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Stress and the Decision to Change Oneself: A Theoretical Model*

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This paper presents a model, drawn from research on stress and on self and identity, of the decision to change oneself. In this model, the impetus for intentional self-change can be provided by a stressor—chronic role strain, a life event, or both. Stressors can implicate the self by generating unfavorable reflected appraisals, threatening competent identity performance, and generating unfavorable social comparisons. Any of these effects can reduce self-efficacy, self-esteem, and sense of authenticity, thus leading to psychological distress. Whether this impetus will lead to a resolve to change oneself is hypothesized to depend on six conditioning factors: 1) the identity-relevance of the stressor, 2) whether one attributes responsibility for a stressor to oneself, 3) awareness of and access to structural supports for self-change, 4) the belief that one can effect self-change, 5) the extent to which the benefits of changing are perceived to outweigh the costs, and 6) social support for self-change. Finally, the decision to change oneself may be precipitated by a critical event that causes persons to view their circumstances differently, usually by influencing one or more of the conditioning factors. Several types of critical events are described.

More than a decade ago, Brim and Kagan (1980, p. 18) wrote, “[W]e know little about how often or how seriously people want to change their character.” Although this statement remains true, the immense popular self-help literature (analyzed, among others, by Benton 1993; Biggart 1983; Simonds 1992; and Starker 1989) suggests widespread interest. This paper defines intentional self-change and then presents a model of the decision to change oneself, drawn from theory and research on stress and on self and identity.

Some literature already has addressed the topic of self-change. In recent years psychological social psychologists, clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, and sociologists (e.g., Cantor and Kihlstrom 1987; Curtis and Stricker 1991; Fein 1990; Gurin 1990; Howard 1991; Markus and Wurf 1987; McNulty and Swann 1991; Prochaska, DiClemente, and Norcross 1992; Viederman 1986) have proposed pathways by which

self-change occurs. This research usually takes the decision to change oneself as a given or starting point. The existing research relating to the antecedents of intentional self-change includes studies of exiting from roles (e.g., Biernacki 1986; Ebaugh 1988; Tuchfeld 1981), seeking treatment for mental problems (e.g., Gurin, Veroff, and Feld 1960; Kadushin 1969; Thoits 1985; Veroff, Kulka, and Douvan 1981), types of intentional self-change (Gurin 1990), and stages of self-change (Prochaska et al. 1991; Prochaska et al. 1992).

Intentional self-change is of sociological interest because it directs attention to the self as agent (also see Thoits 1992b). An announcement of intention to change some aspect of self, made to oneself or to others, increases the likelihood of changing because it represents an acceptance of a new “future” self (Markus and Nurius 1986) that one will act to bring about. Moreover, a public announcement of intended self-change represents a commitment to make the change. Such an announcement implies a “promise” to others; they will watch for the change, leaving the announcer embarrassed if it does not take place. In addition, social identities are involved. Because intentional self-change usually is left undefined, I will define it before presenting a model for the decision to change.

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INTENTIONAL SELF-CHANGE

Intentional self-change is a form of self-affirmation, an "effort to construct a particular kind of self" (Turner 1987, p. 125).¹ It entails intentionally changing some aspect of self-conception, the stable, relatively enduring idea of self (Turner 1968, akin to Burke's [1991] notion of an "identity standard"). In many cases, persons bring their self-conception as well as their self-image, the picture of self that appears in situations (Turner 1968), into line with an "ideal self" or "ought self" (Higgins, Klein, and Strauman 1987). For example, a person may wish to cast off a self-conception as a shy person. In other, probably fewer cases, persons attempt to "lower" their self-conception so that a current or recent self-image will become a less painful affront to it (Turner 1972). For example, a man who could not reconcile his recent divorce with his self-conception as a moral and responsible person attempted to "degrade" himself in order to rid himself of that troublesome self-conception (Willard Waller, cited in Turner 1972).² In less extreme cases, persons decide to change after failing to live up to what they have come to see as an unrealistic self-conception.

To change their self-conceptions, persons might want to change their roles or identities. Alternatively, they might want to change their personal attributes or traits, "more or less pervasive styles of relating to the external world" (Stryker 1987, p. 100) that usually extend across role-identities. Sociologists tend to emphasize the former; psychologists, the latter (Hoelter 1985). Mortimer, Finch, and Kumka (1982) have identified three types of changes in self-conception. First, *structural change* occurs when identities are either added or discarded. For example, one might decide to relinquish a problematic role-identity such as heroin addict (e.g., Biernacki 1986; Ebaugh 1988; Fein 1990). Second, *level change* refers to change in the impor-

tance of a role-identity or in the level of an attribute, without a change in its ranking. For example, one might decide to become more optimistic. Finally, *ipsative change* refers to a change in the ranking of one's role-identities or in "the relative strength of behavioral dispositions" (Mortimer et al. 1982, p. 270). This process entails developing some role-identities or traits and suppressing others. For example, one might decide to become more caring and less competitive.³

Changes in the self-conception sometimes are accompanied by changes in one's appearance (Stone 1962), dress, or body. Methods for changing the body include diet and exercise (e.g., body-building; Fussell 1991). Changes in appearance, dress, or body may announce to others that one is changing oneself; they serve as cues to elicit responses that affirm a changed or changing self.

One's goal is to make a relatively permanent change, which becomes so habitual and so deeply ingrained (Schmidt 1976) that one need not fear reverting to a previous, undesired aspect of self. This point implies that persons must change their behavior as well as their attitudes and beliefs, the changes in behavior must matter to self and to others, and the changes in self-conception and behavior must persist (Rokeach 1985, p. 14). In the absence of behavioral change, persons will not receive support for an altered self-conception. Conversely, behavioral change in the absence of cognitive change is likely to produce cognitive dissonance (Cooper and Cooper 1991). The self-conscious effort required to change and the goal of permanent change distinguish intentional self-change from routine self- and emotion management (described by Thoits 1985).

