

A Typology of Mid-Life Career Changers

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This study examines the motivations for and the outcomes of mid-life career change among a sample of 73 men who had left professional and managerial careers between the ages of 34 and 54. Measures of personal desire for change and external pressure to leave were dichotomized to produce a typology of career changers: Drift-outs, Opt-outs, Force-outs, and Bow-outs. The four types of changers were found to differ on a number of variables, including: amount of education completed, additional schooling undertaken to change careers, time taken to make the change, radicalness of change, and the importance of personal values in deciding to leave their former careers. Overall, respondents were found to be highly satisfied with their career redirection.

Instances of mid-life career change have recently attracted considerable attention and raised the question of how stable the mid-life span is, both vocationally and psychologically. Professionals in the field have known that career, or job change, is not infrequent among blue collar and lower status workers during mid-life, but this has not attracted popular attention because in many cases the changes were made due to poor health or being laid off (Parnes, Adams, Andrisani, Kohen, & Nestel, 1975). What is unique about middle-class career changers is the fact that their decisions were apparently voluntary. Their behavior has been particularly puzzling because in many cases their occupational change was to jobs with lower prestige and pay than those which they left. The obvious question arises "What motivated them to do it?"

Although research on middle-class workers has not been nearly as extensive as that on blue-collar workers, a body of research has begun to accumulate. Unfortunately the results have tended to be contradictory and noncumulative. Some studies have reported that such mid-career change was motivated by a rejection of societal values, particularly the

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work ethic (Roberts, Note 1; Krantz, 1977), other researchers have reported that psychological and family considerations were the major motivations for change (Oliver, 1971; Clopton, 1973, Vaitenas & Weiner, 1977), while still other studies have pictured career changers as more conventional persons seeking to move into a different field for the usual reasons of prestige and advancement (Hiestand, 1971; Schlossberg, 1975).

Reasons for these discrepant findings are not hard to discover. A cursory look at the various studies indicates that most of the research which has examined voluntary mid-life career change has been limited to very particular populations, such as: persons who quit their jobs and move to a particular location to live (Oliver, 1971; Krantz, 1977), subscribers to a counter-culture magazine who had dropped out of the mainstream of society (Roberts, Note 1), early military retirees (Spencer, Note 2; Biderman, 1973), populations drawn from older students who returned to school to change careers (Hiestand, 1971; Clopton, 1973; Schlossberg, 1975), and entrepreneurial career counseling (Vaitenas & Weiner, 1977). Not surprising, differing motivations and other characteristics were found for these select populations.

The present study seeks to broaden our understanding of voluntary career redirection by focusing upon managers and professionals who changed careers during their middle years. This group is of particular interest because they have more clearly defined career paths, and in the past they have been more likely to remain in their established careers through their middle years than persons in lower status occupations (Parnes et al., 1975). Unlike many of the previous studies, the sample on which this research is based is drawn from a number of different sources, and includes men who have moved from a wide range of managerial and professional careers to an even wider range of second careers (cf. Robbins, Thomas, Harvey, & Kandefor, 1978). Such a sample should offer a good overview of motives which operated in bringing these men to give up the security and prestige of established careers for occupations in different fields.

Untangling the motivations for mid-life career change has proven more complex than originally anticipated, however. Earlier analysis of data collected on this sample led to several tentative hypotheses for explaining career change (Thomas, Mela, Robbins, & Harvey, 1976; Thomas, 1977; Thomas, 1979). Closer examination of the protocols, and further data analysis, suggest that considerable caution must be observed in assigning blanket motivations for mid-life career change. The present paper reviews some of the single-cause hypotheses and presents data which suggests that a more fruitful approach is to seek to discover various types of career changers. From these observations a typology is developed which appears better to account for vocational redirection among the middle-aged men sampled in this study.

METHOD

This study is based on a sample of 73 men who had changed from established careers between 34 and 54 years of age. A majority of the respondents came from middle- or upper-middle-class family backgrounds, all had some college training, and the majority had completed college. Prior to changing careers respondents had been employed in a wide range of managerial, professional and technical professional careers (*Dictionary of Occupational Titles* "Zero" and "One" category first digit code). At the time of the study all of the respondents were residing in the northeastern section of the US.

