Emotion and self-regulation in deliberate personal change: A case study analysis

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Abstract: Two young adults' experiences of deliberate personal change in the realms of study habits and social interaction were examined using a qualitative, interview-based case study approach. Both talked about an aspect of their behavior that they had changed and one that they would like to change. Thematic analysis was used to interpret their stories and reach an integrative and contextualized understanding of their individual developmental trajectories. Our analysis explored the use of motivated reasoning to avoid or reinforce change, and the role of emotion in decision-making under uncertainty. These two themes are integrated in our discussion of the role of self-regulation in deliberate change, which sheds light on the experience of ambivalence about change and on the unpredictability of individual development trajectories. Building on theory and research on affective forecasting biases, we propose that a failure of 'experiential emotional anticipation' can explain ambivalence about personal change and why people sometimes do not act upon their rational beliefs.

Keywords: Planned Change, Emotion, Self-regulation, Decision-Making, Personality.

Emoções e auto-regulação em processos de mudança pessoal deliberada: Um estudo de caso. Investigámos as experiências de mudança pessoal deliberada de dois jovens adultos, no que respeita a hábitos de estudo e de interacção social, através de um estudo de caso baseado em entrevistas. Ambos os participantes falaram de um comportamento que tinham alterado e de outro que gostariam de alterar. Usámos a análise temática para interpretar as suas histórias e compreender as suas trajectórias de desenvolvimento pessoal de uma forma integrada e contextualizada. Nesta análise, exploramos a forma como os enviesamentos de raciocínio podem deter ou impulsionar a mudança, bem como o papel das emoções na tomada de decisão face a perspectivas incertas. Estes temas realçam o papel da auto-regulação na mudança deliberada, ajudando-nos a compreender a experiência de ambivalência em relação à mudança e a dificuldade de prever trajectórias de desenvolvimento. Partindo da teoria e da investigação sobre enviesamentos na previsão de estados emocionais, argumentamos que a dificuldade de antecipar e sentir o impacto emocional de uma decisão ajuda a explicar a ambivalência em relação à mudança pessoal e o facto de as pessoas por vezes não agirem em conformidade com as suas crenças racionais.

Palavras-chave: Mudança Deliberada, Emoção, Auto-regulação, Tomada de Decisão, Personalidade.

When people deliberately change important characteristics associated with their habits of behavior and personality, without training or counseling, how do they go about it? How do they come to a decision, muster the motivation to navigate the transition, and experience personal change? We sought to address these questions through case studies of two undergraduate students who reported experiences of successful and unsuccessful personal change in the realms of study habits and interpersonal relationships. Both recognized the need to work harder at university but one changed his study habits and the other did not. They revealed the opposite pattern in the realm of interpersonal relationships.

Individual differences in personality, reflecting dispositions and motivations to behave in certain ways, are driven by our genetic endowment and are fairly stable over the lifespan (Costa & McCrae, 1994). Yet, there is now clear evidence of change in personality traits throughout childhood, adolescence and adulthood (Caspi, Roberts, & Shiner, 2005). Although higher-order personality traits are fairly stable, lower-order traits and the way these traits are behaviorally expressed are more changeable (Ardelt,

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2000). Human behavior is highly adaptable and strongly influenced by the social context (Ross & Nisbett, 1991). People often change as they adjust to new challenges and go through different stages in life (Helson & Stewart, 1994). Further evidence for the human potential for change comes from evaluations of psychotherapy and behavior modification programs, training interventions, and people's own accounts of life change (e.g., Bergin & Garfield, 1994; Kazdin, 2001; Heatherton & Nichols, 1994).

There is substantial variability across individuals in patterns of personality change across the lifespan (Roberts & Mroczek, 2008) and some of this variability is likely to be associated with effortful adjustment to particular life circumstances. A full understanding of human development therefore requires studying the experience of deliberate personal change and the role it plays in individual developmental trajectories. Furthermore, our understanding of the human capacity to learn and change has important implications for education, management, counseling and personal development. Although investigators from all areas of psychology have studied change, research on planned or deliberate personal change outside clinical or training contexts has been relatively scant. Yet, most people who are interested in overcoming personal or psychological difficulties do not resort to psychotherapy or training (Henry, 1999).

We focused on emerging adulthood because this is a period of life when individuals may have substantial scope for changing their identity (Arnett, 2000) and when personality change is particularly evident (Roberts & Mroczek, 2008). Turning points in adults' lives are often related to family, education, work, and social transitions (Rönka, Oravala, & Pulkkinen, 2003). In emerging adulthood, experiences associated with leaving home, becoming more independent, making new friends, studying at university and getting a job present new challenges and potentially promote personal growth (Gottlieb, Still, & Newby-Clark, 2007).

We were particularly interested in the role of emotion in deliberate personal change. When making complex decisions – such as choosing a career or changing an important aspect of self – most people do not seem to undertake a rational analysis of all possible options and their pros and cons (Dijksterhuis, 2004). These decisions may be largely driven by intuitive, emotion-based judgments. Also, emotion is closely linked to motivation. Yet, the prevailing model of decision-making under uncertainty, expected utility theory, does not do justice to the role of emotion (Loewenstein & Lerner, 2003). Some dual-process models of decision-making have overcome this limitation. Fuzzy-trace theory, for example, suggests that affect encodes gist representations of experience that guide intuitive decision making (Rivers, Reyna, & Mills, 2008). In this case study research, we explored how two individuals saw themselves managing reason and emotion to reach complex decisions and navigate personal change. Decisions associated with effortful personal change usually entail some inner conflict (Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005). Therefore we were also particularly interested in participants' experience of managing conflicting forces or motivations that might pull them in different directions. Accordingly, we explored both their emotional experience and self-regulation processes.

