

Making Sense of Sudden Personal Transformation:
A Qualitative Study on People's Beliefs About the Facilitative Factors and
Mechanisms of Their Abrupt and Profound Inner Change

by

Susan Ilivitsky
B.A., University of Victoria, 2007

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Abstract

Sudden personal transformation (SPT) was defined as a subjectively reported, positive, profound, and lasting personal change that follows a relatively brief and memorable inner experience. Although such change has been described in numerous biographies, works of fiction, and religious and scholarly texts, a consistent definition and systematic program of research is lacking in the psychological literature. Moreover, almost nothing is known about what causes such change from the subjective point of view of individuals who have experienced it first hand. This study used semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to explore the common beliefs of three participants about the factors that facilitated and the mechanisms that caused their SPT. Findings reveal that all participants reported a life transition, feeling miserable, feeling exhausted, feeling unable to resolve adverse circumstances, reaching a breaking point, and support from others facilitated their individual SPT's. All participants also indicated that a formalized activity or ceremony as well as a process outside of their conscious control (either a higher power or a deep inner wisdom) produced or caused their SPT's. Implications for future research and counselling practice are discussed.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

*Walking down the street you don't know what can happen for someone,
what can click, what can be felt, what can come up.
—Participant in this study*

Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky recounts an unforgettable experience that occurred to him while interned in a Siberian labor camp. Resting in the barracks, he found himself lost in a detailed memory from his childhood.

It came to my mind at the needed time: that tender, motherly smile of a poor peasant serf [...] And when I climbed down off the boards and gazed around, I suddenly felt [...] a wholly different outlook, and, suddenly, by some miracle, all the hatred and anger completely vanished from my heart. (1985, pp. 209–210)

Bidney (2004) argues this experience had a lasting effect on the writer, and Dostoyevsky himself wrote that such “impressions...remain intact throughout one’s whole life” (1985, pp. 209–210). Descriptions of dramatic, sudden changes of this kind often trigger both awe and incredulity in the listener. Is it possible that one transient yet memorable inner experience can bring about profound, beneficial changes that persist, as in this example, a lifetime? Although a consistent term and definition for this type of change is lacking in the psychological literature, similar experiences have been described in numerous biographies, works of fiction, religious and scholarly texts, and even a handful of empirical studies. William James, the credited founder of modern psychology, believed that such phenomena, even if they seem anomalous, have great import to our understanding of human change overall:

The elementary mechanisms of our life are presumably so uniform that what is shown to be true in a marked degree of some persons is probably true to some degree in all, and may in a few be true in an extraordinarily high degree. (1902/1985, p. 191)

However, what has yet to be understood is, if such change were indeed possible, by which psychological processes can it be explained? Driven by this question, this study focused on individuals' subjective reports of both the facilitative factors and mechanisms that they feel caused the abrupt, profound change they experienced.

Most commonly, positive and lasting psychological change has been characterized as a gradual process that occurs over a period of months or years, resulting in specific alterations in a given behavior or diagnosed mental disorder (Baban & Cracium, 2007; Bien, 2001; Fosha, 2006; Hayes, Laurenceau, Feldman, Strauss, & Cardaciotto, 2007; Higginson & Mansell, 2008). However, many of us are also familiar with another type of change, prevalent in fiction and popular culture. In Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843), curmudgeonly Scrooge undergoes an unexpected transformation in the course of a single night into a kind and generous old man. In the film *It's a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey, having lost all hope and about to commit suicide, comes to a joyous realization about his life's true worth. Indeed, many films depict a character experiencing "a sudden, intuitive realization where all the pieces of the jigsaw fall into place" often "followed by a life-changing decision or determination to follow a new path" (McErlean, 2007). Similarly, Irish novelist James Joyce wrote frequently about moments in which his characters experienced unexpected and important illuminations about themselves or the world (Hayman, 1998).

Such experiences are not limited to fiction and can also be seen in numerous biographical accounts. For example, Leo Tolstoy, another prominent Russian writer, recounted how, during a walk in the woods, he suddenly heard a voice from within telling him to spend his life "seeking God." He writes that at this moment, "more than ever

before, all within me and around me lit up, and the light did not again abandon me” (1940, pp. 64–66). Similarly, Mother Teresa described how, on a routine train ride to Darjeeling, she suddenly “heard a call”, which would profoundly shape the rest of her life, “to give up all and surrender myself [...] in the service of the poorest of the poor in the slums” (Muggeridge, 1971, pp. 85-88). According to several biographers, Mahatma Gandhi’s lifelong commitment to social activism stemmed from a dramatic turning point in the course of a single day in South Africa when he was subjected to a series of racial injustices (e.g. Bhana & Goolam, 2005). In yet another example, Patti Smith, an American singer and writer, describes her profound revelation as a pregnant teenager about her “mission” to be an artist:

I sat readying myself to face my parents, praying beneath my breath. For a brief moment I felt as if I might die; and just as quickly I knew everything would be all right.

It is impossible to exaggerate the sudden calm I felt. An overwhelming sense of mission eclipsed my fears. [...] I felt in full possession of myself. [...] I would never look back. I would not return to the factory or to teachers college. I would be an artist. (2010, pp. 233-242)

While these specific stories vary, what unites them is that for all of these people, a beneficial, profound, and lasting personal change occurred, or at least began, during a brief and memorable inner experience.

Personal changes of this type can also be found in many religious worldviews (Chodron, 2005; Lofland & Skonovd, 1981; Schultz, 2001; Suler, 1990) and theological writings (e.g. Loder, 1981). Similar concepts have been explored by historical and literary scholars (e.g. Beja, 1972; Bidney 1997, 2004; Denzin, 1989; Hayman, 1998; Schultz, 2001), and sudden, profound personal changes were one of the first topics studied in modern psychology (e.g. James, 1902/1985). More recently, such experiences

have been investigated by a handful of mainly unpublished empirical studies. For example, Murray (2006) interviewed nine participants about a positive “life-changing moment of mental clarity” (p. ii), which he termed the *unencumbered moment*. Jarvis (1994) and McDonald (2005) interviewed five participants about their experience of *epiphany*, characterized as an abrupt, positive transformation that is profound and enduring. Finally, Miller and C’de Baca (1994) collected survey and interview data from 55 participants from which they developed the term *quantum change*— a “vivid, surprising, benevolent, and enduring personal transformation” (2001, p. 4). Given their numerous overlaps, the above studies provide evidence for the subjective experience of lasting, positive, sudden and profound personal changes. However, in light of the generally nascent and disjointed nature of this area of research, as will be discussed in Chapter Two, the changes examined in these studies may not represent discrete categories but rather a unified process has merely been claimed, labeled, and interpreted in a variety of ways.

Statement of the Problem

There is a vast gap in the literature when it comes to the conceptualization and empirical research examining sudden, profound inner change. Empirical investigations have been sparse, comprised of only a handful of studies. Moreover, as will be outlined in the following chapter, the expanded definitions in all of these studies contain a number of limitations, including inconsistent use, narrowness, ambiguity, and the inclusion of causal claims. There is also a shortage of methodologically trustworthy studies, with Miller and C’de Baca’s (1994) quantitative survey research appearing to have the fewest known limitations. Lastly, while researchers have attempted to document common antecedents,

experiential features, and outcomes of such change, as well as their own subjective explanations (Jarvis, 1996; McDonald, 2005; Miller & C'de Baca, 1994, 2001; Murray, 2006), this author could find no study to date that has focused directly on the first-hand explanatory accounts of its participants.

Purpose of the Study

The first purpose of the present study was to develop a clear term and empirically-derived working definition for the phenomenon of interest. Based on the most robust survey results in Miller and C'de Baca's study (1994), the term *sudden personal transformation* (SPT) was defined as a positive, profound, and lasting personal change that follows a relatively brief and memorable inner experience. Chapter Two discusses in detail how this term was developed.

Second, the present study was meant to address some of the omissions in the qualitative methods that have previously been used to study SPT-like change. For example, it is the first such study to employ a comprehensive set of inclusion and exclusion criteria; to clearly back up each of its results with corresponding interview extracts; and to use member checking to add credibility to its findings.

Finally, given that at least one methodologically-sound study (Miller & C'de Baca, 1994) has already described numerous antecedent, experiential, and outcome features of SPT-like change, the central aim of the present study was to move into the realm of explanation by directly asking participants about the factors they believe to have facilitated and the mechanisms they believe to have caused their SPT. To accomplish this, qualitative methodology using in-depth semi-structured interviews was chosen, and thematic analysis was used to develop recurring themes from interview transcripts, which

were then sent to each participant for confirmation. It should be noted that this study did not aim to provide yet another sweeping theory to explain such change, as speculations of this type can be found in abundance in the literature (e.g. Jarvis, 1997; McDonald, 2006, 2008; Miller & C’de Baca, 1994, 2000; Murray, 2006). Rather, the goal of the present study was to examine the relatively unexamined topic of the local understandings of individual participants.

It is hoped that this study will inform professional helpers and individuals more generally about such experiences, so that they are more likely to approach them in others’ and perhaps even in their own lives, with greater awareness and validation. Such awareness may contribute to greater support for clients who have experienced SPT outside of therapy, and may alert helpers to potential signs indicating that this type of change may occur. For those in distress, the first-hand accounts in this study can foster faith that “amazing change can and does happen” (Miller & C’de Baca, 2001, p. 177). Finally, whereas the literature so far has focused mainly on change that is gradual and specific, the current study can potentially add to a broader and more detailed understanding of the variety of ways in which change might occur.

Definition of Key Terms

Given the lack of an authoritative term and/or definition in the literature, defining the phenomenon of interest in the present study has required a detailed review, critique, and synthesis of previous constructs. While a more in-depth explication of this study’s definition has been outlined in Chapter Two, a brief summary of important terms is provided below.

In this study, *sudden personal transformation* (SPT) is defined as “a positive,

profound, and lasting personal change that follows a relatively brief and memorable inner experience.” (When referring to constructs in the literature that are almost identical to the above definition, the term *SPT-like change* will be applied.) This definition includes two necessary parts: (a) a relatively brief and memorable inner experience during which change occurred or began (which will be referred to as the *transformative experience*, and may include insights, experiences of connection with a higher force or power, memories, visions, dreams, an inner voice, intense emotional experiences, and so on); followed by (b) a positive, profound, and lasting personal change (*personal transformation*).

Regarding the specific words used in the above term and definition, *sudden* refers to the relative brevity or abruptness of the transformative experience; *personal* indicates a subjective change in one’s emotions, thoughts, behaviors, and so on (as opposed to external circumstance only); *positive* denotes change that is experienced as beneficial by a person; and *profound* implies self-reported “deep” change in one’s emotions, thoughts, behaviors, etc. (as opposed to a circumscribed change that has little bearing on a person’s life overall). Finally, *lasting* implies a change that endures or continues to evolve throughout one’s lifetime.

Although they are not necessary components of SPT, religion, spirituality and mysticism have often been associated with such experiences in the literature. Here, *spirituality* implies a connection to a force or power larger than one’s self (such as God, humanity, nature, a greater truth, and so on) and *mystical experiences* refers to subjectively intense or direct experiences of such a connection. The term *religion* often denotes organized cultural systems that explicitly engage with spirituality and which usually involve a set of beliefs, narratives, practices, and ethics. In this study *religion*

refers specifically to ancient world faiths and traditions – for example, Buddhism, Christianity, Aboriginal spiritual traditions, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Sikhism – as opposed to New Religious Movement (NRM's), coercive groups that exist on the fringes of dominant religious culture and occupy a contested space within society as a whole (Lewis, 2008). (NRM is a recently-developed term for groups previously referred to as *cults*, although in the present study the terms have been used interchangeably.)

Researcher Context

In any qualitative study, the investigator is a “part of the research” (Krefting, 1991, p. 218). Through interacting with participants during interviews, transcribing the data, and intentionally selecting, refining, and presenting findings, the researcher inevitably adds their own interpretations to any study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In line with this, I offer here some reflections on the nature of my interest in this topic and my personal expectations prior to this study.

Throughout my undergraduate psychology degree, my training to be a counsellor, and specifically in my work in the field of addictions, I developed an abiding interest in how people free themselves from the often obstinate nature of life's problems. Moreover, as a counsellor I align myself with a strength-based approach that views individuals as capable and resilient. Thus, I was interested in understanding how people change in their own lives, largely outside of expert interventions.

I began with the view that individuals are capable of astounding feats of transformation, as I experienced such change in my own life. One evening in the summer before one of my last years of high school, I found myself in a state of almost unbearable emotional pain. Though this pain seemed in part a culmination of previous problems, the

intensity of it was new. In a way that was uncharacteristic for me, I remember inwardly reaching out to some higher power or presence for help. I do not recall a dramatic spiritual connection or marked, immediate change, but in the days that followed I felt increasingly drawn towards new priorities, ways of thinking, and behaving that eventually culminated in a completely different, more positive sense of self. Though I have since been through many personal fluctuations and developments, I look back on this change with gratitude as a singular, positive turning point in my life.

I did not think about this experience in terms of a larger phenomenon until five years later, when, as part of an undergraduate psychology course on motherhood, I conducted a case study with a young single mother who described a similar change. Though many details of our experiences differed (for instance, hers occurred in a formal Christian religious context while mine was private and spiritual yet not religious), her story felt strangely familiar. I began to posit a possible link between these experiences and stories of spiritual transformation (a term used in Alcoholics Anonymous) that I heard while working with the street community. After writing the case study, I discussed my interest in such experiences with my psychology professor, who encouraged me to pursue the topic further.

Initially, I expected such phenomena would always be preceded by reaching “rock bottom” and would usually involve some kind of spiritual dimension. However, as I began to review the literature, I quickly discovered that some sudden, profound changes seem to appear without any notable immediate antecedent (Miller & C’de Baca, 1994), and others, as will be discussed in the following chapter, do not seem to involve spirituality at all but rather are felt as life-changing moments of cognitive insight (e.g.

Miller & C'de Baca, 2001). These new understandings led me to broaden my conceptualization of the construct. I also predicted that participants would have at least some pre-formed ideas about how and why their change occurred. However, I realized this was a personal bias based in my own tendency towards introspection and exposure to psychological theory; participants usually seemed to arrive at their explanations more spontaneously throughout the interview process. I also imagined that participants whose experience *did* have a spiritual or religious component might be averse to logically explaining it away, which may have led to some trepidation in asking cause-related interview questions. Such expectations, as discussed in Chapter Five, may have limited to some extent the richness of the data.

I identify as someone who values religious practice and spirituality, yet – unlike at least one of my participants – I interpret the world from a largely secular, non-religious perspective. This view both shapes and limits the perspectives I express in this work. Finally, the focus of this research on participants' subjective explanations has been driven by my own intense curiosity and desire – as a researcher, student of psychology, helper, and someone with direct experience of such change – to understand this complex and seemingly mysterious process. In the following chapter, the literature most relevant to the construct of SPT is reviewed.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter presents a broad historical and conceptual background to the construct of sudden personal transformation (SPT) and a detailed rationale for this study's definition of SPT. Following this, a summary of relevant descriptive findings in the empirical literature is provided. The chapter concludes with an overview of previous researchers' theoretical explanations of SPT-like change, and a rationale for the present study based on the existing literature. This review will hopefully show that while accounts across various disciplines and groups have described sudden and profound inner change, the empirical examination and conceptual development of such change within psychology has been scarce, disjointed and, more often than not, methodologically flawed. Further, while at least one large and trustworthy study (Miller & C' de Baca, 1994) has documented common antecedents, experiential features, and outcomes of such phenomena, almost no research has solicited participants' own explanations of SPT-like change. These gaps provide much of the rationale for the present study.

Change

One of the most enduring questions in counselling and clinical psychology concerns how humans change from one condition to another (Lyddon, 1990; Mahoney, 1991; Paloutzian, Richardson, & Rambo, 1999). Specifically, psychologists have focused on how individuals might achieve a lasting shift from a less desirable to a more desirable state. However, despite a proliferation of theories and associated interventions designed to facilitate change, theoretically divergent treatments have consistently been shown to have little difference in efficacy. Further, for reasons that are not yet clear, studies have found that individuals frequently change or recover "spontaneously"—that is, on their

own, without any therapy (see Duncan, Miller, & Sparks, 2004). Such findings add to the ongoing mystery concerning the basic principles, processes, and mechanisms of human change (Higginson & Mansell, 2008).

Within the context of the psychological literature on change, there is a significant yet largely overlooked disparity. Though change has most commonly been conceptualized in terms of specific shifts over an extended period, an emerging literature also describes change that occurs abruptly and, in a seemingly brief period of time, profoundly transforms various aspects of an individual's inner world.

In reference to popular notions of change, Miller and C'de Baca (2001) observe:

Normally, change happens a little at a time. It is hard to say exactly when someone becomes more wise or cynical, more intelligent or confident, more optimistic or selfish. Personal qualities wax and wane, one small step at a time, for better or worse. (p. 18)

McDonald (2005) suggests that change in the field of psychology is likewise generally viewed in terms of gradual developments across the lifespan and in terms of progressive modifications in therapy (p. 90). For instance, a therapist, according to Bien (2004), will commonly “observe a series of micro-changes, marked by sighs and other physical indicators as well as increasingly insightful verbal expression, which gradually accumulate into something substantive” (p. 494). A particularly seminal and empirically-supported body of work by Prochaska, DiClemente, and Norcross (e.g. 2003) proposes that change, both outside of and across various therapies, is governed by a finite, “transtheoretical” set of principles. Here too change is assumed to be gradual, involving “progression through five stages – precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance” with individuals normally recycling “through these stages several times” before a change is completed (p. 63). Fosha (2006), however, argues that

psychologists do in fact acknowledge change that occurs in “one fell swoop”, but only when such change is negative, such as trauma. Yet, when it comes to positive growth and healing, she writes “we become skeptical, cautiously maintaining that enduring change need be slow and gradual” (p. 590).

