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WORK CAREERS IN MID-LIFE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. THE DILEMMA OF CULTURE AND TIME	5
Culture	6
Culture Over Time: History	7
Time	11
Summary	13
III. MID-LIFE CAREER CHANGES	14
Introduction	14
Methodology	16
Definitions	19
Results	20
IV. GUIDING THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS	29
Personal Themes	29
Environmental Constraints	32
The Case of Mr. A	34
Summary	38
V. CONCLUSION	38
VI. APPENDIX	41
VII. BIBLIOGRAPHY	44

Dowry

SEP 23 1960

## INTRODUCTION

In 1974, 39 year-old housewife Joanie Caucus, of the comic strip "Doonesbury," left her husband and hitched a ride to Walden Commune. By 1978, she had a new career working as a lawyer for the House Committee on Ethics in Washington, D.C. This sequence of events would have been considered bizarre fifty years ago, but today, Joanie is knowingly described as someone who has made a career change after facing a mid-life crisis. In her own words, "I got fed up with the meaningless roles that defined my life" (Trudeau, 1975).

According to numerous accounts published in the last ten to fifteen years, Joanie's case is not unique (Bayer, 1970; Mela, 1977; Stetson, 1971). Stories of housewives turned lawyers, successful executives turned writers, and disgruntled employees "fed up" with twenty year careers have focused an increasing amount of attention on what is going on during this time called mid-life. In this paper I will examine the factors that influence adaptive decisions individuals make during their middle years.

The idea of mid-life as a special time in adult lives is fairly recent. After a long history of studies limited to childhood and adolescence, developmental psychologists became interested in the entire human life span. Although several groups of theories have emerged from this stream of traditional psychological research, the life stage theories are the only comprehensive attempt to explain behavior throughout the life span. Life stage theories support the notion that lives can be best understood by dividing them up into segments, each with identifying characteristics. Levinson (1978) discusses the idea of seasons: "A series of periods or stages within the life cycle." He further describes a season as a relatively

stable segment of the total life cycle, each season being different from those that precede or follow it. Gould (1972), in concluding remarks on the adult period of life, says, "...there is strong evidence that a series of distinct stages can be demarcated." His later work (1978) describes four major phases of adulthood, each characterized by changes in the individual's consciousness caused by challenging a specific false assumption. For example, the major false assumption challenged during mid-life is that "There is no evil or death in the world. The sinister has been destroyed." Erikson (1950) describes the eight basic ages of man, each marked by a set of developmental ego qualities. He states that these qualities, for example, the "generativity" of adulthood, are the criteria by which people show they have achieved specific stages in the basic timetable of the human life cycle. Vaillant (1978) uses a slightly modified version of Erikson's approach. Kohlberg (1973) examines seven stages of moral development people pass through. These stages are based on the belief that "moral change is clearly a focal point for adult life...our theory of moral stages would be consistent with the notion that such changes represent moral-stage change." Finally, Sheehy (1976) remarks in the popular literature that "A developmental stage...is defined by changes that begin within." She claims that individuals observe these changes in four areas of perception: "...the interior sense of self in relation to others; ...the proportion of safeness to danger we feel in our lives; ...our perception of time; and a...shift at the gut level in our sense of aliveness or stagnation."

In their treatment of the life stage concept, these theories share several explicit and implicit assumptions. Explicitly, they are psychological theories, in that, even though some mention the impact of external factors, they are primarily concerned with describing changes

within the individual. Second, they view life stages as completely different from one another. Thus a man in Levinson's "early adult" era is clearly distinguishable from a man in the "middle adult" era. And third, they assume that life stages are tied to specific age spans; for example, if adolescence exists, it always occurs between the ages of 14 and 19.

Implicitly, they assume that all individuals go through the same life stages; for example, a miner in Appalachia experiences the same developmental stages as an affluent lawyer in Washington. Finally, they assume that life stages are permanent; for example, adolescence is, always was, and always will be a life stage.

Not surprisingly, all life stage theories include a mid-life stage. Although not all theories agree on precisely what characteristics differentiate mid-life from other life stages, a typical description follows. Mid-life is a time when individuals simultaneously face changes in their family lives and in their careers. Issues apt to surface during this life period are a more certain knowledge of the degree of career success attainable, a feeling of job entrapment, a change in family relationships as children leave the home, and an acute awareness of physical aging and death. It has been suggested that these issues generate sufficient stress to induce an upheaval in adult lives (Brim, 1976; Gutmann, 1976; Hall, 1976; Molander, 1976; Schein, 1978), a disturbance which has led to coining the phrase "mid-life crisis" (Jaques, 1965). Evidence for the existence of such a crisis is found in reports of increasing psychosomatic illness (Anshin, 1976; Levinson, 1969; Soddy, 1967) and suicide (Carey, 1978; Jaques, 1965).

The management literature has shown particular concern for the problems of managers facing mid-life issues and crises (Constandse, 1972; Figler, 1978; Hill, 1973; Kets de Vries, 1978; Levinson, 1969; Schultz, 1974). As Kay (1974)

states in his book on middle management: "...the midlife crisis has great significance in that it is indicative of a phase of life through which many middle managers are or shortly will be passing....We can no more deny the existence of a midlife crisis than we can adolescence."

The idea of mid-life as a special time has become so popular that newspapers and magazine articles often refer to it as an "understood" explanation for adult behavior (Cerra, 1979; Pauley, 1978; Rogers, 1973). For example, in a recent New York Times article, Stevens (1979) describes former Representative Barbara Jordan's 1977 decision to leave politics as a decision "that many another 43 year old caught up in a mid-life transition might recognize."

This concern with mid-life has particular importance in the world of work, where the Horatio Alger ethic is still embedded in the philosophy of organizational careers. This 19th century version of the successful American worker depicts the young hero who goes from rags to riches at an early age and then lives happily ever after. However, acceptance of the notion that careers end "at an early age" is belied by the popularity of articles on mid-life.

Traditional assumptions concerning work careers, which are frequently monolithic, can no longer provide a framework for career structures sufficiently flexible to meet the joint needs of employees and the organizations for which they work (Beckhard, 1972). For example, the conventional measure of career success in America is position on the organizational ladder. This means that there is only one way to be successful at work: an individual must aspire to advance "onward and upward forever" (FERENCE, 1977). Organizations use this measure because competition for a limited number of high positions gives



them a large pool of recruits from which to select executives. However, this large pool of recruits eventually becomes a large pool of capable employees who did not make it to the top. The perception of failure these individuals are likely to feel, whether or not they desired to advance, is detrimental to themselves and to the continuing contributions they can make to the organization.

I believe that the conflict between changing employee needs and organizational constraints can only be resolved by developing pluralistic career structures. This means that organizations need to officially sanction and reward individuals for pursuing a wide variety of career paths. One example is Hall's (1976) description of the legitimization of downward transfers. In order to determine what structures are appropriate to meet the needs of both employees and organizations, a more thorough understanding of adaptation during the middle years is necessary.