We also can distinguish deliberately sought self-change from self-change that happens inadvertently and is later rationalized. After discovering that he had become less shy, for example, a man might credit himself, on the basis of selective memory, with having reached a goal of "overcoming shyness." This analysis is concerned with "prospectively" rather than "retrospectively" intentional self-change.

¹ I will not discuss self-limiting affirmations, in which persons choose self-acceptance after deciding that they cannot or will not change themselves (Turner 1987).

² Another type of self-change, which I will not discuss, involves changing one's behavior to make one's self-image congruent with one's self-conception (Turner 1976). In this case, one's self-conception already is congruent with an "ideal" or "ought" self. For example, Tuchfeld (1981, p. 636) quotes a now-sober alcoholic who saw "the drunk that I am" (in others' eyes) as "somebody that isn't me."

³ On the basis of Rokeach (1985, p. 164), we would infer that the more psychologically central is a changed aspect of self, the more strongly that self-change in turn will affect "other, less central yet related" aspects of self, probably resulting in some degree of unintentional self-change.

Finally, intentional self-change can be viewed as one of numerous possible ways of coping with stress. Coping can entail 1) acting directly on the environment or the self to change a stressful situation, 2) redefining a stressor as less threatening or oneself as more able to deal with it, or 3) managing emotions to keep distress within manageable bounds (Menaghan 1983; Pearlin 1989; Pearlin and Schooler 1978). Intentional self-change has elements of all three. Persons must change their behavior as well as their self-conception, they must learn to interpret situations from the standpoint of their changed self, and they must manage their emotions in the process (Piaget and Binkley 1985; Prochaska et al. 1992; Rudestam 1980; Schmidt 1976; Thoits 1985).

A MODEL OF THE DECISION TO CHANGE ONESELF

Figure 1 displays a model of the determinants of the decision to change oneself. The model is divided into four panels labeled A through D. The decision to change oneself (Panel D), as described above, is based on an appraisal of what one can do to cope with stress. The initial impetus to change (Panel A) is provided by a stressor such as chronic role strain or a life event. A stressor can implicate the self by generating unfavorable reflected appraisals, lowering self-perceived competence, or generating unfavorable social comparisons. Each of these in turn can reduce self-efficacy, self-esteem, and sense of authenticity, thus leading to psychological distress.

Whether this impetus leads to a resolve to change oneself is hypothesized to depend on six conditioning factors (Panel B): 1) the identity-relevance of the stressor, 2) whether one attributes responsibility for the stressor to oneself, 3) awareness of and access to structural supports for self-change, 4) the belief that one can effect self-change, 5) the extent to which the benefits of changing are perceived to outweigh the costs, and 6) social support for self-change. Finally, a critical event (Panel C) may precipitate the decision to change oneself.⁴ A critical event causes

persons to view their circumstances differently, usually by raising the level of one or more of the conditioning factors, as shown by the left-pointing arrow. Yet if the additive effect of the conditioning factors is already sufficiently positive, a critical event may not be necessary. In the following sections I present theoretical and empirical support for the model.

THE IMPETUS TO CHANGE ONESELF

Stressors: Life Events and Chronic Strain

In my model, the initial impetus to change is provided by a stressor—a life event, chronic strain, or both. Stressors either make “socioenvironmental demands that tax the ordinary adaptive capacity of the individual” or deny persons “the means to attain sought-after ends” (Aneshensel 1992, p. 16). They can be acute (life events) or chronic. Chronic strains are of five types (Wheaton 1983, pp. 213–14): 1) barriers to achieving life goals; 2) inequitable rewards from roles, in relation to one’s effort; 3) excessive or insufficient demands from the environment; 4) frustration of role expectations; and 5) economic deprivation.

Not all stressors are expected to cause persons to consider changing themselves. Of the universe of stressors, those which involve roles are most important here. Stressors involving roles that have high salience or roles merged with the person should make the self-conception especially problematic because so much of the self-conception is formulated in terms of social roles.

Both life events and chronic strains often involve roles. Many life events entail either losing or acquiring roles. Chronic role strain, a subset of chronic strain, refers to “continuous and persistent conditions in the social environment” that overwhelm “the individual’s capacity to perform adequately in social roles” (Wheaton 1990, p. 210). Types of role strain include role overload, interpersonal conflicts within role sets, interrole conflict,

strain, a generalized belief, and a precipitating factor as precursors of an incident of collective behavior. All are necessary; when all are present, such an incident is likely to occur. The distinctive combination of factors (e.g., type of generalized belief) determines which type of collective behavior occurs. Similarly, Brown and Harris (1978) identified factors that precipitated episodes of depression.

⁴ Ralph H. Turner pointed out to me the possible role of a critical event, on the basis of Smelser’s (1962) value-added model for explaining collective behavior. Smelser posited structural conduciveness, structural

