

Chapter 3

The Size and Importance of Intentional Changes

Many women and men succeed in producing significant changes in their environments, activities, and inner selves. They find these changes very beneficial to themselves and to others. While it is true that people resist certain changes, they definitely seek and achieve certain other changes.

This picture emerged clearly from our 150 interviews with men and women in various parts of the United States, Canada, and England. These interviews focused exclusively on intentional changes: the person chose the change and then took definite steps to achieve it. Specifically, the interviewer helped the person recall the largest, most important change during the two years before the interview.

This chapter presents our findings concerning the size and importance of the changes and the amount of benefit to the person and to others. One section then examines the phenomenon of non-change, and the final section examines unintentional changes.

Size of Changes

It would be very difficult, time-consuming, and expensive to rigorously and objectively measure the size of each person's intentional change. This task would require a unique pretest and posttest for each particular change.

As an alternative, it is reasonably effective to simply ask the person how large and important the change was. Most people can estimate the size of their changes fairly accurately. From a list of four possible statements, we asked people to select the one that came closest to describing the size and importance of their intentional change. Here are the results:

- 31% chose the statement "a huge or enormous change, or of central importance in my life,"
- 40% chose "a fairly large and important change,"
- 26% chose "a definite change with *some* relevance and importance in my life,"
- 3% chose "small, trivial, petty, unimportant."

Most persons, then, do achieve quite a large significant change over a period of two years, according to their own assessment. Only 3% of the changes were reported as small, trivial, petty, or unimportant. Over 70% of the changes were at least fairly large and important.

At the beginning of the interview, some people were quite self-deprecating about the size of their changes, but then usually they felt much more positive after recalling and reflecting in detail. An earlier study found a similar phenomenon (Tough, 1967, p. 40). Apparently people have a negative stereotype about their capacity to choose and produce significant changes in themselves and in their lives. After an hour or more spent examining one of their actual changes, they become much more positive about their thoughtfulness and success in changing. People are generally much more capable of intentionally changing than the widespread stereotype indicates.

Percentage of Goal Achieved

As another measure of how successfully people achieve their desired changes, we asked people to compare their originally chosen change and their actually achieved change. We asked, "What percentage of your desired change did you actually achieve?" Exactly half of the interviewees had achieved 100% of their desired change, but a few had achieved much less. The average (mean) amount achieved was 80%. Some persons changed even more than originally anticipated, but we studied only the portion that had definitely been chosen.

Extent Noticed by Others

Here is another question we asked: "Now let's imagine a certain situation for a moment. Let's imagine that you describe your change to all your friends, relatives, neighbors, people at work, and everyone else who knows you. And then you say to each of these people, 'Have you noticed this change?' Approximately how many would say yes?"

The typical (median) answer was seven persons. Many (41%) of the interviewees said more than ten persons.

This question asked for very specific data, and is probably less likely to be influenced by inaccurate self-reporting or cognitive dissonance than broader questions are. The responses to this question support the other findings that the changes are large, significant, and noticeable.

Amount of Benefit to Self and Others

To what extent do people benefit from their changes? Do changes lead to unhappiness, or to satisfaction and productivity? In an attempt to answer these commonly discussed questions with actual data, we asked people to tell us, "How much has this change contributed to your happiness, your satisfaction with life, or your well-being?" Here are the results (rounded off):

- 17% said "an enormous amount,"
- 34% said "a large amount,"
- 43% said "some definite benefit,"
- 4% said "little or nothing,"
- 3% said "it has done me more harm than good."

Clearly, intentional changes are usually seen as beneficial, and the person feels pleased rather than unhappy with their personal consequences.

The fear that personal changes are often harmful is certainly not confirmed by the data. Only 3% found that the change did more harm than good. One of these persons has such a simple but poignant story that I often think of it. Age 73 at the time of the interview, she had been employed and reasonably happy until her sons, who lived in a large city, persuaded her to give up her job and move to their city so she would be closer to them. "So I gave up my job, uprooted myself, and moved closer to my sons. Now I find my entire lifestyle has been altered. This change has not been a happy

experience for me. My sons influenced me to make this change, but in fact I seldom see them."

Let us now turn to the amount of benefit for other persons. This topic brings us to a common misconception regarding intentional changes. Among my graduate students, among my friends, and in audiences to which I speak, I find a remarkable number of people who believe that such changes, especially if they are chosen and planned without professional help, are highly selfish. They equate "self-initiated and self-guided" with "selfish." Some people believe such changes are self-indulgent and use up energy and time that should be devoted to contributing to family, community, or society. Some people even go further and tell their favorite horror story about someone whose changes caused great pain to family and friends. A few believe that the community and nation would be better off, and people would be happier, if people reduced their changes.

