural evolution to try something new when her kids were grown and her husband's health improved. This was very different from Mark who suddenly didn't feel connected any longer to his field of dentistry and patients and coworkers. So while I observed that the experience was slightly different for each participant, this feeling of disconnect created strong emotions towards wanting to change. The participants were consistent and clear that their work at the time carried little meaning for them.

Work was endless and carried little meaning: The participants described consistently that they were working hard for firms in never ending cycles of long hours and rewards. A few participants discussed feeling little creativity with no time for more interesting work with substance. At the same time, it was common for most participants that they were just working to pay the bills and make ends meet; they expended lots of activity but experienced little personal value. Many described their work lives as fearful, hectic, and working long hours. Suzanne summed this up best.

Suzanne: Well, I had been working like 90 hours a week because of our situation because of, you know, just trying to keep up with – you know, keep our house up, the medical expenses and things like that. So I was really worn out.

Many participants had this feeling of being caught in a never ending wheel of work.

This illustrates how the participants experienced their work at the time. Although they each had very different backgrounds, their described experiences with their work was similar; endless cycles of work without meaning or purpose.

Internal and external triggers pushed the need for change

The participants described the different life events which influenced their decision towards making major change in their life and work.

Divorce, layoff, death of a relative: It was interesting to learn that some participants had an external trigger event that occurred which led to the need for change. Mark saw his father die, Hilton was laid off, Kevin suffered an injury, Craig went through a divorce. This led them to search for new options.

Mark: It was something very specific in a very specific time and place. My father had passed away, and I was headed east on Speedway Boulevard in Tucson; my father had passed away a couple of weeks earlier, and I was like, "Wow," all of a sudden in this one moment I

thought, "Man, I'm gonna die too." And in that very moment, I said, "I've got to do something about my life," and I made a commitment to myself to take six months off to travel and take pictures, which is what I was most passionate about.

One thing I noticed was that the men were affected more by the external trigger events in their lives compared to the women. This may relate to gender differences and the tendency for men to not make major moves until they have no choice but to change.

Sudden realization of the need to change: The women seemed more confident and clear about their situations and what they should do after a sudden realization that they need to do their change. For example, Cate and Anu had made risky decisions to quit after a sudden realization that came to them. Cate: Without any breathing room or recovery space. Um, and that, you know, financially I was in a place, you know, after having given 20 years in corporate America, that I could take some risks. Um, I was questioning, honestly, whether I needed to get out of HR, whether I needed to get out of corporate America, or whether I needed to get out of both and just kind of start fresh. And it was a whole, like, you know, rethinking my identity because I'm an HR gal. Um, so I did. I, I literally walked away. I gave notice, um, you know, on the heels of a potentially very large promotion and, um, went to work for the – I just completely changed.

Decisions and risks were made given each person's economic situation which influenced the next steps they took.

Internal push for change: All participants described this time of their lives as a realization that doing nothing at this point was not an option. Participants expressed these feelings in different ways but all did not feel connected to their work.

In listening to the participants it was clear that a combination of feeling empty and withdrawn from their work and external trigger events for some participants was enough to take the next step towards change and take time for reflection.

Time for reflection, self-awareness, and self-care: As a result of analysis of the interviews, all participants after the internal or external triggers took time to reflect deeply about their lives and their work and what they wanted. This reflection took many shapes.

Going through heal in: Several participants described the need to settle past wounds and or heal before fully moving forward in their transitions. The reasons were very different between each person. For example, Cate just needed to get away from what she described as the rat race which made her feel depressed. Mark needed to take off and travel. Craig needed time to recover or repair after wounded relationships. As well, Hilton and Kevin needed to build self-confidence after their layoff.

Craig: Uh, so, for ten years, I just struggled, uh, lost energy and was stagnant. Uh, and then through the traumatic divorce there was nothing left anymore, there was nowhere to go. Uh, so it was either do or die at that point.

All participants though described this liminal state where some time was needed for self-care.

Needed to step back and reflect: Each participant took time for reflection in their own way. For some like Anu and Kevin, this meant

trying out new roles in new areas. For others such as Cate, it meant taking time to be away.

Cate: Uh, it was interesting. Once, I shed the label and, um, I took that year, kind a academic year, um, as this career adviser, um, it became really obvious that I was not going back to corporate America. Um, but I still loved HR. And, um, the dream job just landed in my lap. Truly, once, once I opened my eyes, um, within, within days this dream job landed in my lap, and I've never looked back.

I learned from the group that this need for self-reflection was a prerequisite to making any changes in their life. While the participants took different approaches the goal was the same, which was to find new directions for their work and life.