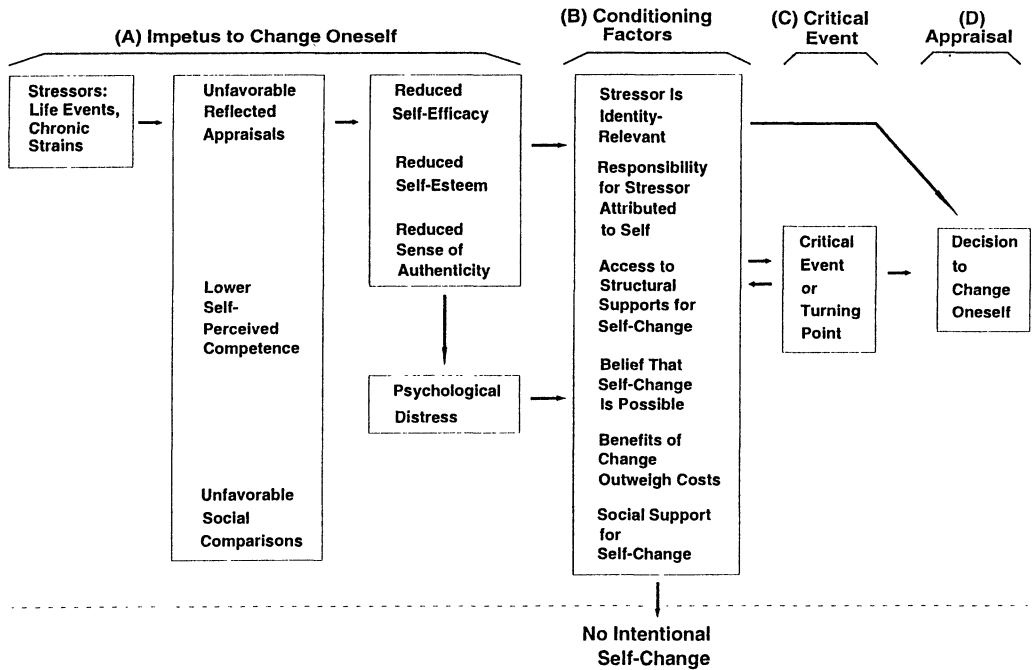


Figure 1. Model for the Decision to Change Oneself

captivity in an unwanted role, and restructuring of continuing roles due to aging or to changing circumstances (Pearlin 1989).

Life events and chronic role strain usually occur together: life events often lead to chronic role strain, and vice versa. Moreover, as Brown and Harris (1978) point out, a single life event (such as losing one's job) can lead to chronic role strain in more than one role-identity. In addition, chronic role strain and life events can provide "meaning contexts" for each other; a life event may cause chronic role strain to be perceived more negatively, or vice versa (Brown and Harris 1978; Pearlin 1989, p. 246; Pearlin et al. 1981, p. 339).

Life events do not always produce psychological distress (Thoits 1991). When negative life events bring relief from prior chronic role problems, for example as when divorce follows marital conflict, they do not damage mental health (Wheaton 1990). In such cases we would not expect self-change to result. In general, the more undesirable, uncontrollable, and unexpected life events are, the greater psychological distress they cause (Thoits 1983).

Life events, however, can lead to the decision to change oneself even if they do not greatly increase psychological distress (as shown by the arrow from reduced self-

efficacy, self-esteem, and sense of authenticity to the conditioning factors). Some life events involve role acquisition rather than role loss, and desired new roles are sources of satisfaction (Thoits 1991, p. 106). Rather than causing harm or loss or posing a threat, role acquisitions may offer challenges, with the potential for gain or growth (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Such life events, however, still could lead one to decide to change oneself if they make the self-conception problematic. For example, becoming a parent for the first time may lead one to decide to become more "responsible."⁵

Finally, stressors are not really exogenous variables: in fact, although the model does not show it, exposure to stressors is influenced by location in social structure. Some stressors are by-products of social organization, as when macroeconomic fluctuations generate widespread unemployment (Aneshensel 1992). Other stressors stem from inequality: women, members of minority groups, the young, and persons of low socioeconomic status are apt to encounter more severe role strain than others (Aneshensel 1992; Pearlin 1989; Turner and Roszell in press). In addition, location in social structure may influence vulnerability to

⁵ I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this insight.

stressors (Aneshensel 1992; Kessler, Price, and Wortman 1985), and it directly influences self-efficacy and self-esteem (Aneshensel 1992; Gecas 1989; Turner and Roszell in press). Higher status confers more resources and greater opportunities for building favorable self-assessments (Gecas and Schwalbe 1983). Nevertheless, although social structure influences many of the variables in my model, a detailed discussion of its effects is outside the scope of this paper.

Reduced Self-Esteem, Self-Efficacy, and Sense of Authenticity

Panel A shows that life events and chronic strains indirectly cause psychological distress by reducing self-efficacy, self-esteem, and sense of authenticity. Self-efficacy refers to the extent to which persons see themselves as having control over their own outcomes (e.g., Gecas 1989). Self-esteem refers to sense of self-worth (Rosenberg 1979). Numerous studies have shown that both of these self-assessments tend to be reduced by chronic role strain and life events (e.g., Pearlin et al. 1981; Aneshensel 1992; Burke 1991; Gecas 1991; Gurin and Brim 1984; Kessler, Price, and Wortman 1985; Turner and Roszell in press). Identity-disrupting life events such as role loss, for example, undermine self-efficacy by decreasing efficiency in processing self-relevant information and in making decisions (Brown and McGill 1989).

Sense of authenticity refers to one's sense of being one's "real self" (Gecas 1991; Turner 1976) and reflects the extent to which persons are fulfilling their commitments to a core sense of self (Erickson 1993). This concept has not been included previously in models of the stress process.⁶ Sometimes,

however, we find hints that stressors call the sense of authenticity in to question. The only empirical study of authenticity that I found explores the characteristics of situations associated with sense of authenticity or inauthenticity (Turner and Billings 1987). This study provides some leads (discussed below) as to how stressors might reduce the sense of authenticity. I include this concept in my model because it is another route by which stressors may make the self-conception problematic.

Models of the stress process often depict stressors as directly affecting self-assessments. The literature on the self, however, suggests three intervening variables through which stressors may affect self-esteem, self-efficacy, and sense of authenticity: reflected appraisals, self-perceived competence, and social comparisons (Rosenberg 1979). In the next sections I describe how these variables intervene between stressors and self-assessments.

