Exploring Career Change

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Abstract

Once associated with lifetime employment, policing and teaching have become increasingly associated with employee attrition. We used a life course research design to explore career turning points and transitions, in the context of preceding and following careers. Former police officers (*n* = 9) and former teachers (*n* = 15) from around Australia participated in 30-60 minute interviews about their careers and career decision-making. Transcribed interview responses were analysed using contextualising and categorising methods. Although participants’ experiences of ruptures preceding voluntary career change differed, the theme of feeling undervalued as a result of ruptures was common among participants. Participants felt valued in subsequent careers when prior skills were recognised and opportunities existed to acquire and apply new skills. Practical implications include the need for organisations to offer supportive workplace environments that value individual members and their contributions.

Keywords: career change, police officers, teachers, qualitative research, life course research design.
Life Course Research Design: Exploring Career Change Experiences of Former School Teachers and Police Officers

Career development can be regarded as a lifelong process in which an individual cycles and recycles through various stages (Super, 1990). Although Super (1980) defined occupational careers as “the sequence or combination of occupational positions held during the course of a lifetime” (Super, 1980, p. 286), the term career is used here in the sense of the sequence of occupations held within one field. Career stability has increasingly given way to career mobility (Fehring & Bessant, 2009; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). Teaching and policing, both traditionally seen to offer long-term, stable careers, have come to be characterised by high levels of employee attrition in Australia and internationally (Ewing & Manuel, 2005; White, Cooper, Saunders, & Raganella, 2010). Loss of experienced employees from an occupational group is associated with loss of accumulated knowledge and skills (Stone, 2002). Teacher attrition has implications both for continuity for students (Smethem, 2007) and for informal support for new teachers from experienced colleagues (Ewing & Manuel, 2005). Similarly, the loss of high level policing-specific knowledge has the potential to severely inhibit satisfactory service delivery (Lynch & Tuckey, 2007).

To understand the voluntary attrition which often precedes career change, researchers have looked to individual characteristics, such as extraversion and youth (Carless & Arnup, 2001); organisational characteristics, such as leadership and work-group cohesion (Griffeth, Hom, & Gaertner, 2000); and broader social explanations, such as changes to workplace contracts (Smithson & Lewis, 2000). In practical terms, multiple factors may contribute to career decisions made by individuals (Cooper & Davey, 2011). For example, in a study of career transitions of physical education teachers in Quebec, experienced teachers sought new challenges, while younger teachers sought job security (Bizet, Laurencelle, Lemoyne, Larouche, & Trudeau, 2010). Qualitative studies have emphasised the occurrence of career
decision-making within a relational context, influenced by partners or spouses, parents, and friends; and consideration of those affected by the career decisions (Blustein, Schultheiss, & Flum, 2004; Motulsky, 2010; Phillips, Christopher-Sisk, & Gravino, 2001).

Life course research designs aim to facilitate understanding of processes of change or transformation (Zittoun, 2009). Due to the dynamic nature of career change, past researchers have argued that life course research designs have potential merit in studies of career change (Fehring & Bessant, 2009; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Zittoun, 2009). Many studies have examined turning points, which can be seen as catalysts for change (Zittoun, 2009) and from which a range of possible courses can be followed (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). It is not enough, however, to consider a turning point or an end point in isolation; rather, examining turning points and the transitions which follow is critical to understanding processes of change (Zittoun, 2009). Furthermore, turning points and transitions cannot be separated from the periods of routine preceding and following them (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). Life course designs thus necessitate longitudinal data, collected in real time or retrospectively (Zittoun, 2009). Whilst retrospective collection of quasi-longitudinal data overcomes the obstacle of collecting data over a period of years, it is inherently limited in that participants’ recall of events in the present is influenced by their current interpretations of those events (Fehring & Bessant, 2009). The limitation of participants’ memory recall, however, is not problematic for research focused on meaning-making (Zittoun, 2009).

We aimed to explore career change in two careers that traditionally offered lifetime employment and now have increased employee attrition: We chose to consider policing and teaching careers because both careers met the two criteria. Although policing and teaching careers differ in a number of respects, occupational differences were not the focus of our study. Our primary aim was to locate and describe the similarities in career decision-making and meaning-making of people involved in career change, from occupations previously
associated with lifetime employment. Accordingly, we did not endeavour to obtain a representative sample or focus on differences due to demographic characteristics. We were interested in participants’ experiences, and their explanations for these, and thus considered reconstructive interviews including participants’ present interpretations of their past experiences appropriate for our purposes (Zittoun, 2009).