Qualitative research may be particularly useful in capturing and understanding the subjective experience of personal change and the complex interplay of reason and emotion in transition periods. Thus, we undertook a qualitative, idiographic study of two emerging adults' experiences of deliberate personal change at university. By "deliberate personal change" we mean a change in aspects of behavior, personality, values or motivation that participants consider significant to their identity or important in their lives, and perceive as resulting at least in part from a conscious decision and effort to change - in contrast to naturalistic change, or effortless or "mindless" adaptation. Our interest in deliberate change is consistent with perspectives in life-course psychology that view individuals as active contributors to their own development (e.g., Elder, 1998). Note that although deliberate change involves some effort and conscious planning, we are not suggesting that it is driven by willpower alone. In fact, individuals are often forced to adapt to new circumstances in life or induced to change by their peer group. Moreover, important drivers of change may operate below conscious awareness.

In sum, we used an exploratory case study approach to investigate how two individuals saw themselves embarking on and managing personal change, with a particular focus on emotional and self-regulation processes. Our aim was to generate a richer understanding of the subjective experience of personal change, as well as insights that might inspire theoretical development and further research, rather than seek proof of universal processes.

METHOD

The value of person-centered and idiographic approaches in psychological research has been expounded by various authors (Bergman & Magnusson, 1997; McAdams, 1993; Smith, Harré, & van Langenhove, 1995). Some dimensions of personal change are probably best understood through the narratives that people construct to make sense of their lives (McAdams, 1993). In particular, a case study can provide an

integrative perspective on the complex web of interactions (including person-context interactions) that drive personal change and that may be difficult to model quantitatively.

The two cases examined here were selected for in-depth analysis from a qualitative study of deliberate personal change involving eight undergraduate students who had left home to attend university (in the south east of England) three years earlier. Participants were asked to talk about an aspect of their behavior or personality that they had changed and an aspect that they would like to alter but had not yet changed.

Participants
One participant, whom we will call Dan (to safeguard anonymity), was 21 and in his second year of a management course, having repeated his first year. Most of his friends were gaining work experience on optional, paid industrial placements before returning for the final year of university. Dan said he had changed his study habits and would like to change his "difficult" interpersonal behavior but had not yet done so. The other participant, Lauren, 22, a final-year law student who had skipped the placement year, said she had changed her interpersonal behavior and would like to change her work habits but had not yet done so. Both were British citizens of Caucasian background. They were interviewed again one year later. These follow-up interviews focused on the events of the preceding year and further examined the processes and implications of change. They suggested that the changes described below had substantial and lasting impact. The present paper addresses the initial stages of change that were the focus of the first interviews.

These two participants were ultimately selected for detailed consideration because they discussed personal change in both the study and interpersonal realms, and the contrast between their experiences was particularly informative. The themes that emerged from the analysis of their transcripts also surfaced in similar ways in interviews with other participants, suggesting that the issues examined here may well have broader relevance. However, the juxtaposition of these two cases allows the themes and associated processes to be conveyed in a more elaborated and potentially useful way than would have been afforded by a less detailed consideration of broad commonalities across data from the whole sample. Our idiographic approach allows deeper, more contextualized insights into processes of personal change for these participants, for the larger sample and, mindful of Warnock's (1987) conviction that analysis of the particular can offer insights into the universal, possibly other groups of young people.

Interviews
One of the authors (JG) recruited participants through personal contacts at the university site, having sought students who were willing to talk about successful and unsuccessful experiences of personal change, and conducted the interviews. We used a semi-structured interview format and open-ended questions to encourage participants to talk freely about their experiences, influence the direction of the interview and emphasize aspects that they deemed relevant. After obtaining informed consent, the interviewer asked participants to talk about an experience that involved changing a personality characteristic or habitual behavior. As the conversation unfolded, the interviewer asked further questions related to perceived motivations, triggers of change, shifts in perspective, emotions, facilitating factors, obstacles, consequences and feedback. During the second part of the interview, participants were asked to talk about a personality characteristic or habitual behavior that they had tried to change but had not yet managed to change. Participants were interviewed in private in their lodgings. The interviews lasted about one hour. They were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Analytic Strategy
Transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis, which focuses upon identifying, analyzing and interpreting patterns of response within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). At a time when qualitative research methods in psychology have become increasingly diverse and complex, thematic analysis offers an accessible and flexible analytic approach. It does not stem from and is not tied to a particular theoretical or epistemological position but permits the theorizing of its outcomes in more or less active, explicit ways. In the few years since its formulation by Braun and Clarke (2006), this version of thematic analysis has been applied to data on a wide range of research topics, including on human development (for example, O'Sullivan-Lago, de Abreu & Burgess, 2008; Wicks & Mitchell, 2010). The present paper demonstrates how this method can be used in a case study approach that is theoretically informed without being driven by pre-existent theoretical commitments (see Riggs & Coyle, 2002, for another example with a different qualitative method). The analysis involved the repeated reading of each transcript by two of the authors (PL and JG), who coded the data by noting key phrases relevant to the research aims, summaries of content, connections between different aspects of the transcript and initial

interpretations. These notes were condensed to identify themes that represented recurrent aspects of each participant's reports of their experiences and meaning-making. Frequent checks ensured that emergent analyses were consistent with the data. In this process, themes were reviewed, refined and defined to address the research questions. Theoretical concepts were then explicitly invoked as possible resources for developing our psychological understanding of the data.