Reflected appraisals. According to Burke (1991, pp. 836–37), stressors generate reflected appraisals (inferred from others' behavior) that are incongruent with persons' identity standards, the set of meanings they apply to themselves in a given role or situation. These incongruencies interrupt the normal process whereby persons maintain their identities. In interrole conflict, for example, one identity interrupts another.

Burke (1991) argues that when persons' reflected appraisals fail to match their identity standards, persons first change their behavior in order to alter their reflected appraisals. Such routine identity maintenance usually succeeds. Yet if persons cannot bring their reflected appraisals into line with their identity standards, self-efficacy and then self-esteem decline, and the result is psychological distress.⁷ I would argue that unfavorable reflected appraisals which are congruent with persons' identity standards also can reduce self-efficacy and self-esteem; for example, shyness may be part of one's self-conception. In addition, incongruent reflected appraisals, either favorable or unfavorable, evoke a sense of inauthenticity (Turner and Billings 1987).

⁶ A somewhat related three-dimensional concept, sense of coherence (Antonovsky 1987), also has been found to intervene between stressors and psychological distress. Sense of coherence refers to the extent to which one views both internal and external stimuli as comprehensible (predictable and explicable), as manageable with the resources at one's disposal, and as meaningful and worthy of investment. Manageability is akin to self-efficacy (Turner and Roszell in press). As sense of coherence is measured currently, it indicates comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness of the environment. Although indicators of sense of coherence could be refined to separate assessments of self from those of the environment, sense of authenticity ought to be related more closely to self-change because it is an exclusively self-referential concept (Erickson 1993).

⁷ This sequence is still under debate. Pearlin et al. (1981) imply that self-esteem and self-efficacy decline in tandem, whereas Burke (1991) contends that self-efficacy declines first.

Burke (1991) also argues that if the mismatch between reflected appraisals and identity standards occurs for a long time or over many identity-disrupting events, identity change (presumably involuntary) occurs. That is, persons reluctantly adjust their identity standards to match their reflected appraisals. Rather than changing involuntarily in an undesired way, one could decide to change oneself in order to alter reflected appraisals, usually to make them more favorable. The likelihood of attempting such self-change, however, may be a function of how much effort is required, as well as of the perceived certainty of success (see "Conditioning Factors" below).

Self-perceived competence. Stressors, especially chronic role strain, are expected to undermine self-perceived competence, one's assessment of whether one's identity performance meets normative expectations. In turn, failure to meet normative expectations in identity performance should reduce self-esteem (Rosenberg 1979; Schwalbe and Staples 1991; Thoits 1991) and self-efficacy (Gecas 1991). In the words of Pearlin et al. (1981, p. 345), "[H]ardships that are an enduring testimony to one's lack of success or to the inadequacy of one's efforts to avoid problems would seem to pose the most sustained affront to one's conceptions of self-worth and of being in control over personal destiny." Similarly, inability to comply with internal pressures is a source of feelings of inauthenticity (Turner and Billings 1987). Thus as self-perceived competence declines, so will self-efficacy, self-esteem, and sense of authenticity.

Social comparisons. Stressors tend to activate social comparisons because of persons' need to evaluate their situations, their resources, and their emotional reactions (Taylor, Buunk, and Aspinwall 1990, p. 76; Thoits 1985). Rare stressors and stressors that occur "off-time" in the life course particularly encourage social comparisons by heightening perceptions of uniqueness and difference from others (Gurin and Brim 1984). This is the case because persons tend to compare themselves with older or younger persons who are experiencing the event, or with age-mates who are not (Gurin and Brim 1984). Unfavorable social comparisons are expected to reduce self-esteem, self-efficacy, and sense of authenticity (Rosenberg 1979; Schwalbe and Staples 1991).

Unfavorable social comparisons, however, may not lead initially to the decision to change oneself. Before deciding to change, persons probably cope with unfavorable social comparisons by generating positive comparisons (e.g., Pearlin and Schooler 1978)—choosing a target who is worse off, a dimension of evaluation on which they compare favorably, or both (Taylor et al. 1990). Persons will decide to change themselves only if these efforts fail to raise self-esteem or self-efficacy or to restore sense of authenticity. This is the case because self-change requires one to exert more effort and to venture into the unknown, and because unfavorable social comparisons are associated with setting lower goals for oneself (Bandura and Jourden 1991). Self-change, however, could be an alluring strategy because the expectation of being better off in the long term might improve self-esteem and ease fears of being worse off (Taylor et al. 1990).

Psychological distress. As the model shows, unfavorable reflected appraisals, lower self-perceived competence, or unfavorable social comparisons reduce self-efficacy, self-esteem, and sense of authenticity, thus leading to psychological distress. Numerous studies have found fairly strong negative associations between self-efficacy and distress, and moderate negative associations between self-esteem and level of distress (Turner and Roszell in press). Studies linking reduced sense of authenticity to psychological distress remain to be conducted. In this regard, research is needed to specify which aspects of psychological distress (e.g., anxiety or depression) are affected most strongly by reduced sense of authenticity.

The Motivation for Self-Change

In the hypothesis that self-change may result from reduced self-efficacy, self-esteem, and sense of authenticity, it is assumed that persons are motivated to view themselves favorably, to perceive themselves as effective agents, and to feel genuine (Gecas 1991). Self-change is motivated by both cognitive and emotional needs. Persons can be cognitively motivated to change when they encounter more than an occasional or explainable large discrepancy between self-image and self-conception in either a positive or a negative direction. Similarly, Rokeach (1985) states that self-change may result when

persons are confronted with contradictions between cherished beliefs about themselves, or with contradictions between their behavior and their beliefs about themselves. Persons may be cognitively motivated to change, for example, if they become socialized to a group's values or standards (either higher or lower than their own) that disparage their self-conceptions. To illustrate, a teenage girl joined a soccer team whose members were more strongly committed to achievement than her former teammates. Lower self-perceived competence and unfavorable social comparisons motivated her to meet her new team's higher standards. In another case, a strictly reared teenage girl began to associate with a group of risk takers who ridiculed her self-conception as a "moral" person. These unfavorable reflected appraisals motivated her to become less "moral."