Exploring new opportunities: The participants described that they took time to explore new opportunities. For them this was finding new path, a new direction and an opportunity to try out their creative sides. Hilton enrolled in college to learn how to produce movies. Mark was writing a book. Anu opened up a spiritual practice. All three discussed these projects with great passion describing that they felt free to finally try out some new ideas without perceived constraints. These, however, were not the final paths that these participants ended up doing.

Mark: I was extremely passionate about the book that I was writing.

Anu: I would say, I did healing arts work, including teaching, uh – I'm teaching physics to the – to healers.

While the movement in the new direction was exciting and internally motivating it also led to the next stage and the challenges that the participants would encounter.

Change was difficult: The participants described the challenges that each went through in their transitions and how they dealt with these challenges.

Unknown path: For most of the participants, it was not clear what they would do next. Hilton thought something creative like making movies would be fun. Mark wanted to write books and travel and Ana wanted to do something in marketing. Suzanne was open to many possibilities but not clear. Kevin wanted to teach. Cate wanted to do something in the community. She approached this unknown path with deep questions about what she might do next.

Cate: Wow, what, could I be? What could I be if this label wasn't attached, you know, squarely to my forehead? Um, if I wasn't living behind this, you know, title? What, what are those other things I'm interested in and, and truly how do I want to spend the rest of my career?

Kevin described the challenge of the unknown path he took shortly after being laid off and injured. His wife worked but after going through losing a house and bankruptcy the need to make sustainable money was an on-going pressure.

For some participants, this work and life transition also meant a change in relationships.

Loss of friends: Hilton described the experience of selling all his material goods and initially moving to Florida with his dog alone,

no friends and no clear idea what he would do next. He said after his move it was difficult to meet new friends until he was clear what he was doing. He wasn't sure how he would tell new friends who he was or what he was doing. Although the participants didn't specifically address this, it was interesting to note that during the time when they were in transition without a firm role or job title they had a hard time keeping in touch with their friends.

Trial and error: All participants moved quickly to try out new roles which they were curious about. Cate tried student counseling for about a year. Hilton enrolled in a film college for a few months before realizing that this was not practical for him. Ana developed a website to promote her marketing business. Kevin started support groups for parents with children who had autism. Anu started her spiritual practice. Mark drove to South America and Craig started to sell cars to support himself during the transition from divorce. Suzanne free of parenting responsibility took on a new adventure.

What was consistent, however, for all participants was that their next move was only temporary. Each described a series of trial and error work related moves that would meet both their desire for work with more meaning and income that would be enough support them.

Anu: I did yoga teacher training and started studying Shamanic practices, and so this was a, you know, continuation– I wasn't employed full time, and I had time to finish this training in energy medicine and healing arts and continued and have continued as I have the patent litigation because there's all this flexibility, and I have a lot of – I give it a lot of respect and value.

For many, this search for stable work and happiness didn't come so easily.

While there were differences in the level of struggle which each participant went through, all of them had to go through financial struggles.

Financial hurdles: For many participants there were adjustments to be made in their financial situation. Mark who initially lived off an inheritance and money from selling his dental practice soon needed to make many adjustments.

Mark: It certainly got less and less, and I got to a point where I actually, um, I actually gave my house back to the bank. I was driving around, and ended up And so I didn't have the money to get my teeth fixed, and I looked pretty gnarly, and I'm driving around in a fairly beat up car that's got dents on three out of four sides. I hadn't bought any new clothes in a couple of years, and I'm living at home with my mom. Can you say loser?

Making money was a constant worry throughout the transition and even after the new beginning.

All participants, however, described their new beginning as needing some adjustments either emotional or financial. All said that eventually this new road led to feeling better about themselves. I learned that for most participants the joy of leaving the old job soon turned into its own series of challenges.

A new beginning: Even though the participants described the financial and lifestyle adjustments that each had to go through while making change, at the same time they all described a new sense of self,

more confidence, happiness and better relationships. As a result, the analysis emerged in sub-themes as follows:

Better sense of self: All participants described feeling better about themselves and what they were doing. They discussed feeling more content, happier, and calm about where they were now in life. They described that they felt excited about every day.

Anu: Nothing to defend. I feel more settled with myself. Like there is nothing to prove. I felt really good about myself and that has a big part, that's a big thing to do with it. Even if I set an alarm, I'm awake a little bit before it, naturally, um, and so I feel excited – about whatever's to come that day, or it's not excited anticipating a day that you solve some puzzles and have a little, you know, fun.

I found from the interviews that the participants described that they felt more secure not in a financial sense but in their emotional state of mind. I noticed there was less anxiety as they spoke, more confidence and sense of direction for them. I found this led to better relationships.

Better relationships: I was interested to find out how the participants' relationships changed as a result of their transitions. I wanted to understand both their closest relationships as well as casual friends. Some participants were more open about this. Ana and Hilton were fairly closed about this but did say that they thought new people that they would meet today would find them happier, easier to be around. Mark described how his family relationships improved.