In this paper I will examine the description of mid-life that has evolved from the life stage theories. First, the dilemma of the life stage theories, that fixed "stages" can always describe behaviors influenced by changing environments, will be discussed. Second, an interview study designed in light of this dilemma to examine the relationship between mid-life issues and mid-life crisis, with an emphasis on individuals who have made career changes, will be presented. Finally, the factors influencing career change decisions will be explored.

#### THE DILEMMA OF CULTURE AND TIME

A second approach to the study of the life span comes from a group of what I call interactional theories. These theories focus on understanding the process of interaction between individuals and their environments. The complexity of this process is such that comprehensive theories of life span behavior do not yet exist; theorists are only in the stage of developing

"metatheories" (Baltes & Willis, 1977). Even so, the groundwork provided by these researchers questions some of the basic assumptions made by the life stage theorists about culture and time.

### Culture

In an article discussing the methodological implications faced in studies where aging is a factor, Kuhlén (1963) cites findings clearly implying that attitude changes were not the result of aging, as originally thought, but of cultural change. Neugarten (1968, 1976) has identified consistent cultural expectations of "acceptable" age-related behavior. She discusses the impact of social/cultural age norms on the way individuals perceive their progress through life and suggests that the idea of being behind one's time or ahead of one's time may have a powerful influence on behavior. For example, the man or woman who has not married by the age of 35 may feel that he or she is somehow behind schedule. Bengtson, Kasschau, and Ragan (1977) discuss the notion that social structure, represented by socioeconomic status, ethnic group membership, and sex, has a direct impact on patterns of aging. And, Cohler and Lieberman (1979) have examined the impact of ethnicity on the behavior of individuals passing through mid-life. They found that what they call the "mode of personality change with age" clearly differentiates members of an Irish sample from corresponding individuals in Polish and Italian groups.

These studies suggest that life stages observed by researchers are determined not only by the life issues basic to life stage theories, but by cultural norms and environmental constraints as well. In addition, they imply that some factors that influence human behavior change with time, raising the possibility that life stages are also time dependent.

### Culture Over Time: History

To be specific, if our perceptions of life stages are dependent on culture, then as culture changes, perceptions of life stages are also likely to change. The ebb and flow of culture can only be observed by examining mid-life from an historical perspective. Although mid-life issues may be shared by many individuals in modern times, it is possible that such issues simply did not arise during earlier periods in American history (Demos, 1977). For example, before the widespread use of effective contraceptives most parents had young children in the house through their fifties, thus postponing the "empty nest syndrome" until their late fifties and sixties. Also, without modern medical technology people commonly experienced the deaths of family members and friends throughout their own lives, probably reducing the impact of a sudden "awareness of mortality." Finally, feelings of job entrapment may be the result of living in a modern society in which there are many career choices. Limited job options and expectations in early American life may have reduced the decision making stress felt by those who have many alternatives. As these issues have changed in the past, they may well change in the future. An example is suggested in "Going" (Silverberg, 1974), a science fiction story that describes a future time in which death need not be contemplated until one tires of living. Each individual chooses his or her own appropriate time to "go." Clearly, the life issue of facing one's approaching death, considered an important element in our current understanding of mid-life, would have no meaning in such a world. As long as life stages are defined by culture-bound life issues and only coincidentally linked to age, it seems inevitable that as life styles change life stages will change also.

The likelihood of a relationship between currently observed life stages and historical change is reinforced by an examination of changes in perceptions

of the pace of life. This perception of pace tells people what the normal speed of events "should be." In our modern industrialized society, we seem to divide our lives into smaller and smaller units of time. Age categories used by the Census Bureau provide some pertinent information. In 1790, the year of the first U.S. census, a population count was made of white males in two categories, under and over 16 years of age. When coupled with the information that people during that time often did not know or care how old they were (Demos, 1977), a picture emerges of a population that had very little interest in, or use for, subdivisions in age. It was not until 1880, nearly 100 years later, after a major war and the industrial revolution of the country, that the census noted yearly increments in age for the entire population.

Changes in the pace of life can also be discovered by examining attitudes towards work. The Puritans always maintained the importance of hard work as one of the most important duties of a true Christian, thus defining what later became widely accepted as the fundamental characteristic of a stable and upright citizen. Children were admonished with sayings like "An idle mind is the Devil's playground," and taught the importance of diligence in daily life. But how busy was a hard-working person? It is hard to believe that people in early America lived by the clock in an effort to get an honest day's work done, particularly when household clocks were not common until the end of the 1830's and pocket watches not until the Civil War. When so much of time passed by unreckoned it is doubtful that Benjamin Franklin's statement, "Time is money," meant the same thing to him as it did two centuries later to Frederick W. Taylor (Rodgers, 1978).

Finally, it is interesting to note that as attention has turned to understanding the adult life span, theoretical subdivisions have become more

and more narrowly defined, from Keniston's (1970) suggestion that a new stage of "youth" be considered, to Neugarten's (1974) suggestion that old age be divided into those who are "old old" and those who are "young old." Changes in the pace of life are likely to have had a significant effect on how life stages are perceived. As a result, adults in 17th century America are apt to have viewed their lives with very different spectacles from the ones used today.

In order to explore the impact of culture and history on understanding mid-life, two 17th century diaries were selected for examination. Diaries were used because they are first hand accounts of lives as opposed to the retrospective stories told in autobiographies. In order to control for historical time period, a "target" period of ten years, 1695-1705, was studied. The two individuals selected were both from the same area in New England and represent members of an elite group in the Boston area. Samuel Sewall (1652-1730), was one of the judges at the Salem witch trials and was related by his child's marriage to one of the early governors of Massachusetts. Cotton Mather (1663-1728), the second diarist, was one of the famous Mather ministers, a prolific writer, and minister of the North Church in Boston. During the target years, each of these individuals was in the mid-life period, with Cotton Mather representing the younger decade, ages 32-42, and Samuel Sewall, the older decade, ages 43-53.<sup>(1)</sup>

Several observations on the lives of these diarists support the proposition that issues of mid-life are culture-bound and present themselves in different ways to people in different historical time periods. As already indicated, the normative family cycle was significantly affected by the

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(1) Matthew's (1959) annotated bibliography of published American diaries was very useful in diary selection. The Mather (1911) and Sewall (1878) diaries were obtained from Boston area libraries.

difference in the birth rate in colonial times, and it is evident that these men did not experience the mid-life empty nest syndrome. Instead of the gaps between generations experienced in modern times, these colonial families experienced a great deal of continuity. Samuel Sewall had fourteen children born at regular intervals between the time he was 25 and 50 years old, and Cotton Mather had fifteen children. As shown in the following quotations, Samuel Sewall at age 44 was simultaneously concerned with the approaching adulthood of his eldest son and the death of a young daughter.

Kept a Day of Fasting with Prayer for the Conversion of my Son, and his settlement in a Trade that might be good for Soul and body. I am very sorrowfull by reason of the unsettledness of my Samuel. (January/February 1696) Samuel Sewall, Jr., Age 17.