One of the problems encountered in selecting a sample for the present study was in deciding when a job change was truly a career change. Hiestand (1971) handled the issue in a very subjective manner, distinguishing only between those who made "45-degree" changes, which involved relatively minor discontinuity with former careers and "90-degree" changes involving major discontinuity. For this study we sought to give the Hiestand designations a more objective basis by combining them with the formulation of Bell (1975), in which he notes the importance of whether training for the former career was necessary and sufficient for the new career. A change to a career for which previous training was unnecessary, and for which more training was needed, would seem to qualify for what Hiestand called a 90-degree change. Movement to a career for which previous training was either unnecessary or insufficient (but not both) would correspond to Hiestand's 45-degree change. For the present study we included both 45- and 90-degree changers, and rejected those whose previous career training was necessary and sufficient for the second career.

Names of potential respondents were obtained by means of a modified form of "referral sampling," which seemed to be the most feasible means of reaching a widely scattered population for whom no central reference was available (cf. Welch, 1975). Personnel officers from a variety of large companies and college placement services throughout New England were asked to provide names of men who had made mid-career changes within the past five years. Short screening questionnaires were sent to prospective respondents, and those who met our sampling requirements were contacted for a personal interview. Following the interview, respondents were asked for the names of acquaintances of theirs who had also made mid-life career changes. These referrals were then sent questionnaires, and if found to be appropriate, were interviewed.

Personal interviews lasted from one to two hours and were semi-structured in nature, following the interview format developed by Murray, Powers, and Havighurst (1971). In addition to the Life Pattern Interview questions, respondents were asked to complete several attitude and personality measures, as well as the Strong-Campbell Interest Inventory.

Most interviews were conducted in the respondent's home, though some were interviewed at their place of business. An overall response rate of 58% was obtained from all eligible persons contacted.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

When one asks what is the motivation for career change, at mid-life or at any time, the common sense answer would suggest that it be for money. After all, this is supposed to be the way the work force functions in a capitalistic society. If this were found to be the case, we could close the book on our study and move on to other unsolved questions. In the present case simple economic motives did not prove to be decisive. Only eight of the men in our sample, some 11% of the total, indicated that salary considerations were important in their career decision. For the remainder, most of whom took salary cuts in order to move into a new career, the motivations were more complex than that postulated for the textbook "economic man."

Having eliminated the simple economic motive for career change, let us turn to a consideration of the motives suggested by previous research in this area. We had begun our work pretty much accepting the "counter-culture" hypothesis of mid-career change, but early in our pretesting we became aware that our respondents simply were not motivated by rejection of societal values. To be sure, they had made some reordering of their personal values, but we found little evidence of counter-culture beliefs. The Musgrove Counter-Culture Attitude Scale (1974), which was administered to our respondents, indicated that the men in our sample were relatively low in adherence to counter-culture attitudes. The mean score for our sample on the scale was 138, compared to a mean score of 147 found by Musgrove with a sample of British college students and adults.

On the other hand, our respondents were not found to be responding to "conventional" career considerations in making their change. As indicated above, only slightly more than one-tenth were motivated by salary considerations in their desire to change, and only 13% were looking for greater security in their career redirection. Few of our respondents were found to have changed careers out of necessity: only seven (10%) indicated they changed because they were laid off, and for only six (8%) were health problems a major reason for change.

Nor did we find nonwork related family and personal considerations to be a major motivation for a majority of our sample. Only about one-quarter of the sample indicated that they changed to have more time with their families (26%), time for recreation (23%), and in order to live in a better locality (20%). No unique family characteristics were discovered which would seem to be an adequate explanation for their behavior, either. In a majority of the cases (60%) the wife was not working at the time of the change, which removes the factor of added spouse income as a

facilitating factor. Further, almost three-quarters of the sample (74%) had dependent children at home when they made their career transition, removing reduced family responsibility as a motivating factor as well.