Such skepticism appears rooted in a rift in popular understandings of self in Western culture, marked by the rise of psychology at the beginning of the twentieth century. Previous models of positive change, which included religious concepts such as faith healing and being “born again” —in other words, suddenly changed by an act of God— were eschewed in favor of a rational-scientific paradigm in which change could be systematically measured, predicted, and shaped. To be sure, some examples of miracle or faith healing had also been, around this time, exposed as fraudulent. However, in separating itself from religion and aligning with modern science, it appears that psychology, perhaps unfairly, came to associate most sudden change with outdated, irrational, or superstitious worldviews. The stigma and mistrust associated with such change has continued. Indeed, it is not surprising that individuals who experience SPT-like change rarely speak of it to others (Miller & C’de Baca, 2001). In the psychiatric literature, sudden changes are generally negative, following the onset of a mental illness or neurological trauma. Moreover, in the latter half of the twentieth century, a variety of sociological and anthropological studies have linked abrupt changes to cults and unhealthy forms of mind control (e.g. Siegelman & Conway, 1978). Undoubtedly, examples do exist of cult members and even religious adherents initially believing they have found the “true” path, only to later defect from the group. As well, individuals experiencing the sudden onset of psychosis at times reject treatment, seeing their changes

as positive. Nevertheless, as will be discussed, not all sudden changes occur in such contexts.

The assumption that positive change must be gradual may also stem, as Hayes et al. (2007) argue, from the predominance of quantitative research designs in psychology. Many quantitative studies, according to these authors, fail to capture abrupt or dynamic fluctuations by condensing large samples into numerical averages, ascribing intra-individual variability to “noise” or “error”, and measuring specific variables only once or twice (pp. 715-716). Woodcock and Davis (1978) propose this “one-sided view” (1978, p. 9) is not limited to psychology, but extends throughout many areas of science:

The mathematics underlying three hundred years of science [...] are ideally suited to analyze – because they were created to analyze – smooth, continuous, quantitative change: the smooth curving paths of planets around the sun, the continuously varying pressure of a gas as it is heated and cooled, the quantitative increase of a hormone in the bloodstream. (p. 9)

Psychological change has further been commonly defined in terms of specific modifications in one life area. For instance, Baban and Cracium’s (2007) review of major theories of change in health and applied psychology (e.g. The Stages of Change Model, The Theory of Reasoned Action, The Theory of Planned Behavior, Social Cognitive Theory, and Goal Theory) reveals a consistent focus on specific outcomes and discrete behaviors such as smoking cessation or a reduction in risky sexual activity. Another review has found that change within much of clinical psychology research is defined as the alleviation of discrete symptoms associated with a diagnosable mental illness (Higginson & Mansell, 2008). These trends can, in part, be attributed to the influence of the medical model in psychology, which tends to isolate problems in order to target them with specific, highly-specialized treatments. Further, a narrow focus on a well-defined set

of outcomes tends to greatly simplify both the researcher's and therapist's tasks. However, such approaches seem to have reinforced an assumption that human change overall is equally circumscribed, making it difficult to initiate discourse on profound or transformative change. In the words of Forcehimes (2004), "gradual, stepwise models have emerged as the classic pattern describing the process of change" (p. 507).

Abrupt and Profound Change

Woodcock and Davis (1978) list a number of non-gradual changes in the natural world with which most of us are familiar: "The abrupt bursting of a bubble, the discontinuous transition from ice at its melting point to water at its freezing point, the qualitative shift when our minds "get" a pun or play on words" (p. 9). Likewise, *tipping points* in epidemiology refer to non-linear thresholds at which disease risk begins to rise at a faster rate (Resnicow & Vaughan, 2006), and, in sociology, to the discontinuous way in which certain ideas or behaviors suddenly take hold and become widespread (e.g. Gladwell, 2002).

In parallel, an emerging range of psychological studies evidence more sudden, discontinuous types of human change. For instance, participants have described change during the psychotherapy process (Carey et al., 2007) and recovery from various diagnosed mental illnesses as "involving both sudden and gradual components" (Higginson & Mansell, 2008, p. 311). Sudden gains have been observed in 60 percent of a non-treated sample of depressed individuals (Kelly, Roberts, & Bottonari, 2007) and in 73 percent of a treated sample, with sudden-gainers showing a 74 percent lower risk of relapse (Tang & DeRubeis, 1999). Rapid cessations in substance use have been found in studies of alcoholism (Edwards, Oppenheimer, & Taylor, 1992; Kurtz, 1979), as well as

with smokers, where around 50 percent of quit attempts are unplanned and spontaneous (Larabie, 2005; West & Sohal, 2006). Interestingly, similar to the above findings on depression, one study of smokers found that those who quit spontaneously were more than two times more likely to maintain abstinence than planned quitters (West & Sohal, 2006). Likewise, in a study of alcoholism, individuals whose decision to quit stemmed from an abrupt experience (e.g. “hitting rock bottom”, having a “spiritual awakening”) were also twice as likely to be non-problem-drinkers at follow-up than those who weighed the pros and cons (Matzer, Kaskutas, & Weisner, 2005). Outside the literature on addiction and mental illness, various studies have documented abrupt, enduring shifts in sexual orientation and gender identity (Barlow, Abel, & Blanchard, 1979; Barlow, Reynolds, & Agras, 1973; Jensen, 1998). Overall, these findings converge on a seemingly powerful dimension of change that has been largely ignored within the dominant discourse on change in the literature.

In contrast to the research described above, studies examining positive change that is both sudden *and* profound (i.e. affecting more than just one specific problem, behavior, aspect of identity, and so on) are harder to find. However, such change has long been described within various religious groups. For instance, the Christian terms *born again* (John 3:3) and *rebirth* (Corinthians 5:17), particularly common in charismatic movements, denote an abrupt, dramatic return to Christ, accessible through the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. This type of change is perhaps most commonly exemplified by the New Testament account of disciple Saul/Paul’s revelation on the road to Damascus (Lofland & Skonovd, 1981). Buddhism also describes profound revelations which result in a fundamentally changed consciousness. These are said to occur as part of

a long-term practice of meditation (e.g. Chodron, 2005), as depicted in Buddha's attainment of *enlightenment*. The Zen Buddhist tradition terms sudden, lasting experiences of profound understanding *satori*, which it contrasts with the more transient *kensho* experience (Schultz, 2001, p. 80). In many North American Indigenous traditions, a young person will embark on a *vision quest* meant to bring about an important insight, vision, or dream about their life path through connection to the spirit world (Suler, 1990). While spirituality and religion have only recently begun to gain credibility in mental health research, albeit mostly in the context of stress and coping (e.g. Ahrens, Abeling, Ahmad, & Hinman, 2010; Allen & Marshall, 2010; Ekedahl & Wengström, 2010; Krok, 2008), they have, for centuries, provided models through which many people have sought to change and better themselves. In fact, a 1991 poll showed that more than one third of Americans claim to have been "born again" in the sense described above (Beauregard & O'Leary, 2008, pp. 192-193). Thus, though religious constructs of sudden change are not objectively-derived, by representing the subjective experiences of large segments of people across a number of cultures they warrant at least some further attention.

Sudden, profound changes have also received some treatment in various academic fields. Loder (1981) provides a theologically-based philosophical examination of what he terms *transforming moments* or *convictional experiences*. He posits that such change involves a series of phases: a conflict or rupture in habitual ways of knowing; an inner search for new meaning; a sudden, unusually convincing insight accompanied by a sense of relief and release; and, lastly, new thoughts and actions that emerge alongside the integration and interpretation of the experience. The related, though secular concept of *epiphany* in literary studies (also widely characterized as a sudden, profound insight) is

explored by Bidney (1997, 2004), Denzin (1989), and Schultz (2001) in the biographical accounts of prominent figures, and by Beja (1972) and Hayman (1998) in works of fiction.

Sudden, profound changes were first studied in psychology over a century ago by William James and his contemporaries George Coe (1917) and Edwin Starbuck (Starbuck & James, 1899). In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James (1902/1985) lists numerous case examples of what he terms *sudden* or *instantaneous conversions*, which he describes as moments of dramatic, profound inner transformation, distinct from more gradual changes in a person's formalized religious beliefs or practices. In the context of modern self-help, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) uses *spiritual awakening* to describe sudden, profound transformations, which typically follow "rock-bottom", as illustrated by the dramatic sobering experience of the group's founder, Bill Wilson (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 2002). From a less spiritual point of view, Freud acknowledged "how sweeping insights could bring about important changes in personality" (in Baumeister, 1994, p. 295) while Carl Jung described transformative phenomena characterized by an "intuitive way of knowing...where the process is more like making leaps than proceeding step by step" (in Miller, 2004, p. 185). More recently, Tennen and Affleck (1998) use the term *posttraumatic growth* to depict positive, often abrupt, "dramatic transformations" – including changes in priorities, relationships, personal strength, purpose, and spirituality – that sometimes follow a phase of destabilization and distress (p. 87).

Unfortunately, while a varied consideration of sudden and profound change can be seen across different social groups and theoretical disciplines, its empirical

development in psychology has remained largely static since the time of James (1902/1985). Currently, due in part to the reasons outlined above, the study of lasting, positive human change that is abrupt and profound is limited to a handful of mostly unpublished reports. As will be discussed, these studies have ambitiously attempted, although with serious oversights, to define, describe, and propose explanations for such change.

Empirical Literature on Abrupt and Profound Change

Defining the Phenomenon

A major challenge in the empirical study of sudden and profound change, which must clearly define an appropriate sample for research, is the lack of an authoritative name and descriptive framework in the literature. A series of independent studies have developed three overlapping and largely indistinguishable concepts: the unencumbered moment (Murray, 2006), epiphany (e.g. Jarvis, 1997; Liang, 2006; McDonald, 2005), and quantum change (e.g. Miller & C' de Baca, 1994), all of which remain separate from one another, with no serious attempts made at integration. Adding to the confusion, each of these terms has been inconsistently used, with authors seeming to alternate between definitions both throughout their individual reports and across publications. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the existing definitions of these terms are either overly narrow (e.g. Murray, 2006), contain dubious causal claims (Jarvis, 1997; McDonald, 2008), or fail to capture robust empirical findings (Miller & C' de Baca, 2001).

Murray (2006), who interviewed nine participants, defined an *unencumbered moment* as:

A life changing moment of clarity when one's foundational beliefs about self and world shift completely and one commits to take actions to

change one's life in order to save it. The action taken to change one's life is profound, positive, and irreversible and brings a reprioritizing of how the self and the world are perceived. (p. ii)

For example, one participant in this study described an instant in which it became “absolutely, totally powerful, totally clear” that she needed to leave an abusive relationship (pp. 259-261). However, Murray’s (2006) definition is problematic as a future study using this construct would need to recruit participants from an extremely narrow demographic: those whose life was previously in danger, whose “foundational beliefs” suddenly shifted “completely,” who committed to take irreversible actions, and whose actions brought about a reprioritizing of perception, and so on. Undoubtedly, very few people who experience sudden and profound change fit all of these characteristics. In fact, Murray overtly models his definition after his own unique experience with such change, systematically rejecting constructs that do not closely fit this experience. Moreover, he does not make clear how a shift in one’s “foundational beliefs about self and world” was operationally defined during sample selection, or if this differs from a “reprioritizing of how the self and the world are perceived.”

At least three studies have borrowed the literary term *epiphany* to describe positive and enduring change that is both sudden and profound. Here, the definitions are somewhat clearer. Jarvis (1997) defines epiphany as a “sudden, discontinuous change, leading to profound, positive, and enduring transformation” (p. v), echoed by both McDonald (2008) and Liang (2006) who define it, respectively as: “a sudden, abrupt, and positive transformation that [is] profound and enduring” (p. 90); and “a critical incident characterized by sudden, profound transformation of one’s life” (p. 113). However, all these definitions go on to include unfounded causal claims. For instance, both Jarvis

(1997) and McDonald (2008) go on to assert, respectively, that epiphanies occur “through the reconfiguration of an individual’s most deeply-held beliefs about the self and the world” (p. v), and “transform the individual’s concept of self and identity through the creation of new meaning” (p. 89-90). Such definitions are precarious as there is currently no evidence or even consensus of opinion regarding the causes of any kind of sudden profound change, including the idea that such change occurs “through the reconfiguration of [...] deeply-held beliefs” or “the creation of new meaning”. Moreover, such definitions make it difficult to recruit a sample, as it is rarely apparent exactly what caused change for a given participant.

Perhaps the most helpful construct to date, which has also received the most attention in mainstream psychology, is Miller and C’de Baca’s (2001) *quantum change*, most commonly defined as a “vivid, surprising, benevolent, and enduring personal transformation” (p. 4). This is the only known definition of sudden, profound change that seems at least partially empirically-derived (based on a mixed-methods study of 55 participants who claim to have had a sudden and profound inner change). In one of many examples the authors provide, one participant recalls how “all of a sudden” he heard an inner voice telling him to do what he believed:

I felt a quiet, relaxed world, a way of being. [...] Now from that point on, I didn’t go back to that tense world. [...] This change has lasted, no question about it. Forty years. (pp. 110-113)

Based on their analysis of qualitative interview data, Miller and C’de Baca (2001) further differentiate between two apparent sub-types of quantum change (though they are careful to note that certain experiences elude classification). *Insightful quantum changes*, which are most similar to others’ descriptions of epiphanies and unencumbered moments

(e.g., Jarvis, 1997; McDonald, 2005; Murray, 2006), are characterized by a moment of “particular clarity” in which a “new realization, a new way of thinking or understanding” breaks upon a person’s consciousness in a way that is “distinctly different from ordinary reasoning processes” (pp. 18-19). For example, one participant stated: “A really great sense of peace and well-being enveloped me. And I knew – I mean I knew, not believed, not thought [...] that I had made the most important step I would ever take in my life” (p. 18). *Mystical quantum changes*, on the other hand, are distinguished by a “noetic sense of being acted upon by something outside of and greater than oneself” (p. 21). In the words of one participant: “Out of nowhere, this wave of spiritual electricity washed over me [...] I experienced what God is, which is absolute love and unity” (p. 99). (Confusingly, the authors use “epiphany” for such change, though the term’s popular use denotes insight.) Sudden conversion experiences, of the type studied by James (1902/1985), are said to fall into this “mystical” category. Thus, quantum change is particularly compelling as it suggests an integrative framework within which sudden, profound changes across both religious/spiritual and secular contexts can be viewed in terms of a unified human experience.

Strangely, however, Miller and C’de Baca’s (2001) definition of quantum change appears to bypass some of the most robust of their findings and sample characteristics. For instance, while brevity and profundity is absent from the definition, all participants reported a “profound” change that occurred or began in a “relatively short period of time” (1994, pp. 258-259). Further, though the authors define quantum change as “surprising” (2001, p. 4), only 58 percent of participants stated they were surprised or startled during the experience; in fact, 27 percent had been “expecting or hoping for something like this

to happen” (1994, pp. 262-263). Elsewhere, a somewhat different definition of quantum change includes the term “dramatic” (Miller, 2004, p. 453), a descriptor found nowhere in the original results. Indeed, in comparing much of Miller and C’de Baca’s writings (e.g. C’de Baca & Wilbourne, 2004; Miller, 2004; Miller & C’de Baca, 2001) to their actual data (Miller & C’de Baca, 1994), it appears that their zeal for describing a little-known psychological concept often took precedence over the data itself. Further, like other definitions to date, quantum change seems to blur the distinction between a “distinctive, memorable” *experience* (e.g. 2001, p. 5) and the positive, lasting *transformation* that followed for participants in their study (1994). Thus, though quantum change appears to be a suitable starting point, it also requires some further modification.

Sudden Personal Transformation

Derived from the most robust findings in Miller and C’de Baca’s study (1994) (i.e. characteristics identified in all or nearly all of their sample), *sudden personal transformation* (SPT) was tentatively defined here as “a positive, profound, and lasting personal change that follows a relatively brief and memorable inner experience”. The following is an elaboration on this definition, justifying and further expanding on its various components.

It should be noted, firstly, that the term “quantum change” was not used for a couple of reasons. First, the term SPT marks a departure from Miller and C’de Baca’s original definition of quantum change. Second, it creates a more readily-understood descriptive term, given that “quantum” might in some cases be confused with unrelated concepts in quantum physics or New Age psychology (e.g. Wordsworth, 2007). Still, it is

acknowledged that the term is provisional and that revisions may be made in future studies.

The above definition of SPT takes into account the following empirical findings:

(a) *Profound, Brief*: All 55 participants in Miller and C’de Baca’s (1994) study reported a profound change following a brief inner experience; 95 percent claimed their entire lives had changed following this experience;

(b) *Positive*: 96 percent stated this experience changed their lives in a positive way;

(c) *Memorable*: Participants were able to give a detailed re-telling of their experience an average of 10 years later (Miller & C’de Baca, 1994); C’de Baca and Wilborne’s (2004) follow-up study found that an average of 20 years later, 97 percent of those re-interviewed still recalled it;

(d) *Lasting*: All participants, an average of 10 years after the experience, claimed its effects had lasted or mostly lasted (Miller & C’de Baca, 1994) and, 20 years later, 97 percent reported it continued to have an important influence on their lives (C’de Baca & Wilborne, 2004).