This day I remove poor little Sarah into my Bed-Chamber, where about Break of Day December 23 she gives up the Ghost in Nurse Cowell's arms. (December 1696) Sarah Sewall, Age 2.

Certainly the colonists had much more experience with death than individuals in modern times and the difference lies primarily in the death rates of children and mothers in childbirth.<sup>(2)</sup> Nine of Sewall's fourteen children died during his lifetime and only two of Mather's children survived him. The two diarists exhibit a fascination with death, and apparently this attitude was not uncommon at the time (Vinovskis, 1978). Both diaries report many deaths, yet few marriages and births are recorded, except for those in the family. This is particularly noteworthy in the diary of a minister, who certainly was involved in sacraments of all kinds.

Sickness and death were somewhat mystifying to 17th century Americans. These people did not have access to the medical knowledge of disease and

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(2) Contrary to traditional thought about colonial death rates, after reaching age twenty-one, Americans could expect to live to a ripe old age. In 17th century Plymouth, men had a life expectancy of 69.2 and women 62.4, if they lived past childhood (Vinovskis, 1978).

confidence in treatment so commonplace in the 20th century. Other than describing physical symptoms, Sewall and Mather were constrained to a limited vocabulary to describe all ills. For example, people were said to have "convulsions," a bad "flux," "cholic," or a "sickly disorder." It is no wonder that although doctors and nurses were called in to heal the sick, the alternatives of getting well or dying were considered to be in the hands of God. The following is Cotton Mather's description of the illness and subsequent death of his mother-in-law.

My Wife's Mother, took her Bed, very sick of a Feavour, that Night... Shee dyed, on the Friday Night, about ten o'clock. Now I count it a singular Favour of God unto mee, (and it might bee so unto her!) that tho' shee were delirious the first Night of her Illness, yett shee had the free Use of Reason, all the rest of her little Time. And hereby, I enjoy'd an Opportunity for two Dayes together, to talk with her, and pray with her, and do all that it was possible for mee to do, in assisting her, about the great Acts of resigning her Spirit unto the Lord. (February 1698)

Given these different attitudes and experiences it seems likely that the mid-life issue of one's awareness of approaching death was perceived differently by individuals in 17th century America.

### Time

Such historical examples confirm that both culture and time are important in understanding human lives. In opposition to the segmented temporal perspective of life stage theories, interactional theories are based on the proposition that "there exist basic social and psychological processes that are serially dependent and continuous throughout the life span" (Maddox & Wiley, 1976). The biological odometer which starts at birth and ends with death is part of the basic nature of human life, and each portion of the life journey is to some extent determined by the previous sections. The idea of life as an evolution of experiences is often called adult development, and serves as a second major assumption that distinguishes

the life stage from interactional theories. Such a notion is developmental in the sense that each new experience in a life is not isolated, but built on the total body of experiences to which the individual already has access. This does not imply that as individuals grow older they necessarily grow better or that they make substantive changes in their personal orientations towards life. It only means that lives can not be understood merely by photographing them at a particular moment. They must be understood within the cumulative experience of the individual.

An example which describes the importance of understanding "lives in progress" is the old fable in which the tortoise and the hare compete in a race, the tortoise plodding slowly and steadily towards the finish line and the hare alternately running in quick energetic bursts and sleeping by the roadside. If one takes a "biographical picture" at the end of the race, one would see the tortoise with fresh laurel leaves on his head, heralded as the winner. Given this picture and our cultural expectations, we may make certain assumptions concerning the behavior of the tortoise. We may assume that he is a go-getter, a mover, and an outgoing personality. Our assumptions are likely to suffer a considerable jolt when we learn something about the behavior of our competitors earlier in the race. In this case, it is very difficult to make inferences concerning what makes a winner and what makes a loser unless behavior during the entire race is taken into consideration.

Bailyn's (1978) discussion of career trajectories is relevant to our interest in mid-life adaptation patterns and work. Her model describes two different career paths, the Challenge/Success model, and the Apprenticeship model, which in the short run have very different characteristics, but in the long run obtain similar results. In the Challenge/Success model,



individuals are promoted rapidly throughout the early portion of their careers. Although early work is very promising, an individual in this model may reach a plateau at a specific level and remain there for fifteen years. In the Apprenticeship model, an individual makes slow, steady progress up the corporate ladder. By age 50, both may have reached the same level. Even though the outcomes of these two career strategies are identical, it seems likely that if one took a biographical picture of the employee's perceptions of career success, the images would look very different. The first individual is likely to express frustration and failure from the plateauing effect, while the second individual may describe feelings of success at having moved up another small rung in the organizational ladder. Unless we examine the trajectories of entire lives, interpreting how people adapt to the events in their lives is difficult.

### Summary

To summarize, culture and time pose major challenges to the life stage theories. On one level, research on social/ethnic differences has indicated that culture influences how people live their lives and make life transitions. At another level, historical evidence indicates that culture changes over time, implying that life stages are true only for the specific sample and time period in which they are constructed. Finally, when considering the time dimension alone, the two groups of theories offer a very different perspective. Life stage theories imply separate, delineated time segments, while the interactional view states that lives must be observed in the light of the totality of all experiences.

To be fair to the life stage theorists, many have admitted these difficulties, although they still consider them secondary to the importance

of observed life stages. For example, Gould (1978), in his recently published book Transformations, says:

These phases of life are determined to some extent by age-linked cultural roles dictated by our society and by the individual evolutionary work each one of us has accomplished in the preceding phases of his or her own life. Therefore, in each particular sub-culture in this country, there will be a particular mix of forces at work to move the timetable of potential challenges forward or backward. Although the ages given for the four phases are approximate, they fit a very large segment of the population.

#### MID-LIFE CAREER CHANGES

All of this creates some difficulty in knowing the best perspective to use in understanding patterns of adaptation during mid-life. To further examine this question, I chose to study career changes, a single occurrence in the lives of middle aged individuals that is likely to highlight the differences between the life stage and interactional approaches.

Making a career change is clearly an adaptational decision--but adaptation to what? The life stage theorists would have us believe that mid-life is a time of crisis and that some people resolve that crisis by changing careers. The interactional theorists would tell us that career changes are only one event over time in a life and must be understood within the context of individuals' life experiences.

Because a group of individuals who have made mid-life career changes will allow us to look at both approaches as well as provide us with a group of people who have recently thought about what was going on in their lives, this group provides an ideal sample for trying to see which of the two approaches best explains the career change phenomenon.

#### Introduction

At this time, little is known about what is involved in mid-life

career changes. The number of speculative discussions of mid-life career change far exceeds the number of empirical studies. Those studies which have been done focus primarily on describing the characteristics of those who make career changes (Clopton, 1973; Driskill & Dauw, 1975; Haug & Sussman, 1967; Sheppard, 1971; Thomas et. al., 1976) and examining the reasons why people make career changes (Clopton, 1973; Driskill & Dauw, 1975; Hiestand, 1971; Osherson, 1976; Roe & Baruch, 1967; Thomas, 1977).