Discrepancies between self-image and self-conception also evoke various emotions. These include shame and pride in the case of self-esteem; helplessness, despair, hope, and elation in the case of self-efficacy (Gecas 1991); and feelings of phoniness, being out of place, genuineness, and belonging in the case of authenticity (Turner and Billings 1987). These emotions, too, impel the individual toward some action that either relieves shame, despair, and a feeling of phoniness or fulfills the hope of sustaining pride, elation, and a feeling of genuineness.

CONDITIONING FACTORS

Stressors that reduce self-efficacy, self-esteem, and sense of authenticity via unfavorable reflected appraisals, inability to enact competent identity performance, and unfavorable social comparisons create an *impetus* to change oneself, but are not sufficient to result in a *decision* to change oneself. I propose that the resolve to change oneself depends on several "conditioning factors" (Turner 1990). My model includes six such factors, to be discussed below.

Identity Relevance

First, life events or role strains that affect a person's most highly valued role-identities should be more likely to lead to a resolve to change than those which affect less highly valued role-identities because, according to Thoits (1991), stressors that are identity-

relevant should engender greater psychological distress than those which are not. Nevertheless, Thoits found later (1992a, p. 253) that "the salience of an identity generally did not exacerbate the effects of perceived role stress on psychological symptoms." She noted, however, that the lack of such a relationship may have resulted because role stress had led some persons to increase their commitment to an identity, and others to decrease theirs.

Attribution of Responsibility for Stressor to Self

Second, I suggest that if a stressor is to lead to a decision to change, one must attribute either causality or responsibility for that stressor to some aspect of self that one believes can be changed. Such attributions are motivated by a desire for control and are associated with a belief that future negative outcomes can be avoided. These attributions can be made about a life event, about chronic strain, or about one's resulting psychological distress. If one attributes responsibility for a stressor to an aspect of self that one regards as immutable, or if one does not attribute responsibility for a stressor to the self, one is unlikely to decide to change.⁸ Prochaska and colleagues (e.g., Prochaska et al. 1992) found that if self-change is to occur, persons must move from a "precontemplation" stage to a "contemplation" stage by becoming aware that they have a problem.

Access to Structural Supports for Self-Change

A third conditioning factor is access to structural supports for self-change. At the individual level, the decision to change oneself requires awareness of and access to some means of self-change. Kadushin (1969) found that knowledge of psychiatry was related positively to seeking treatment for mental health problems.

More generally, intentional self-change probably is a "strategy of action" (Swidler

⁸ Lerner and Miller (1978) distinguish between "behavioral self-blame"—blaming a negative outcome on one's behavior, which can be changed—and "characterological self-blame"—blaming a negative outcome on some aspect of one's character, which is virtually immutable. This distinction should be modified in light of the widespread belief that character *can* be changed.

1986) only in modern, Western societies, which value individualism and self-direction (Schooler 1989). In these societies, various social structural supports (akin to Smelser's [1962] notion of structural conduciveness) provide individuals with means and opportunities for effecting self-change. These supports include mental health professionals (Kadushin 1969), voluntary self-help groups such as Recovery, Inc. (Thoits 1985), and the immense popular self-help literature (for analyses see Benton 1993; Biggart 1983; Simonds 1992; Starker 1989).⁹

These social structural supports for self-change rest upon cultural beliefs that self-change over the entire life course is possible, desirable, and even mandatory. Many observers now assert that lifelong human development and change are possible (Brim and Kagan 1980; Dannefer 1984; Demo 1992; Lerner and Busch-Rossnagel 1981; Rokeach 1985), although not everyone is sanguine about the possibility of self-change. Costa and McCrae (1980) represent the view that personality tends to be stable; Thoits (1985, p. 243) mentions the well-known finding that psychotherapy produces only "minor or very modest measurable improvements" in clients' functioning. Self-change also is viewed as desirable because it usually connotes self-improvement (Lerner and Busch-Rossnagel 1981; Ryff 1985). Finally, self-change is even mandatory. Persons are *supposed* to have high self-esteem and a sense of efficacy (Meyer 1986, p. 209), and those who lack these qualities are often urged to take corrective action.

Belief in the Possibility of Change

Fourth, one must believe that one can effect self-change, if only for "a day at a time." Stress theory assumes that persons assess not only the costs and benefits of various coping options, but also their ability to exercise those options (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). In practice, persons evaluate their ability to enact their desired new selves

in various situations. For example, smokers who wish to quit can imagine situations in which they would be more or less likely to smoke (Prochaska et al. 1991).

Benefits versus Costs of Change

Fifth, the perceived benefits of self-change must outweigh the costs. Stress theory assumes that persons behave fairly rationally; they are somewhat aware of possible coping options, and they assess the costs and benefits of each (Lazarus and Folkman 1984; see Turner 1991 for a definition of rationality). As persons contemplate self-change, they assess problematic aspects of their self-conception or behavior and the costs and benefits of change (Prochaska et al. 1991). Addicts, for example, weigh the consequences of continuing to use heroin, and some make "explicit, rational decisions to stop" (Biernacki 1986, p. 49).

Nevertheless, characterizing as somewhat rational the decision to change oneself does not mean that the decision serves only self-interested goals or that it is purely cognitive. Persons may decide to change because of concern for others as well as for themselves (Biernacki 1986), and they can pursue altruistic goals as rationally as self-interested ones (Turner 1991). In addition, as described above, emotions such as shame, guilt, embarrassment, pride, relief, and fear may motivate the decision to change oneself, just as they motivate other types of self-control (Shott 1979). Persons can rationally pursue a goal of feeling good; that feelings influence their goals and calculations does not make their actions any less rational.