While the above characteristics do not differ significantly from previous psychological depictions of sudden and profound change (e.g. as in the unencumbered moment and epiphany), they are unique that they are grounded in the experiences of a relatively large sample.

Although prior definitions have usually lumped the following features together, SPT is conceptualized here in terms of (a) a relatively brief and memorable inner experience in which change is subjectively felt to occur or begin (which will be termed the *transformative experience*); and (b) positive, profound, and lasting personal change

(referred to as *personal transformation*). Such a revised conceptualization is meant to assist future theoretical development, which generally takes into account common antecedents, a given phenomenon, and its outcomes (e.g. Cano, 2002).

Within the present study, examples of *inner experiences* might be (in parallel with Miller and C'de Baca's (2001) observations), (a) *mystical transformative experiences* (i.e. a transient sense of connection to or of being acted upon by something outside of and greater than oneself); (b) *insightful transformative experiences* (i.e. new realizations and/or ways of thinking and understanding, moments of clarity, etc.); and (c) experiences that contain overlapping aspects of both. However, given the early stages of research on this phenomenon, the present study did not rule out experiences that did not clearly fit under either category, so long as they constituted some kind of *inner* event (e.g. a memory, vision, dream, inner voice, intense emotional experience, etc.) (see Appendix B for a complete list of inclusion and exclusion criteria).

External life events, windfalls, and developmental turning points that would normally be expected to have positive outcomes (e.g. winning a lottery, the birth of a child, getting married), fall outside the understanding of *inner experience* above. However, the present study did not rule out individuals who, in conjunction with a positive external event – for example, winning the lottery – *also* experienced some out-of-the-ordinary inner state such as a mystical experience or insight. Moreover, profound and sometimes even positive changes have at times been described following unique neurological states and disturbances, such as chemical intoxication, stroke (e.g. Taylor, 2006), and being medically dead or near death (e.g. Greyson, 2007). However, the present study excluded such cases as, in this early stage of understanding, it sought to

investigate how SPT might occur in individuals more generally, outside of diagnosable trauma or disturbance in the brain.

In light of previous findings (e.g. Miller & C’de Baca, 1994) regarding SPT-like change, while the word *sudden* also denotes unexpectedness and intensity, it refers here in its strictest sense to the subjectively-reported brevity of the transformative experience. The specific length of these experiences may vary: for example, transformative experiences in Miller and C’de Baca’s (1994) study lasted from less than a minute to a number of days, with 64 percent claiming it lasted less than 24 hours. Moreover, the term “sudden” is not meant to imply that change occurs all at once, with no antecedents. Indeed, as Bien (2004) argues, change may in fact proceed “continuously, but at some point this change is manifested in an apparently dramatic manner” (p. 494). Likewise, this study assumed that many factors leading up to SPT might be important to the experience, and, also, that the resultant changes may evolve for a long time afterwards. The main concern was whether participants subjectively perceived their positive change as qualitatively different from most other personal changes in their lives in that they link it to a single, distinctive inner event.

Other words used in the definition of SPT, such as *memorable* and *positive*, were also determined by the subjective self-reports of each participant. As an added caution, this study excluded individuals who failed to provide a rich and detailed account, indicating that the experience was not vividly remembered. It is also acknowledged that the term “memorable,” on one level, may be somewhat redundant, as, in order for participants to directly attribute their change to some inner experience, they must at least have some memory of it. However, another layer to this term, implies, again, a subjective

sense that this experience was unique and distinct from ordinary daily experiences (Miller & C'de Baca, 2001).

When considering the positive nature of the change, the present study, as an added caution, excluded individuals who reported that their friends and family perceived their change as negative (in other words, when the positive nature of the change has been contested by others). It is acknowledged, however, that this criteria may have potentially excluded some legitimate instances of SPT. Finally, dramatic changes that occur in cult-like situations might at times be considered detrimental and, also as a caution, were ruled out from this study.

In the present study, *profound* personal change, or *transformation*, was defined by self-reported “deep” changes in various emotions, thoughts, values, behaviours, and so on, as opposed to more circumscribed or surface change that has little bearing on an individual’s life as a whole. However, it was expected that for some individuals a seemingly circumscribed change, such as ceasing to smoke, may be felt as a very deep behavior shift which has far-reaching effects on their emotions, behaviour, etc. Thus, the distinction between “deep” and “surface” was seen as largely subjective and context-dependent, and therefore was left to each participant to determine for themselves.

The term *personal* denotes a subjective sense that “something about me” (for example, emotions, thoughts, values, behaviours etc.) has changed, rather than circumstance or environment only (for example, moving to a preferred location, the resolution of financial difficulties, etc.). Also, in order for change to be considered *lasting*, a participant’s transformative experience must have occurred at least two years

prior to this study. This timeframe seemed reasonable in establishing the enduring nature of the change without simultaneously excluding younger participants.

Lastly, in considering the connection between transformation and some inner event, it is acknowledged, as proposed by Beaumeister (1994), that individuals may at times over-attribute personal change to potentially random incidents, “whereas in fact the change might well have occurred without these events” (p. 290). However, verification that change directly followed some inner event not only lacks feasibility, but is unnecessary in light of the qualitative position of this study and the focus on participants’ subjective experience that this was so.

It is acknowledged that the above definition of SPT is somewhat broader than terms such as epiphany (which have been used to refer to insights), the unencumbered moment (similarly, referring to moments of clarity), and the two subsets of quantum change (i.e. mystical and insightful). However, given the emerging nature of this area of research, the numerous methodological limitations of existing studies (to be discussed below), and the fact that none of the existing classifications have been corroborated by generalizable data, it is at present unclear that separate categories of this type of change are warranted. Thus, a relatively broad working definition of SPT appeared appropriate while the literature is still at an early stage of understanding.

Given that a number of terms have been used to refer to positive, profound, and lasting personal change following a brief, vivid inner experience, and given that SPT has been proposed as an alternate term for such phenomena, *SPT-like change* will be used in reference to existing studies in order to streamline the discussion. In line with this, any brief, vivid inner experience that is part of an SPT-like change will be termed a

transformative experience, and the profound change that follows will be labeled a *personal transformation*.

Differentiating Sudden Personal Transformation from Related Terms

According to the definition above, certain phenomena in the literature might at times represent some aspects of SPT, but would not necessarily be considered examples of it in and of themselves. For instance, *mystical* or *peak experiences* (e.g. Maslow, 1971), *spiritual emergencies* (Grof & Grof, 1986), and everyday insights do not always produce lasting, profound, or positive change (Miller, 2001). Conversely, some changes, though profound, are not necessarily preceded by an abrupt experience. For example, there is a current consensus that many *religious conversions* occur gradually over many months or years and often lack the distinctive conversion “experience” described by William James (e.g. Paloutzian, 1996; Ullman, 1982; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998). Similarly, the concept of *spiritual transformation*, developed as a broader category than conversion and which affects personal “strivings” and “ultimate concerns” is also not necessarily abrupt (Paloutzian, 2005, p. 334). As such, while the present study did not rule out experiences that fall into any of the above categories, it limited itself to events that also fit the definition of SPT overall.

Descriptive Findings

Having delineated the construct of interest for the present study and examined its background in the theoretical literature, the task that remains is to explore what is empirically known about such change based on the existing research. All known empirical studies of SPT-like change can be classified as initial explorations meant to arrive at a broad description of their phenomenon of interest. In line with this, descriptive

data collection methods (for example, quantitative questionnaires (e.g. Miller & C' de Baca 1994), or, more frequently, in-depth interviews) have been used.

Methodological Limitations of Existing Studies

A complete and useful synthesis of the existing findings on SPT-like change is complicated by a number of factors. First, though most studies have made fleeting references to previous work, no systematic program of research has been sustained. Not only do the terms and definitions, as discussed, seem to exist in isolation, methodologies have also ranged widely, and include mixed-methods approaches (Liang, 2006; Miller & C' de Baca, 1994), phenomenological analysis (Jarvis 1996; Liang, 2006), self-identity existential analysis (McDonald, 2005), and non-specified qualitative methods (in both cases presented as a series of common themes) (Miller & C' de Baca, 2001; Murray, 2006). Moreover, almost all known studies of SPT-like change contain numerous methodological limitations, the extent of which varies. One study (Liang, 2006) was even found to contain too many flaws (discussed below) for its findings to be considered relevant here. Correspondingly, only a few empirical studies have led to peer-reviewed, published results (C' de Baca & Wilbourne, 2004; McDonald, 2005; Miller & C' de Baca, 1994), while the rest consist of unpublished doctoral research (Jarvis, 1997; Liang, 2006; Murray, 2006).

With regard to specific limitations, perhaps stemming from their exploratory nature, some studies have used inclusion criteria that are somewhat broader than their finalized definition of SPT-like change (Miller & C' de Baca, 1994; Murray, 2006). However, other limitations have been more serious and avoidable, and concern specifically the qualitative investigations that represent the large majority of reports. For

instance, Liang, (2006) entirely neglected to use inclusion criteria despite speculating epiphanies do not happen to everyone. McDonald (2005, 2008) used circular reasoning in selecting a sample based on a set of a priori predictions about epiphany which he “derived from the literature” (2008, p. 97), and then presented his results as support for these predictions. For example, one of his predictions was that epiphanies would be “preceded by periods of anxiety, depression, and inner turmoil”. Even though he used this prediction, among others, to select a sample for research, he goes on to present the unsurprising fact that “each of the 4 participants [...] experienced periods of anxiety, depression, and inner turmoil” (pp. 93-98) as support for his initial prediction about the nature of epiphany. Connected to this limitation, both Jarvis (1997) and McDonald (2005) make assertions inconsistent with their qualitative methodology (i.e. phenomenological and self-identity existential analysis) by presenting findings as support for pre-formed characteristics or “hypotheses.” Also inconsistent with her qualitative methodology, Liang (2006) presents her qualitative findings on epiphany with the frequent use of causal language (e.g. “results from,” “common triggers,” “comes from”) (p. 160). Further, as noted, some reports (Miller & C’de Baca, 2001; Murray, 2006) have presented their findings as a set of common themes without specifying the methodology used to arrive at these themes. Murray (2006) only goes as far as to call his methodology “qualitative” (p. 70). Miller and C’de Baca, who conducted a mixed-methods study, were also often unclear in their later publications (e.g. 2001) whether findings stemmed from their more recent qualitative analysis or from quantitative survey data that was presented in a previous article (1994).

Most importantly, in all qualitative studies examined, there is often a tenuous connection between the researchers' claims and those of the participants. Researchers' (C'de Baca & Wilbourne, 2004; Jarvis, 1996; McDonald, 2005, 2008) interpretive categories often poorly matched corresponding interview extracts. For example, one of the findings presented by McDonald (2005, 2008) is that "epiphanies are an experience of profound change and transformation in self-identity" (2008, p. 99), yet almost none of the quotations he provides explicitly speak to self-identity, and some seem to reflect different changes altogether. For example, one participant relates a realization about his desired future, and how this relates to his present behavior: "I realized that the way I was going, I was not actually going to have the right to make that speech. That future moment, that visioning, was my epiphany to say, "I want that moment"" (p. 99). Finally, and perhaps most significantly, no known studies have used member checking (e.g. Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002) to corroborate any of the authors' interpretative claims, and if they did use member-checking they did not report this.

In all, Miller and C'de Baca's (1994) quantitative analysis of 55 participants' questionnaire data was found to contain the fewest methodological limitations. For example, the survey used (Miller, 1991) seemed to be clearly worded, lacked leading or loaded questions, and appeared to have a good flow (for instance, it asks participants to first give some general information about the experience, such as how long ago it happened, then leads them sequentially through questions about what happened before, during, and after the experience). Moreover, the frequency data generated from this survey was clearly tabulated in their published work (Miller & C'de Baca, 1994).

Experiential Features and Outcomes

Given that the above research (C’de Baca & Wilbourne, 2004; Jarvis, 1997; McDonald, 2005, 2008; Miller & C’de Baca, 1994, 2001; Murray, 2006) comprises the only known empirical description of SPT-like change, an effort was made to integrate the most commonly-reported findings, with a greater emphasis on the more reliable of these reports (e.g., Miller & C’de Baca, 1994). Such a synthesis follows from the assumption that while individual authors have used somewhat differing conceptual frameworks and methodologies, they all refer to a common process of positive, profound, and lasting personal change following a brief, vivid inner experience.

The most extensive focus of the descriptive research so far has been on the ways in which participants described their transformative experience and its outcomes, with less focus placed on the life context preceding it. Researchers’ depictions of transformative experiences generally fall into two categories: (a) moments of mental clarity, insights, flashes of awareness, etc. (e.g. McDonald, 2005, 2008; Miller & C’de Baca, 2001; Murray, 2006) and (b) mystical experiences of connection to a larger force or higher power (e.g. Miller & C’de Baca, 2001). Still, as noted, some accounts seemed to elude “neat categorization” (p. 175).

Most studies commented on the emotional aspects of these experiences. Miller and C’de Baca (1994) found that 78 percent of their participants reported an accompanying sense of relief. Similarly, other studies have described a sense of calm, emotional release (Murray, 2006), relief, and liberation (Jarvis, 1997). Miller and C’de Baca (2001) claimed that while emotions during the transformative experience were usually positive, “being sadder but wiser,” compassion for the suffering of others, and

“responsibility and remorse” were also expressed (p. 15). They also found that 87 percent of participants reported that during the experience “an important truth was revealed,” while 58 percent “had experiences that are very difficult to explain in words,” and 56 percent “felt at one with or connected with everything around [them]” (1994, p. 262).

Marking a departure from popular notions of self-change and healing as “self-initiated” and “intentional” (e.g. Prochaska et al., 2003, p. 63; see also Resnicow & Vaughan, 2006), two studies reported that participants’ transformative experiences seemed to present themselves “without thinking” (Murray, 2006, p. 290) and were “rarely remembered as willful or volitional” (Miller & C’de Baca, 2001, p.14). In line with this, Miller and C’de Baca (1994) found that 58 percent of participants claimed their experience took them by surprise and 76 percent felt that it emanated from something outside themselves. Conversely, 13 percent stated they were trying to have a special experience in the time just beforehand. Thus, though it seems to be the case with many, it is unclear if all SPTs are experienced as non-volitional.

As noted, participants’ personal transformations following these experiences have been widely described as “profound” (Jarvis, 1997, p. v; McDonald, 2008, p. 89; Miller & C’de Baca, 1994, p. 258; Murray, 2006, p ii), “positive”/“benevolent” (Jarvis, 1997, p. v; McDonald, 2008, p. 93; Miller & C’de Baca, 2001, p. 4; Murray, 2006, p ii), and “irreversible”/“lasting”/“enduring” (Jarvis, 1997, p. v; McDonald, 2008, p. 93; Miller & C’de Baca, 2001, p. 4; Murray, 2006, p ii). Lending support to these first two characteristics, Miller and C’de Baca (1994) found that 95 percent of their participants reported their entire lives had changed, and 96 percent felt their change was for the better. Regarding the enduring nature of such change, C’de Baca and Wilbourne’s (2004) 10-

year follow up with 30 of the 55 original participants in the 1994 study found that 97 percent felt their changes had continued. (The other 25 participants either could not be located, were ill, or had deceased.) They described their changes on a continuum between one-time transformations and as part of a lifelong process of growth.

The specific outcomes reported by participants have been broad and vary somewhat from study to study. Miller and C’de Baca (1994) found that 84 percent of participants reported a different perception of the world; 95 percent felt a new sense of meaning; and almost a quarter expressed a newfound belief in God. These authors also found notable differences in their sample’s retrospective values and emotions before versus after the experience, based on average results in a card sort test (the reliability and validity of which were not reported) and Likert scale ratings. Further, all known qualitative studies have interpreted an affirmed, strengthened, or clarified sense of self or identity following participants’ experiences (e.g. C’de Baca & Wilbourne, 2004, p. 537; Jarvis, 1997, p. 146; McDonald, 2005, p. 111; Murray, 2006). Finally, a few studies described various behavioral changes, such as “a period of productive activity and heightened energy” (Jarvis, 1997, p. 165) and release from destructive behavioral patterns (Miller & C’de Baca in C’de Baca & Wilbourne, 2004, p. 537).

Antecedent Factors

Overall, in terms of what makes a particular individual likely to experience SPT-like change, much is unknown. Two studies noted that participants’ transformative experiences were not limited to any particular point in the life span (Jarvis, 1997; Miller & C’de Baca, 1994). In one study, 46 percent of participants stated it happened in the context of routine, everyday events (Miller & C’de Baca, 1994). Anecdotally, it has also

been observed that a large sample of people who had experienced such change was not difficult to recruit, and that participants “seemed to be diverse and largely ordinary individuals” (Miller & C’de Baca, p. 260).

The most commonly-reported specific antecedents of such change appear to be negative life events and inner states. In Miller and C’de Baca’s (1994) study, participants reported moderately high levels of negative life experiences and relatively low levels of positive events in the preceding year compared to published norms. Just prior to their transformative experience, 56 percent reported feeling emotional distress or upset. These authors’ qualitative results also included four antecedent “themes” which were largely negative, such as a traumatic childhood and aimless drifting or purposelessness (2001, pp. 26-29). Similarly, Murray (2006) found that prior to their life-changing moment of clarity, participants reported feeling alone and unhappy with themselves, failing in attempts to solve their problems, and had a history of suicide attempts. Likewise, both Jarvis (1997) and McDonald (2005) described all five epiphanies in each of their studies as preceded by inner turmoil, which included suicidal ideation and feelings of loneliness, alienation, anxiety, depression, anger, and despair. However, contradicting prevailing assumptions that negative experiences *always* precede SPT-like change (e.g. James, 1902/1985; Denzin, 1989; Jarvis, 1997; McDonald, 2008; Murray, 2006; Tennen & Affleck, 1998) a large portion (44 percent) of Miller and C’de Baca’s (1994) participants did not report distress or upset *immediately* prior to their experience. Still, it is unknown if this subset of the sample experienced distress in the preceding weeks, months, or years.