In these studies, career change is viewed as an event whose etiology is specific to mid-life, thus using the life stage approach. Many of them examine the reason or set of reasons articulated by the individual that results in the career change. This is most frequently obtained by asking individuals to specify reasons on a questionnaire or through direct questions in an interview. Although individuals give different reasons for making career changes, the researchers assume that mid-life crisis promotes the change of attitudes or discontent that leads to the career change. Since resolution of the mid-life crisis brings a new approach to life, the new career is expected to be symbolic of the individual's change in outlook, and therefore a radical departure from the interests and desires that characterized the first career.

Career changes have not been studied using the interactional approach; however, preliminary interviews suggest the following description. Career changes do not occur overnight. An art director does not sit up in bed one morning and decide to become an engineer. Career change appears to be a process that occurs in a particular context over a period of time. Context refers to the specific work, family, and cultural environments that affect individuals throughout the process of career change. Process refers to the sequence of events that characterize a career change. The process of career

change seems to include a period of reassessment during which the career change decision is made, a transition period during which the new job and/or new qualifications are sought, and a final period of socialization into the new career. These recall the three stages described in Lewin's (1947) theory of change: unfreezing, moving, and freezing.

The differences between these two interpretations--career change as an event caused by reasons and career change as a process that occurs in a particular context--are the elements of culture and time. The life stage interpretation is static. Events and reasons are examined at a single time and often without regard to the significant environments in the individual's life. The developmental approach is dynamic, considering events and reasons both over time and within a context.

### Methodology

In order to study individuals who have made mid-life career changes, interviews covering personal and career histories were conducted with ten individuals. Using interviews as the data collection technique offers several advantages. Since this is an exploratory study, the categories people use to describe their lives can be evoked from subjects rather than being prescribed through the use of a questionnaire. Moreover, interviews are the only way to obtain detailed information concerning entire lives short of information collected in a longitudinal study. However, interviews also pose limitations. They do not provide information from the relevant social environments of the subjects and since these interactions can not be observed, we can only draw indirect implications as to their importance in understanding the cases. Also, assessing the accuracy of retrospective data is difficult. As suggested by Weick (1969), people see the past through the "here and now," singling out those things that fit in with their current

perspective. Indeed, Vaillant & McArthur's (1972) experience with the Grant Study subjects, who have been studied longitudinally over a thirty to forty year period, confirms that not only do people selectively remember past events, they sometimes reconstruct them. For these reasons, any results must be interpreted with care.

Subjects were selected on the basis of recent career changes using a non-random selection process. Several individuals were recommended by friends, one individual heard about the study and volunteered to be a subject, and others were located through calling various agencies likely to have worked with individuals who had made career changes. In order to cover the years generally included in the mid-life period by both life stage and interactional theories, mid-life was defined as the middle period in the present human life span, ages 35-55.

All of the individuals who participated are currently between the ages of 35 and 55 and made their career changes during mid-life. Preference was given to subjects whose career changes were made within the last several years since preliminary interviews suggested that the more distant the experience, the more difficult it was for the individual to remember what it had been like. Other criteria for selection were diversity in original work careers and a balance of men and women. Representatives from such diverse careers as priest, retail clerical worker, and manager were obtained and the final sample included five men and five women. (See Table 1 for a complete list of the occupations and career changes of the subjects.) A heterogeneous sample was considered advantageous because it emphasizes differences, making any similarities observed all the more important to a general understanding of mid-life.

Following an initial telephone contact during which the nature of

Table 1  
Mid-life Career Change  
Interview Sample  
Ordered by Age at Beginning of Transition

SUBJECT	CAREER CHANGE		TRANSITION PERIOD		AGE AT INTERVIEW	MARITAL STATUS
	Old	New	Age at Beginning	Age at Total No. of Years End		
Ms. J	Public School Librarian and Administrator	Writer	47	50	50	M <sup>(1)</sup>
Mr. B	District Sales Manager in a large company	Community Relations Director in a small public hospital	46	51	52	M
Mr. C	President and Owner of a small business	Career Counselor	45	48	49	M
Ms. G	Clerical Worker in a retail store	Custodian	44	46	46	S
Mr. A	Jesuit Priest	University Administrator	43	44	45	M
Ms. H	Supervisor of Clerical Workers	Foreman	38	38	41	S
Ms. F	Housewife	Personnel Representative in a plant in a large company	38	38	39	M <sup>(2)</sup>
Ms. K	Housewife	College Administrator for Fund Raising/Corporate Development	37	38	41	M
Dr. D	Project Manager in a small industrial consulting firm	Professor of Business Administration	36	40	48	M
Dr. E	Professor of Physics at a small college	Musician	35	35	42	M

(1) Second marriage

(2) Separated

the study was explained, each individual was interviewed at a place of his or her convenience. Nine of the ten subjects were interviewed twice, with the second interview usually separated from the first by a few weeks. The tenth subject was out of town during the period of the second interview. The first interview was not structured and subjects were asked to relate information concerning their family and career histories, usually in chronological order. The second interview was used to ask questions evolving out of the first interview. Each interview, lasting approximately one to two hours, was taped and transcribed for use in the analysis. In addition, subjects completed a short questionnaire giving demographic information on their families and careers (see Appendix).

### Definitions

For this study, career change is defined as a job move in which the second job does not belong in the normal career progression of the first. Specifically, this refers to people who not only change jobs, but actually change the entire occupational focus of their work. For example, a physicist who becomes a bricklayer changes careers, whereas an engineer who becomes a manager does not, since becoming a manager is in the career path of many engineers.

Discussing career changes raises the question of how to define a career path. There are two ways to do this. One way is to use society's description of how people progress in their work, and the other is to use the individual's perceptions of progress (Van Maanen & Schein, 1975). Because the subjects in this study were selected prior to the interviews, an outside assessment of their changes in career paths had to be used as the basis for selection.

The term crisis is defined here as a situation in which people perceive

there has been a dramatic upheaval in their lives. An internal crisis results from changes within the individual, and to some extent, individuals feel they have control over such changes. For example, the life stage approach suggests that a voluntary career change is the result of an internal crisis. People reach a certain point in their lives, experience a crisis of conflict in their innermost feelings, and resolve the crisis by changing careers. An external crisis results from events outside the individual that often occur without warning. In this case, individuals do not feel they have control over these events. An involuntary career change, for example, would be the result of an external crisis. A person gets fired from one job and must find another.

Significantly, the definitions used in this study are tied to a cultural and historical perspective. For example, society's current definition of a specific career change may no longer be considered a career change in the future. In fact, the assumption that Joanie Caucus' transition from housewife to lawyer is viewed by American society as a career change may be stretching the definition even now. Certainly as the housewife-to-paid-labor-force transition becomes more and more common, society will redefine that transition as a career path. Another example is the term mid-life. Right now, mid-life refers to the middle years of an average life. But what happens if the life expectancy is 140 and subjects of 35-55 are considered young upstarts? The point is that although the definitions themselves may remain stable over time, the groups defined by those definitions do not:

## Results

Three propositions suggested by the life stage approach are examined in this study: 1) Mid-life career changes are the outcome of the resolution



of a mid-life crisis; 2) People in mid-life face specific mid-life issues; and 3) Career changes are best described as events caused by specific reasons.