Mark: Well, it's interesting, because right now, I'm – in the past year or two, I have sort of re- - I've gotten back into relationships with my family, my immediate family. Not my children family, but my mother and my siblings, and my sisters, uh, my sister, who is just a little bit older than me, is going through some health kind of related, mental health challenges, so I've been spending a lot of time with her, and my mother is in her 80s, and, um, she's doing really great, but she can use a hand once in a while, you know, so it's all – al of a sudden I'm involved with my family closer than I have been, um, and it's brought up a lot of compassion. It has developed, uh, working with my sister, and being with my sister has opened up this – this, uh, compassion.

For others such as Anu and Craig who handsome instability in their relationships before were hopeful for better relationships in their new beginning. I observed that the relationship change was an important element in everyone's transition. For those with stable relationships, the transition was easier, less stressful.

Change was worth it: In the interviews, I was interested to know how the participants measure or know that they made the right choice. For most, the measurement was their positive feelings and emotions. They described not dreading getting up in the morning to go to work. They explained feeling fulfilled, having a good feeling inside, and being happier overall was their measure. For some, being able to make their own schedule and be more flexible, for others having passion towards their work was important.

Cate: You know, it's a nine out of 10, probably. Is it the perfect job for the rest of my life? No. There are obviously pluses and minuses of every job. But it, it hits just about every major box for me. So yeah, it was absolutely the right move. If I had it to do over again, I absolutely

would have.

Finally, I asked the group if they were to give advice to others who were considering major midlife change in their life and work, what advice would they give. Kevin summed this up best for the group:

Kevin: There arterial and errors, but don't give up. I've had to make some, numerous changes heading me towards the direction that's just right for me.

And this is indeed what I learned from the interviews that each road will be quite unique and different for each person. The road becomes clearer with movement, decisions and choices for more meaningful work.

Discussion

Some of the research findings are consistent with the literature and yet in other areas, the research provides new insight in the experience before and after the transition which has not been covered as much in the literature to date.

There were 5 Major Master Themes which emerged from the collective analysis. These themes revolved around a cycle of change. This cycle started with an awareness of how unhappy the people I interviewed were in their work lives in the past. This led eventually to deep reflection and a new need for self-care and self-awareness. As a result of this, the participants described that they were more confident to move towards change although they thought the transition would be difficult. They saw the need to find a new work which would be a better alignment with their overall lives and sense of self. This cycle led to many challenges and difficult transitions. In the end, the participants described their lives as working again and, in most cases, feeling a greater sense of peace, joy, and happiness with their work and lives. Ultimately, all participants were consistent in the interviews and said their changes were worth it.

Theme 1: The experience of “treadmill” of life and work

The participants explained their situations before their change as the experience “of treadmill” of life and work. There is much support in the literature on the experiences people go through when working in jobs which carry little meaning. The results of this study, however, show that there is much variation in how people experience their own treadmill of work. Some have described this as a feeling of being unsatisfied or pondering whether their works roles make sense any longer [8]. Many of the participants explained their lives before as a rat race or a series of days which seemed routine and boring. This was described in the literature as work for many was a series of deceleration and disengagement experiences [15]. The participants described their lives as empty and did recognize that there was something missing for them.

Participants described their work in terms such as lacking meaning, focused on shareholders, and making money with little purpose [18,32]. A few participants explained that the people they saw working around them seemed to be doing their jobs without the issues they had which made them feel different and alone. In the literature, there is significant support for this feeling of lack of interest or seeing meaning in one's work [1,14].

Several people during the interviews continued to work just to

support their families but deep inside knew this could not last forever if they didn't enjoy their work [37]. The problem they explained was that if they worked harder the organization which they worked for kept giving them even more work. This led to stress.

Theme 2: Internal and external triggers pushed the need for change

It was interesting to hear that the participants described their inner questioning which started them down the path to change. Many discussed the feeling that something major had to change in their life. This inner questioning was also discussed in the literature [13,14] as a period of life when perhaps a major event occurred to prompt sudden questioning. Indeed, in the interviews many discussed a job layoff, divorce, or death of a parent as the trigger which moved them into action. There is support in the literature for this re-assessment and self-appraisal [6]. For my participants, first steps towards change happened after the external or internal triggers pushed them towards change.

Theme 3: Time for reflection, self-awareness, and self-care

I found it important finding that all participants described that at some point they felt need to seek more meaning in their lives [8]. Levinson (1978) discussed the importance of questioning one's own expectations. Participants described this questioning in all the interviews. This is consistent in the literature as a process which people go through. It is also interesting to note that this questioning seemed to come as described from within and not from others or society views.