Further in the way of negative events, a few qualitative reports found that individuals reached a point of limited or exhausted possibilities and hit “rock-bottom.”

For instance, just before their moment of clarity, all participants in Murray's (2006) study were described as having run out of options, and finally reaching a "low point" (p. 64) or "emotional bottom" (p. 253). Similarly, Miller and C'de Baca (2001) described the dual antecedent themes of (a) feeling trapped, defeated, or like all possibilities had been tried and exhausted and (b) hitting bottom or the end of one's rope.

Some other antecedent factors included the role of others and an exposure to religion. For example, Murray (2006) found that despite their negative experiences, all nine participants knew at least one person who provided them with an "emotional anchor" and unconditional support (p. 292). Miller and C'de Baca (1994) also found that a third of their 55 participants had someone guiding them through the experience, and almost a quarter stated that others around them were having a similar experience themselves. Moreover, 59 percent of their sample reported a prior belief in God (though it is unclear how this compared to US norms), and almost a third stated that they were praying just prior to their experience.

Overall, the descriptive literature on SPT-like change has reported on a number of experiential features, outcomes, and, less often, antecedent themes. Generally, transformative experiences fell into two categories: insights/moments of clarity and mystical experiences. These were described as accompanied by various emotions, most often relief or release, and were generally portrayed as non-volitional. Their reported outcomes included profound, lasting changes in perception, values, emotions, identity, and behaviors. Preceding such change, common antecedents included negative life events and emotions, the role of others, and religion.

As stated, a major drawback of these findings is that most of them come from methodologically unsound reports. However, even the more reliable of these findings tell us little about their relevance, with no studies having directly asked participants which factors they considered to be important or helpful to their experience, and which were just coincidental. The following section relays the researchers' attempts at explaining SPT-like experiences of their participants.

Researchers' Explanations

While the research to date has described various features of SPT-like change, it is far from providing a full understanding of what actually causes or helps bring about such phenomena. When it comes to cause-and-effect relationships, experimental research (e.g. in which measurements are taken before and after a treatment in a controlled setting) would provide the strongest form of evidence for causal relationships (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). However, this type of investigation is restricted by the ethics of inducing profound and permanent changes in participants. Moreover, longitudinal prospective research, which is sometimes used to explore the common antecedents of a phenomenon, is complicated by the apparent unpredictability with which such changes seem to occur throughout the life span and across various demographics (Miller & C' de Baca, 2001, p. 176). Finally, it appears as though no known retrospective correlational studies have explored common self-reported antecedents of SPT-like change as opposed to gradual changes. Hence, the only explanatory information to date consists of researchers' own speculations about their findings and such speculations vary widely.

When theorists seek to explain a given phenomenon, they often refer to its (a) triggers, or facilitative or predisposing factors and (b) mechanisms. Using an analogy,

one can theorize that good physical health and having access to the proper equipment can facilitate riding a bicycle, whereas the physical principles behind the maintenance of balance and the motion of the bike through space describe mechanisms. When it comes to a medical disease such as cancer, smoking and genetic risk can act additively to predispose someone to the condition, whereas the biological processes of cancerous cell replication describe mechanisms. Likewise, the distinction between facilitative factors and mechanisms in the present study is that the latter are conceptualized as antecedent elements which help SPT along or make it more likely, while the former are seen as forces or processes that produce or cause the individual's transformation. Though distinctions of these kinds are often unclear in the literature, the discussion below will focus on facilitative factors and mechanisms separately.

Facilitative Factors

The most widely expressed explanatory claims, which seem to appear in almost every empirical study of SPT-like change reviewed, concern the common antecedent of negative life experiences and inner states. For instance, Jarvis (1996) uses the metaphor of chaos theory to propose a connection between personal turmoil and epiphanies, arguing that a re-establishment of equilibrium and "highly-adaptive structural changes" often follow from periods of turbulence (p. vi). She concludes that "though clinical psychology generally encourages the view that chaos is negative, a period of psychological chaos may prelude an important and enduring positive change" (p. vi). McDonald (2008) also suggests that negative experiences and emotions facilitate epiphanies, theorizing that participants' experiences of meaninglessness, guilt, and depression forced them to reflect on existential concerns, ultimately creating a

“dissonance between the minor insights gained during this period... and the past choices they had made” (p. 111). Similarly, Miller and C’de Baca (2001) propose that some quantum changes might be facilitated by “intense pain or emotional distress” (p. 174) and dissonance between life circumstances and “goal templates... central to meaning and identity” (1994, p. 273).

Two studies have suggested that, within a context of negative life experiences and emotions, a “rock-bottom” episode or breaking point coupled with the surrender of personal control can facilitate SPT-like change. Murray (2006) proposed that when every known problem-solving strategy had been exhausted, participants were pushed to a sense of “rock-bottom”, leading them to surrender or let go of control, which ultimately led to an apperception of “new approaches” (pp. 285-290). Similarly, Miller and C’de Baca (2001) stipulate that quantum change may be triggered by a breaking point: a moment of crisis that demands action. At this point, they state that individuals may surrender control by “turning for help to something greater and wiser than themselves” (pp. 157-158).

Fewer potentially positive or neutral facilitative factors have been suggested. Though they do not back up these ideas with empirical findings, Miller and C’de Baca (2001) propose that some quantum changes might be facilitated by a period of seeking a deeper meaning or purpose in life. They also propose that a conscious decision to be open to spirituality may be involved (1994). Finally, they suggest that others might play a role in supporting quantum change, with certain individuals, or “givers”, being perhaps especially skilled in facilitating such change (2001, p. 180).

Mechanisms of Change

There is some agreement that the process of SPT-like change is usually not

conscious. For example, as stated above, Murray (2006) believes that transformation emerges from a moment of clarity “that presents itself without thinking” (p. 290). Miller and C’de Baca (2001) propose a process of subconscious incubation wherein a resolution to a major personal obstacle may be gradually prepared while one is “not even thinking about it,” in a manner similar to the “aha” moments associated with smaller daily problems (p. 165). This kind of explanation, they posit, might account for experiences that occur in the absence of any noticeable prior distress, as an individual need not be aware of an underlying problem for it to be resolved in this way. Such explanations bear a similarity to theories of unconscious problem-solving (e.g. Zhong, Dijksterhuis, & Galinsky, 2008), yet concern specifically sudden, profound human change.

Other ideas regarding mechanisms are quite varied. For example, Murray (2006) wrote that profound inner change occurs primarily in self-identity via a metaphorical “shift away from a negative [sense of] self” (p. 282). McDonald (2008) similarly suggests that during epiphany, an insight about authentic versus inauthentic modes of existence causes an individual to take on “a new and more authentic self-identity” (p. 111). Potential mechanisms proposed by Miller and C’de Baca are perhaps the most numerous, and include: a self-regulatory shift in various levels of behavioral organization (1994); a deep-level restructuring of previously incompatible values; the incorporation of a new sense of self or reality from external templates or an inner store of “possible selves” (as in Cross & Markus, 1991); a personal maturation event (Miller & C’de Baca, 2001); a shift in one’s perception of reality similar to a figure/ground reversal in Gestalt psychology (1994); a manifestation of an inner, collective wisdom (2001); and even a form of spiritual intervention or “act of God” (1994).

It can thus be seen that researchers have presented a number of varied ideas about how SPT-like change might occur. However, while the feasibility of experimental research may be limited, it seems remarkable that no research to date has taken the relatively straightforward approach of asking participants what *they* believe triggered or caused their change.

Rationale for the Present Study

SPT-like changes have been described quite extensively by a diverse, if limited and disconnected range of studies. While it is acknowledged that further research is needed to address these limitations and corroborate findings, at least one large, methodologically sound study has provided quite an extensive preliminary description of SPT-like change (Miller & C'de Baca, 1994). Therefore, a seemingly more serious omission is how little is known about participants' own explanations of their SPT-like change.

Only a few studies have devoted a very limited focus to this topic. For instance, Miller and C'de Baca (1994) asked their 55 participants, "How do you understand what happened to you? What do you make of it?" (Miller, 1991, p. 5). Strangely, however, participants' answers are not addressed in any of their reports. One reason for this might be that the authors' central goal was description rather than explanation. Another reason could be a lack of richness in the findings: when asked "how they did it," they claim that participants "often had a hard time being specific" (Miller & C'de Baca, 2001, p. 37). Yet another challenge may have been a lack of consistency. The authors state that "while many features of quantum changes were similar, the meaning and interpretation given to them varied widely, guided in part by the person's prior conceptual framework" (p. 29).

Nevertheless, it is surprising how little attention was given to participant's explanations given that large sections were devoted to those of the authors.

C'de Baca and Wilbourne (2004) re-interviewed 30 of the 55 individuals who had participated in the 1994 study and asked, among other questions, "How do you understand what happened to you back then?" (p. 536). The findings, however, are presented only briefly as part of their overall report and contain some major drawbacks. They state that participant "understanding" fell into two categories-- (a) "some participants understood their experience in spiritual or religious terms [...] as connections with spiritual powers outside of themselves" while (b) "others described the change as an affirmation, insight, or validation of their sense of self" (pp. 536-539). However, the authors provide no elaboration on these statements, nor any indication of the number of participants that contributed to either finding. As well, only a few transcript extracts are presented, some of which do not clearly match these categories. For example, one of the extracts for category (a), above, contains no mention at all of religion, spirituality, or spiritual powers:

I know that it was real. Absolutely, no question about it. I know that it occurred in me at a very deep level. It wasn't a burning bush out there, it was inside. Whether it was generated inside, or only acknowledged inside I can't tell you, but there is no question in my mind that it was real. (p. 536).

Finally, no ideas about participant-reported facilitative factors were provided.

Thus, it is clear that more research is needed on participants' own understanding of what caused and facilitated their SPT. As noted, such research can also add to the literature by employing sound methodological practices that have been largely absent from qualitative studies so far.

Chapter Summary

Positive, lasting psychological change has been typically conceptualized as gradual and discrete. However, abrupt, profound changes, first described by psychologists as early as 1902, have been examined more recently by a handful of empirical studies. Current definitions are varied and often flawed, yet converge on a type of change that is positive, profound, lasting, and that follows a relatively brief and memorable inner experience. This study has provisionally termed such change *sudden personal transformation (SPT)*. While a small number of studies have described a range of antecedent factors, experiential features, and outcomes of SPT-like change, the studies themselves contain numerous methodological limitations. Further, although researchers have drawn a variety of theoretical conclusions, no study to date has focused on participants' own explanations. The present study will add to previous research by using more trustworthy qualitative methods and by exploring participants' beliefs about the facilitative factors and mechanisms of their SPT. The following chapter addresses the specific steps taken to accomplish these goals.

Chapter 3: Methodology

A review of the available literature has shown that very few studies have directly asked participants what made their SPT possible. In an attempt to bridge this gap in understanding, the following research question was developed: *What are the self-reported facilitative factors and causal mechanisms for individuals who have experienced a sudden personal transformation (SPT)?* This chapter describes the specific methods and assumptions used by the present study to answer this question. It begins with a discussion of research design (semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis) and epistemology, and follows with a summary of participant recruitment and selection, data collection and analysis, and the assessment of trustworthiness. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the ethical considerations undertaken by the researcher in conducting the present study.

Research Design

This study used semi-structured interviewing and thematic analysis, which are specific methods that fall under the broader category of qualitative research. Qualitative research uses descriptive (often language-based) data to represent human perspectives and experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Creswell, 2009). In contrast, quantitative research uses numerical data to describe a population or, in some cases, to test hypotheses about relationships between variables. In qualitative research, social reality is assumed to be a co-construction that occurs via dialogue between researchers, participants (or co-researchers), and readers (Creswell, 2009). Such an approach is by necessity reflexive given that the researcher, being a part of the research, must analyze themselves within the context of what they are studying (Krefting, 1991).

Qualitative interviews were chosen in the present study to collect data as they facilitated a broad and exploratory account from participants. Specifically, semi-structured interviews were chosen as they allowed for a dialogue in which interview questions could be modified in light of participants' responses. At the same time, a pre-set protocol created a sense of preparedness in terms of topics to be covered (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Thematic analysis (the steps of which are described in a following section) was found to be the most straightforward method of categorizing participants' subjective reports. Individuals' subjectively reported experiences can be presented as themes: patterned responses that capture something meaningful in relation to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Outlining themes that were shared in common across participants, in line with thematic analysis' focus on themes across a data set, facilitated an overall summary of the most relevant features of an otherwise large body of data

Epistemology

SPT was assumed to be a valid, complex, and multifaceted phenomenon that occurs in the real world (albeit with unknown frequency). It was further assumed that SPT is facilitated and produced by a potentially varied set of factors and mechanisms. Further, participants were seen as experiential experts or "insiders" with respect to this phenomenon in their lives. As Beaumeister (1994) notes, individuals "engage in considerable interpretive activity to make sense of their lives and themselves" and any important life change or event will most likely be filtered through a person's self-interpretations. While these subjective interpretations (e.g. beliefs about facilitating

factors and causes of SPT) and real world or objective processes are not necessarily related, oftentimes they are, and as such are worthy of examination (p. 281).

In this study, access to a “true” or complete account of participants’ experience was understood to be partial and constrained by numerous factors (Smith et al., 2009). Some of these factors relate to the retrospective nature of the data, which is limited by participants’ memory of the event. Interview data is further bound by context, a limited time frame, the specific details that participants choose to disclose, and the ambiguous, multivalent nature of language. (However, direct claims expressed by participants were nevertheless taken seriously, at face value.) As discussed, the researcher also co-constructs the findings through interacting with participants and intentionally selecting, refining, and presenting information to readers (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 80). Methods of increasing trustworthiness of such findings, despite their context-bound and subjective nature, are discussed in more detail below.

The nature and scope of the knowledge produced by the present study is determined by its qualitative positioning. The results of this study lack empirical generalizability and can only speak of the particular cases examined. These results also cannot inform us of the actual factors that predict or cause sudden personal transformations. All this is not to say, however, that they have no relevance; as will be addressed below, qualitative research can have “theoretical transferability” by engaging with the extant literature and by outlining new constructs that can be tested in future studies.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

Three purposefully chosen volunteers were the participants in this study. This relatively modest sample size is due to an earlier research design using interpretive phenomenological analysis. However, it is still sufficient according to philosophical sensibilities of qualitative inquiry, which focuses on an in-depth understanding of smaller samples (Smith et al., 2009). Participants were recruited via word-of-mouth referral. The research topic was described to numerous acquaintances (either verbally or via the form shown in Appendix A), who either personally expressed interest or who knew other potential candidates. Participants of interest were adults aged 18 and over who reported having experienced an SPT as defined by this study (for a detailed list of inclusion and exclusion criteria, see Appendix B). During the initial phone contact, I spoke with individuals briefly to assess their ability to provide a rich, descriptive account, and asked a number of screening questions (Appendix C).

Data Collection

Prior to data collection, all interview procedures were piloted with a colleague in the counselling psychology program at the University of Victoria. Once procedures were revised and participants selected, a mutually convenient time to conduct the interview was arranged with each participant. Interviews took place at a private lab room on the University of Victoria campus or by telephone. Before the interview, all participants read and agreed to the conditions in the informed consent form (as shown in Appendix D).

Data was collected using an audio-recorded, in-depth, semi-structured interview, which was guided by a schedule, as detailed in Appendix F. The interview questions used reflect the present study's research question by asking participants about the broader

context of their SPT followed by the specific factors and mechanisms they believe facilitated and produced this experience. All topics in the schedule were addressed, with the order and phrasing varying with each interview and additional questions and prompts added as needed. The duration of the interviews was between 62 and 105 minutes.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was guided by the six phases of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). These are, summarized briefly: Transcription/familiarization; generating initial codes; searching for themes across transcripts; revising themes; naming and defining themes; and producing the report. This analysis was informed by an inductive approach in that the development of themes was driven by the data as opposed to *a priori* constructs (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2007). In acknowledgment of the difficulty in separating oneself from one's theoretical knowledge base, there was a ten-month gap between the initial literature review and the data analysis. A subsequent revision of the literature followed the final results.

During the first phase, recorded interview data was transcribed verbatim by a transcriptionist. Transcripts were then checked by the researcher for accuracy against the original audio recording, and punctuation was added to express non-verbal elements such as intonation, rhythm, emotion, and speaking style. Following this, short line-by-line summaries, initial questions, and ideas were jotted down throughout each transcript. This process continued until the researcher felt familiar with all aspects of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Codes refers to the most basic element of the data that can be meaningfully assessed regarding the phenomenon (Boyatzis, 1998). In phase two, data was coded line

by line according to whether it answered the research question, beginning with segments where individuals explicitly addressed questions concerning facilitative factors and mechanisms.

In the third phase, commonalities between participants were explored. All relevant data extracts from the three transcripts were collated in a separate file and organized by similarity into potential themes. It was decided that a candidate theme must appear clearly in the accounts of at least two out of the present study's three participants in order to be considered. Extracts that did not seem to belong anywhere were sorted into a theme called "miscellaneous" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 86). This phase concluded with a set of candidate themes, under the dual categories of facilitative factors and mechanisms, with relevant data from all three participants collated beneath each theme.