Social Support for Self-Change

Sixth, I predict that social support for self-change is related positively to the decision to change oneself. Others seem to weigh the costs and benefits, to themselves and to the person, of the changes that the person is contemplating, and their approval can accelerate the person's decision to change (Ebaugh 1988). The importance of social support is suggested by Gurin's (1990) finding that 64 percent of persons who changed themselves had help from a friend or family member, whereas only 30 percent changed by themselves. Sometimes, however, others may resist persons' efforts to change (McNulty

⁹ I am not implying that these structural supports function only as agents of self-change. Many persons seek them out to obtain comfort (Simonds 1992), confirmation of their beliefs (Starker 1989), social support for not changing (Thoits 1985), or social support for blaming others instead of themselves for their problems (Kadushin 1969), so that they can avoid changing.

and Swann 1991) because the changes appear to threaten their own self-conceptions or well-being. When significant others argue that the costs of change outweigh the benefits or threaten to punish persons for changing, persons often postpone changing or decide not to change (Ebaugh 1988).

Kadushin (1969) found that others' influence was crucial in making persons see themselves as the source of their problems. Thus, for example, if others label a person as disturbed (Thoits 1985) or agree with a person's self-diagnosis of needing treatment (Kadushin 1969), the person is more likely to seek treatment for mental health problems (which could lead to self-change). Conversely, others can discourage self-change by helping persons validate or transform deviant feelings (Thoits 1985).

Whether social support for self-change leads persons to decide to change may depend in part on whether they attribute causality or responsibility for a stressor to some aspect of self. Persons who do not believe they have a problem, such as those in the "precontemplation" stage of self-change (Prochaska et al. 1992, p. 1103), usually seek help or attempt change only because of pressure from others; they return quickly to their old ways once the pressure is removed.

CRITICAL EVENTS

If most of the conditioning factors are present to a sufficient degree, one probably will decide to change. Evidence from several sources, however, suggests that the addition of the six conditioning factors to the impetus to self-change does not always result in the decision to change oneself. Instead, as the model shows, the decision may be instigated by a critical event, a turning point (Ebaugh 1988), or an "epiphany" (Denzin 1989). Critical events cause one to view one's circumstances differently, bringing about a "fundamental reorientation" that may take minutes, days, or months to occur (Biernacki 1986, p. 5). Critical events may be "significant events in themselves" or minor events (Ebaugh 1988, p. 134), such as daily hassles. Critical events differ from the stressors described above because of the symbolic significance that persons attach to them: "It is as though the specific event becomes the reason why the individual cannot now do other than" change (Ebaugh 1988, p. 134). In

addition, critical events are critical in context; their impact depends on the impact of prior stressors on self-assessments. Several types of critical events have been described.

First, numerous investigators have identified a type of critical event described as the "straw that breaks the camel's back" or the "last straw." For example, about two-thirds of Biernacki's sample explicitly decided to stop using heroin after a "cumulation of negative experiences coupled with some particularly significant personal event" (Biernacki 1986, p. 49). These events ranged in severity from purchasing poor-quality heroin to losing a loved one. They "shattered addicts' complacent attitudes about their addiction and awakened perspectives rooted in identities . . . not related" to heroin use (p. 50). Often such events awakened fears that continued use would ruin other actual or potential identities. Similarly, Ebaugh (1988) identified the "last straw" as an event that "followed a gradual build-up of feelings" (p. 128). She found that most such events were minor.

Second, a critical event may cause persons to hit rock bottom or experience an existential crisis. "Rock bottom" is the "point at which people reach the nadir of their lives and decide, with some emotion, that they must change" (Biernacki 1986, p. 57). Some addicts stopped using heroin because of the humiliation they felt at being jailed. Similarly, Ebaugh (1988, p. 132) identified a type of turning point that she called "either/or alternatives," in which persons felt they "had to exit [from a role] or lose their physical or mental well-being." Even more profound than hitting rock bottom is experiencing an existential crisis. In Biernacki's (1986) study, addicts questioned not only their identity as addicts but their entire lives. They felt guilty, degraded, worthless. This pattern was most characteristic of addicts who were immersed in the world of addiction.

Third, deadlines may cause persons to believe that "now or never" is the time to change. Some deadlines require commitment to a role (Ebaugh 1988). For example, some nuns leave their orders when it is time to take their final vows. Other deadlines are self-imposed (but still socially constructed), as when a person decides that after twenty-five years with an organization, "now or never" is the time to change careers (Ebaugh 1988).

Fourth, some critical events provide ex-

cuses or justifications to change. Ebaugh (1988), for example, found that some ex-police officers ostensibly retired because of injury in the line of duty, but in fact already had been considering retirement because of discontent with their work (p. 131).

Fifth, some critical events may be “non-events”—expected events that do not occur, such as a promotion (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Such nonevents also can cause persons to reinterpret their situations and can instigate a decision to change themselves.

Finally, some critical events are positive events or experiences.¹⁰ Some life events facilitate the performance of salient identities or add desirable identities (Thoits 1991, p. 106). A person may enjoy some unexpected success or pleasurable activity (Csikszentmihalyi 1985), or a stressor may abate, improving one’s circumstances slightly or temporarily. Even a slight improvement can provide hope that one need not be “stuck” with low self-esteem, low self-efficacy, a sense of inauthenticity, or psychological distress. Gurin (1990) found that persons were more likely to attempt self-change when they were feeling good than when they were feeling bad.