Most changes are selfish in the sense that the person does benefit from them, as we have seen in the responses about whether the change contributed to "your happiness, your satisfaction with life, or your well-being." No doubt, too, one can find examples of changes that are unduly selfish and that hurt other people.

Most changes are of benefit not only to the person, however, but also to others. If we categorized all intentional changes as purely selfish, mixed, or purely a benefit to others, we would find very few examples in the two extreme categories. Individual change and social change are intertwined and interdependent, not separate and competing.

Here is the way we worded our question in the interview: "Let's set aside your own benefits for a moment, and look at any benefits for *other* people. Your change might already have been of some benefit to your family, your friends and relatives, your boss, other people in your organization, colleagues in your field, and so on. To what extent has your change provided some benefit to people other than yourself?" Here are the responses:

- 25% said "only to a small extent,"
- 36% said "medium amount; of some definite benefit to at least one or two persons,"
- 39% said "to a fairly large extent."

Obviously, intentional changes are not nearly as selfish as some critics suggest when they dismiss all personal change efforts as useless navel-gazing or irrelevant for society.

Some intentional changes do, of course, have adverse effects on other people, although Blackwell (1981) found that these effects were inconvenient or incommodious rather than harmful. For example, a few of his interviewees reported less time for family activities or home repairs. Two men were concerned about the effects that moving would have on their families, and one man inconvenienced his employer by quitting his job.

Variations in the General Picture

We have now seen the general picture for five variables: size of the change, percentage achieved, extent to which the change was noticed by others, amount of benefit to self, and amount of benefit to others. Does this general picture vary significantly (at the .05 level) with age, educational level, social class, sex, country, race, or area of change? To answer this question we used a multiple analysis of variance for percentage achieved and a chi square test for all other variables, with an additional analysis for area of change using one-way analysis of variance. Of the 35 possible relationships, only 7 were statistically significant. Each of these will now be described.

The size of the change varied significantly with age, country, and area of change. The younger age group tended to have larger changes. The Americans tended to have larger changes with the Britons close behind, compared to the Canadians. Changes in residence location and in relationships were especially large, and the Sheffe procedure found that both of these groups (areas of change) were significantly different from enjoyable activities. Changes in volunteer activities and in religion were also comparatively small.

The percentage achieved did not vary significantly with any of the seven variables.

The extent to which the change was noticed by other people varied significantly with educational level. About 70% of the people in each educational level below a graduate degree reported that at least six persons noticed their change, whereas only 30% of those with a graduate degree reported this. The relationship between the extent noticed and the area of change was barely significant. Changes in residence location and physical health tended to be noticed by a relatively high number of persons, whereas changes in the areas of religion, basic competence, and volunteer activities tended to be noticed by relatively few.

The amount of benefit to the person's own happiness, satisfaction with life, and well-being varied significantly with age. People

under 40 tended to report large or enormous benefits from their change, people between 40 and 59 tended to report a medium amount of benefit ("some definite benefit"), and people over 59 avoided the medium category and saw their benefits as either high or low.

The amount of benefit to other people varied significantly with nation. The Canadian groups tended to report higher benefits than the other two countries, and the people in England tended to be low.

In this chapter we have been discussing five measures of the size, importance, and benefits of intentional changes. To what extent are these five variables related to one another? The Pearson correlation coefficients are shown in table 3. As expected, all of these are positive. I would not have guessed, though, that the highest correlation would be between percentage achieved and extent noticed by others. The relatively high correlations between size and benefits are much easier to understand. It is interesting to see a reasonably high positive correlation between benefits to self and benefits to others, not a negative correlation as some critics of personal change might have predicted.

Only three correlation coefficients are not significant, and all three of them involve percentage achieved. I am surprised by this, and puzzled. I expected percentage achieved to show a high positive correlation with the other four variables.

Nonchangers

Approximately 4% of the people with whom we began an interview were unable to identify any intentional change at all from the previous two years. As a 61-year-old woman put it, "I've changed absolutely nothing during the past two years, not even my brand of soap or my style of clothes." Because I am fascinated by nonchangers, I discussed these individuals at length with the interviewers.