During the fourth phase, themes were refined with the consultation of two supervisory faculty members. Pattons's (1990) dual criteria for assessing themes – internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity – were used to evaluate the themes developed. First, a close degree of coherence was sought between each data extract and the central concept of the overall theme. Second, dissimilarity was sought between themes. If two themes overlapped they were collapsed into one theme or adjusted so that each theme was clearly distinct. Throughout this process, transcripts were reviewed continuously for relevant extracts that had been overlooked in the initial coding.

During the fifth phase, finalized names and definitions were created for each theme. According the Braun and Clarke (2006), names should give a concise, immediate sense of the theme's content while definitions should describe the scope of this content in a few sentences or less. Again, consultation was sought such that the theme names,

definitions, and data extracts were corroborated by this writer's supervisor and departmental committee member.

Following this, themes and representative data extracts were sent via e-mail to participants for confirmation. Each "facilitative factor" theme was followed by the question: "Does this theme describe a factor that you believe helped your sudden personal transformation to occur? i.e. That made it more likely?" while each "mechanism theme" was followed by: "Does this theme describe a force or process that you believe produced or caused your sudden personal transformation?" Participants were asked to type "YES" or "NO" and to supply comments. Participants were also able to endorse themes that they had not originally spoken about by being presented with themes and data extracts pertaining to the other two participants.

Finally, the sixth phase produced a final summary of participant-confirmed themes and extract examples, as well as a discussion relating themes to the research question and the prior literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Assessing Trustworthiness

While validity and reliability have been used to assess the trustworthiness of findings in quantitative research, a number of parallel constructs have been suggested for qualitative work. Specifically, Lincoln and Guba (1985) have proposed four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This section outlines how these constructs have been strengthened in the present study.

Instead of measuring statistical relationships, qualitative research seeks to understand phenomena from subjective, first-person points of view. Thus, the construct of credibility (rather than internal validity) is used to assess whether the findings

developed by the researcher are believable to participants. This construct was enhanced by using participants' language in the wording of themes where possible, and most importantly, by asking participants to review and supply comments on each theme (Morse et al., 2002).

While the results of this study do not have empirical generalizability (i.e. external validity), they may have transferability to the broader literature. This has been enhanced by outlining this study's sample characteristics, the methods used to arrive at findings, and by suggesting how results can be used in future research. Ultimately, however, a study's transferability is at the discretion of those who are seeking to apply the findings elsewhere.

Reliability in quantitative research refers to the degree to which results can be duplicated. The parallel notion of dependability focuses on the need to account for the context of the research and how it may have influenced results. In keeping with a reflexive stance that sees the researcher as "part of the research, not separate from it" (Krefting, 1991, p. 218), a journal was kept of the researcher's experiences and perspectives on SPT, which are summarized in Chapter One. The characteristics of the unique sample used in this study are described in Chapter Four, and Chapter Five discusses how these qualities may have influenced results.

Finally, confirmability (rather than objectivity) establishes the degree to which results can be substantiated by individuals other than the researcher and research participants. In this study, confirmability was enhanced by making sure themes and supporting quotations were corroborated by two supervisory faculty members. This study also created an auditable paper trail that documents all stages of data collection and

analysis. Finally, attempts were made to closely match transcript extracts to the central concept of each theme, such that the fit would appear immediately recognizable to a lay readership.

Ethical Considerations

SPT, by definition, is non-traumatic and has positive outcomes. Participants were therefore not expected to experience any unusual negative effects through talking about this experience. However, it is normal for participants to feel a number of emotions when discussing past events. To minimize unexpected negative reactions during the interview, participants were provided with a copy of the interview schedule and informed of their right to stop the interview or withdraw at any time. A list of local counselling resources, though never used, was also available (Appendix G).

To help ensure participant anonymity, pseudonyms were used for all names, and geographical locations were disguised. Participants were also informed that they would be directly quoted in this study and were advised to use discretion when disclosing their participation to others. Confidentiality, on the other hand, was protected by ensuring full transcripts were only seen by the researchers and up to two supervisors. Moreover, the transcriber was made to sign a confidentiality agreement (Appendix H). Audio recordings were destroyed after the study's completion and transcripts were stored in a locked cabinet for future reference for no longer than 10 years. Finally, regarding voluntary participation, participants were informed that they could refuse to answer any question, withdraw from the study at any time, and withdraw their data up to two months after the conclusion of their interview.

Of somewhat broader ethical concern is the way in which the findings of the

present study may be interpreted by readers. Given this study's context within counselling psychology, the findings might be seen as potentially relevant to therapeutic interventions that "instill" SPT in clients. Readers, however, are encouraged to consider such ideas with extreme caution in light of the current paucity of research in this area. Any kind of radical psychological change can involve "both opportunity and danger" (Lyddon, 1988, p. 125) and is perhaps best left as a naturally-occurring process that may or may not take place in the course of an individual's life.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the assumptions and practical methods used to investigate the self-reported facilitative factors and causal mechanisms for individuals who have experienced a sudden personal transformation (SPT). Word of mouth recruitment and a range of criteria were used to purposefully select three participants. Participants were asked, during a semi-structured interview, to describe the broad context of their SPT and their beliefs about its facilitative factors and mechanisms. The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed, using the methodology of thematic analysis, for recurring themes, which were progressively refined before being sent to participants for member-checking. The following chapter describes the results of the present study.

Chapter 4: Results

In this chapter, the themes developed from the interview transcripts of this study's three participants will be presented to answer the question: *What are the self-reported facilitative factors and causal mechanisms for individuals who have experienced a sudden personal transformation?*

Participants

To provide context to the themes and quotations that follow, below is a brief description of this study's participants and a series of vignettes, as interpreted by the researcher, of each of their stories. The participants were two women and one man, all cis-gendered (meaning that their gender-identity corresponded to social norms for their biological sex), whose ages ranged from 27 to 33 years at the time of the interview. All participants stated that they had experienced a sudden personal transformation (SPT) as it was defined in this study and also endorsed the term "sudden personal transformation" as an accurate descriptor of this experience.

All participants were Canadian, although they grew up in different cities in British Columbia and Ontario. Two participants were of mixed European descent while one was a first-generation Canadian of Jamaican descent. All participants described having a Christian family background, though specific denominations and degrees of practice in the family of origin varied. Participants also encompassed a range of socio-economic backgrounds (SES) and current careers. Levels of education ranged from some technical training to part of a university graduate degree. All participants were students at the time of the interview, and two were working part-time.

Participants' ages at the time of their SPT ranged between 21 and 28 years, an average of 6.7 years prior to the interview. Participants' transformative experiences lasted from a seeming instant to about two weeks and occurred in the context of their daily lives (i.e. outside of therapy). In line with previous findings (Miller & C'de Baca, 2001; Murray, 2006), two participants indicated their changes were still evolving, and none described the experience as a once and for all resolution of all their life challenges.

Jason

In his early twenties, Jason decided to move away from his hometown for the first time with some friends. He found this change, however, did not solve his longstanding feelings of aimlessness, frustration, and alienation. He did not enjoy the work he found, and described feeling disheartened, alone, and sad. Eventually, at the end of his rope, he sat down on his floor and meditated on the changes he wanted to see in his life, inspired by an earlier phone conversation with a friend. Although he did not notice an immediate difference, within a few days he went to a party and met new friends who he felt validated him in ways he had not previously experienced. At this point, Jason described feeling a "definite switch" and sense of liberation, which then deepened into a transcendent experience of interconnectedness with his environment. He stated that this experience left him with a radical shift in his understanding of the world, a positive, more authentic sense of identity, a sense of a burden being lifted, peacefulness, and a trust in the future.

Laura

Laura described feeling anxious, isolated, and dropping out of high school after being increasingly controlled, manipulated, and put down by an older boyfriend. After his

sudden death, she described feeling numb, bitter, and partying continuously. Some months later, she discovered she was pregnant, and grew further depressed during her pregnancy and after her daughter's birth. In her early twenties, following a decision to stop partying, she began spending time with women from a local Pentecostal church. Though initially hesitant, she eventually agreed to attend church. On one of her first visits, she states she unexpectedly received the Holy Ghost while praying during an altar call. Almost immediately after this self-described "point of transformation," she states her life has turned around completely. One month later, she was baptized. She described her experience leaving her with a lasting sense of joy, comfort, peace, inner completion, confidence, presence as a mother, self-worth, and commitment to her faith.

Rachel

Rachel stated that she never liked the person she was when she was with her father, yet did not know how to change it. When she was in her late twenties, her father was forced to confess that he had molested his younger step-sister when he was a teenager. This altered Rachel's perception of her father, and she began to feel increasingly angry towards him and to place responsibility on him for her own negative experiences around him. She struggled to reconcile these feelings with her continued involvement with her family. On the day of his sudden death almost a year later, Rachel felt exhausted after having to call and notify numerous friends and family, and decided to take a walk around her neighborhood. After walking past the hospital where her father's body was being kept, she remembers looking down at her feet and hearing a vivid, authoritative message from deep within telling her she was now "free," accompanied by an immediate sense of relief and release. Since this self-described "sudden, intuitive

perception of reality” she has felt a lasting sense of freedom, loss of vigilance, and openness to life.

Themes

In this section, each theme is listed with a title, description, and illustrative quotations from each participant who contributed to that theme during his or her interview. The presentation of themes is divided into two sections: (a) the facilitative factors that participants believed helped their transformative experience occur or made it more likely; and, (b) the mechanisms that participants believed produced or caused their personal transformation. In sum, the thirteen themes under the category of *facilitative factors* are: (1) Life Transition; (2) Unsettling Information; (3) Feeling Put Down by Others; (4) Feeling Miserable; (5) Not Caring; (6) Feeling Exhausted; (7) Feeling Like I Couldn't Do It; (8) Breaking Point; (9) Letting Go, Relinquishing Control; (10) There Must Be Something More; (11) Early Belief in a Higher Power; (12) Support from Others; and (13) Hearing Someone Else Describe a Related Experience. The two themes developed within the category of *mechanisms* are: (1) Formalized Activity and (2) Transformed by a Process Outside of My Conscious Control (Higher Power or a Wisdom Deep Inside).

As noted, while participants did not always explicitly state in their interviews that a particular factor or process facilitated or produced their SPT, all 15 themes were endorsed during member checking by at least two out of three participants via an affirmative answer to the question “Does this theme describe a factor that you believe helped your sudden personal transformation to occur? i.e. That made it more likely?” or,

for mechanisms, “Does this theme describe a force or process that you believe produced or caused your sudden personal transformation?”.

Facilitative Factor Themes and Supporting Quotations

The following themes represent factors that participants believed helped their sudden personal transformation occur or that made it more likely.

1. Life Transition

(Initial interview 3/3; Final validation 3/3)

All participants reported that they experienced at least one major life change or loss, including changes in environment, work, life stage, or the loss of a person prior to their transformation.

- *Jason.* “So, I’m 22, living in Waterloo, Ontario. Moved to that city a year before that. Sort of the first time I had left my hometown. [...] Not sure what the next step was. Even though I didn’t really have a problem finding work, but the work I found was not good. [...] I know just previous to when I had this experience, I had quit a job very spontaneously.”
- *Laura.* “I find that, like, through high school, I don’t know... something happened when I reached high school. [...] I guess it was just such a big shock, going into the next step of your life and... I just got really down.”
- “And, what happened was [my boyfriend] ended up getting murdered [...] I was 16. I met him when I was 15 and I was 16 when he passed away. [...] So, anyways, he ended up getting into a fight downtown in our city where we live [...] And what happened was he ended up stabbing him and my boyfriend, he passed away on the scene.”

- *Rachel*. “Well, the reason why I could name the date [of the experience] so well was because that was the day my father died, very, very suddenly of a heart attack in a golf course parking lot. [...] I was always prepared for his death. Like, I knew it would come, but I didn’t know the impact it would have on me.”

2. *Unsettling Information*

(Initial interview 2/3; Final validation 2/3)

Laura and Rachel described having to contend with new information that unsettled their prior beliefs, assumptions, or feelings before their transformation.

- *Laura*. “When [my boyfriend] passed away, so many things came out about him, like about his real age, about – just so much stuff. Like, he lied to me about everything you could imagine.[...] Like, total betrayal on every level. He was around with every woman. His age was a lie. Like, what else? Who knows? It was just so much.”

- “I went to the doctor’s, and thank God, I didn’t have any STDs. But I found out that I was four months pregnant.[...] And that’s the thing. Like I was drinking so much and I didn’t know I was pregnant, so right there I felt really hurt.”

- *Rachel*. “Ten months before [my father] died, he was forced to confess that he, in his words, ‘molested’ his stepsister when he was a teenager. [...] And my sister and I are talking and we were like, “Did he ever try to mess with you?” “No, he didn’t.” These are the conversations you never think you’re ever going to have. Like, how I always think about that is, never in a million years of him sitting down on that couch did I think those are the words that are going to come out of his mouth. [...] So, that was the 10 months before-hand and it was a really tumultuous 10 months

because that's when I had started to try to – and when it really dawned on me like, 'Holy shit he has a lot of' – and I was very angry.”

3. Feeling Put Down by Others

(Initial interview 3/3; Final validation 2/3)

While all three participants described feeling judged, belittled, or put down by others preceding their transformation, only Jason and Rachel endorsed this as a factor that facilitated their transformation.

- *Jason.* “[My family] have some major flaws, some of which included like, just being incredibly belittling on a fairly regular basis. Like, really negative sort of name-calling and, you know, anxious sort of negative predicting about maybe what the direction of my life would be should I continue to live in the ways that I do. Like really just oppressive kind of judgments. A lot of judgment, I think, that's actually probably the best way of putting it. So, in my view, it was quite clear to me that I absorbed that, those voices, you know, from my father, from my grandparents, and applied them to myself, you know.”
- *Rachel.* “[T]alk about pathologizing people, [my father] had a lot of shit and he projected it on me. I was the ‘crazy’ member of the family, I was unstable. I’m sure he had a sense that he would have to financially take care of me for the rest of my life. That I was just a mess. I didn’t know who I was. Always changing. [...] Like, ‘Who are you?’, ‘You’re crazy’, ‘You’re a mess.’ [...] So, being there, being in front of him, was like being wrong, constantly being wrong, and pitied in lots of ways, like really pitied.”

4. *Feeling Miserable*

(Initial interview 2/3; Final validation 3/3)

All three participants reported feeling miserable in the time before their transformation. Jason and Laura explicitly stated so during their interview, whereas Rachel endorsed this theme later, during member checking.

- *Jason*. “Like, I was just at work one day and I was like, ‘I am just so fucking miserable.’”
- *Laura*. “I remember sometimes I’d be like on the floor just crying to myself and [my daughter] was so tiny and she would come and lie down beside me and start crying... Yeah, and she just – they follow everything you do, you know. So, she’d like be beside me crying with me. Yeah [...] Oh, my gosh, I was so miserable.”

5. *Not Caring*

(Initial interview 2/3; Final validation 2/3)

Jason and Laura described “not caring” or not taking care of themselves in the time before their transformation.

- *Jason*. “[D]efinitely, during that time that I’m speaking of, you know, there had been many years of pretty self-destructive behavior, like drinking and, you know, just whatever. Yeah, but mostly around that, around drinking, and just felt destructive and just not taking care of myself and not caring. Like, not being able to muster up enough love for myself or want to.”
- *Laura*. “Cause what happened [after my boyfriend died] was I just started partying like crazy. Like, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, I was out partying... Yeah, after he died. I didn’t care. [...] I remember going partying

with my friends every day. And, at the time, like, I would run away from home and I'd be gone for days or weeks, I don't even know. [...] Like, I partied so much it was ridiculous.”

6. Feeling Exhausted

(Initial interview 3/3; Final validation 3/3)

All participants described feeling worn down, drained, tired, and exhausted (mentally, physically, emotionally) prior to their transformation.

- *Jason*. “[Just before I did the meditation,] I didn't really think about it very much, I just sat down, kind of. It was almost like I sat down just because I was so tired. Like, I just felt extremely tired, you know.”
- *Laura*. “I remember I was just tired of everything. I was tired of feeling like this [...] I was tired of this living, yeah. The life that I was living I was tired of it.”
- “[I was] drained mentally, yeah. So, like, I don't know, waking up in the morning was hard. ‘Oh, God, life again, really, do I have to? Let me sleep it off and see if tomorrow will be better.’”
- *Rachel*. “My mom was a total mess so my sister and I had to do the whole, ‘here's the list of people we now need to call.’ It was an exhausting day.”

7. Feeling Like I Couldn't Do It

(Initial interview 3/3; Final validation 3/3)

All participants described feeling incapable of resolving adverse circumstances or emotions with the means available to them in the time before their transformation. Jason and Rachel described failed attempts at resolution.

- *Jason*. “[I thought,] ‘I really have tried everything that I know how to do to kind of liberate myself from the way that I feel and I can’t do it... I can’t figure it out...’ [...] Like, there was a large part of what I was doing, which was just like, ‘I just don’t – I don’t know,’ you know? It was like, ‘I just really, really don’t have the...tools. Like, I just really am at a loss.’”
- *Laura*. “[I thought,] ‘I can’t do this on my own.’”
- *Rachel*. “And I remember thinking, like, ‘This is going to go on for years. This is going to screw this family up.’ [...] We went to [family counselling], and then we went back to the Sunday dinners where it was all just supposed to be exactly the same. [...] I remember thinking, ‘How am I ever going to figure this out?’ Like ‘This is going to be a mess.’”
- “I had a sense of like, ‘Yeah, [...] there’s no real place for me to change it.’”