Effects on Conditioning Factors

In my model, critical events may precipitate the decision to change by raising the level of any of the six conditioning factors discussed above, as shown by the arrow pointing left from critical events back to the conditioning factors. First, critical events may heighten the “identity-relevance” of stressors by directing attention to valued identities that are threatened unless persons change other aspects of self. Biernacki (1986) found that some former heroin addicts decided to quit when some event convinced them that their addict identity adversely “affected and conflicted with” their other identities (either actual or potential).

Second, critical events may cause persons to regard themselves as responsible for a stressor. Biernacki (1986) asked a woman who had hit “rock bottom” what had made her quit using heroin:

I felt bad about it. I felt bad about myself. That time I was in jail I just—after I kicked, you just

start doing all this thinking—wow! I just really felt bad about myself. I didn’t like all the shit I was doing to other people and to myself . . . I wanted to get out of it (p. 58).

Third, critical events may increase one’s awareness of and access to structural supports for self-change. One slim young man who had felt weak and fearful since moving to a large city happened upon a book on body building as he ducked into a bookstore to escape a hulking street person. He resolved to begin body building as a means of becoming less fearful and appearing less vulnerable (Fussell 1991).

Fourth, a critical event may cause one to believe that self-change is possible. The type of critical event most likely to do so is an improvement in one’s situation, described above. An easing of role strain, a positive experience, or an unexpected success may make one believe that one can effect self-change. One shy man enjoyed unexpected ease and success in conversing with strangers at a party; this experience gave him confidence that he could become less shy. Also, a positive experience or event involving one identity could give a person the confidence to make changes involving another identity.

Fifth, critical events may generate the belief that the perceived benefits of changing outweigh the costs. Critical events cause persons to reevaluate the implications of a situation for their psychological well-being and to decide what can be done (Lazarus and Folkman 1984, p. 56); changing themselves is one option. Stated another way, critical events may cause persons to perceive chronic role strain more negatively than in the past (Pearlin 1989, p. 246). For example, they may lead persons to judge a role or an attribute as untenable, such that the costs of retaining it now seem to outweigh the benefits (Turner 1990). Ebaugh (1988) found that the decision to exit from a role usually occurred when an individual reached a “turning point,” an event “that mobilizes and focuses awareness that old lines of action are complete, have failed, have been disrupted, or are no longer personally satisfying” (p. 123). Similarly, critical events might call attention to trade-offs involving self-defeating behavior (and identities) such as substance abuse or shyness, in which persons choose immediate benefits to self-esteem or self-efficacy although they recognize the long-

¹⁰ Ralph H. Turner, personal communication.

term costs of harm, loss, or risk (Baumeister and Scher 1988, p. 12). Critical events make the benefits of self-defeating behavior seem less rewarding and the harm to self seem more costly.

Finally, a critical event may alter one's social support so as to increase the likelihood of self-change. After a person's emotional outburst, a friend could discover "just how bad things are" and could urge the person to find help immediately. Alternatively, critical events may decrease support for a person's identities or traits, paving the way for intentional self-change. Biernacki (1986) found that a few former heroin addicts voluntarily had stopped using the drug after losing their drug source or moving.

Some findings, however, challenge the hypothesis that a critical event is necessary for instigating intentional self-change. Ebaugh (1988) found that about 20 percent of role exits occurred with no identifiable turning point. Moreover, in a survey of United States adults, Gurin (1990) found that 51 percent of respondents who changed some aspect of self did not experience a critical event beforehand. Perhaps, however, experiencing a critical event decreases the likelihood of relapse. Biernacki (1986), Ebaugh (1988), and Tuchfeld (1981) sampled respondents who had not resumed their discarded identities, whereas Gurin's (1990) sample included respondents who had not sustained the changes in self that they had made.

THE DECISION TO CHANGE ONESELF

In the stress framework (Lazarus and Folkman 1984), the decision to change oneself is the outcome of appraisal, in which persons evaluate what can be done to cope with a threat, a loss, or a challenge (stressor). Persons assess which coping options are available, how effective a given option would be, and how successfully they could exercise it (Lazarus and Folkman 1984); usually they decide on more than one option. The decision to change oneself probably occurs after other ways of coping have failed to resolve a problem. Persons tend to seek verification of their self-conceptions as evidence that the world is predictable and controllable, even if they must sacrifice self-enhancement (e.g., McNulty and Swann 1991; Swann 1990). Consequently, individuals probably will not

decide to change themselves unless something at least as compelling as self-verification is at stake.^{11, 12}

WHICH ASPECT OF SELF DOES ONE CHANGE?

As noted above, persons could decide to change a role-identity, an attribute or trait, or both. In this section I present two hypotheses concerning which aspect of self persons will decide to change. First, on the basis of identity theory (Stryker 1980, 1987), I hypothesize that persons are most likely to decide to change those aspects of self which directly or indirectly protect or enhance identities to which they are highly committed. Rosenberg (1981, p. 606) described direct identity enhancement in observing that "we are more likely to cultivate the skills or qualities relevant to the role performances of central statuses than of peripheral ones." Persons also may seek *indirectly* to protect or enhance identities to which they are committed by changing aspects of self that impinge upon those identities. Biernacki (1986) found that some heroin addicts decided to give up their addict identity because it disrupted other identities, such as father, to which they were more highly committed. Both interactional commitment—the numbers of relationships tied to the identity (Stryker 1987)—and the subjective importance of the identity (Thoits 1991) are relevant here.

My second hypothesis is that in deciding which aspect of self to change, persons are influenced by the relative importance, for their self-esteem, of reflected appraisals,

¹¹ I would hypothesize that the desire for control or personal efficacy (see Gecas 1989) may be stronger than the desire for self-verification. As noted by Swann (1990, p. 414), what "warms up" self-verification is the "desire for prediction and control." I know of no studies, however, that have pitted the desire for self-verification against the desire for control.