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of a subset of former Australian police officers and teachers who had participated in a larger study about career decision-making among police officers and teachers. Recruitment was via invitations in education or policing association newsletters, on a mature-aged university forum, and through snowball sampling. Interview participants had left careers in teaching or policing voluntarily, had entered or were preparing to enter new careers, and had consented to be contacted for interviews. We aimed to interview approximately ten participants from each career group to achieve breadth, recognising that in so doing we would sacrifice some depth (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). Thirty-two people volunteered to participate in interviews, and of these, 25 responded to arrange interview times; one later cancelled due to unexpected commitments. The resulting 24 interview participants consisted of 15 former teachers and 9 former police officers. Their demographic details (previous career, name [pseudonym], gender, years in career, age at exit, current career field) are summarised in Table 1 to provide context.

Materials

Semi-structured interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and telephone pick-up attachment. Participants were asked seven key questions drawn from recent research (Amundson, Borgen, Iaquinta, Butterfield, & Koert, 2010; Buchanan, 2009; Cooper & Davey,
Exploring Career Change (2011). The interview guide is presented in Table 2.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

We used participants’ shared turning point, the decision to enter the chosen career, as a starting point. Subsequent questions aimed to focus on the experience of career decision-making and change. We regarded career decisions as potential turning points, followed by transitions. Critically, we explored the periods of routine in the first and subsequent careers. Interestingly, it was not necessary to ask specific questions about routine life in participants’ careers, as these details emerged in participants’ telling of their experience.

**Procedure**

Participants who were willing to consider interview participation were offered interview times within a two-month period and telephone interviews were scheduled at times convenient to participants. Individual interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes. Recordings were transcribed verbatim within 1-5 days after the interviews. Three participants were asked via email to clarify comments which had not been clearly audible in the recordings.

**Method of Analysis**

Interview transcripts were read multiple times to facilitate immersion. Initial data analysis was conducted primarily by the first author (Howes) who received training in qualitative research methods as part of a psychology honours degree. Decisions and steps in the process were discussed with, and overseen by, the second author (Goodman-Delahunty) who is a research professor with extensive experience in qualitative research. Disparities were resolved through discussion to consensus. We used contextualising and categorising methods to analyse interview data (Maxwell, 2005).

**Contextualising method.** Zittoun (2009) suggested using individual cases to build a model from which to generalise, testing and modifying the model based on subsequent cases. We constructed decision-making timelines for five participants. Following Cooper and Davey
Exploring Career Change (2011), the timelines showed key life events, length of time in career, details of significant life or career events, and thoughts of career change mentioned in the interviews. Shared features of the timelines were retained in an overall timeline that described the chain of events for all five participants. Transcripts of all participants were then read in conjunction with the decision-making timeline, and the timeline was modified and simplified as a result. We identified a series of five discrete phases through which the participants had progressed or were progressing at the time of interview. The five phases are as follows: (1) Joining the career, (2) Life in the career, (3) Crisis or rupture, (4) Transition following rupture, and (5) Integration and Transformation.

**Categorising method.** We conducted a thematic analysis based on steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Fourteen individual transcripts were read and notes made in margins to code the data at the level of idea (whether expressed in phrase, sentence, or paragraph form). Similar codes were grouped in thematic maps for individual participants and proto-themes (tentative themes) were used to name frequently occurring and related codes. Proto-themes were systematically tabulated; compared and combined across participants; modified after reviewing the ten additional transcripts; and further modified after multiple readings of all transcripts. Twelve manifest (surface) themes in participants’ career decision-making journeys resulted, one of which, *personal and family circumstances*, was a common thread through all contextual phases. All themes applied to a minimum of twelve participants (except *support in leaving*, which applied to eight participants). Quotes which best exemplify participants’ comments are reported for each theme. All themes pertained to members of both occupational groups; and where certain aspects of themes applied specifically to teachers or police officers only, this was explicitly noted.