Proposition 1. This sample of individuals was selected because of the likelihood that their career changes would have been precipitated by crises in their lives. However, two distinctly different patterns of career change emerged from the data: the traditional crisis pattern of career change and a modal non-crisis pattern of career change.

The crisis pattern was observed in only three of the ten cases. Mr. C, the owner of a family business, suffered a severe externally created crisis--one brought on by factors over which he had essentially no control. The crisis, the result of unanticipated difficulties with the Internal Revenue Service, eventually required him to sell his business, forced him to look for new work, and had serious side effects on his home life. Mr. A, the Jesuit priest, was confronted with an internal crisis, a severe disruption prompted by a reevaluation of himself and his relationships with others. This reevaluation involved facing and understanding the death of a brother many years earlier and bringing the emotional side of his life into full expression. Finally, the crisis faced by Ms. G had both internal and external qualities. A retail clerical worker without many family ties, she faced the devastating loss of a lover of eighteen years. The loss itself was an external crisis which came without warning, while the personal reevaluation she faced in the wake of that loss was an internal crisis.

The crisis pattern of career change has many of the expected characteristics of mid-life crisis. In each of the three cases, a personal change preceded the career change. For example, the Internal Revenue Service crisis forced Mr. C to rethink his feelings about himself as a person. "I wasn't infallible. It was a shock. This was a real shock. I learned

not to take myself so seriously....Just let things happen the way they're going to happen and it changed, yah, it changed my outlook all of a sudden--drastically." This "unfreezing" of his former infallible picture of himself finally allowed him to sell the family business and move on to other work.

A second characteristic of the crisis pattern is the transition to the new job. In each case there was a crisis transition. By this I mean that the subjects perceived transitions as abruptly new and different life situations from which there was no turning back. Mr. A was thrust into the secular world during his transition period. "I had nothing specific in mind. And all my finances were cared for by the Jesuits until May, Memorial Day. Then, I was on my own."

Finally, all three of the crisis model subjects were between the ages of 43 and 45 at the time they left their original jobs.

Although the mid-life crisis explanation of career change does seem to apply to the crisis pattern subjects, it is not sufficient to describe the career changes of the non-crisis group. The subjects who fit into the non-crisis pattern of career change had very different characteristics. For these people, the personal change associated with the career change occurred throughout the process of career change. These people explained their career changes in a manner similar to Weick's (1969) observation that we can only know what has happened to us by looking back at it after it has happened. For example, only by taking on a new job with job requirements she had never handled before did Ms. K find out that she loved selling. Although she had already made her career change from housewife to administrator, it was not until she had experienced the new job that she could look back and say that her new career was going to be in sales.

Another characteristic of these subjects is that they perceived

opportunities to change before making the change. Many of the subjects related critical events that precipitated their career changes. Sometimes these came in the form of a person suggesting a certain job option; at other times, they came in the form of a new job opportunity. For example, Ms. H relates the story of how she became interested in becoming a foreman.

So one day, my district manager came and he says, "I think we're gonna have a program on intensive development," and I said, "What's that?" And he said, "Well, I'm going to put women into a non-conventional job, and being a foreman out in the field. Would you like that?" I don't think if he hadn't come to me and said that this was available, I probably wouldn't have asked for it at that time.

In contrast to the crisis model subjects, these individuals had planned transitions to the new careers. Subjects perceived the transitions as involving elements of choice. In effect, these people often had one foot firmly on the beach while they were testing the water to see if they wanted to commit themselves to swimming. A good example of this is Dr. E who knew he was interested in playing professionally as a musician, but wasn't sure how successful he would be. He took a leave of absence from his tenured job as a physics professor at a small liberal arts college and accepted a full-time job in the music world. But, it was only after two successful years in his new work that he finally relinquished the old job.

Proposition 2. The second proposition suggested by the life stage approach is that people in mid-life face specific mid-life issues. As pointed out in the introduction, these issues, as usually stated, are based on the experience of individuals with normative mid-life family and career cycles. For example, the mid-life issue of fear of obsolescence presupposes that individuals are in the middle portion of their career paths. And the empty nest syndrome requires that individuals be married and have had children who are already grown by the middle years of their parents' lives.

Specific mid-life issues emanating from career cycles are difficult to assess in this sample because of the diversity of occupational groups represented. Family cycles, however, can be examined. The influence of the norms surrounding the family cycle can be seen by examining the eight subjects who have been married (see Table 2). Although the range of ages represented in this sample is from 39-52, several similarities between family cycles can be noted. First, all eight subjects had their first children within the first two years of marriage. Second, three of the five men were married between the ages of 22 and 25,<sup>(3)</sup> and all of the women married between the ages of 22 and 23. With the exception of the one individual who did not start a family until this past year, the individuals who have completed their families all have between two and four children.

However, not everyone lives a normative life. The subjects studied here also provide examples of people unlikely to face the mid-life issues associated with the family cycle. Two of the men interviewed were out of step with the normative family cycle of the other subjects: they married late and still have young children. These men are certainly not faced with empty nest concerns or the transition crisis of young adults leaving the home. Mr. A has a child of six months and Dr. D has children, ages 11 and 13, just entering adolescence. In fact, at the time of the career change, the first subject had no children, and the second's first child was only one year old. These individuals spent considerable time during the interviews talking about their family concerns--of spending time with wife and children

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(3) The two men who did not fit this family cycle, ages 45 and 48, married at ages 33 and 43. One was Mr. A, the Jesuit priest, who was constrained by his occupation from being influenced by a normative family cycle.

Table 2  
Mid-life Career Change  
Family Cycles of Married Subjects  
Ordered Within Groups by Age at Time of Interview

	SUBJECT	CURRENT CAREER	AGE AT TIME OF INTERVIEW	NUMBER OF CHILDREN	AGE	
					In year of marriage	At birth of first child
MEN:	Mr. B	Hospital Administrator	52	4	23	32
	Mr. C	Career Counselor	49	3	22	33
	Dr. E	Musician	42	4	25	32
Non-normative Cycle	Dr. D	Business Professor	48	2	33	37
	Mr. A	University Administrator	45	1	43	?
WOMEN:	Ms. J	Writer	50	2	23 <sup>(1)</sup>	28
	Ms. K	College Administrator	41	3	22	31
	Ms. F	Personnel Representative	39	3	22	32

(1) First marriage

and watching their children grow. While other subjects were certainly concerned with their families, the accommodation to family was particularly marked in the lives of these men.

In addition, two of the women in the sample never married. One might expect that these women would have had close relationships with other members of their families and vicariously experience the family cycle. But neither of them has very close ties with the families of close relatives. Ms. G is on very poor terms with her family and Ms. H feels that although she once wanted to have a large family with many children, her recent experience in visiting her sister's family has convinced her that she made the right decision in not marrying.