8. *Breaking Point*

(Initial interview 2/3; Final validation 3/3)

All participants reported reaching a breaking point – a sense of rock bottom, the end of their rope, or their lowest point – prior to their transformation. Jason and Laura described this in their interview, whereas Rachel endorsed this theme during member checking.

- *Jason*. “I don’t know what triggered this, probably nothing, maybe something small, but I was just really at the end of my rope, you know, and not working and not happy. Yeah!”
- “I just really don’t think I could have kept *living* in the way that I did. Like, when I look at this experience, the way that I make meaning *of it*, like I just – it was

either, you know, receive the balm or die, you know? I was like a bleeding creature, you know? And, a lot of people – I don't think people really knew how upset I truly was. [...] No, it was very much like a rock bottom sort of like, 'Help!' sort of thing, you know?"

- *Laura*. [What do you think helped you? What made this experience possible for you?] "Being at my lowest point in my life [...] Rock bottom. [...] I think I was at rock bottom. Honestly."

9. Letting Go, Relinquishing Control

(Initial interview 2/3; Final validation 2/3)

Jason and Laura reported that they relinquished control over the resolution of their problems just prior to and during their transformative experience.

- *Jason*. "I think it really is simple. I just relinquished my will. Like, I just let go of the belief that I could figure it out. [...] I mean, it's like the person who's – the wounded person – you know what I mean – like, you can't suture the wound if the person won't stay still enough to have it fixed. Right? I think literally up until that point I was still in the throws of really *fighting*, you know. [...] I think I absolutely needed that spirit to get me there and then it was also what I needed to let go of in that moment. [...] Yeah, I think I would say, you know, in your darkest hours let go of that willfulness. Let go of that belief that you have to do it all on your own."

- *Laura*. "[S]he knew that if you surrender – the thing is, if you surrender your heart to God and you ask Him to forgive you for everything, all the things in your life that aren't right... She's like, 'just give it all to Him.' And, like, the way by surrendering is by lifting your hands. And usually, when you surrender – like if the

police hold you up – you lift your hands. So it's the same thing. Like, when I was at the front of the altar she was like, 'just raise your hands. Just surrender. Give everything to God.' I remember raising my hands and then I felt like this warm feeling come over me, almost like a comforter."

10. There Must Be Something More

(Initial interview 2/3; Final validation 2/3)

Jason and Laura reported having a sense of there being "something more" or "something else" to life or to themselves as a person before their transformation.

- *Jason.* "[I thought,] 'I just won't accept – I know there's something else and I'm just not going to relent. I'm just not going to accept that this is who I am,' you know."

- *Laura.* "I remember I'm asking myself, 'There's got to be more to life than this, seriously. Like, there's got to be something more than just partying and getting drunk and getting into relationships.'"

11. Early Belief in a Higher Power

(Initial interview 2/3; Final validation 2/3)

Jason and Laura (who, in a later theme, describe a higher power as a mechanism of their transformation) reported that they developed a belief in a higher power early in life.

- *Jason.* "I mean, so first thing that comes to mind [in terms of what facilitated it] is definitely my experience in church as a young person [...] I guess it was – yeah, just the sense of there being something other than me. A belief in the power that

was outside of myself or just that I was part of something larger – that, that was a requisite, I think.”

- *Laura*. “Well, growing up I didn’t have any religious background. [...] There was always like um... a fear of God though. Like, my mom always instilled in us that there’s a God and stuff like that.”

12. Support From Others

(Initial interview 3/3; Final validation 3/3)

All three participants described receiving support from others before or during their transformation.

- *Jason*. “I’m just hypothesizing, but I think, you know, without having that kind of support, without at least just knowing that it was there, I may have, you know, verged over into some real despair [...] I think, you know, it could have been I may not have – yeah, without having that love in my life I don’t know if I would have been able to approach it in the way that I did. I might have just wanted to destroy myself a lot more.”

- *Laura*. “One of my best friends’ moms was really supportive. Like, she was a teenage mom herself [...] She would always come by to visit me and see how I was doing. So she was really supportive. And even when I was, like, in the hospital she was there, my mom was there, my sister – a lot of people were supportive.”

- “Then I remember that lady she’s like, ‘well, do you want to take a bible study?’ [...] Like, I started doing the bible study and everything like that and then, like, I remember going to church. I finally decided to go to church one morning [...] And she asked me to go to the front with her and she’s like, ‘do you want to come to the

front?’ I’m like, ‘okay.’ And, you know, I was crying and everything like that and she told me, she’s like, ‘just raise your arms.’”

- *Rachel*. “And [my boyfriend at the time] was really supportive, which is kind of shocking considering who he was. He was like, ‘yeah, that’s cool.’ Like he was supportive of [my experience].”

13. Hearing Someone Else Describe a Related Experience

(Initial interview 2/3; Final validation 2/3)

Jason and Laura described hearing others talk about a related experience prior to their transformation.

- *Jason*. “I had remembered kind of how important this conversation I had with this friend was. [...] I was talking to this friend on the phone and I remember her telling me that she had just spent like an hour – or she had just really deliberately kind of like meditated on changing her life.”

- *Laura*. “They were telling – you’re getting people from all walks of life, like all ethnic backgrounds, all walks of life, and the thing that it is, is they just tell you their testimony, like where they were coming from and what God has brought them through now... I heard Elizabeth’s testimony... And you know at church, Brother Dan? He’s a preacher, and his experience, if you read his book, how God transformed his life, awesome, it will blow your mind. [Okay. So, those really impacted you those stories?] Definitely... My mom’s... That was a big eye-opener for me. She changed so much I’m like, ‘there’s got to be something to this.’”

Mechanism Themes and Supporting Quotations

The following themes represent forces or processes which participants believe produced or caused their sudden personal transformation.

1. Formalized Activity

(Initial interview 2/3; Final validation 3/3)

All participants described being engaged in a formalized activity or ceremony during their transformative experience. While Jason and Laura described this in their interview, Rachel endorsed this theme during the member check, commenting that since her childhood, going for a walk was her own type of “ritual.”

- *Jason.* “I started doing this kind of meditation, prayer, around just what I wanted and what I no longer was accepting in my life or something. [...] Like, it was like an unprecedented sort of ritual of sorts. [...] [Do you think that if you didn’t sit down on the floor [to meditate] that experience would be different?] [...] I just don’t – I don’t think I would have been – [the transformation] just wouldn’t have happened. I am completely clear about that for myself, you know.”

- *Laura.* “Like, after everything was done, she’s like, ‘you’ve just received the Holy Ghost.’ [...] And that was the point of transformation. [...] And so, I got baptized a month later.”

2. Transformed By a Process Outside of My Conscious Control (Higher Power or a Wisdom Deep Inside)

(Initial interview 3/3; Final validation 3/3)

All the participants stated that they were transformed by an unplanned, unwilling process outside of their conscious, deliberate control. For instance, participants described

this process as running itself, having its own momentum, as just happening, or as something they could not have done on their own.

Jason and Laura described this process as coming from a higher power outside themselves while Rachel stated that it emanated from a deeply-embedded inner wisdom.

- *Jason*. “[T]he actual process was sort of really – was just running itself in a certain way – you know what I mean. Like, it was more like, just a relenting to a certain kind of – um... it was just like an opening of a gate or something and then it was just sort of like I was in it and it was happening. I wasn’t really thinking very much about it once I was there. [...] I would say there was definitely just a momentum to the process itself that was very unlike anything I had really done before for myself.”

- “It was like [...] what I was missing was sort of just handed to me. [...] I realized how much of what was happening to me really wasn’t about *me* or *my* conscious effort, but like, it was a gift that I was receiving and it was temporary in a sense of like the very visceral sort of like, immersed feeling that I was having.”

- “I mean, that’s what I would call God. That’s when I met – when God said, ‘Okay, now I can work with you.’ I would say, to me, that’s very clear. [...] Yeah, and that’s when the healer could work, you know. I definitely felt healed in that experience. I felt like, ‘Okay, so yes, now I’m receiving the balm to the wound’ and like – and, you know, like, ‘thank you.’ So, yeah.”

- *Laura*. “Honestly, I don’t think I could have done it. If I wouldn’t have found God, I don’t know if I would be alive today at the rate that I was going. [...] It was something outside of me. [...] It’s not like inner strength where I have, like, this

inner energy that transformed me, no. It was all by the power of God. The Holy Ghost is what transformed me. [...] I give the credit to God, solely and fully.”

- *Rachel*. “This was an unconscious change. Like, I didn’t have a choice. Like I didn’t sit there and go, ‘yeah, I should really quit smoking.’ [...] It just happened. But, sometimes change isn’t a choice. Like it wasn’t a choice for me to feel that way, like it just happened, I just felt that way. The words came, the feeling was there, boom! That sometimes change isn’t a choice. If that isn’t already known [regarding change] then that is what I would like to add.”

- “Like there was no pre-contemplation, there was no contemplation there was just – there’s nothing in action because I didn’t act. I didn’t do anything. I walked down the street and it was like, ‘ah, I’m free. I’m free.’”

- “[It came from] inside of me, but there’s lots of parts of me. [...] From deep inside that really got it. Like part of me that just – balls to bones is how I think of it. Like a really ‘hard wisdom’ is a phrase I would use to it.”

Chapter Summary

Participants described thirteen factors that they believed facilitated their SPT: going through a life transition; hearing unsettling information; feeling put down; feeling miserable; a sense of not caring; feeling exhausted; feeling like they could not resolve their problems; reaching a breaking point; letting go or relinquishing control; a sense of there being “something more” to life or to themselves; an early belief in a higher power; receiving support from others; and hearing others describe a related experience. Two mechanisms were also described: a formalized activity or ceremony and a process outside of their conscious control. These results are discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

In the previous chapter, recurring themes representing the facilitative factors and mechanisms that individuals believed to have played a role in their sudden personal transformation (SPT) were presented. These findings fill the gap in knowledge described in Chapter Two by outlining, in detail, participants' subjective explanations. They also add significance to previously-reported antecedent factors of SPT-like change, and experiential validity to various authors' theoretical claims. This chapter will explore how each specific finding reflects and/or further extends the previous research. It will also discuss the relative strengths of this study and some of its potential limitations. Finally, this chapter will outline some recommendations for future research as well as the implications of this study for the field of counselling.

Findings in Relation to Previous Literature

Apart from the specific findings of this study, one particular pattern in participants' accounts appeared to play a mediating role in the findings overall. Though all participants reported an SPT as defined in this study, two categories of experience seemed to exist. Jason and Laura's accounts were congruent with a *mystical transformative experience*, defined in Chapter Two, characterized by a sense of connection or of being acted upon by something outside of and greater than oneself. For example, Jason described being "healed" by a higher power and made the following remarks during his interview: "I felt really connected to the world. [...] I felt absorbed in sort of a different sort of consciousness [...] It felt like [...] I'm actually something... small that's part of something larger." Laura also described being acted upon by a power greater than herself: "I felt him [God] inside of me. [...] The Holy Ghost is what

transformed me.” On the other hand, Rachel’s description fits closely with an *insightful transformative experience*, which lacks a sense of being acted upon by an external force and is characterized by a “new realization, a new way of thinking or understanding [...] distinctly different from ordinary reasoning processes” (Miller & C’de Baca, 2001, pp. 18-19):

It was not a thought that I had been thinking or like logically pondering. [...] It was really this bubbling up – like a bubbling and the words just sort of popped. [...] Like I just took them and like, “Fuck yeah, I am free. Yes.”

Possibly related to this observation, both Jason and Laura endorsed 13 of the same themes out of a possible total of 15. On the other hand, five of the 13 facilitative factors endorsed by both Jason and Laura were *not* endorsed by Rachel. Moreover, Jason and Laura both attributed their change to a higher power whereas Rachel attributed it to a deep inner wisdom. Although definitive generalizations cannot be made, this pattern of data suggests that individuals who have a mystical versus an insightful transformative experiences may attribute at least some differing facilitative factors and mechanisms to their change.

Novel Findings

Life Transition

All participants reported that at least one major life change or loss facilitated their transformation, an antecedent not found in the previous literature. One possible reason for this is that life transitions could have been grouped by other authors into a larger pattern of distressing events and experiences, which, as a whole, have been discussed at length (Jarvis, 1997; McDonald, 2005; Miller & C’de Baca, 1994, 2001; Murray, 2006). Such distressing experiences have been proposed to act cumulatively in leading into a breaking

point, which some authors believe facilitates SPT-like change (Miller & C'de Baca, 1994, 2001; Murray, 2006). In terms of playing a unique role in facilitating SPT, it is also possible that major life transitions might have brought about a loosening of participants' sense of self and identity, making them more open to even further inner shifts.

Unsettling Information

Laura and Rachel believed that having to contend with new and unsettling information facilitated their SPT, a finding also not reflected in previous studies. It seems reasonable that an unsettling or one's prior beliefs, assumptions, or feelings may work in a similar way to a life transition in (a) contributing to a larger pattern of distress in participants' lives, and (b) forcing an individual to question their previous sense of identity or overall reality.

Feeling Put Down by Others

Jason and Rachel believed that feeling judged, belittled, or put down by others facilitated their transformation. Though Murray's (2006) qualitative study found that participants reported a negative self-perception, a sense of aloneness, and disconnection from family (pp. 244-245), being put down specifically has not been described. Again, this specific theme may have been just another factor that fed into participant's overall distress. It is also possible that insults and belittling comments could create an unwanted or subjectively false script about self or identity that participants resisted and wanted to change. For example, Jason states:

It was quite clear to me that I absorbed that, those voices, you know, from my father, from my grandparents, and applied them to myself [...] it was that like a schematic had been like, built, like, erected inside of me [...] And I was pissed off about it [...] I had a sense of that truth, that it wasn't really a part of me.

There Must Be Something More

Jason and Laura reported that having a sense of there being “something more” to life or to themselves facilitated their SPT. Though similar to the inner search for new meaning described by Loder (1981) in Chapter Two, nowhere in the empirical literature has this specific antecedent been found. It is reasonable to assume that despite the negative events in their lives, participants also had a number of inner resources that allowed them to overcome their adversities without spiraling further downward. For example, implicit in this theme is a sense of hope, which has been widely associated with the ability to cope with prolonged psychological stress (e.g. Folkman, 2010). The potentially related construct of “possible selves”, which, akin to this theme, include visions of ourselves as we would like to be, have also been shown to play a role in the motivation for change (e.g. Cross & Markus, 1991). More than this, a sense of there being “something more”, especially in the context of being belittled or put down by others, can be interpreted as a form of constructive personal resistance. Such resistance, as defined by Wade (1997), can include “any mental [...] act through which a person attempts to [...] withstand [...] abstain from, strive against [...] refuse to comply with, or oppose any form of violence or oppression (including any type of disrespect)” (p. 25).

Hearing Someone Else Describe a Related Experience

Jason and Laura believed that hearing others talk about a related experience facilitated their SPT. Though this particular antecedent has not been noted, Miller and C’de Baca (1994) found that for almost a quarter of their sample, others were having similar experiences at the time of their quantum change (i.e. they *saw* rather than heard others have related experiences). In the broader psychological literature, word of mouth

endorsements have long been shown to influence behavior (though mainly in the context of marketing) (e.g. Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991). In the present study, given participants' sense of inability to resolve their difficulties, ideas provided by others may have been particularly compelling in supplying novel avenues through which to seek change. Indeed, both Jason and Laura felt their SPT occurred as a result of a ritual that they had heard about through others. Other people's stories may have also provided participants with hope that positive change was possible.

Findings Supported by Previous Literature

Overall, the first eight themes (Life Transition; Unsettling Information; Feeling Put Down by Others; Feeling Miserable; Not Caring; Feeling Exhausted; Feeling Like I Couldn't Do It; and Breaking Point) can be interpreted, at least in the way they were described by participants, as largely negative or distressing life experiences and inner states. As noted, such experiences were found to precede and were proposed to facilitate SPT-like change in every related empirical study (Jarvis, 1997; McDonald, 2005; Miller & C'de Baca, 1994, 2001; Murray, 2006), as well as in much of the relevant theoretical literature (e.g. Chodron, 2005; Denzin, 1989; James, 1902/1985; Tennen & Affleck, 1998).

Feeling Miserable

Specifically, all three participants believed that misery – in other words, great mental or emotional distress – facilitated their transformative experience. This parallels Miller and C'de Baca's (1994) finding that 56 percent of participants reported emotional distress immediately prior to their transformative experience. This finding is also similar to antecedents such as suicidal ideation/attempts (McDonald, 2005; Murray, 2006),

depression, and despair (McDonald, 2005) reported in other studies. In the more general theoretical literature, James (1902/1985) described sudden religious conversions as preceded by “self-despair” (pp. 185-186), and Denzin (1989) proposes that epiphanies are always preceded by painful emotions (pp. 70-71). Tennen and Affleck’s (1998) *posttraumatic growth*, by definition, follows a phase of distress (p. 87), and Pema Chodron (2005), a Buddhist monk and teacher, believes that accelerated transformation can be facilitated by fully experiencing one’s emotional distress during meditation. Though, like other factors discussed in this chapter, it is unknown why feeling miserable was seen as facilitative by participants, it is clear that this finding echoes previous observations. However, given that in one previous study 44 percent of participants did *not* report distress immediately prior to their experience (Miller & C’de Baca, 1994), it is unclear if such experiences are truly necessary for SPT, or if they only reflect the particular stories of this sample.