We uncovered latent (underlying) themes for individual participants after multiple readings, drawing from Hollway and Jefferson’s (2000) approach. We highlighted key
recurring words, phrases, and ideas; contradictory words, phrases and ideas; and closely examined the surrounding text within the context of individual participants’ whole transcripts. This approach allowed us to listen more intently to participants and to hone in on core personal meanings expressed. Key latent themes related strongly to participants’ needs; the overarching latent theme, important for all participants, was the need to be valued. Sub-themes evident for at least half of the participants included the need to do meaningful work; the need to have one’s contribution recognised; and the need to feel supported.

Analysis and Discussion

Themes from the categorical analysis are presented below in the sequential order of the five contextual phases specified above.

1. Joining the Career

A combination of circumstances led to participants’ decisions to join their careers.

a. Altruism and pragmatism. For both careers many participants reported awareness of an intuitive sense that they were personally well-suited to the type of work performed in the career, along with a desire to work with people, and to help other people in some way.

...I was striving for the excitement of uh working with people....whether it was a grandiose idea of helping people out, working with the community, really I suppose trying hard to make a difference... (Luke)

Teachers had often enjoyed school themselves or had a passion for their teaching subject or both. Some had received scholarships which had helped decide between two competing career options, or had made university study an affordable option.

...so basically, the initial reason was the offering of a scholarship to go to uni and study English and History, which was what I loved... (Therese)

Police officers had been attracted to the idea of an active, rather than desk-bound role. The opportunity for paid training was also appealing.
...so I don’t even know how I got the idea of the police but I think I just thought, “It’s got some freedom, I’m not stuck in an office!” It just seemed an exciting um job, and you got paid, even when you were learning. (Karen)

The foregoing explanations for joining the careers are in keeping with past research findings suggesting that both altruistic and pragmatic reasons factored into decisions to enter policing or teaching careers (see e.g., Anthony & Ord, 2008; White et al., 2010).

b. Naïvety. Participants further explained the background to their choices, however, as having been made with youthful enthusiasm. Many drew on childhood aspirations.

...and I remember – you know how kids play doctors and nurses? I used to play teacher and students with a friend and I, I really quite like the idea of it. (Kurt)

Others sought advice from knowledgeable others, such as school careers advisors, or were influenced by role models or friends.

...and a mate of mine’s dad was a detective sergeant and um, I was pretty close with him, and he invited his son and myself to the police station, ah, as a bit of a tour ....thought it’d be a good idea, something different... (Stephen)

A common experience among participants was of reflection in hindsight on their naivety or immaturity at the time of that decision.

... ’cause where I grew up there wasn’t that much awareness of the outside world and I was pretty naïve... (Annette)

Participants had made the best career decisions possible when they were young, using the knowledge and resources available to them at the time.

c. Personal and family circumstances. Considerations of personal circumstances in this phase included meeting parental expectations, and the compatibility of career and desirable lifestyle or career and family life.

...get yourself into a government job, so you know, it’s a stable job... (Isaac)
I seriously considered going into um, a professional theatre, but um, I was just getting married and we were talking about children so I ended up deciding to ah, that teaching was the better idea. (Thomas)

Participants had tried to meet their needs for meaningful and personally suitable work taking into account practical and family considerations.

2. Life in the career

Participants’ time in their careers was characterised both by love and by frustration.

a. Passion and enjoyment. Participants expressed passion for, or love of their careers.

They took pride in their membership in the careers and respected the work done within them. Teachers and police officers enjoyed working with colleagues on shared goals, mastering job-specific skills, and the opportunity to work in various locations.

I relished the absolute bonded-ness of the team ....it was an unbelievably tight, ah group of people, I really enjoyed that ... (Stephen)

... it was like, in terms of um achieving what I wanted to do, it was perfect - gave me a real insight and access into a remote indigenous community (Daniel)

Teachers reflected upon the enjoyment of teaching, and positive feedback from students.

...because then there really is nothing more astonishingly rewarding than standing up in front of a class when you have, you’re on a roll, and the students are getting what you’re saying and you’re getting the students and there’s a synchronicity... (Kurt)

Police officers appreciated the diversity of roles, and positive feedback from colleagues.

...everybody starts in general duties, and that’s what I did, I, then I had a very short career in the highway patrol....and then I decided to go into plain clothes, and within that of course, you can swap to the different ah, squads.... certainly plenty of excitement in the cops ... (Kenneth)

Love for and commitment to the chosen career was evident throughout the interviews.
b. Frustrations and disappointments. However, this love existed alongside various frustrations, disappointments, challenges, or issues. The most commonly expressed frustrations were issues with management through differential and unfair treatment.