Such an analysis inevitably involves a high degree of subjectivity. In conducting the interviews and analyzing the transcripts, we tried to set aside preconceptions (to the extent that this is possible) and remain open to what participants might tell us. Inevitably, prior beliefs colored our interpretations. For example, the first author's belief in the human potential for growth may have shaped his reading of the interviews, prompting him to scrutinize contradictions in participants' assertions regarding what they can or cannot change. His past experience of juggling conflicting motivations regarding personal change may also have sensitized him to attend to this issue. Nonetheless, the fact that two authors analyzed the transcripts separately, discussed their interpretations, reached a common understanding and then cross-checked their findings against prior theory and research (with the analysis then checked by another author) helped each analyst to identify and compensate for the "blind spots" of the other, curbed any idiosyncratic interpretations and contributed to a balanced and well-grounded analysis.

ANALYSIS

Our analysis identified two salient themes that yielded fruitful insights for theoretical development, contributing to a richer understanding of personal change. These themes concerned the use of motivated reasoning to justify the perpetuation of habitual behavior and to avoid change; and the role of emotion in decision making and in the reinforcement of change. The two themes are related insofar as they contribute to a richer understanding of the role of self-regulation in deliberate personal change. To provide an integrative idiographic perspective on personal change, we present separate analyses for Dan and Lauren. Furthermore, rather than structuring the analysis by themes, we explore how the above processes can function together to drive change. In the quotations that follow, empty square brackets indicate where material has been omitted; information within square brackets has been added for clarification; and ellipsis points (…) indicate a pause in participants' speech.

Dan

What Dan Changed: His Work Habits
Initial response. This is how Dan told his story:

"I've had two first years at uni and all my friends are now in their third year and they've all gone off and are on placements. They're all earning money [ ] and they're all having fun and you kind of want to go out and do that as well but you can't, cos I have no money, being a student. And if I hadn't mucked about I could be and should be doing that now, and that's kind of annoying. It's my own fault. [ ] The first two years at university, I've done no work and just coasted along. [ ] I'm 21 now and all my friends are getting jobs and it was like: 'Really go and do some work and actually make an effort and actually, you know, get some qualifications.' [ ] So I've actually changed my work ethic, you know. There's a friend as well, we go into uni together and do work during the week, even when we don't have to. We just go in, get into the library, do work and get it out of the way. [ ] I don't leave essays till the last minute any more. I get them started two weeks earlier. [ ] It's taken quite a while and it's not been like easy cos [ ] it's a complete change."

The reported contrast between Dan's dissatisfaction with his situation and his view of his friends making money and having fun was laden with strong emotions and called for change. "It's depressing not having money to do anything," he said. One of the functions of emotions is to direct attention to threats and opportunities and trigger appropriate action (Frijda, 1988) or induce learning (Baumeister, Vohs, DeWall, & Zhang, 2007). Having repeated the first year of university, Dan also felt bad about letting his parents down again with low grades at the end of the second year: "It was my mum who got the results.[ ] It just puts you on a massive downer," he said. "They'd put so much time and money [ ] into me." Apparently Dan had not anticipated that he would get low grades again. "It just kind of brings you down to earth," he added. People tend to nurture self-enhancing illusions (Taylor & Brown, 1988) and sometimes it takes repeated negative feedback to face reality and realize the need for and urgency of change.

In Dan's account, there was no indication that studying was ever enjoyable. Thus it would seem that part of the difficulty of changing study habits, for Dan, was that studying involved sacrificing immediate enjoyment for the sake of uncertain and distant rewards. "Some friends [ ] still haven't

realized that they need to sort of actually knuckle down and do work and [ ] it's hard not to fall into the trap of going out with them." He seemed to feel torn between the need to get a degree and a decent job a couple of years down the line, on one hand, and the urge to go out and have fun with friends, on the other. Parents – "they're on my back all the time" – and hard-working colleagues – "they're a good influence" – were said to pull him in one direction. Less diligent, fun-loving friends lured him the other way. How did he overcome the ambivalence engendered by conflicting desires and expectations? In this situation, the vivid contrast within his account between his feeling 'down' and his friends having fun may have helped him to realize what he really wanted. Vivid images associated with strong emotions are likely to be highly accessible and prompt goal-directed action.

For Dan, the motivation for change came with a change in perspective: "The main thing that's helped me make this change was just realizing myself that I needed to make the change. [ ] That being lethargic and not really bothered by anything was affecting other areas of my life – not just academically but socially as well. [ ] The reason I'm not doing as well as I should be is I'm just not putting the effort into anything. And if I put that effort in, it'll get better." Here, Dan engaged in critical self-reflection and linked together different aspects of his life with which he was dissatisfied, and which he formerly used to view as minor, isolated issues. Baumeister (1994) called this process "crystallization of discontent." Realizing that these aspects were part of a bigger problem presumably revealed the need to change. In Dan's account, only then did he assume responsibility for his problems – "it's my own fault" – and decide to take charge of his life. At this point, an increased sense of control over his life may have been rewarding in itself.