Not Caring

Jason and Laura believed that “not caring” or not taking care of themselves in the time before their transformation – in both cases described as excessive partying and substance use – facilitated their transformation. More than a century ago, James (1902/1985) wrote that ceasing to care was a common antecedent of sudden religious conversions:

By getting so exhausted with the struggle [...] we drop down, give up, and *don’t care* any longer. Our emotional brain-centres strike work, and we lapse into a temporary apathy. (p. 175)

Similarly, Miller and C’de Baca (2001) describe aimless wandering, drifting, or purposelessness as common antecedents. In terms of facilitating SPT, this theme might be

seen as a paradoxical coping strategy akin to Robinson and Ward's *resistance for survival*, wherein short-term, sometimes self-destructive behaviors are used to temporarily protect a person from other, more oppressive conditions (in Garcia Coll et al., 1998). Similarly, members of AA often express gratitude for their previous self-destructive behavior, which they believe led to their breaking point and ultimate sobriety.

Feeling Exhausted

All participants believed that feeling exhausted (mentally, physically, emotionally) facilitated their SPT. This sense of exhaustion seems reasonable given participants' struggle with ongoing negative events and emotions. James (1902/1985) believed that a state of exhaustion facilitates sudden conversions by dampening conscious ("egoistic") thought, allowing for a more "expansive" inner force to take over:

This state of temporary exhaustion not infrequently forms part of the conversion crisis. So long as the egoistic worry of the sick soul guards the door, the expansive confidence of the soul of faith gains no precedent. But let the former faint away, even but for a moment, and the latter can profit by the opportunity, and, having once acquired possession, may retain it. (p. 175)

This view of exhaustion is similar to Chodron (2005) and Murray's (2006) thoughts on relinquishing control, described below, whereby a diminishment of conscious attempts to resolve one's problems might paradoxically create for a greater openness to change.

Feeling Like I Couldn't Do It

All participants believed that feeling incapable of resolving adverse circumstances or emotions facilitated their experience. This is similar to some previous observations. Miller and C'de Baca (2001) state that many participants felt trapped, defeated, or like all possibilities had been tried and exhausted, while Murray (2006) found that participants spent long periods in pursuit of a solution without success and eventually felt they had no

options left. Murray proposed that the failure of every previously-known strategy facilitated SPT-like change by leading to a breaking point and ultimately a surrender personal control (pp. 285-286). Similarly, according Forcehimes (2004), “recognition of personal inability to control one’s alcohol problem” is a necessary step in reaching the SPT-like *spiritual awakening* described by AA (p. 511).

Breaking Point

All participants agreed that reaching a breaking point or “rock-bottom” facilitated their SPT, reflecting previous qualitative findings (Miller & C’de Baca, 2001, pp. 24-32; Murray, 2006, p. 253). This theme seems to represent a culmination of participants’ ongoing distress (e.g. feeling miserable, exhausted, incapable of finding a solution). Miller and C’de Baca (2001) suggest that breaking points represent a point of crisis (or *kairos*) in which “change simply must occur because the person is unable or unwilling to continue in his or her present course” (p. 157). In other words, reaching rock bottom, there is nowhere to go but “up.” Murray (2006) proposed that rock bottom (brought about by an exhaustion of possibilities, as described above) led participants to surrender or let go of control, which facilitated their SPT-like change (pp. 285-290). Beaumeister (1994) describes a related construct, the *crystallization of discontent*, wherein a major life-changing decision can be triggered by the apperception of a broad, distressing pattern of events across one’s life. Similarly, in AA, “rock-bottom” experiences are seen as important precursors to spiritual awakenings. Interestingly, the breaking points of participants in the present study seemed to immediately precede the decision to take some novel course of action – for example, meditating, deciding to stop partying, leaving the house to take a walk – in an attempt to escape a situation that was no longer bearable. In

turn, these actions often created the context in which participant's SPT occurred.

Letting Go, Relinquishing Control

Jason and Laura reported that relinquishing control over the resolution of their problems just prior to and during their transformative experience facilitated their SPT. Miller and C'de Baca (2001) state that in the face of extreme adversity, some individuals might feel that their only option is to turn "for help to something greater and wiser than themselves" (p. 157). Similarly, according to Forcehimes (2004), the final step before spiritual awakening as described in AA is "surrendering one's will to a higher power" (p. 503). This idea of surrendering to a higher power is reflected in both Jason and Laura's remarks: "It was very much like a rock bottom sort of like, 'Help!' sort of thing"; "She was like, 'just raise your hands. Just surrender. Give everything to God'". From a Buddhist perspective, Chodron (2005) discusses how inner transformation can be accelerated by ceasing attempts to consciously control one's distress, which creates space for a more spontaneous inner wisdom to manifest itself. Similarly, according to Murray (2006), "when one surrenders and stops the fight that keeps him or her in control", a solution – "no longer being actively searched for or expected" – might finally be able to present itself (p. 290).

Early Belief in a Higher Power

Jason and Laura reported that a belief in a higher power, developed early in life, helped bring about their SPT. This seems a reasonable precursor given that, in a later theme, both these participants attribute their transformations to a higher power. In the broader literature, the connection between spirituality and the ability to cope has been well-documented (e.g. Ahrens et al., 2010; Allen & Marshall, 2010; Ekedahl &

Wengström, 2010; Krok, 2008). However, more than coping it is possible that a belief in a higher power provided Jason and Laura with a previously-untried avenue through which to seek change (e.g. meditation, religion) in their time of distress. Miller and C'de Baca, who found that most of their participants reported a prior belief in God (1994), propose that a previous exposure to religion may provide “somewhere to turn at the bottom, when all other hope had been exhausted” (2001, p. 30).

Support from Others

All three participants believed that receiving support from others facilitated their transformation. Similarly, both Murray (2006) and Miller and C'de Baca (2001) propose that others might play a role in supporting SPT-like change, though they are unclear exactly how this might occur. An interesting aspect of this theme is that the support received by participants at times occurred far in advance of their SPT. For instance, Jason spoke of a positive relationship as a teenager with his tennis coach, and Laura described being supported by family and friends during her pregnancy. Though the role of supportive behaviors such as empathy, respect, and attentive listening have been widely shown to impact change in therapy (e.g. Duncan, Miller, & Sparks, 2004), it is possible that a similar process might also be involved in sudden, extra-therapeutic change. Mere support, therefore, might partially account for the large number of extra-therapeutic sudden gains (Kelly, Roberts, & Bottonari, 2007) or spontaneous recoveries (Duncan, Miller, & Sparks, 2004) observed in studies of change.

Formalized Activity

All participants believed that one of the mechanisms of their personal transformation was a formalized activity or ceremony: a private meditation, an alter call

at church, or a personal ritual of walking. Anecdotally, rituals such as prayer, meditation (both “sitting” and “walking” meditation), vision quests, fasting, and the like, have been used to achieve profound inner change. In some situations, ritual may also act as source of comfort to people in distress. Prayer in particular was noted in Miller and C’de Baca’s (1994) study to be the single most common act immediately preceding transformative experiences. However, they do not mention other types of ritual, nor suggest ritual to be a direct mechanism of SPT-like change. Though the reasons for why participants in the present study believed ritual played a causal role are uncertain, perhaps, in light of the theme that follows, participants may have felt that ritual helped them to connect to an inner process or higher power outside of their conscious control.

Transformed by a Process Outside of My Conscious Control (Higher Power or a Wisdom Deep Inside)

All participants claimed that they were changed by an unplanned, unwilling process outside of their conscious, deliberate control. For Jason and Laura, this process came from an external higher power (i.e. “God”), whereas for Rachel, it came from a deep inner wisdom that “just knows what it knows.” In parallel with Jason and Laura’s depictions, both sudden conversions (James, 1902/1985) and mystical transformative experiences (Miller & C’de Baca, 2001) have been described as passive and to involve a connection to a higher power. Miller and C’de Baca (2001) and Murray (2006) also claim that insightful transformative experiences or moments of clarity such as Rachel’s are “rarely remembered as willful or volitional” (p.14) and usually present themselves “without thinking” (p. 290). Again, this finding suggests that not all instances of positive self-change are “self-initiated” and “intentional”, as is commonly thought (e.g. Prochaska

et al., 2003, p. 63; see also Resnicow & Vaughan, 2006). Such findings also relate to the literature on unconscious problem-solving, which is discussed in a section to follow.

Overall, one particular observation made by Miller and C’de Baca (2001) seemed to apply to the present study: “While many features of quantum changes were similar, the meaning and interpretation given to them varied widely, guided in part by the person’s prior conceptual framework” (p. 29). Although only two common mechanisms were found in the present study, each participant also offered individual interpretations. Laura, who described herself as an actively-practicing Christian, interpreted her experience in line with her understanding of scripture: to her, God’s spirit “filled” the parts of her that were previously “missing” (participants’ words in quotations). Jason, who identified as spiritual though not religious, attributed his transformation to a higher power – though not necessarily the religious “God” of his childhood. He also stated that an experiential encounter with a more “authentic self” and a shift in his habitual ways of “making sense of the world” caused his transformation. Rachel, who described her outlook as extremely secular, attributed her experience to an inner process of “logic” that deduced she was now “free” based on the facts of her life. Thus, each person’s explanations appear to parallel his/her individual belief system. Although this observation can also apply to the range of scholarly hypotheses in the literature, what makes the explanations in the present study unique is that they come from the participants themselves.

Personal Reflections on Findings

While the goal of this study was not to develop a comprehensive theory of SPT, I offer here some personal reflections on how the findings above might potentially link together in a sequence of events. First, each participant experienced a number of

distressing events (e.g. major life transitions, unsettling information, feeling put down by others). Participants felt unable to resolve their adverse circumstances, and felt miserable, exhausted, and, in some cases, apathetic and self-destructive (i.e. “not caring”). For some, a sense of there being something more to themselves or to life, a belief in a higher power, and ideas and support provided by others may have acted as sources of resilience (i.e. providing hope, motivation, or potential avenues through which to seek change). Participants’ negative emotions and experiences eventually culminated in a breaking point. Perhaps hoping to diminish the inner pain caused by this breaking point, some participants actively surrendered conscious control, and all participants engaged in a ritual (e.g. prayer, meditation, walking). Perhaps in part triggered by this activity, an abrupt, unconscious process of inner change was able to take place. (Some possible connections between ritual, unconscious thought, and sudden change are articulated in a following section.) Finally, it is possible that the subjective content of each person’s transformative experience (i.e. a sense of connection with a higher power vs. a manifestation of a deep inner wisdom) was shaped by each individual’s pre-existing conceptual framework.

Strengths and Limitations

Given the small and fragmented nature of the empirical literature, the main strength of this study is its contribution to a relatively unexplored area. This is also the first study, of which I am aware, to develop a clear, consistently used, and empirically derived operational definition of SPT-like change. I did this, however, using Miller and C’de Baca’s 1994 findings, and thus credit these authors with much in this regard. Further, unlike many qualitative reports to date, the methods used to analyze data in the

present study were explicitly and sequentially outlined, each of the findings were supported with verbatim quotations, and the number of participants that contributed to each category was clearly indicated. It is also the only qualitative study of such change, of which I am aware, to use member-checking to add credibility to its findings. Finally, this study was the first to directly ask participants about the factors they believe to have facilitated and the mechanisms they believe to have caused their SPT, and, as such, the results support and add significance to existing descriptive findings and theoretical claims on SPT-like change, and also present novel areas for future study.

As discussed in Chapter Three, some factors that apply to the transferability of this study are the unique attributes of its sample. The sample displayed some diversity in terms of transformative experience (i.e. a mystical experience in a religious context; a mystical experience in a non-religious context; and an insightful experience). It also contained differences in gender, ethnic background, sexual orientation, cities of residence, and SES. At the same time, all participants had a Christian family background, were cis-gendered, non-Aboriginal Canadian, in their late twenties or early thirties, and were students at the time of the interview. Further, the narratives of sudden change in this sample are very likely influenced by popular ideas of such change in North American culture, which, in light of a largely Christian religious history, are likely reflective of New Testament accounts (as detailed in Chapter Two). Ultimately, it is up to the reader to decide whether the viewpoints expressed by this sample can be applied in other contexts.

Finally, some of my personal expectations may have limited the richness of the findings. For example, the present study reveals little about why participants believed

certain factors to be facilitative, and only two mechanism themes were developed. Though it was not the case, as suggested by Miller and C’de Baca (2001), that participants had great difficulty arriving at explanations, they did often seem to require more time and prompting. As I initially imagined that participants would have more pre-formed explanations, and expected participants with spiritual experiences to be averse to “explaining away” their experience, I devoted perhaps less interview time than was necessary towards cause-related questions. Future studies are advised to be aware of these potential challenges.

Recommendations for Future Research

Much has been written about sudden, profound change, yet there is a scarcity of trustworthy empirical studies. Trustworthy research, both qualitative and quantitative, is needed to further explore SPT in the lives of human participants and to lend credibility to this topic as a worthwhile area of study.

Overall, it is suggested that future qualitative studies clearly outline their definition, inclusion criteria, methods of data analysis, and use member-checking to corroborate their findings. A number of specific possibilities exist for future qualitative work. Both the present study and Miller and C’de Baca (1994) interviewed participants who described mystical as well as insightful transformative experiences. Future studies may investigate these two apparent categories separately and in greater depth. Specifically, mystical transformative experiences have received relatively little attention. Second, participants in the present study did not always explain the specific role that a facilitative factor played or how each mechanism produced their change. Future studies might examine each of the themes described in the present study in more detail. Also,

given the cultural specificity of this, as well as previous studies, future research might examine how SPT is described and explained within differing cultural settings or in the lives of individuals with a non-Christian family of origin. There is also a range of contexts in which such experiences may occur; for example, within a formal religious setting or as part of an individual's recovery from addiction. It may be worthwhile to investigate SPT's in such specific contexts.

A somewhat troubling application of this study's findings concerns coercive means of psychological influence. It would be worthwhile to conduct a comparative literature review to examine similarities and differences between naturally-occurring as opposed to coerced sudden, profound change. Similar to the experiences reported by participants in the present study, cult members are often recruited at a low point or transition in their lives and are provided with social support, word-of-mouth endorsements, a vision of a better life (i.e. "something more") and a set of rituals. Techniques are sometimes used to induce exhaustion and members are sometimes belittled or put down in "breaking sessions" until they reach a breaking point. Members are also encouraged to surrender personal control to a singular leader (e.g. Myers & Spencer, 2004). It seems reasonable that a naturally-occurring change process might have historically been exploited to manipulate and control others, and further knowledge in this area can potentially prevent similar abuses.

When it comes to quantitative research, epidemiological studies might investigate the prevalence of SPT in the general population. Replication of the 1994 descriptive survey by Miller and C'de Baca, or conducting a survey similar to this, is also recommended in order to more conclusively describe such change, and/or add validity to

the present study's definition of the phenomenon and the potential categories (i.e. mystical, insightful, and so on) suggested. Survey research can also add generalizability to participants' subjective explanations in the present study, while written options can allow participants to express novel explanations.

In terms of investigating common precursors of SPT, it would be worthwhile to conduct prospective correlational research in a context where SPT-like change is not only common but expected. Laura, for example, stated that many people at her Pentecostal church eventually experience such change. The unique antecedents of SPT relative to gradual change might also be examined by retrospective correlational research. It would be interesting to relate findings from such studies to the gradual model of change proposed by Prochaska et al. (e.g. 2003), perhaps suggesting ways in which the model might be adjusted to include sudden changes. Retrospective studies might also compare SPT with sudden, memorable inner experiences, such as mystical experiences or insights, that are *not* followed by lasting, profound change.

Two categories of response seemed to be described with particular emphasis by participants in the present study. Distressing experiences and emotions, such as feeling miserable and hitting rock-bottom, were talked about at length by participants here, and appear prominently in previous research. Because such experiences are not always followed by positive change, it is unclear when and how they are. There is also some controversy as to whether such experiences are necessary for SPT, yet nothing is known about their statistical frequency in the broader antecedent context before SPT-like change. All participants also described, often at length, that a process outside of their conscious control caused their SPT. Such processes have received almost no attention in

the literature on human change, which generally assumes that change is “self-initiated” and “intentional” (e.g. Prochaska et al., 2003, p. 63; see also Resnicow & Vaughan, 2006).

One area that is potentially related to this latter category is the literature on problem solving, specifically unconscious thought theory, which holds that unconscious thought excels when problems are complex and involve abstract or weak prior associations (e.g. Zhong et al., 2008). Indeed, all participants in the present study described complex, intractable problems, which their transformative experience seemed to resolve outside of their conscious control. Recently, an experimental study by Zhong et al. (2008) found evidence of a causal relationship between unconscious thought and the accessibility of solutions in a creative problem-solving task. Such findings have more obvious applicability to Rachel’s insightful transformative experience (in fact, Rachel explicitly stated: “that’s the mechanism - logic, problem-solving, what-have-you”) than to Jason and Laura’s mystical experiences. However, if we assume that unconscious thought *is* involved in SPT, this may account for the fact that ceremony or formalized activity was also reported by all participants to be direct cause. A focal point or distraction, which a formalized activity may provide, has been widely used to activate unconscious thought in studies of problem-solving. Thus, it is possible that ritual, by distracting participants from conscious attempts at solving their problems, actually increased their access to life-changing new perspectives or solutions. This process may have differed subjectively from ordinary problem-solving (e.g. involved a higher level of emotion) because of the deep relevance of these “solutions” to participants’ lives. Though such ideas are purely

speculative, future research might examine potentially common substrates of unconscious thought, ritual, and SPT.