The closest we came to finding common reasons for career change was in the realm of intrinsic work motivation (Herzberg, Mauser, & Snyderman, 1959). A near majority of our respondents (48%) indicated that "a better fit of values and work" was a very important motivation for change (an additional 21% said it was of some importance), and a slight majority in our sample (53%) said that "more meaningful work," was a very important factor for them (with an additional 23% indicating this was of some importance).

The overall picture we arrive at in analyzing our data, however, is one of motives almost as varied as the number of individuals studied. Rather than finding one cause or motive, our relatively homogeneous sample presents a varied spectrum of characteristics and motives for mid-life career change. Faced with a problem in establishing stable clusters of motives for career change, we next analyzed our data to determine if there were identifiable groups of changers within our sample.

In order to examine different types of changers, we adapted the typology developed by Murray et al. (1971), who dichotomized respondents by amount of pressure from self and external pressure from the environment to make a career change. The Murray typology was developed to include both persons who had made a career change and those whose careers were stable, while the present sample includes only men who had made actual changes. The men in our sample did differ in the degree to which they felt external pressure to leave their former jobs, as well as the amount of personal desire to make a change.

Respondents were asked to indicate the amount of external pressure placed on them to leave their former job, and the extent to which they personally desired to make a career change, by checking a Likert-type intensity scale ranging from 1 (strong influence to remain) to 10 (strong pressure to change). Scores were dichotomized for each variable (cutting point for external forces was 4.5, and 5.5 for personal desire for change). The typology resulting from placing individuals in quadrants based on these scores is presented in Table 1. Since all of the men in our sample had in fact changed jobs, the names of the quadrants were retitled from those used by Murray et al. (their titles are given in parentheses).

Individuals who experienced low external pressure to leave their former careers, and who were not really highly motivated to leave them either, were designated "Drift-outs," to indicate the discretionary nature of their change. Those who were under equally low external pressure to leave, but were themselves highly motivated to change, best fit what is typically thought of as "Drop-outs." Since most of the men we talked with insisted they weren't "dropping out" of anything, but were moving

TABLE 1
Typology of Career Changers

		Pressure from self to change	
		Low	High
Pressure from environment to change	Low	"Drift-outs" 17 (Routine) ^a	"Opt-outs" 12 (Self-determined)
	High	"Force-outs" 25 (Situation-determined)	"Bow-outs" 19 (Accommodation)

^a Titles in parentheses are those used by Murray *et al.* (1971) in their original formulation of this typology.

to something they wanted to do more (Thomas *et al.*, 1976), we decided to designate this group as "Opt-outs." Men who were unmotivated to change careers, but were under external pressure to change, were characterized as "Force-outs," while those who were under high internal and external pressure to make a change were labeled "Bow-outs."

When respondents in the quadrants were compared, they were found to differ significantly on a number of variables, both in terms of background and in motivations for career change. Force-outs were found to have had the least amount of education in preparation for their first career, while Bow-outs had the highest amount of prior education. Likewise, the Force-outs were least likely to utilize formal education in pursuing their career change, with only 20% undertaking further education. The Opt-out group, on the other hand, most frequently utilized formal education in preparing for a change, with a full four-fifths of this group reporting some such educational experience.

The groups were found to differ significantly also in the amount of time they took considering their change in careers before actually doing it. Not surprisingly, the Force-out group took the shortest time, with a majority (60%) taking less than six months to make the decision. The Drift-outs were least likely to make their decisions in so short a time, with only 18% taking six months or less.

As a measure of radicalness of career change, former and subsequent career titles were transformed from DOT (*Dictionary of Occupational Titles*) codes to Holland work environment designations (Holland, 1973), utilizing the transformation procedure (Method II), devised by Viernstein (1972). Finally, degree of congruence between old and new work environments was determined by means of the Zener-Schnuelle Index (cf. Robbins *et al.*, 1978, for complete description of the Procedure).