Continued response. Dan said he found it easier to get into the habit of studying every day because he started studying with a friend: "It makes it more fun." Encouragement from a friend and the good spirits and energy that friends can nurture helped him find enjoyment in an activity that otherwise might yield only uncertain long-term benefits. One of the challenges for Dan was resisting temptations such as going out with friends all the time. "If you go out and have a drink, have a few drinks on the mid-week and stuff, [ ] you end up dropping back into the old ways for like the next few days [ ] because you're hungover and stuff. And then it's hard to get yourself back into the routine and get yourself motivated to [ ] work." In this passage, Dan can be seen justifying his decision to stop going out as much as he used to. This bolsters his resolve to work and can be viewed as a self-regulation process.

Dan said it also helped that he had to work hard during the summer: "I had no money during the summer, so all I had to do was go into work. [ ] You get into the routine of doing work and you actually quite enjoy it. [ ] It feels so much better if you actually get up and do something, and actually get up early in the morning." Here, Dan talks about his change of behavior as driven by necessity. Yet, here again he observes that the benefits of change justify the outcome in a way that reinforces change: "it feels so much better." Positive reinforcement is crucial for behavior modification (Kazdin, 2001). Once Dan got into a new work routine, it seems that positive emotions kept him going and reinforced his newly acquired work habits. The fact that he managed to change his work habits and 'got a grip' on his life brought him added satisfaction. "Overall it's been fairly successful," he said of his effort to change, with some pride. "It's getting better. [ ] Definitely I'm doing more work." Taking pride in his accomplishments and celebrating progress serves a self-regulatory function, boosting motivation for change.

What Dan Had Not Changed: His Difficult Interpersonal Style
It is interesting to compare the way Dan talked about changing his work habits and the way he talked about his interpersonal style, which he said he would also like to change because he found its consequences annoying:

> "I'm quite difficult all the time – not all the time, but I can be – for no sort of apparent reason. I just get fun out of being difficult... and obviously that's a bit of a negative because, you know, people are just not going to take you seriously enough and just aren't going to listen to you, [ ] which obviously is quite annoying. So that would be good to change."

Here, Dan seemed to be contemplating change but had not yet decided to act, as often happens in the early stages of behavioral change processes (Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992). He seemed divided about change. On one hand, he said he would like to gain more respect from friends who sometimes dismissed his opinions because they thought that he did not take anything seriously. He also explained that listening to people with an open mind might help him not just socially but at work as well. On the other hand, he found it fun to be difficult and suggested that he would often start joking because others were "talking rubbish." By blaming others rather than accepting responsibility for his behavior, he

downplayed the need to change. Furthermore, he justified his lack of change by constructing this change as inherently difficult:

"I think it would be quite hard cos it's quite ingrained in me. [ ] Not saying that I can't control it but I don't necessarily realize when I am doing it – it just happens. And to actually change it, I would have to recognize when I'm doing it and then make a conscious effort not to do it."

Dan further emphasized that his interpersonal style was very much part of his sense of self: "I guess it's just hard to change because it's kind of the way I have been [ ] for the last twenty-one years. [ ] It's part of who I am." In contrast, Dan did not talk about his work ethic being part of his sense of self at all. This contrast is striking because one's "work ethic" may be as much part of one's personality and self as interpersonal style. Note that self-discipline, achievement striving and dutifulness, which are related to one's "work ethic," are facets of the personality trait of conscientiousness. Yet, Dan's rationale helped him to avoid cognitive dissonance and the negative affect that often goes with it, at the cost of recurring interpersonal problems. Research on motivated reasoning (e.g., Kunda, 1990) suggests that people selectively accept evidence that supports their beliefs and discard information that does not fit. This way, people can justify any decision, and this justification process serves a self-regulation function.

Lauren
What Lauren Changed: Her Arrogance
In some ways, Lauren's story is a mirror image of Dan's. Lauren said she used to be arrogant with people and managed to change that. She thought she should work harder but had not got there yet.

"I used to be quite arrogant when I was younger. [ ] When I was playing sports or doing things like that, I'd be [ ] quite competitive and come across quite arrogant but er…I think I kind of changed that. [ ] People used to say things but I didn't really care and I just thought… people were having a laugh and stuff like that. But [ ] after a while of having arguments with friends and my brothers – because people would say that I was being arrogant – in the end I kind of decided that… it's not a good idea. If it's annoying people, it's making it harder for myself. [ ] So yeah, I've probably changed and become less like that, less arrogant. [ ] People probably respond better now and they've [ ] kind of noticed I'm less arrogant."

Lauren reported having dismissed critical feedback about her apparent arrogance for a long time, thinking that others were just joking about it. She may have put on cognitive 'blinders', discounted negative feedback and nurtured self-enhancing illusions. In her story, it was only after Lauren received consistent negative feedback from different people, found herself falling into the same draining arguments over and over again, and felt the sting of occasional social rejection that she accepted responsibility for her circumstances and the need to change:

"Some of my friends didn't mind because they're like that as well. But then [ ] you meet different types of people [at university] and [ ] not everyone likes being competitive… having a go at each other. [ ] So like I found myself arguing with people and people would say things. [ ] People wouldn't want to play with you cos they know like you're going to be really arrogant if you win. [ ] At first that made me angry and I thought it was unfair, cos to me it's quite normal to be like that. But then I [ ] thought that maybe it's kind of my fault that all these different things are happening and I'm having these arguments in like different situations. 'Maybe they're right. Maybe it is something I'm doing that is kind of causing the problems.' [ ] That's what kind of made me want to change."