_The principal told me on the phone before I took the job that it was permanent….and ah, I mean I just took his words, and then [my husband, children and I] got up here and they finally got me a copy of the contract and it was for 12 months…. I just couldn’t believe it…_ (Amanda)

Political decisions had a flow-on effect and could change the nature of the job. For police officers and teachers this often resulted in increasing accountability or paperwork that added pressure and took time from what was perceived as the _real_ job of helping people.

...where they name and shame all of the schools....and I just thought, ‘Where does this end?’....I mean if you’re working in a school that has [between 300 and 400] kids and they all come from a ....low-literacy background, of course your results are not going to be off the scale—they’ll be below... (Therese)

For police officers, political decisions could also have an immediate impact on the roles that specialist police services were able to perform.

...ah, the night of the election, and we were directed to go straight back into the office .....it was more...frustration that there were police out there who needed our help and we weren’t allowed to go and help. (Peter)

Teachers and police officers spoke of being passed over for promotion in the absence of a sound reason or explanation.

.....the board that decided ah on the applicant uh, decided on an unknown person....over the top of me.... I had to stay there initially and teach the new incumbent his job, which I found fairly demeaning, because he knew nothing about the place… (Walter)

Teachers spoke of the difficulty in achieving career progression, in terms of lack of
opportunities for promotions and diversification of roles.

It seemed to be that if you were going to go into an executive position you had to take a whole lot of sort of short-term roles to prove you could do it (Rita)

I’d gotten to a point where I felt perfectly confident with all the little elements of my job .... I started looking around me and seeing what was actually available and what’s next and thinking, “There’s really not much that I’m interested in there.” (Thomas)

For teachers another key issue was that of a heavy workload, coupled with little acknowledgement of work accomplishments.

...and the thing was, is when I was the acting [head] teacher, they didn’t reduce my load fully, they didn’t take off the extra-curricular jobs that I was doing....I was absolutely knackered! (Annette)

Another frustration was common amongst participants: Many perceived impersonal or bureaucratic treatment when injury, illness, or difficult personal circumstances arose.

...[I asked them,] “If I’m fit for operational policing, why can’t I stay where I am?” and they said, “Well, no, you can’t stay here [in this unit], because that’s where the injury [to your back] was [sustained].” (Isaac)

Participants were nevertheless able to withstand difficulties and challenges within the career when these were balanced by love and enjoyment of the career.

c. Personal and family circumstances. During this phase, considerations of personal circumstances kept people in the career. The types of things that influenced staying were flexibility of work days as a casual teacher (e.g., that enabled the dual role as a carer for a family member with an illness) and whether a job-change or promotion to another location would benefit the family as a whole.

I was going to have to move myself and my family from the country area to [city] ....I didn’t want to leave the uh, oh I suppose somewhat idyllic situation we were in, ah from
Although frustrations coexisted with love for the career, while life in the career enhanced personal and family circumstances, people stayed in their chosen careers.

3. Crisis or rupture

The scale could be tipped, however, towards frustrations; and frustrations and disappointments provided a backdrop for ruptures. We chose the term *rupture*, rather than *turning point*, or other related terms, as it seemed to more accurately reflect participants’ experience of the jarring, unexpected, or emotionally painful “interruption to what had previously appeared as continuous” (Zittoun, 2009, p. 407). Lee and Mitchell (1994) argued that such ruptures or shocks to the system were major precipitating events to turnover. Theoretically, rupturing incidents could be single events or emerge gradually over time (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). In practice, ruptures were generally not one incident in isolation: They could be thought of as “straws that broke the camel’s back” in that they were one frustration or disappointment too many. On the surface, the rupturing incident or incidents varied among participants, but all ruptures attacked participants’ need to feel valued.

a. Rupturing incidents. Some rupturing incidents made participants feel undervalued through attacking their need to feel supported. Ruptures which did this included the perception of unfair treatment (of self or others) by the hierarchy.

*I’d asked for three months without pay and been knocked back where other guys – it was granted to other guys, you know, it was fairly personal…* (Peter)

*[the head teacher] basically went around and started bushfires and fanned the flames …. It was just… Oh, I can’t describe how dreadful it was. It just, it got worse as the year progressed to the point where I couldn’t stand going up to the staffroom…* (Amanda)

Many participants reported that they were treated poorly, or impersonally, particularly when illness or injury was present. This included having limited input in accessing an appropriate
job-role that would make use of their accumulated skills when injured.