Implications for Counselling Practice

Any examination of how people achieve positive change outside of therapy, be it sudden or gradual, can eventually lead to better ways of helping people who want to change in therapy. However, as noted in Chapter Three, the direct application of findings from the present study to the facilitation SPT in therapy has important ethical implications. Still, the first-hand accounts in this and other studies can normalize such experiences in the mental health community. Professional helpers may encounter clients who have experienced SPT outside of therapy. In this case, their job might be to validate and help clients better understand their experience (Bien, 2004, p. 499). The results of this study may also alert helpers to possible (though not conclusive) clues that a given client could possibly experience an SPT in the future; for example, if they report feeling miserable, exhausted, unable to solve their problems, and reaching a breaking point. In such situations, the counsellor's role might be to educate the client that in some similar instances individuals have reported a profound, positive inner change. Such knowledge might provide hope to some clients in the midst of their distress.

In line with such antecedents, this study reframes the assumption that distress necessarily has negative outcomes. The positive, lasting changes of participants in the present study were all attributed to negative events and emotions prior to their change. This is not to say, however, that counsellors should stop supporting clients through their distress. In fact, all participants described a sense of support as helpful. The results of the present study also hint at some possible areas of coping or resilience. Two participants

felt that a prior belief in a higher power facilitated their SPT, supporting the idea that clients' existing spiritual resources can be an important part of their positive change. Hearing about someone else's experience was also found to be helpful, which happens to be one of the defining functions of group counselling. This finding also mirrors interventions used by narrative therapists, who sometimes invite "insiders" – individuals with experience overcoming a given problem – into therapy sessions with clients.

Finally, the findings of this study can reassure both helpers and clients that amazing examples of positive change can and do occur. Such change, moreover, is not always the result of a planned expert intervention. Rather, it can happen unexpectedly, in the context of a client's everyday life. As Rachel states, her experience has taught her "that planning isn't everything": "Walking down the street you don't know what can happen for someone, what can click, what can be felt, what can come up".

Summary and Conclusion

Positive change and healing are at the core of numerous helping professions, including psychiatry, clinical psychology, counselling, and social work. Understanding how individuals achieve such change both within and outside of therapy can have vast implications for both theory and practice. This study interviewed three participants who had experienced a sudden personal transformation about the factors and processes they believe made it possible. Fifteen themes were developed using thematic analysis, showing that individuals attributed their change to a number of common antecedents and mechanisms. This study contributes to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of human change, revealing that, at least subjectively, positive change has the potential to be both sudden and transformative.

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Appendix A: Invitation to Participate

**INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A STUDY ON
PERSONAL TRANSFORMATIONS**

Have you ever experienced profound, positive inner change? Would you like to share your story in order to help increase the current understanding of how people change?

If you answered yes to both of these questions, then you are invited to volunteer for research exploring how people make sense of sudden personal transformations.

As part of my Master's thesis (Counselling Psychology at the University of Victoria), I am looking for individuals who:

- Can recall a brief, memorable inner experience; and
- Believe this experience has led to positive, profound, and lasting personal changes

Volunteering for this study involves participating in one interview, between 60 and 90 minutes in length, in person **or by telephone**. Your story will be completely anonymous and you can withdraw from participation at any time.

Please contact me if you are interested. For further clarification, you can reach my supervisor, Dr. Honoré France at (250) 721-7858.

Sincerely,

Susan Ilivitsky

Master's Candidate
Counselling Psychology Program
Tel: (250) 590-8409
Rm: MAC D109
Em: susanili@uvic.ca

Department of Educational Psychology & Leadership Studies
Faculty of Education, University of Victoria
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Appendix B: Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria

- Males, females, and intergendered individuals
- Age 18 and above
- Able to provide informed consent
- Self-identifies as having experienced a positive, lasting, profound personal change, which followed a relatively brief and memorable inner experience
- Judged by primary researcher as able to provide rich, detailed, articulate first-person account of their experience and meaning-making activities

Answers “Yes” to all the following screening questions:

- Did this experience deeply change your feelings, thoughts, values, and/or behaviors?
- Would you describe this change as positive?
- Was the experience memorable?
- Was the experience relatively brief compared to other personal changes in your life (e.g. lasting less than a week)?
- Did this experience occur two or more years ago?
- Has the change been lasting or mostly lasting?

Exclusion Criteria

Answers “Yes” to any of the following screening questions:

- Do most of your friends and/or family believe the change was negative?
- Did this experience occur as a direct result of a positive external event – for example, getting married, having a child, winning the lottery?
- Were you under the influence of a chemical substance at the time of the experience?
- Was the experience a result of meeting or associating with the influential leader of a group?
- Do you have a history of brain injury, seizures, psychosis, or temporal lobe epilepsy?
- Were you having a near-death experience at the time of the event you are describing?

Appendix C: Screening Script

“Thank you for your interest in volunteering for this study.”

“As you may be aware, I am a Master’s student in Counselling Psychology at the University of Victoria, conducting my thesis research on sudden personal transformations – specifically positive, lasting, profound personal changes which can be traced to a relatively brief and memorable inner experience. I am interested in how individuals make sense of such experiences.”

“If you would like to volunteer for this study, your participation will involve answering some brief yes or no screening questions by phone today and, at a later time, talking about your experience in an in-depth interview. The time involved in participation will vary depending on how much you choose to participate, but will require a minimum of about two hours, including transportation.”

“Do you have any questions?” [Answer all questions.]

“Are you interested in volunteering for this study?” [If yes, continue, if no – “Thank you for your time. Goodbye.”]

“So that I am not taking up your time unnecessarily, would it be alright if I asked you 12 screening questions to see if your experiences matches up to the types of experiences I am looking at in this study?”

[If yes, continue. If no – “How can I help you at this time?”]

“You have indicated that you had an experience that changed you profoundly. Please do your best to answer the following questions with a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’. You are not obligated to answer any of these questions. Your participation in all parts of this study is completely voluntary”:

- Do you believe this experience deeply changed you? For example-- your feelings, thoughts, values, and/or behaviors? *(if yes, continue)*
- Would you describe the effect that it had on you as positive? *(if yes, continue)*
- Was the experience relatively brief (e.g. less than a week)? *(if yes, continue)*
- Did this experience occur two or more years ago? *(if yes, continue)*
- Would you say the change has been lasting or mostly lasting? *(if yes, continue)*
- Was the experience memorable? *(if yes, continue)*

“The next six questions were put in place for an extra level care in caution in this research. None of them are meant to imply that some people’s experiences are any more or less legitimate than any others’.”

- Do most of your friends and family believe the change was negative? *(if no, continue)*
- Did this experience occur as a direct result of a positive external event – for example, getting married, having a child, winning the lottery? *(if no, continue)*

- Were you under the influence of a chemical substance at the time of the experience? (*if no, continue*)
- Was the experience a result of meeting or associating with the influential leader of a group? (*if no, continue*)
- Do you have a history of temporal lobe brain injury, temporal lobe seizures, psychosis, or temporal lobe epilepsy? (*if no, continue*)
- Were you having a near-death experience at the time of the event you are describing? (*if no, continue*)

[If participant meets the screening criteria, continue. If participant does not meet screening criteria: “Thank you again for your interest. However, in my research I am looking at a specific type of experience, which is a little different from yours, so unfortunately I will not be able to interview you for this study. However, I will be more than happy to speak with you now to answer any questions you may have.” Answer all questions. If needed, provide contact information of thesis supervisor, or further referral information from referral sheet.]

“OK. Great. That was the first part.”

“Now, if you agree to participate, here is a brief summary of what will happen.”

“We can decide together on a place to meet that is convenient for both of us, or, if this is not possible, we can arrange a time to do the interview by phone.”

“Before the interview, I will go over a consent form with you, and will answer any questions that you have. The interview will last from 60 to 90 minutes, and will focus on your experience and how you have made sense of this experience.”

“Are you still interested in participating?” [If yes, arrange time and location of interview, if no – “Thank you for your time. Goodbye”.]

Appendix D: Participant Consent Form

Participant Consent Form

This is an invitation to participate in a Master's research project entitled "Making Sense of Sudden Personal Transformation," conducted by Susan Ilivitsky under the supervision of Dr. Honoré France, at the University of Victoria. You are being asked to take part in this study because you have reported having experienced a positive, profound, and lasting inner change over a relatively short period of time.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this project is to understand how people make sense of their experience of transformation. This research does not aim to provide final answers but rather seeks to understand the unique perspective of each person and to explore common themes.

What is involved

Volunteering for this study involves participating in one interview, between 1 and 1½ hours in length. You will be asked some specific questions, followed by 10 in-depth questions. Please answer as honestly and thoughtfully as possible so that the research has significant value. A list of all questions is attached to this form.

The interview will be audio-recorded and a transcription will be made. I will then search the transcript for key themes. You will have a choice of giving feedback. **Would you like to be contacted at a later time so that you can let me know if the key themes I have found fit with your experience?** _____ YES _____ NO

Risks

You may at times feel some emotion when speaking about life experiences that are important to you. You have the right to take a break or end the interview at any time without explanation or penalty. I will be available now and after the interview to discuss any concerns you may have. I also have a list of local counselling resources available should you need them.

Benefits

Your participation will help increase the current understanding of the process of human change and can assist helping professionals in working with people who are trying to change. You may also find that talking about your experience helps you gain deeper insight and understanding.

Voluntary Participation

You may withdraw from the study now, or at any point in the future, without any consequences or explanation. You can withdraw your data from the study up to **two months** after the completion of the interview by contacting me or my supervisor. If you choose to do so, all records of your participation in this study will be destroyed.

Anonymity, Confidentiality, and Dissemination of Results

To ensure your anonymity, no information that can be used to identify you will appear on any document associated with the research. Full transcripts of this interview will only be seen by the primary investigator and up to two co-researchers. If a transcriber is hired (s)he will sign a confidentiality agreement.

Some direct quotations from your transcript will be published in my Master's thesis and possibly a journal article and/or scholarly presentation. If you do not want other people in your life (e.g. the person who may have referred you to this study) to know parts of what you will be telling me today, please do not tell them that you have participated in this study.

According to British Columbia and Ontario law, I have a duty to report to appropriate authorities any suspected cases of child abuse or neglect. As well, in accordance with the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association code of ethics, confidentiality may be broken if, during the course of this research, I learn that a human life is in danger.

Inconvenience

Your time commitment will vary depending on how much you choose to be involved, but will require a minimum of about two hours, including transportation. This may pose some inconvenience to you.

Disposal of Data

All audio-recordings, will be destroyed after the printing of my Master's dissertation. Transcripts will be stored in a locked cabinet for future reference for a period of no longer than 10 years.

Contacts

Individuals that may be contacted regarding this study include the researcher, Susan Ilivitsky (250-590-8409 or susanili@uvic.ca) and research supervisor, Dr. Honoré France (250-721-7858 or hfrancer@uvic.ca). In addition, you may check the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

Signature

Date: yy/mm/dd

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher

Attachment: Interview Questions

Specific Questions

1. I will be using a pseudonym instead of your real name. What first name do you prefer?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your age (in years)?
4. What is your occupation?
5. What is your highest level of education?
6. What is your/your family's ethnic background?
7. What was your religious background growing up?*
8. Do you remember when your experience occurred? *
9. How old were you when it happened? *
10. Have you had experiences like this before the one you are describing? How many times? *
11. Have you had experiences like this since the once you are describing? How many times? *
12. In this study I am using the term "sudden personal transformation." Is there another term that you feel fits better with your experience?

In-depth questions:

1. Can you tell me a bit about your life before the experience?
2. How would you describe yourself as a person before the experience?
3. Can you tell me about the time in your life right before the experience?
4. Can you tell me about the experience itself?
5. Can you describe how this experience has impacted your life?
6. How would you describe yourself as a person now?
7. If you had to list the most important things that helped make this experience possible for you, what would they be?
8. Looking back, can you tell me what you believe produced or caused your personal transformation?
9. If there were a hidden message in your experience to the outside world, what would that message be?
10. Is there anything else about this experience that you would like to tell me before we end the interview? How was it for you to talk about this experience?

* Miller (1991)

Appendix E: Telephone Verbal Consent Script

[Start tape]

[Read Informed Consent Form aloud to participant; STOP at “Your signature below”; substitute with the following:]

“Do you have any questions about what I have just read to you?”

“Have you understood the conditions of participation in this study and have had the opportunity to have your questions answered?”

If yes: “So that you know what to expect, I will read you some of the questions I will be asking you today.”

[Read interview questions aloud]

Appendix F: Interview Protocol

[Start tape]

“As you know, I am interviewing you for a research project on sudden personal transformation. I will be taping the interview so that I can be a good listener during the interview, and so that I will have a record of the interview for my study. The interview should take between one hour and an hour and a half.”

“The purpose of this interview is to help me better understand your experience of personal transformation and how you have made sense of it.”

“There are no right or wrong answers to the questions I will ask you. I’m only interested in your thoughts, feelings, and experiences. If I ask a question that you would rather not answer please tell me and we will skip that question.”

“First, I’d like to start with some very basic information about you and your experience.”

1. I will be using a pseudonym instead of your real name. What name first do you prefer?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your age (in years)?
4. What is your occupation?
5. What is your highest level of education? (some high school; high school graduate; some college/university; college/university graduate; technical training; post-graduate degree)
6. What is your/your family’s ethnic background?
7. What was your religious/spiritual background growing up?*
8. Do you remember when your experience occurred? *
9. How old were you when it happened? *
10. Have you had experiences like this before the one you are describing? How many times? *
11. Have you had experiences like this since the once you are describing? How many times? *
12. In this study I am using the term “sudden personal transformation”. Is there another term that you feel fits better with your experience?

“The following ten questions ask you to talk about your experience in more depth. Some of the questions may be more challenging than others. Take your time to give each question some thought. I will prompt you for extra information along the way.”

* Miller (1991)

11. Can you tell me a bit about your life before the experience?

Possible prompts: Relationships (with self, partner, family, friends, higher power); Work (Education, career, hobbies).

12. How would you describe yourself as a person before the experience?

Possible prompts: Values, goals, interests, feelings; What gave you satisfaction/happiness? What would your friends/family say about you?

13. Can you tell me about the time in your life right before the experience?

Possible prompts: Were there any important concerns that you were dealing with? Were there any steps leading up to the experience?

14. Can you tell me about the experience itself?

Possible prompts: Where were you? What were you doing just beforehand? Who (if anyone) was with you? How did you know something out of the ordinary was happening? What did you think/feel/do? Was there any unusual sensations/sights/sounds? How did the experience end?

15. Can you describe how this experience has impacted your life?

Possible prompts: How do you know it has impacted your life? What changed? What stayed the same? Has it changed the way you see things, feel, behave, relate to others, relate to yourself, etc.?

16. How would you describe yourself as a person now?

Possible prompts: Values, interests, goals? What gives you satisfaction/happiness? If you had to write a profile about yourself, what would it say?

17. If you had to list the most important things that helped make this experience possible for you, what would they be?

Possible prompts: What factors helped it occur? What happened before that made it more likely? Why do you think it happened to you (as opposed to someone else)? How would you encourage this process in someone else?

18. Looking back, can you tell me what you believe produced or caused your personal transformation?

Possible prompts: How do you think it was possible? What happened to you in that moment? What emotional /psychological/social/spiritual/biological etc. forces or processes were at play? (Leave room for multiple interpretations)

19. If there was a hidden message in your experience to the outside world, what would that message be?

What would you say to someone who was struggling to change in a permanent, profound, and positive way? What should helpers (e.g. counsellors, social workers, psychologists, nurses, doctors, spiritual leaders) know about change? What would you want your children to know about you and your experience?

20. Is there anything else about this experience that you would like to tell me before we end the interview? How was this for you to talk about this experience?

“This brings us to the end of the interview.”

“Is it alright if I contact you again if I need some follow-up information to clarify anything you have said today?”

“I would also like to remind you that you are welcome to review the analysis of this interview when it is ready. Your feedback on the analysis will be incorporated into my study.”

“Would you like to be contacted when the analysis of the interview is completed?”

“Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today to share your experience.”

Appendix G: Counselling Resources

Ottawa ON

Ottawa Crisis Line: (613) 722-6914

Centre for Psychological Services: Providing psychological services to people from the Ottawa-Gatineau area

Phone: (613) 562-5289 (Standard fee which can be modified according to family income; covered in part by some insurance plans)

Victoria BC

NEED Crisis Line: (250) 386-6323

Citizen's Counselling Centre: Volunteer lay counselling service

Phone: (250) 384-9934 (Sliding scale fee)

Appendix H: Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement

Confidentiality Agreement Transcription Services

This study is being undertaken by Susan Ilivitsky, under the supervision of Dr. Honoré France, at the University of Victoria in partial completion of her Master's in Counselling Psychology. The purpose of this project is to explore how individuals who have experienced a positive, profound, and lasting inner change over a relatively short period of time make sense of their experience.

Project Title: "Making Sense of Sudden Personal Transformation: A Qualitative Study on People's Beliefs About the Facilitative Factors and Mechanisms of Their Abrupt and Profound Inner Change"

I, _____, transcriptionist, agree to:

1. keep all the research information shared with me confidential by not discussing or sharing the research information in any form or format (e.g. disks, tapes, transcripts) with anyone other than Ms. Ilivitsky.
2. keep all research information in any form or format (e.g. disks, tapes, transcripts) secure while it is in my possession.
3. return all research information in any form or format (e.g. disks, tapes, transcripts) to Ms. Ilivitsky when I have completed the research tasks.
4. after consulting with Ms. Ilivitsky, erase or destroy all research information in any form or format regarding this research project that is not returnable to Ms. Ilivitsky (e.g. information stored on computer hard drive).

I am aware that I can be held legally liable for any breach of this confidentiality agreement, and for any harm incurred by individuals if I disclose identifiable information contained in the audiotapes and/or files to which I will have access.

Transcriber

(print name)

(signature)

(date)