In the interviews, I saw that this moved the participants towards change in their lives while taking greater control [39]. I observed that each participant had carefully taken the time with their transitions for self-care. I also observed at this stage a commitment to change with no turning back. The participants discussed that they must change their lives and as a result have greater insight towards what they wanted to do and align much more closely with their inner self than ever before.

Theme 4: Change was difficult

There is evidence in the literature that people get stuck and find change difficult [37]. In the interviews the participants were consistent in their responses with regards to their realization that change was mandatory for them despite knowing that it would be difficult. The literature is lacking in what the actual experience was like during the change in mid-life to more fulfilling work. That is where in my view, this study contributes new insights.

While those interviewed did not have severe life conditions at the time which would have made change more difficult [40], they did experience significant reactions to the change. I discovered from my participants that they all had to make adjustments in their financial situations. Also, it was important for all participants to ensure that their transition met not only their economic needs but also their needs for peace and being content with their new choices. For all participants, this was an important step before making change. I found that the transition was easier for those who had supportive relationships. The participants discussed different ways they discovered their new vocation. For most, it was a sequence of trial and error as they didn't have a roadmap for what to do next.

Theme 5: A new beginning

Recent researchers have noted that major change in mid-life is a good opportunity for exploring new possibilities where to align one's passions and interests [1,2]. These possibilities lead to new work opportunities which can enable more meaning and joy.

I discovered from the interviews that the participants at some point realized that work was a major part of their life and they had no intention of ever retiring. They no longer considered retirement as an option which is consistent with newer research of Corbett [44-52] who suggests many are taking a new anti-retirement position in mid-life. This is consistent with International research team (1987) study which suggested that people want to keep working if the opportunity is there to do so.

The participants expressed a new sense of freedom and meaning around their work and no longer questioned the value of their work. This was expressed in the literature as well for those who would seek meaning making change in their lives [39,25]. They did say that they would never consider going back to the work which they were doing before. Some of these participants did describe their work as a calling while others were unsure but expressed they were happier in their work then before because this was their choice [28].

Those interviewed were consistent when they said they could continue the new type of work they were doing for a long period of time because it was more inner directed then before [35]. This supports the work of Becker (1971) who suggested that our self-esteem depends on our inner newsreel. This study adds new data describing both the thought process, as well as emotional and psychological steps that might occur for those making the transition in mid-life from work which is stale and meaningless to work which better fits one's view of self, is more fulfilling and brings happiness.

Conclusion

The experience of these eight participants in many areas was consistent with the literature. Recent literature tends to focus on the positive benefits of recreating one's work later in life. This study also identifies in greater detail the challenges and significant issues that people can encounter when approaching such change.

The experience of participants of being bored and stuck in their work lives while not unusual does become a marker which those in midlife should pay attention to and not ignore. It can be easy to push aside these feelings and continue to work in jobs which provide little meaning and joy. For the participants in this study, it became critical not to ignore these signals and instead move to a deeper self-reflection, looking inward for new direction. One of the important findings of this study is that this inner search for meaning in one's work in mid-life is both healthy and important for self-growth. Ignoring this could lead to other issues which not only affect the person, but also their family as well and at a macro level the society. As people ignore their developmental needs, they may not be as satisfied with life and those around them. Thus, in this cycle of change as learned in this study, paying attention to self-care and better self-alignment at this point of life is critical if a person wants to experience more out of work and life.

This study shows that the change to more fulfilling work is not

easy and there will be many challenges. It takes both sacrifice and courage to take this journey into new roads not traveled. There will be trade-offs needed. But for those mid-life adults seeking greater peace, joy and harmony with their work, this pursuit is needed. The results shown here suggest that mid-life adults who do take greater control of their life and work will find a deeper purpose about their lives, greater meaning about their work, and internal happiness.

Additionally, this study pointed out that having strong relationships before major transition made the transition easier. For others, successful work change in midlife to greater meaning doesn't always bring better relationships. This study also pointed out that based on a person's economic situation, making major life and work change later in the second half of life is quite unique to each person. This study shows that throughout and after the transition, much trial and error will be required. And, as a result, this process will be very difficult.

During this process it is important to take time to self-reflect in mid-life. Do my values align with my goals and daily behaviors? This deep reflection will have a bigger affect if done after a crisis or trigger event hits in one's life. Do I feel stuck in my work? Why? It is important to not be afraid to seek deeper meaning in work. This is important and healthy for personal growth. As noted earlier one should expect that there will be challenges and the transition to joyful work will take time and during this change a person will need to build a strong support network. As a result change to joyful work can bring a new sense of happiness and fulfillment to one's life and work. During this change it is important to expect that it may take doing a few new roles which don't work so well to understand better the roles which will work.

These participants shared a valuable lesson which showed that change can be challenging, lonely, and fearful. But it is the necessary road to travel on if the adults are willing to explore and eventually create a work life which best fits them for the middle part of their lives and beyond.

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