*Well um, I don’t think the department really cared about me at all, I [was] just [serial number] as far as they [we]re concerned... (John)*

*I suppose I became a little bit disillusioned with the fact that they weren’t prepared or they couldn’t provide, or they couldn’t find something that was um, more mentally engaging... (Luke)*

This type of experience demonstrated the failure to recognise or value the contribution which participants had made, or were willing to continue to make to the organisation.

For both newly qualified and experienced teachers, difficulties in finding suitable work, coupled with the need for self-promotion which this necessitated also represented a rupture to the perception of the career as a context for meaningful work.

*...like, I know of people who’ve had to wait twenty years to get a full-time job around here, and I wasn’t prepared to wait nearly that long. (Aaron)*

*I had applied for one that I thought I was very well-suited for and I didn’t get it – it was a promotion type one...– and I started to think, “It’s not going to happen”. (Rita)*

Rupturing incidents all attacked the need to be valued. This either occurred directly, or indirectly, through attacking the need to feel supported, the need to have one’s contribution recognised, or the need to do meaningful work.

**b. Impact of ruptures.** Ruptures undermined previously held beliefs about the career.

Prior to ruptures, the career had provided the context within which participants were able to fulfil one of their career goals – to do worthwhile and meaningful work.

*And I thought, “Oh – can’t do it. I can’t work with people who are so destructive.” .... I was really disheartened, you know I was deeply disheartened... (Kath)*

Ruptures led participants to feel that the career was no longer going to be able to provide the context in which they could make meaningful contributions.
Being treated as a fungible, or like a number was registered as a shock by many participants faced with illness or injury who had been extremely dedicated to their careers. 

_When I joined, if, if you, you know, if something happened to you and you were injured ....the police sort of family, would look after you, and they couldn’t do, you know, too much for you ....but then in the end, in that Ryan era, everybody just became this you know, faceless number. (Kenneth)_

Ruptures which resulted in feelings of betrayal could be regarded as violations of the psychological contract (Rousseau, 1989). Participants had believed that they had relational contracts with their employers, built on loyalty and trust, but ultimately the contracts were more transactional in nature. This changed participants’ perceptions of the career as a suitable context in which to continue to do meaningful work.

Ruptures undermined participants’ beliefs about the self and impacted self-confidence, or more devastatingly, their identity. Whereas, prior to ruptures, participants had taken a great deal of pride in their work, and had been dedicated and committed to their roles, ruptures led participants to feel that their contributions were ignored or undervalued.

...you know, I’m not, I’m just a person – I can be replaced.... and I suppose I realised at that time that there’s really no loyalty to me at all – regardless of what I do... (Kurt)

Due to the strong commitment to their careers, high level of investment and identity associated with ongoing membership of the teaching profession or the police force, for many participants, this rupture was internalised and taken to mean that they were not valued.

...I felt again pretty low, I felt I’ve got no identity, no-one’s going to talk to me who I used to work with, um, “What have I got to offer?” , um, yeah, “What do we do now?”

(Stephen)

Feeling demoralised and devalued left participants in unsustainable situations.

c. _Agency in leaving._ All participants left their careers on a voluntary basis, but notably,
while the career exit was considered voluntary, many participants it did not perceive that they had any other choice.

*I mean, I can be cynical but I can also be fairly um...enthusiastic, I suppose uh and these people had just lost all that, I, I didn’t want to go down that, that path...* (Bill)

While some felt that they could avoid future regret by leaving, many people did not feel that they affirmatively made decisions about their careers at all, but rather, that they had responded to unanticipated circumstances.

*...but when they made it look like my career was going to be so mundane, they paint you into a corner, where really, there’s only one way out.* (Luke)

This notion of reactivity rather than proactive career planning was also true of those for whom suitable opportunities arose prior to considering career change.

*I don’t know that I’ve actually made any career decisions. I think they’ve all sort of been made for me and I’ve just sort of gone with the flow... Here’s an opportunity, I’ll take it.* (Annette)

Overall, in the majority of cases, participants characterised their actions as having been the only real choice available to them at the time.