Having frequent arguments is emotionally draining. Recurrent negative emotions signal a need for change. Lauren said she would get angry when she felt rejected, blaming others for her interpersonal difficulties. As happened with Dan, Lauren's realization that she needed to change seems to have been triggered not just by pent-up dissatisfaction but also by a crystallization of discontent. It was only when Lauren started piecing together all the different arguments and looking at these as manifestations of a broader pattern that she accepted responsibility for her difficulties and decided to take charge of her life:

"I kind of always thought, 'Oh this is what I'm like. It's me, I've always been like this, there's nothing I can do about it. [ ] If you don't like it, then it's up to you, don't be around me….' But then I kind of realized, [ ] 'Yeah, I can. I'm responsible for how I am.' [ ] I started to think that I can be like how I

want to be. 'If I want to change the way I'm acting, [ ] yeah, I can do that, it's easy. All you have to do is not make comments like that.'"

According to Lauren, her shift in perspective was accompanied by the realization that she did not have to change her whole self in order to interact more effectively with others. She just had to change her way of talking to people – "not make comments like that." This cognitive shift may have helped to tip the balance of perceived costs and benefits towards change: "I can probably do it quite easily." Earlier on, Lauren held beliefs that sustained her behavior – "I've always been like this, there's nothing I can do about it." When she decided to change, however, Lauren espoused beliefs that strengthened her resolve to behave differently – "Yeah, I can do that, it's easy." The way individuals espouse beliefs that justify their behavior can therefore be viewed as part of an active self-regulation process that can be used to avoid or sustain change.

Lauren reported that her friends at home also thought it was funny to be competitive and arrogant. Thus, her behavior was socially approved and encouraged by some of the people who mattered most to her. This compounded Lauren's ambivalence about change:

"A lot of my mates at home [ ] were quite similar to me like that, and also quite arrogant, and like kind of saw it as a bit of a joke to be like that, and quite funny. So when I kind of stopped [ ] acting like that and I was being less arrogant, [ ] they tried to encourage me to carry on being like that."

Moving to a new environment helped Lauren to change because she started interacting with different people who expected her to act differently and modeled alternative behaviors:

"Then I came to uni and met all these new people who were completely different to [ ] the people I'd been hanging around with for ages at home. [ ] It just kind of made me think like, there are other people there who are having a joke and a laugh without being really arrogant. And that kind of made me think like, 'Well, you don't really have to be like that.'"

Lauren received ample reinforcement for change at university in the form of positive feedback from peers and more gratifying social interactions. "I can kind of tell people are treating me differently. [ ] That's made me happy", she said. "I think people have noticed that I kind of made a decision to do it and so they kind of respect that." Notice that in this passage Lauren is interpreting others' responses in a way that bolsters her motivation to change. Still, sometimes she lapsed into her old habits:

"When I'm not noticing it or like I'm not concentrating on it, when I'm drunk or something, then I'll start acting like that a little bit. But now I can sort of like notice myself doing it. So I see myself act like this and I kind of notice it might be annoying the people around me, whereas before I wouldn't have noticed that. And I kind of notice that I'm choosing to be like that, so I kind of think, 'Right, stop being like that.'"

Changing habits takes time. Nonetheless, Lauren developed several self-regulation mechanisms that facilitate personal development, including self-awareness ("now I can notice myself doing it"), awareness of others ("I notice it might be annoying the people around me"), and self-control ("I think, 'Right, stop being like that'"). This is consistent with the idea that, over time, the repeated exertion or practice of self-control can help people develop willpower and a capacity for self-regulation (Baumeister, Bratlavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998).

What Lauren Had Not Changed: Her Work Habits
Considering the way Lauren talked about taking charge of her social life, the helplessness she revealed when talking about her work habits was surprising:

"Now I'm at uni but I work as well and it's the same for both, [ ] not working hard at all, being really immature… And probably if I could change anything I'd want to change so that I'm more hard working and kind of take it a lot more seriously. [ ] Because you've got to get a proper job, eventually, and that's going to be an important thing, like how hard-working I am and how seriously I take it."

Here Lauren seemed to be contemplating change but had not yet committed to it. Rationally, she did recognize the need to work harder, yet the reasons she presented for working harder did not seem to

carry enough weight. "It's an important thing," she commented at one point, but then immediately qualified her statement with the phrase "I suppose", as if the importance of working hard were an abstract notion or supposition that she could grasp intellectually but did not truly feel. This phrase could also be viewed as a way of distancing herself emotionally from the prospect of change. Another statement, "I haven't really made any change, I've just kind of thought about it," further suggests that Lauren was playing with rational arguments that did not really move her. Perhaps Lauren did not feel the urgency of change because she had not fully processed the painful consequences that her current attitude might bring about later. Yet, rationally she did acknowledge the consequences of inaction: "I'm in my final year and it's kind of like the last chance to do well in education, cos I've got to get a job after this. It's my last chance to really get what I deserve if I put effort in and work."

In her interview, Lauren could articulate all the reasons why she should work harder and why she urgently needed to change but still she could not commit herself to change. The fact that her rational talk did not move her might reflect a failure of what we might call "experiential emotional anticipation" – the capacity to actually feel the emotional impact of a likely future event or situation. The inconsistency between Lauren's words and actions might also reflect conflicting inner motives (going out versus studying): "If I started like trying to work hard, [ ] all my friends would be like going out all the time and that would make it really difficult." In Lauren's account, as in Dan's, there is no indication that studying is enjoyable. Lauren's lack of effort could also be seen as a self-handicapping strategy: as long as she did not put much effort in, she had an excuse for getting poor grades (other than lack of intelligence). Furthermore, she managed to justify shirking responsibility: "Everyone that I kind of hang around with [ ] is like immature as well", she explained, "cos we're quite young."