The data from this study appear to support Neugarten's (1968, 1976) thesis that "on-time" people are actually better prepared for the transition of dramatic life events, that they are able to plan ahead and are better adjusted. Of the six cases where the subjects were "on-time" in both family and career cycles, only one had a crisis, and that was externally caused. The other five subjects showed remarkably little stress in their career changes. Although this sample is much too small to draw statistical conclusions, it does seem to indicate that being "off-time" is in itself a more difficult issue to deal with in American society than the normal mid-life issues which are said to explain the mid-life crisis.

Proposition 3. The final proposition to be examined is whether it is more useful to examine career changes as events caused by reasons or as a process that occurs within a context over time. The latter approach is clearly supported by the data. The career changes studied here represent the end result of numerous decisions made by subjects, often over the course of several years. People rarely give a "reason" or set of reasons to explain

why they made the career change; rather, they describe it as an evolution. A typical description of the reassessment period in changing careers is given by Ms. F:

How long (ago) when that realization (hit me)? That was probably during three and a half years ago that some point--that I wasn't clear about--it all of a sudden it was a revelation, and I thought I can't stand it. But I think it was sort of (an) evolution process, so it's hard for me to pinpoint it.

The picture of career change as a process included periods of reassessment, transition, and socialization. The distinctions between these three stages were easily seen in the crisis pattern career changes. With the non-crisis cases, the first two stages often occurred simultaneously, with reassessment continuing throughout the transition period. The differences between these two ways of proceeding through the career change correspond with the characteristics of the crisis and planned transitions. Crisis pushes people into the transition from the reassessment period. Since there is no way back, this does not allow people to do further reassessment. The planned transition allows time for the transition to occur while the individual is still reassessing his or her situation since both career options are still open.

An indication of why the "events and reasons" model has been used in most of the literature is suggested by examining the differences between the way men and women present their career changes. Four of the five male subjects had a specific plan of action they followed during the transition period. Women, on the other hand, often had no clear plan. Only one of the five women knew what she was going to do prior to the transition period. This pattern of men having plans for their lives and women not having plans has been observed elsewhere (Wallace, 1979--work in progress) and probably results from the influence of differing cultural expectations on

men and women. Given the logical plans presented by the men and the fact that most previous career change research has used male subjects, it is not surprising that the "events and reasons" approach has appeared appropriate.

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One further finding of interest is that if age at the beginning of the transition is examined for the entire sample, a bimodal age distribution is evident. Five of the ten subjects were between the ages of 35 and 38, while the remaining five were between the ages of 43 and 47 at the time of transition. What is interesting about these two different age groups is the relative time they spent in the transition period (see Table 1). With one exception,<sup>(4)</sup> the younger group is consistent in spending a shorter time in transition than the older group. They all completed the transition in one year or less. The older subjects with one exception, spent between two and five years in transition. This might be attributed in part to the fact that all of the crisis pattern subjects are in the older group. It is possible that these individuals would have longer transitions because they are unable to plan ahead for new jobs prior to the transition period. In fact, two of the three crisis pattern subjects spent over two years in transition.

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To summarize, the crisis model of career change is not supported by the data. The modal pattern of career change in this sample is a pattern in which individuals do not experience crisis in their lives. The life stage approach to mid-life issues and crisis is questioned by the results.

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(4) Dr. D left his old job at age 36 and needed four years to obtain a doctoral degree in order to complete his career change.



Only six of the ten subjects experienced normative mid-life family issues. And, although the mid-life issues/crisis model would suggest that these normative issues create stress in lives, it appeared that "on-time" subjects experienced less stress than "off-time" subjects. Crisis was most prevalent in cases where subjects were both "off-time" and in the second decade of the mid-life period. Finally, career change is best viewed as a process which occurs in a context over a period of time. The "events and reasons" model was insufficient to explain the often complex series of decisions which constituted the career changes reported here. Most likely, the combination of cultural expectations of a man's presentation of himself and the fact that most career change research has used male subjects account for the prevalence of this view.

#### GUIDING THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS

The preceding section opens by asking the question--career change: adaptation to what? It has been shown that mid-life career change is best described as the evolution of a series of decisions. This final section will explore the factors that initiate and guide this decision making process. The data from this study suggest there are two sets of factors that interact in creating the tensions leading to and determining the outcome of career change decisions: personal themes and environmental constraints.

#### Personal Themes

Personal themes, the internal set of factors in this interactional tension, were observed as consistencies in the decisions made over the lives of the ten subjects. Such themes are personal in that they are present with or without reference to career. They pervade the individual's choices in

everyday life at home as well as at work. These personal themes are suggestive of the concept of coherence stated by Magnusson and Endler (1977), "Coherence means that the individual's patterns of stable and changing behavior across situations of different kinds is characteristic for him or her." The coherence of the decision making behaviors related by the interview subjects was striking. Although these subjects had made externally identifiable career changes, it was clear that in all ten cases a direct relationship existed internally between the kind of work they did and enjoyed in the first career and what they chose to do in the second. In fact, many of the subjects spent considerable effort saying that although their career changes looked dramatic, they really were not as dramatic as they seemed. Ms. J, for example, was quite clear that she hadn't really made a change at all.

I guess I feel that, I feel that I didn't make a mid-life change. Well, I'm sort of always changing, and it isn't that I never settled into any one thing, it's I suppose, I have a friend who describes me ... "You would reach out and pull in strands, a strand from here and a strand from there, and you're always kind of weaving a new pattern, and when that new pattern suits you, then you adopt it." And I think that's sort of true about me. It's kind of real. It's not, it's not like I ever made a big mid-life change.

Even in those cases where career change followed a dramatic crisis, where one would most suspect that the new job would be in direct contrast with the old, the new job did not represent a major break with old interests and concerns. An example cited earlier is the case of Mr. C, whose crisis forced him out of a small service-oriented family business and into the job market. Mr. C made several job changes after selling his business. The overt pattern of these decisions was to select jobs that continued to allow him to provide services to people. Moreover, although all of the jobs allowed him to do that, he perceived these various jobs as providing different

measures of satisfaction. Thus, it can be inferred that it was important for Mr. C not only to provide services to people, but to provide services that were congruent with his own beliefs and values about what constitutes "good service." His new job, career counselor, appears to be quite different from the old job as a small business owner. Yet, the continuity of his concern for providing quality services to people remains and is in fact central to his satisfaction with his work.

Consistency was also observed in cases where the career change itself appeared the most dramatic. Dr. E became a musician after being a tenured college physics professor. The most important feature of work for this individual was his ability to be competent at whatever he did. The following is his description of the dilemma of deciding between physics and music.

I mean there were people that'd tell you you were a wonderful musician and so on and so on, but that somehow just wasn't, didn't seem to be enough....I just felt that I knew I could do physics pretty well and that I was able to survive a great deal of sifting and filtering. By the time you get to the stage, up on the stage to pick up your doctorate degree, you've gone through an enormous number of eliminations and you've passed a great deal of tests that presumably tell you something about your ability. So, yah, I had some confidence that I could at least plot myself probably in science whereas I had no real solid information, I felt, about (my competence in) the music business.