**d. Personal and family circumstances.** During this phase, consideration of personal responsibilities contributed to a decision to leave the career for some participants. Changes in personal circumstances which made people vulnerable to experiencing ruptures included relocation to new area, personal illness or injury, illness of family member, needs of partner or children, break-up of intimate relationship, and death in the family.

*...um, it got to the point where really it was either the family or career...* (Stephen)

The paramount issues considered included the need to be available for family members, (e.g., to look after young children, or to care for partners or parents who were unwell), and the need to make the best possible financial contribution for the family.
...um, you know, because we had mortgages to pay... (Natalie)

For newly qualified teachers without permanent or even temporary jobs, financial responsibilities could not be met and therefore, movement into other fields was necessary.

4. Transition following rupture

As had been the case when joining the career, a combination of circumstances influenced people’s career choices once leaving policing or teaching. Job searches and applications had often started while working in the former career or just after, depending upon the time-frame of the rupture. Looking for and taking opportunities that arose was critical in this phase. For many participants the transition into a new job was accompanied by a period of uncertainty reflecting that initially experienced prior to entering the career.

...but um, initially I questioned myself, “Did I have the skills?” (Luke)

For some participants, smoother transitions were achieved by trying a job in another field while retaining the policing or teaching job through taking leave without pay or secondment opportunities, or by pursuing a concurrent field as an interest until a job opportunity arose.

...understanding, realising that I could always return to teaching... (James)

For several participants it was helpful to know that they would be able to return to the career.

a. Support in leaving. Only a small minority of participants (one teacher and one police officer; \( n = 2 \)) felt that they had received appropriate support in leaving the career in cases where the change was precipitated by illness or injuries to the participant.

Mm... It hasn’t been true of all of the people I know, I was a bit lucky. One of my other colleagues didn’t have the same sort of treatment from the system, um, quite a few cases, so it's not true of everybody, but in my case it did work out very well. (Fred)

Six others, five of whom had been in policing, explicitly stated that they felt forgotten.

...you just get left out there on me own, on your own and you think, “No-one cares.” So you do get disillusioned.... there’s no area that will sit down or go and see you or even
offer you um… “Do you need a bit of a hand?” or “Do you need a bit of advice?” or “What can we work with?” or “Can we do -?” or “What opportunities exist?” That just didn’t happen. (Luke)

Some participants reflected in hindsight that they may have made different decisions about career change had they been provided with an opportunity to discuss options and make more informed decisions.

b. New opportunities. New opportunities presented themselves to participants in various ways. Word of mouth led to opportunities for many participants. Of those who left their chosen careers outright, including teachers who had not held permanent positions, some took permanent employment for which they were over-qualified in order to have job security; others took jobs working for people whom they knew. Such interim jobs provided a buffer of safety between career exit and entry into a new career.

   a colleague asked me to help him …build a pub, manage a pub, so I did that… (Peter)

Many participants applied for job opportunities seen in newspapers or on internet job sites. In a number of cases rejected job applications led to offers of similar opportunities.

   Um, and then the owner of the centre actually rang me the next day and said that he had filled the position that I went for but he was really impressed with how I interviewed so he had created another position for me! (Natalie)

In some cases, the first job after leaving the career position was less satisfactory than the job abandoned.

   …the admin role was… it was horrible, horrible! Mainly because of what it did to my self-esteem…. I went from feeling like I was doing, doing something and contributing in some way, teaching, to feeling like I wasn’t contributing at all… (Sarah)

A strong sense of identity as a police officer or teacher, coupled with negative experiences in the new career tended to make people question whether or not they had done the right thing
in leaving the career position. Many participants, nevertheless, found that they were able to
develop different aspects of themselves once they had left.

...it’s more about the conditions and the work-life balance than it is about the dollar at
the end of the day, because if you come home miserable, what does the money even
matter? (Therese)

It um, I seem to have a lot more time, well obviously – I play the piano every day. I didn’t
have the time or intention to do that before. (Kurt)

The availability of time to explore meaning in other areas of life compensated to some extent
for participants’ lack of satisfaction with new job roles, consistent with past research findings
suggesting that positive experiences in one life domain protect against negative experiences
or perceived failures in another (Barnett & Hyde, 2001).

c. Personal and family circumstances. During this phase, considerations of personal
circumstances included the need to find a role that enabled balance between personal
responsibilities and work commitments.