Lauren dismissed repeated warnings: "A lot of people have said stuff [ ] for a long time. Different people, like teachers at school [ ] they're always telling you that you should do more work. But I suppose you hear so many things [ ] that you don't really listen to it. You don't really take it seriously." Deliberately or not, it seems that Lauren associated with people who had similar attitudes towards studying and tuned out parents, teachers, and hard-working colleagues. She stopped being arrogant "cos the group of people I was hanging around with didn't see that as a good thing [ ] whereas with this [not working hard], pretty much everyone I'm mates with is kind of like this." For Lauren, social influence from her peer group seems to have facilitated change on the interpersonal front and hindered change in study habits.

Lauren did not feel real pressure to change until her final year of university, which was more demanding and counted for most of her final degree classification. "I could always get away with it, do alright at school and get by not doing much work. [ ] But now it's harder." She had made some half-hearted attempts to work harder in the past: "I've like tried before and it lasted a month." The sense of control that she had over her interpersonal style did not carry over into the work realm: "I think, 'Oh yeah, you've tried to do it before and it didn't work, so maybe this is just like what you're like and you can't control it.'" Still, Lauren disputed her own thoughts: "I know it sounds stupid, cos you're like making the decision to not work hard." But she claimed that changing her arrogant interpersonal behavior was something she could control, whereas changing her work habits would amount to changing her personality:

> "I think this is more who I am, what I'm like. It's more of like a deep bit of my personality. [ ] It's so much a part of what I'm like [ ] rather than something I do, whereas being arrogant was [ ] more just something I do. [ ] So I don't think that I really can make myself change this."

Here, she was contradicting herself in relation to an earlier point in her interview, when she had mentioned "I could probably do it if I really wanted to." Thus, conflicting thoughts seemed to coexist in her mind and pull her in different directions, depending on what ideas became most accessible at any point. The way Lauren attends to particular beliefs and justifications can be viewed as a self-regulation strategy aimed at avoiding cognitive dissonance and preserving emotional balance. Conflicting goals and cognitions may also explain why reason alone did not sway Lauren. When pondering complex decisions, people might juggle arguments and counter-arguments in their heads and still reach no conclusion. Perhaps they only feel that one consideration is more important than another when emotion tips the balance.

DISCUSSION

We examined two stories of deliberate and effortful personal change. Dan reported changing his work habits but not his difficult interpersonal style. Lauren said she had changed her formerly arrogant interpersonal style but not her study habits. Our analysis examined the role of emotion, motivated reasoning, and self-regulation in decision-making and behavioral maintenance. In this section, we extend

the ideas that surfaced in the preceding analysis and integrate them in order to produce a theoretically informative account of the role of self-regulation processes in these and potentially other individual developmental trajectories. Note that we could have paid more attention to aspects such as external reinforcement, social influence and identity in our analysis, but considered the focus adopted here to contribute most to our understanding of personal change.

Our analysis suggests that cold reason alone may not induce people to change. Both Lauren and Dan contemplated change for a long time before actually doing anything about it. Research on addictive behaviors suggests that this is a common pattern, with many people spending years in the contemplation stage before making a real effort to change their behavior (Prochaska et al., 1992). For Lauren and Dan, conflicting goals and motivations compounded ambivalence about change. As part of a ubiquitous process of self-regulation, they appeared to engage in motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990) to justify old habits and deny the need to change. Rationally, Lauren accepted all the reasons why she should study harder and still did not act upon them. For both Lauren and Dan, emotion seemed to play a crucial role in the deliberation and reinforcement of change.

Decisions about personal change are likely to be complex. They involve weighing pros and cons that may be difficult to put into words and even more difficult to quantify. They often require sacrificing present comfort or enjoyment for the sake of uncertain long-term benefits. They may entail substantial costs because changing habits can be draining (inhibiting habitual behaviors requires self-control), make people feel uncomfortable (new responses do not come naturally), threaten their sense of identity ("Is there something wrong with me?"), and arouse anxiety (fear of the unknown). Decisions about personal change may also arouse inner conflicts.

Consider the decision to change study habits, for example. Lauren and Dan did not find studying sufficiently enjoyable to sacrifice time spent with friends. Exactly how would studying harder translate into a better job down the line? The benefits might be difficult to envisage, especially if people have no clear picture of what they want to do in the future. Expected utility theory proposes that people undertake a systematic analysis of probabilities and expected benefits associated with different possible outcomes, and then combine these into a single calculus to reach a decision. Judging from their accounts, that is not how Lauren and Dan pondered their decisions. In fact, they seemed to find it difficult to grasp the emotional impact of uncertain outcomes associated with their current work and career decisions.

Their ambivalence about change was compounded by their own conflicting aspirations and the conflicting expectations of friends, family and teachers. Previous research suggests that some inner conflict is a common experience when people face personal change (Bauer et al., 2005). In these circumstances, any shift in perspective might alter the perceived balance of costs and benefits associated with a decision. For example, if Lauren were to shift from a short-term to a long-term focus, the importance of getting a good job would become more salient in her mind and she might lean towards studying harder. Then if her friends were to invite her to go out, immediate enjoyment might become a more salient concern once again and tip the balance the other way. By activating goals, cognitions or feelings, different circumstances can alter the perceived salience and value of different outcomes and thereby sway subjective evaluations of costs and benefits. Thus, people may find themselves wavering, unable to come to a decision until an experience laden with emotion weighs on the motivation to change.