Eventually, what allowed this person to make the change was a transition time during which he tested his ability as a musician against the music world, found himself competent, and finally felt good about making the switch.

Personal themes, then, are a critical element in understanding the decision of what kind of career was selected for the career change. They also confirm that career changes are not the end result of a major mid-life shift in orientation. Rather, the notion of personal themes captures the finding in this study that subjects used established patterns of decision making to help them select their new careers.

### Environmental Constraints

The external set of factors in this interactional tension, environmental constraints, has two components. The first component is the person's internalized view of the outside world's expectations of his or her behavior. Individual behavior is influenced by what people think they are expected to do (Thomae, 1970). Perceived normative expectations are individuals' perceptions of what social and cultural norms indicate they should be doing and the age-related expectations of when they should be doing it. For example, Ms. F faced several sets of perceived normative expectations in making her job choices over her lifetime. The most important were those surrounding her role as a woman.

My mother certainly didn't give me emphasis on a career, her emphasis was on getting married and having children and doing that sort of thing. I think that did...influence me to a great degree in my own choice. For me, getting married was...a choice as I saw it...between going off and having some kind of career and/or getting married. I mean I saw that as an either/or decision.

The normative expectations Ms. F saw allowed her only two alternatives of what she could do in her life. Either she became a career woman or she got married and had children. The age-related expectation of when this should happen was that it should occur right after she finished college; indeed, she made her decision at that time. "I got married right after I graduated from college...and I had children very soon." An experience living in India with a culture providing a dramatic contrast to her normative perceptions of life and a return to the changing cultural expectations in the United States allowed Ms. F to reevaluate what she wanted to do with her life. Her perception of the changing normative expectations of a "good mother" allowed her to go to work. Her perception of when she needed to go back influenced the timing of that decision.

It was probably a function of my age too that I wanted to have something different (to start working), you know, having never worked in a professional setting. It was also probably something that I wanted to do before I wouldn't have an opportunity. You know, like I'm going to get past this point and then if I decide that I'd like to go out and be a professional woman, I'm not going to be able to, and everybody's going to say, "Well, you're so old."

A second example of perceived normative expectations is Mr. B who worked as district sales manager for a large company before "retiring" and eventually going to work as community relations director for a small public hospital. Mr. B's perceived normative expectations of a male head-of-household told him what was appropriate behavior for himself. Throughout his life he has felt solely responsible for being the provider for his family. His attitudes towards "providing" are expressed in the following statements:

Well, I guess today you're called a chauvinist, but I wanted to be the provider and I was one of those kooks that if her mother (his wife's mother) gave her like a coat at Christmas, it really bothered me. I wanted to be the one to take care of all her needs.

It was like any other young guy starting a family. It (money) was a necessity. You had to keep hustling and keep improving in order that you could, you know, provide better for your family-- not only immediate needs but the long range needs.

His perceptions of the expectation of providing told him what he had to do to plan for retirement and when it was appropriate to retire. He originally planned to retire at age 50 or 55 and had arranged his finances so that he would be able to provide for his family in a satisfactory manner at that time. When circumstances forced him to consider an earlier retirement at age 46, he was able to adjust to this change without crisis because it did not upset his strong feelings about providing for his family.

I mean I'm sure I didn't plan to retire at 46. I thought I'd retire about 50 or 55. That was my program I started out with so I was four years early on that, but nevertheless, I had planned for this... financially (so) I wasn't concerned.

In both of these cases, the subjects were influenced by their perceptions of the normative expectations of their behavior. Although it is difficult to tell specifically where in the environment these normative expectations come from, Ms. F was certainly influenced by her mother's expectations, and both roles described--woman as wife and mother, and man as the provider--are embedded in the mores of American culture.

The second component of environmental constraints is the objective environment, consisting of the specific policies and procedures characteristic of the social institutions with which individuals are involved. These external characteristics constrain an individual's available behavioral options. For example, they might include the tax laws with their resulting influence on how many children a family might have, promotion policies encouraging more women to attempt to advance in their careers, and employment demand in a particular field.

Because no information was collected from the various environments in which these subjects worked or lived, it is difficult to separate objective environmental constraints from perceived expectations. However, several of the external constraints cited by subjects seem important enough to warrant the inclusion of this component as separate from normative expectations. For example, the tax laws prompted Mr. C's confrontation with the Internal Revenue Service. Mr. A was kept from considering marriage by the celibacy requirement of his religious order. The Equal Opportunity Act required Ms. H's company to institute new promotion policies which allowed her to become a foreman. Finally, Dr. D only went back to school because the new career he chose required the credential of a doctoral degree.

#### The Case of Mr. A

In order to show how these factors interact to produce the tensions

which initiate adaptive decisions, Mr. A's career change will be examined in more detail.

Mr. A is a college administrator. He is 45 years old, has been married for two years, and has a young daughter of six months. He and his wife have just bought their first home and are involved in fixing it up.

Mr. A's personal themes involved several consistent patterns of decision making. By far the most frequently observed pattern focused on stability and security. Other patterns surrounded issues of complexity and detail, challenge, intensity, reflection on life, and intellectual planning.

Mr. A grew up in a Catholic family in a community of several generations of immigrants from Ireland. At the age of five he suffered the traumatic experience of witnessing the death of his brother, who was hit by a truck. The security he needed to help deal with the emotions he felt at that time was not there. Mr. A says that to this day, his parents do not understand the depth of the feelings that were left unresolved for him at that time. The tension between his personal theme of security, the unsettling emotions he was still experiencing, and his perceptions of the normative expectations for his career led him to make the adaptive decision in high school to become a Jesuit.

I think that perhaps my brother's death had a strong emotional influence upon me, making me choose in the first place the career of a Jesuit.

My family situation and my previous grammar school education, the general milieu that I grew up in made that (going into the priesthood) a very reasonable (choice).

After his formal training, he was sent to teach in Baghdad, Iraq. Although over the next years the external environment allowed him few choices about what he would do, when possible, Mr. A always chose positions that involved the maximum amount of reading, reflection, and private study.

He eventually became involved in an administrative position at an American university and split his time between working on his doctoral research in Rome and working as an administrator in the United States. "At that point I didn't wear the two hats simultaneously, I wasn't doing two things at the same time. I was intensely doing one or the other....I'll probably never be as challenged as I was in that period." However, he says, "Towards the end of the second year (of that arrangement), things began to unravel and unwind."

What was happening was that Mr. A was experiencing considerable tension in his life resulting from the concurrent demands of the objective environment and his own personal challenge to reflect on his inner self.

The authorities in Rome were suggesting that I go back to Rome and head up a house that they had there. Another crisis had arisen. They wanted, they wanted me to go, and so I spent a great deal of time quite unsure of whether I was coming or going. However, I had already begun to sit down and do some strong reflecting on my own personal history.

Interestingly, this occurred at a point in his life when his perceived normative expectations of his work had been met.