¹² Self-change is not necessarily inevitable and discernible once one decides to act. Usually the decision to change is followed by efforts to do so (e.g., Biernacki 1986; Prochaska et al. 1992). This sequence, however, often occurs several times before persons succeed (or decide not to change). Relapse is typical, for example, in quitting smoking. After quitting, persons may return to the stage in which they are contemplating quitting, or even to the precontemplation stage in which they deny that being a smoker is causing them problems (e.g., Prochaska et al. 1992; Prochaska et al. 1991). Moreover, whether measurable self-change occurs is an empirical question that remains to be addressed.

self-perceptions of competence, and social comparisons. They might decide to change an aspect of self that they believe would improve others' opinions of them, increase their self-perceived competence, or enable them to make more favorable social comparisons. Although persons have some idea of how much these factors influence their self-esteem (Schwalbe and Staples 1991), they probably do not decide among them (such a step would imply an unrealistic degree of awareness), but instead strive to change themselves so as to improve one or another. Despite some gender differences, reflected appraisals influence self-esteem most strongly for both men and women, followed by self-perceived competence and then social comparisons (Schwalbe and Staples 1991). Consequently a plausible hypothesis is that most people probably change themselves in order to generate more positive reflected appraisals.

DISCUSSION

In this analysis I have proposed a model of the decision to change oneself. Although this model probably applies to most cases of self-change, other patterns that result in the decision to change also are possible. The following hypotheses may be derived from the model: (A1): After exposure to a stressor involving a role that has high salience or a role merged with the person, one's reflected appraisals tend to become less favorable, one's self-perceived competence tends to become lower, and one's social comparisons tend to become less favorable. (A2): In turn, as one's reflected appraisals become less favorable, as one's self-perceived competence becomes lower, or as one's social comparisons become less favorable, one's self-efficacy, self-esteem, and sense of authenticity decline, and one's psychological distress increases. (B): Nevertheless, if intentional self-change is to be selected as a coping strategy, the following conditioning factors must be present to a sufficient degree: 1) A stressor disrupts or threatens to disrupt a valued role-identity, 2) one attributes responsibility for the stressor to an aspect of self that one believes can be changed, 3) one has access to structural supports for self-change, 4) one believes that one can effect self-change, 5) the perceived benefits of self-change outweigh the perceived costs, and 6) others provide social support for self-change.

All of these conditioning factors, except possibly social support for self-change, probably are necessary. It is impossible to specify how strong each must be because no metrics are readily available for such variables. Further research could specify 1) whether each of the conditioning factors needs to be very strong, or whether passing a threshold of positivity is enough, and 2) whether strength in some conditioning factors can compensate for weakness in others. If most of these conditioning factors are present to a sufficient degree, however, one will decide to change. If they are not, either a person will not decide to change or (C1): A critical event that causes one to view one's circumstances differently, usually by strengthening the conditioning factors sufficiently, may instigate the decision to change. (D): Finally, I hypothesized that in deciding which aspects of self to change, persons will choose those aspects of self that 1) directly or indirectly protect or enhance identities to which they are highly committed and that 2) they believe will most improve their reflected appraisals.

Needed Research

Although no data yet are available for testing the proposed model, one potentially useful approach for doing so was taken by Little (1983), who queried respondents about the inception, content, and progress of the "personal projects" in which they were engaged. Self-change could be studied as a type of "personal project." Another approach is represented by longitudinal research (Demo 1992). For example, Prochaska, et al. (1991) followed current and former smokers over time as they either continued to smoke or quit smoking, and as the former smokers either remained nonsmokers or relapsed. Thus the possible approaches to studying the decision to change oneself include collecting retrospective data on the decision to change, surveying individuals who are contemplating or pursuing self-change, and following individuals over time as they do or do not change themselves.

Research also is needed to relate intentional self-change to location in social structure—to characteristics such as gender, age, and education. For example, just as gender influences the stressors to which persons are exposed and conditions the effects of stressors on outcomes (Aneshensel 1992; Pearlin

1989), it may influence the "strategies of action" (Swidler 1986) that persons are offered and that they believe are open to them. Location in social structure also sorts persons into "contexts of action," which afford different amounts of resources and opportunities for engaging in efficacious action and building self-esteem (Gecas and Schwalbe 1983). Consequently, although men and women are equally likely to change themselves (Gurin 1990), they may make different types of changes.

Although this analysis focuses on the self, it also raises questions for stress research, such as how likely persons are to decide to change their self-conceptions as a way of coping, what other coping strategies tend to accompany self-change, and whether intentional self-change is used to cope with some types of role-related stressors (e.g., interpersonal difficulties) more often than with others (Mattlin, Wethington, and Kessler 1990, p. 103). Also of interest is how effectively intentional self-change eases role strain and increases self-esteem, self-efficacy, and sense of authenticity, and whether this effectiveness differs by type of stressor. Finally, I have presented self-efficacy and self-esteem as mediating variables (e.g., Pearlin et al. 1981; Wheaton 1985). Considering them instead as moderating variables (Aneshensel 1992; Turner and Roszell in press; Wheaton 1985) leads us to ask how prior levels of self-efficacy and self-esteem influence self-change as a way of coping.

Implications

My approach to self-change, which emphasizes changing one's self-conception (role identities and traits), differs from approaches that emphasize changing one's behavior (e.g., Prochaska et al. 1992). These approaches are not mutually exclusive; changing one's self-conception requires changing one's behavior, and vice versa. Nevertheless, the emphasis on self-conception, especially role identities, directs us to extant theories and research that link the person to social structure (e.g., House 1981). My approach also is in accord with symbolic interactionists' emphasis on how individuals respond actively to their circumstances (Thoits 1992b). Persons use cultural images of ideal selves as guides in envisioning possible selves that they believe will enhance their self-efficacy, self-esteem,

and sense of authenticity, and they strive to change themselves accordingly.

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