Viewing the life space as a field of conflicting forces helps to explain why personal developmental trajectories may be quite unpredictable (Lewin, 1951; Ross & Nisbett, 1991). The self-regulation process involved in managing conflicting cognitions and motivations, which allows people to deny or amplify the need for change, further helps to explain the idiosyncrasy of individual developmental trajectories, and the experience of turning points. By justifying particular decisions, attending to supporting goals and beliefs, and amplifying consonant feelings, individuals can actively dampen or bolster their motivation to change. To some extent, they can manage or regulate their response to external reinforcement contingencies. Thus, our analysis emphasizes the active role that individuals play in directing their own development.

While they were undecided, Lauren and Dan followed the force of habit and the lure of immediate enjoyment and stuck to business as usual – no change. During this contemplation stage, Dan and Lauren seemed to engage in motivated reasoning and self-enhancing illusions (Taylor & Brown, 1988) to justify inaction and avoid cognitive dissonance (Wicklund & Brehm, 1976). They discounted critical feedback and reported surrounding themselves with friends who supported their attitudes and reinforced their behavior. Perhaps focusing on the short-term and low-level thinking (Pennebaker, 1997) helped them cognitively to deflect the potentially negative consequences of their present choices. Lauren dismissed repeated warnings and advice from teachers and parents about her lack of effort in school, told herself that she could delay the decision to study harder until her final year of university, and found comfort in the fact that her friends also did little work. Dan did not change his interpersonal style in spite of repeated

critical feedback and told himself that he was difficult mostly when others were "talking rubbish." The fact that social feedback is often ambiguous also makes it easier to discount others' reactions.

People's capacity to justify their prior beliefs and behavior helps to explain why cold reason alone might not sway them to change: they can find ways to dispute, discount or dismiss reasons for change. These processes of motivated reasoning and self-regulation often operate below conscious awareness. Thus, it often takes a jolt and strong emotions to make people realize that they must change. For Dan, this meant failing his first year of university and getting bad grades again the following year. For Lauren, it meant moving to university, where she had to build a new circle of friends, and receiving consistent critical feedback from different people about her arrogant interpersonal style. In both cases, the jolt involved a drastic change in external reinforcement.

Decision Making and Experiential Emotional Anticipation

Recent theory and research recognize the role of emotion in decision-making (e.g., Damásio, 1994; Loewenstein & Lerner, 2003). According to the affect-as-information hypothesis (Schwarz & Clore, 1983), when making judgments people might ask themselves "How do I feel about it?" and then use their feelings to reach an evaluation. Both current feelings and anticipated emotions (reflecting cognitive expectations of experiencing particular emotions in the future) are thought to influence decision-making (Loewenstein & Lerner, 2003). When emotion and cognition diverge, feelings often override rational analysis (Loewenstein, Weber, Hsee, & Welch, 2001). What the present case study suggests is that in complex decision-making, emotions can play a fundamental role in defining what factors are taken into consideration. This idea has generally been neglected in prior theory and research (but see Murtagh, Lopes, & Lyons, 2011). Recall that Lauren was able to articulate many good reasons why she should study harder but still did not act on them. Rationally, she realized the importance and urgency of working harder. However, the way she talked about all the reasons for studying hard seemed devoid of emotion – and cold logic alone seemed to carry little weight.

When contemplating personal change, people might find it difficult to envisage and value possible outcomes. In these circumstances, emotions can clarify goals and priorities, tell people what is important or not and how to weigh different pros and cons. In fact, emotions are closely linked to preferences and motivation (Frijda, 1988; Zajonc, 1980). Emotion-laden memories tend to be salient and accessible (Christianson, 1992) and accounts of successful life change often reveal strong emotions (Heatherton & Nichols, 1994). Several authors have argued that rational and emotional-experiential information processing involve different systems (e.g., Epstein, Pacini, Denes-Raj, & Heier, 1996). Yet, Dan and Lauren simply lacked the experience that might lend emotional weight to the idea that preparing for one's future career is important. Thus, our analysis suggests an explanation of when and why the emotional system can override rational thinking and the ways in which people use motivated reasoning to minimize conflict between rational and emotional processing.

Research on affective forecasting (Gilbert & Wilson, 2000), which entails forming cognitive expectations of future emotional states, indicates that people tend to overestimate the emotional impact of adverse future events because they underestimate their capacity to cope ('immune neglect'). Thus, for example, young university professors tend to overestimate how badly they would feel if denied tenure (Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998). Interestingly, our analysis highlights a seemingly opposite phenomenon: namely, that people can grossly underestimate the emotional impact of future events because they are unable or unwilling to vividly picture the outcome. How can these findings be reconciled? For a young professor, tenure is a salient goal that can be clearly envisaged. In contrast, many university students do not know what they want to do in life. Therefore, they might find it difficult to envisage the future and the emotions associated with ill-defined goals. Counter to the view that people generally overestimate the emotional impact of future events, we propose that goal salience and vividness influence affective forecasting biases and define boundary conditions for the appearance of 'immune neglect.' When goals are ill-defined and difficult to visualize, people may underestimate rather than overestimate the emotional impact of future events.