My thinking says when the question (about dealing with the emotions from his brother's death) was posed, I had accomplished all my goals. I was within two months of my 40th birthday and I would say that the known goals that I had in terms of what you'd have to classify as career development had been achieved.

It can be inferred that the prior fulfillment of the normative expectations surrounding his work relieved Mr. A to consider more carefully the full implications of his personal concerns. In order to deal with these issues, his first decision in the career change process was to "take the summer off" and work on the research for his thesis. "That was sort of, what do you call it, therapy, physical therapy, keeping myself busy while I was trying to deal with the, basically the emotional issues that had arisen that went back to,



well, my brother's death." Second, he returned to New England, "which has always been technically home as well as family home" and worked as an administrator in the Jesuit fund raising office. Third, Mr. A then decided that although his religious beliefs had not changed, he could not express the emotional side of his life within the constraints of the priesthood.

So it wasn't job dissatisfaction (that made him leave the religious order). It was a job challenge that met the personal/emotional challenge. Then it became one, one question and the answer was that the career that I wanted needed to deal, needed to be free to better address the emotional issues of my life and that couldn't be done within the job description of Roman Catholic priest.

Mr. A left the Jesuit order and after a transition of roughly one year in several administrative jobs, finally found in his University position the right combination of intellectual planning, complexity, and challenge that he has always enjoyed in his administrative work.

Mr. A's career change highlights the importance of personal themes and environmental constraints in making adaptive decisions. As in the case of Ms. F, where her perceived normative expectations of being a good wife and mother had to be satisfied before making the career change, it was not until the pressures of Mr. A's career expectations were relieved by having met his goals that he was able to look at other important issues in his life. The additional demands from the objective environment, in the form of a proposed job move, forced him to consider the implications of his personal conflict very carefully. Interestingly, Mr. A then selected secure environments in which to do this; he took the summer off in New York and then moved back to his home in New England. In addition to a supportive environment, Mr. A chose to focus on research and administrative work which he saw as therapeutic activities. It appears that reducing the severity of the tension between personal themes and environmental

constraints helped him make the final career change decision to leave the Jesuit order.

Mr. A's career change from priest to administrator did not change his interests in the intellectual planning, complexity, and challenge that underlie his enjoyment of administrative work. Without the inflexible constraint of his objective environment, his job as a priest, he would not have changed careers at all. Examining the personal themes and environmental constraints in this case emphasizes the significant adaptive components of the career change process Mr. A experienced.

#### Summary

The interaction between factors internal and external to the individual was observed to produce the tensions that resulted in career change decisions. The internal elements of this interaction were the individuals' personal themes, or their consistent patterns of decision making. The external elements consisted of the subjects' perceptions of the cultural and social expectations of their behaviors and the objective constraints of their environments.

#### CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the current model used by life stage theories to understand the adaptive decisions made during mid-life. Consideration of interactional theories and historical data raise questions as to whether the life stage approach gives adequate consideration to the forces of culture and time on influencing behavior.

In order to see which approach is more useful in understanding mid-life, the events surrounding a single occurrence, mid-life career changes, were

studied. The study was based on intensive interviews with ten individuals chosen on the basis of recent mid-life career changes, diversity in original work careers, and sex.

I found that the current life stage approach to explaining career change--based on a sense of crisis surrounding such presumably universal mid-life issues as the fear of death and the finite nature of career success--is not supported. Instead, changes are embedded in an often lengthy process of decision making. This process usually involves no sense of crisis and frequently is not even perceived as a change by the individual concerned. Careful analysis of the cases revealed two sets of factors that both initiated and guided the decisions made during this period. Far from being constant and universal, these factors change with the historical and social context in which people live. I have labeled them as personal themes, or the consistent patterns of decision making which evolved over the life of an individual, and environmental constraints, consisting of 1) an individual's perception of acceptable behavioral options within the domains of family and work and the age-related expectations for those behaviors, and 2) the objective environment, consisting of those external characteristics that constrain the individual's available behavioral options.

In order to test whether these categories form a useful lens for studying the adaptive decisions made during mid-life, additional research with a focus on careers is proposed. A comparison of different age groups in several different organizational environments would permit one to separate the characteristics of different life periods from the environmental norms that encourage specific behaviors. Individuals who had made career changes could be compared with others in their age cohort who had not made changes, in order to understand who makes career changes and why. Subsequent research at five to ten year

intervals with the same sample would then allow me to examine such questions as whether personal themes remain constant over time, or whether people "reconstruct" their lives in retrospect so that they appear consistent. Through this increased understanding of behavior in the adult life span, appropriate and pluralistic career structures can be developed for use in designing organizational careers.

APPENDIX

Mid-Life Career Change Interview Questionnaire

Today's Date \_\_\_\_\_

Mid-Life Career Change

NAME (First, middle, last) \_\_\_\_\_ DATE OF BIRTH \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP CODE \_\_\_\_\_

MARITAL STATUS \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Marriage(s) \_\_\_\_\_ Comments \_\_\_\_\_

Children:	Names	Ages
-----------	-------	------

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

EDUCATION:	No. of Yrs. Completed	Degree Received, Date, Field of Study	Institution (Give location)
------------	--------------------------	--	--------------------------------

High School	_____	_____	_____
-------------	-------	-------	-------

College	_____	_____	_____
---------	-------	-------	-------

Graduate School	_____	_____	_____
-----------------	-------	-------	-------

FAMILY:	Age	Education	Occupation
---------	-----	-----------	------------

Spouse	_____	_____	_____
--------	-------	-------	-------

Father	_____	_____	_____
--------	-------	-------	-------

Mother	_____	_____	_____
--------	-------	-------	-------

Siblings	1. _____	_____	_____
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	2. _____	_____	_____
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	3. _____	_____	_____
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Name \_\_\_\_\_

PAGE TWO

JOB HISTORY (or attach resume)

First Job

Job Title \_\_\_\_\_

Job Description \_\_\_\_\_

Employer \_\_\_\_\_

Date entered employment \_\_\_\_\_ Date ended employment \_\_\_\_\_

Second Job

Job Title \_\_\_\_\_

Job Description \_\_\_\_\_

Employer \_\_\_\_\_

Date entered employment \_\_\_\_\_ Date ended employment \_\_\_\_\_

Third Job

Job Title \_\_\_\_\_

Job Description \_\_\_\_\_

Employer \_\_\_\_\_

Date entered employment \_\_\_\_\_ Date ended employment \_\_\_\_\_

Fourth Job

Job Title \_\_\_\_\_

Job Description \_\_\_\_\_

Employer \_\_\_\_\_

Date entered employment \_\_\_\_\_ Date ended employment \_\_\_\_\_

Fifth Job

Job Title \_\_\_\_\_

Job Description \_\_\_\_\_

Employer \_\_\_\_\_

Date entered employment \_\_\_\_\_ Date ended employment \_\_\_\_\_

Sixth Job

Job Title \_\_\_\_\_

Job Description \_\_\_\_\_

Employer \_\_\_\_\_

Date entered employment \_\_\_\_\_ Date ended employment \_\_\_\_\_

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