Although none of the nonchangers could be described as joyful or outstandingly happy, they seemed reasonably contented and satisfied. As far as we could tell, they were quite genuine when they said they did not have much conscious desire to change themselves or their lives at the present time. One person seemed to speak for the group when he said, "Things are going OK, and I'm very comfortable, so I'm not motivated to do something new." Their emotional tone was generally even or flat, rather than marked by peaks

Correlation Coefficients for Five Measures of Size and Benefits

	Size	Percentage Achieved	Noticed by Others	Benefit to Self	Benefit to Others
Size		.06	.14*	.29*	.22*
Percentage achieved	.06		.34*	.10	.06
Noticed by others	.14*	.34*		.14*	.18*
Benefit to self	.29*	.10	.14*		.20*
Benefit to others	.22*	.06	.18*	.20*	

*Significant at the .05 level.

Table 3

and valleys. They were choosing a fairly safe path through life, rather than a path marked by adventure and change.

The nonchangers were generally *not* poor, illiterate, stupid, deprived, poorly educated, "disadvantaged," members of denigrated "minority" groups, nor living in adverse circumstances. In fact, some were upper-middle class, with above-average education. All of them had plenty of opportunities for intentional changes. These findings provide a sharp contrast to the picture of nonchangers held by some people.

Most nonchangers were busy with job, farm chores, child-raising, golf, friends, or whatever. Nonchange cannot be equated with low energy or little activity. In fact, some of their lives did contain minor unintentional changes that were caused by the environment or chosen by the spouse.

No doubt there are times for each of us when we fail to make a change that in fact would have been very beneficial for us. We sometimes let a bad situation go too long, for instance, without trying to change things. Although these situations do exist for all of us occasionally, and presumably for some people more often than for others, they are not nearly as common as I thought. My clear impression from the interviews is that the nonchangers are not

really hurting themselves by choosing not to change. We asked all the interviewees to look back over the past two years and tell us about any change that they wanted but had not achieved. Most of their responses were mild and mundane and indicated that very few people are suffering much from their failure to seek or achieve certain changes.

My former reactions, the reactions of many students in my graduate courses on intentional change, and the reactions of some interviewers do not fit very well with reality. We are upset by nonchangers and assume there is something wrong with them. We assume they would be happier if they made certain changes. We wish everyone would change as much as we do. When talking about the nonchangers (or about our employees or spouse, perhaps!) we use the phrase "resistant to change." I now see that most of these reactions are inappropriate. Because some of us are deeply involved in choosing and guiding our own changes, we are threatened by people who are not. When we talk about resistance to change, we probably mean the person will not choose the particular changes or paths that we think best.

I end up convinced that change is not somehow better or more important than nonchange. On the contrary, the 80% or 95% of the person's characteristics and life that remains stable is probably at least as important as the portion that changes. Certainly people who accept the stable portion of their own qualities and lives, and who live effectively within the given situation, will typically be much happier than people who think only of change and of the future.

Changing too much can be at least as harmful to oneself as not changing at all. It can take time and emotional energy away from other activities that would provide greater happiness, or from family and job. It can lead to such preoccupation with change that people forget about all the beneficial nonchanging aspects of themselves and their lives. My impression of a few people is that they are constantly changing in order to avoid facing their loneliness, their emptiness, or some of their unpleasant characteristics. Changing too much during a year can greatly increase the chances of a serious illness (Holmes and Rahe, 1967).

Sometimes it is wise to choose nonchange. In the poignant ending of *Journey to Ixtlan* (1972), anthropologist Carlos Castaneda is clear on the next appropriate step in his pursuit of knowledge and change, but he decides to literally turn his back on that step and to leave the scene.

The best poem I have seen on the need of choosing nonchange at times was written by Dr. Robert MacIntyre in 1975. It is particularly meaningful to me because I was sitting beside him in a group meeting in my apartment when he wrote it, and because at that time I, too, was implementing too many major changes simultaneously. (I still refer to 1975 as "my year of changes.") Here are some lines from the poem, used with MacIntyre's permission:

Down, dawn, doom—out of the flow.

Stop, stopping, stopped

Stop expecting more!

.....

Mortal man of clay, heavy with unfired dross,
only slightly warmed by flame of life.

Striving, striving, starving

to be more, less, different.

Grow in awareness.

Shrink in ego.

Stupid, leaden, sullen, swollen striving.

Why these endless goals, tasks, aspirations?

There is no end.

There is always another.

Stop. Stop. Stop.

.....

Come, live in the smaller world. Leave the flames of bliss

to those who feel them. You will only consume yourself in them,
implode into your own cold core.

Stop wanting

Stop trying

Stop haunting

Stop vying

Stop stopping

Stop.