Of the four groups, the Force-outs were found to make career changes involving the most radical change in work environments, while the changes made by the Bow-out group involved the least radical changes. Interestingly, the Bow-out group, which showed the least radical departure from their old careers, indicated the least desire of any of the groups to remain in the same career through the next five years. Only 32% would want to be doing the same job in five years, whereas 82% of the Opt-outs indicated they would want to be engaged in the same job five years hence.

When the groups were analyzed for the reasons they gave for making career changes, the Force-outs were again found to differ significantly from the other groups on several variables. They were least influenced by a desire for greater achievement, and least influenced by the desire for more congruence between personal values and their work. Of all the groups, individuals in the Bow-out quadrant were most motivated by the desire for greater achievement. The Opt-out group was most motivated by a desire to harmonize values and work, with all of them indicating that this factor played a large part in their decision.

Table 2 summarizes the results of these comparisons. The Force-out quadrant immediately stands out as the most distinct of the four groups. This is not surprising, since this group of men were clearly less in external control of the change in their careers while showing the least internal motivation to change. Having the least time to achieve their change, they made less use of education, and were apparently forced into careers more different from their former fields than the other men in the sample. The picture that emerges is of relative "losers," who are more like their blue-collar job-change counterparts than they are like the other respondents in this sample.

The other group experiencing external pressure to leave former jobs, the Bow-outs, was also distinct. They were the most highly educated, the most motivated by a desire for achievement, and made the least radical career changes. The picture that emerges is that of the more conventional businessman, seeking to maximize his advancement by changing careers when doors appeared closed in one area. It is interesting that this group was the least satisfied with their new careers.

The Drift-outs were least distinguishable of all the quadrant types, resembling the Opt-outs more than the other quadrants which experienced external pressure to change. The Opt-outs were unique in several respects: they were all influenced by a desire to find a better fit between values and work, almost all of them undertook further formal education to make their change (80%), and finally as a group they were most satisfied with their new careers. This profile comes closest to the image of the "corporate drop-out" that has been pictured in the popular media, it might be noted.

TABLE 2
 Characteristics of Various Types of Career Changers^a

"Drift-outs"	"Opt-outs"	"Force-outs"	"Bow-outs"
		Most radical change in career	Least radical change in career
	Most satisfied with career change		Least satisfied with career change
		Least previous education	Most previous education
	Most additional education	Least additional education	
Took longest time to make the change		Took least time to make the change	
	Most influenced by values	Least influenced by achievement	Most influenced by achievement
		Least influenced by values	

^a All indicated differences are significant at the .05 level, or beyond (using the χ^2 statistic).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

These data indicate that it is a mistake to lump all mid-life career changes together. First it is necessary to distinguish whether an individual's prior occupation was at the lower status blue-collar level, or at the professional or managerial level. The factors leading to individual change from a blue-collar job are known to be principally poor health and being laid off (Parnes et al., 1975), which was not found to be the case with our sample of former managers and professionals.

A second difference between middle-class and working-class mid-career changers lies in their satisfaction with the new job. Evidence from forced career changes among blue collar workers indicates that the effect is often one of physical and psychological deterioration (Slote, 1977). In contrast, men in our sample were overwhelmingly favorable to their career redirection. In response to the question of how they looked on their second career, 62% indicated that it was "very rewarding," and an additional 34% felt that it was "on the whole favorable." Only 4% of our respondents felt that the change was "unfavorable." A similar picture emerges in their responses to the question of what they would like to be doing five years from now: 56% indicated that they would like to be in the same career, 33% would like to be in "the same type of work but with some changes," and only 11% indicated that they would like to be doing "something substantially different" in five years.

Finally, even among managers and professional career changers, there are differences to be found. The present analysis indicates that the extent to which the change was made from internal pressure, and the degree of external pressure exerted on the individual to change, are important variables. The typology generated from dichotomizing these variables produced groups of men with a number of distinct characteristics. To lump them together masks important motivational differences among the men, further indicating how great a mistake it is to treat mid-life career changers as a uniform group.

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