Dan and Lauren both struggled to find the motivation to study. We propose that the ability to experience in the present the emotions that are likely to be triggered by future events, which we term 'experiential emotional anticipation,' may contribute to sound decision making, self-motivation, and personal growth. This ability can motivate people to work towards goals that will bring them joy and avoid situations that will cause them pain, by bringing those emotions forward in time and generating a truly felt sense of urgency or otherwise energizing action. For example, simply knowing (rationally) that one's behavior will lead to an aversive outcome is often not enough to drive change unless one can emotionally imagine the undesired future state and feel in the present the pain of that outcome. In other words, experiential emotional anticipation may help people to infuse personal goals with the feelings that

provide the motivational force to attain these goals (e.g., Karoly, 1999). We expect this ability to be associated with perspective-taking and the capacity to picture future events vividly, as well as with the ability to recognize one's own feelings. This proposition should be tested empirically through future research. Experiential emotional anticipation, we argue, is different from affective forecasting (Gilbert & Wilson, 2000), which relies on cold cognition and does not necessarily entail experiencing in the present predicted future feelings. Our analysis further suggests that leaders and educators interested in bringing about change might usefully heed advice to help others picture the consequences of sticking to business as usual, instilling hope for a better future and, if necessary, dissatisfaction with the status quo (e.g., Kotter & Cohen, 2002).

Integrating Emotion and Cognition in Self-Regulation
We have discussed how emotion and reason can pull an individual in different directions and contribute to inner conflict, wavering and ambivalence. Nonetheless, cognition and emotion are intertwined and should not be viewed as separate phenomena. Indeed, a hallmark of emotional intelligence (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2008) is the capacity to integrate emotion and cognition in order to make sound decisions, guide adaptive behavior and attain well-being. This study suggests that people may find it difficult to reach such integration and hence end up experiencing inner conflict when contemplating personal change. Most importantly, however, our analysis points to the potential importance of self-regulation processes integrating emotion and cognition in sustaining stability or motivating change.

We argue that self-regulation and emotion regulation processes are at play when people manage feelings and beliefs to sustain a particular pattern of behavior despite external pressure to change it, or to alter habits despite inner conflict about change. Spontaneous emotion regulation can be considered a ubiquitous phenomenon insofar as human behavior tends to be oriented towards the pursuit of desired emotional outcomes (Baumeister et al., 2007). Emotion regulation strategies include the selection of situations, the deployment of attention, and cognitive appraisal (Gross, 1998). In Lauren and Dan's case, choosing to socialize with people who supported their beliefs and reinforced their habitual behavior can be viewed as the use of situation selection to sustain positive feelings and avoid change. The way that they justified their behavior to themselves and others, rehearsing beliefs that supported their habits, can also be viewed as the use of cognitive reappraisal for self-regulation purposes. Similarly, attentional deployment can be inferred from the way they avoided consideration of the negative long-term consequences of their behavior.

Our analysis further suggests that emotion and self-regulation may play an important role not only in the deliberation of change but also in reinforcing new patterns of behavior to sustain change efforts. Lauren and Dan both reported having received ample positive reinforcement for the changes they undertook. Moreover, they amplified this reinforcement by taking pride in their achievements and celebrating or savoring progress towards their new goals. Deliberate personal change is likely to be effortful at first and probably cannot be sustained through willpower alone because willpower is a limited resource that can be easily depleted (Baumeister et al., 1998). People need to draw some satisfaction from the change process in order to maintain the effort. Thus, positive reinforcement, in the form of praise and recognition, as well as a sense of achievement and mastery, may be crucial for behavioral maintenance (Rothman, Baldwin, & Hertel, 2004). As Dan and Lauren derived increasing satisfaction from their new behavior, the process of change probably became less effortful and more self-sustaining.

In conclusion, we undertook an in-depth analysis of two students' experiences of deliberate personal change to attain an integrative and contextualized understanding of personal change processes. Analyzing the numerous and simultaneously interacting forces that influence human behavior and decision making, and the way that people self-regulate to manage those influences, helps us to understand the experience of ambivalence about personal change, the human potential for learning and for actively adjusting the course of one's life, and the unpredictability of personal development trajectories. The limitations of our study include the tentativeness with which we can move beyond these cases (although the themes discussed here are consistent with those found in the other six interviews conducted as part of a broader study); possible selection bias; and participants' memory biases and motivated reconstruction of the past. Nonetheless, this case study research generated interesting ideas about the role of emotion and self-regulation in individual developmental trajectories, extending prior theory and research, and contributed to our understanding of deliberate personal change.

From a practical perspective, this study points to the potential importance of encouraging effective self-regulation as well as providing external reinforcement and support in helping people to change habitual patterns of behavior. Testimonials of successful personal change from peers who faced similar issues may be particularly effective for helping students to believe they can change and thereby facilitate effective self-regulation. Our analysis further suggests that young adults may need guidance to consider

personal development issues with an open mind. Mentoring may help them to engage in self-critical reflection and to overcome the resistance to change induced by motivated reasoning and other defense mechanisms. Educational or work experiences that allow students to receive rich, candid feedback from peers about behaviors and attitudes that might influence their performance in the workplace might also help motivate them to invest in their personal and professional development. Finally, our findings regarding experiential emotional anticipation suggest that getting people to imagine, visualize and feel the future consequences of their behavior may help overcome inertia and trigger change. Further research is needed to develop the empirical basis of these suggestions.

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