All of my thoughts so far in this section apply with certainty only to three countries: Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. They probably apply to certain other countries as well. In several other parts of the world, however, I have been deeply moved by the plight of people who have virtually no opportunities for beneficial change. They are nonchangers because of hunger, unending hard labor, overwhelming norms, and enormous restrictions, not because of their own free choice in the face of several

good options. Such circumstances can exist in prisons, nursing homes, and elsewhere in the three countries in which we interviewed, but we did not sample these groups.

Unintentional Changes

It is interesting to consider what proportion of major changes are intentional and what proportion are unintentional. In intentional changes, as chapter 1 pointed out, the person definitely and voluntarily chooses the change and then strives to achieve it by taking certain steps. I use the term *unintentional changes* to refer to all other changes, such as those caused by chance external events, maturation, subconscious influences, and so on. I have come across many people, including several of our interviewees, who believe that almost all human change is largely beyond the person's choice and control; it just happens. Toward the end of many interviews I have seen this stereotype shattered as people recall more and more of their active, deliberate, well-planned, successful efforts to bring about major change.

During our earlier interviews, the idea of asking about unintentional as well as intentional changes did not occur to me. Not until the last 56 interviews did we add such a question. During those 56 interviews, after the person had finished answering our questions about his or her largest, most important intentional change during the previous two years, we said, "We've been talking about a change that was chosen and intentional. Can you think of any unintentional change over the past two years—in yourself or your life—that is even larger and more significant than the change we've been discussing?" Just over half (55%) said no and the rest said yes. Their major unintended changes included separation and divorce, having a nervous breakdown, being fired, spouse being fired, improvement in the family business, unplanned pregnancy, having twins instead of one child, miscarriages, child's death, spouse's death, inflation, car needing to be replaced, and "finding a new girl friend." A 40-year-old engineer said, "Yes, smoking grass for the first time. This was unplanned, but it resulted in tremendous changes in my life."

Several other studies, too, suggest that approximately 55% to 70% of major changes during adulthood are intentional rather than unintentional.

Studying major personal changes in a group of Canadians working abroad, Filson (1975) found that the influence of the conscious process of considering and choosing the changes was slightly more

important than the total impact of external forces and unconscious processes. He also found that 58% of all changes involved some time (usually more than 20 hours) at actively considering and weighing the change. That percentage was higher for men than for women, perhaps because "some of the married women preferred to let their husbands do their thinking for them with respect to the changes they were undergoing" (p. 66). The percentage was relatively high for occupational changes, relatively low for changes in personal awareness and feelings.

Posluns (1981), studying women's detailed changes toward freedom from sex-role stereotypes, found that 68% of their changes were deliberate and only 32% "just happened."

I have conducted two small unpublished surveys among graduate students. In one of these, I asked 20 people to list the most important changes in themselves since finishing secondary school, and then to list the most important activities that produced those changes. More than 50% of those activities were highly intentional. In the other survey, I asked 14 people to choose their three largest changes during the past few years. They then categorized 57% of them as intentional, 21% as unintentional, and 21% as uncertain.

Most men who switch to a different career (not just a different job within the same career field) make the change intentionally. Only a few are forced to do so. This finding arose in a study by L.E. Thomas (1977, p. 326). He reported that "there are cases where an individual makes a mid-career change because he is forced to do so by external circumstances. In our sample the few men we found for whom this was true were either technical professionals whose fields were depressed by cutbacks in government funding, or military career men whose failure to receive an expected promotion signaled the necessity for early retirement. In both cases there simply were no other jobs in the same career field available for them to move to."

Even the field of adult socialization is recognizing the major importance of intentional changes. A review chapter on adult socialization (Mortimer and Simmons, 1978, p. 424) has pointed out that "much of adult socialization is self-initiated . . . and voluntary." Furthermore, "failure to take adequate account of the considerable selectivity . . . and self-determination in adult socialization can lead to the excessively conforming 'oversocialized conception of man' . . . that does not allow for innovation, creativity, and change."

A comprehensive study to compare intentional and unintentional changes was in progress as this book went to press. Joan Neehall

(1981) developed an in-depth interview schedule and collected data from 100 adults in Edmonton. Each interviewee was given detailed descriptions of eight areas of change, was given a careful explanation of the distinctions between intentional and unintentional, and was asked what percentage of change in each area over the past four years had been intentional (and what percentage unintentional). In total, 67% of recent change was reported as intentional and only 33% unintentional. In addition, the interviewees rated the intentional portion of their change as far more beneficial than the unintentional portion. For benefits to self and also for benefits to other people, this difference was statistically significant at the .05 level for each of the eight areas of change.