...it’s a very flexible workplace; um I mainly do most of my work from home so it’s um,
fits very much around my family... (Scott)

Opportunities for work which allowed better balance with personal and family commitments
than had the previous career were extremely valuable in this phase.

5. Integration and Transformation

This phase was a search for a new sustainable fit with the environment (Zittoun, 2009).

a. Rejection of bitterness. Perhaps not surprisingly, a number of participants mentioned
disappointment, disillusionment, or bitterness which they had experienced during the phases
of rupture and transition following rupture. It was clear that many interviewees were aware of
their struggle with these kinds of negative feelings.

You know, I’ve given the best part of my life to the police department, and um .... I just
need some, some help, and I didn’t see it coming. I was quite bitter at one stage…. (Blair)

It was equally clear that participants actively avoided holding negative feelings about the career which they still loved, and to which many still felt attached.

...and I mean I hold no grudge against the school... the school and the other teachers I taught with are fantastic people. Even the kids – I loved them to bits… (Therese)

Participants conveyed the idea that they did not want to feel bitterness or disillusionment about the career, and instead reflected on positive and negative experiences in balance in a return to the perspective they had held in the phase of life in the career.

b. Moving on. Coming to terms with changes in employment was associated with finding new opportunities in which the skills and experience gained in the former career were acknowledged and appreciated. Many participants had been surprised to learn the value of their skills in other workplaces.

... when I got out I was just dumbfounded at how many opportunities and how many doors opened. (Scott)

Positive experiences enabled participants to move forward from past disappointments.

...so it was a bit intimidating at first, I thought, “God, I’ve never done this before!” …but surprisingly... it’s been really good! (Amanda)

Participants who had found suitable roles had tended to come to terms more readily with the experience of leaving their career in policing or teaching. Suitable roles were those in which two conditions were met. First, participants’ special interests, knowledge, skills, and experience from within teaching or policing were a valued commodity. Second, participants had opportunities to acquire and apply new skills in their roles.

Again, I’m back in a team where um, it’s a good bunch of people, you know .... You feel really supported, I have confidence in my managers, I get feedback, and I’m also on a steep learning curve and I’m really, really enjoying learning new stuff. (Kath)
Surprisingly, this kind of suitable job opportunity was sometimes the first one found. Often, however, suitable opportunities were worked towards in increments by taking appealing opportunities as they arose.

If I hadn’t have left, there’s no way I’d be uh, you know, doing what I’m doing today. You don’t, the role I’m in now, you can’t just leave the police force and go into this role... so the work I did [in various roles for industry after leaving the police] ... put me in a good position to get me to the level I am in now, the job I’m in now. (Peter)

Participants’ accounts reflected appreciation for the teaching or policing career that was still present in their minds. In particular, teachers missed their students and colleagues, and police officers missed the bonds that they had shared with their colleagues. Many maintained contact with former colleagues and an interest in the current direction of their former careers. Rather than shedding the teacher or police officer identity, a new career identity was one that integrated the police officer or teacher past.

...yeah well I can still keep a piece of the identity because I’m happy now that that’s kind of shaped where I am today but I can also put the commercial head on.... Um, I can leverage off that too. (Stephen)

As participants integrated previous career experiences with new opportunities, personal transformations took place.

**c. Personal and family circumstances.** In this phase, while personal and family commitments remained a focus, increased confidence in new roles was evident.

... there’s just so many opportunities here that I think, that I just don’t think that I could exhaust them all my, my options any time soon....it suits us, it suits our lifestyle (Natalie)

In many cases, new careers came to provide participants with the experience of feeling valued, through recognition of their contributions in a context for meaningful work.

**General Discussion**
Although policing and teaching are two very different career fields in many respects, the experiences of participants overlapped to a surprising degree. Our approach to exploring career change using a life course design permitted insights not only into the nature of ruptures, the catalysts for career change, but to participants’ associated decision-making considerations and processes of transition into new careers. This holistic perspective is not possible from routine exit interviews conducted at the time of leaving the career. Interview data from the present study suggested that participants’ primary motivations for making a career change were reactive, in the context of the need to feel valued, and in response to circumstances of work and family life, rather than strategic career decisions. This finding confirmed past research indicating a role for chance (Hancock, 2009; Krumboltz, 2009); modification of plans during the career (Rinke, 2009; Smethem, 2007); and making career decisions in a relational context (e.g., Motulsky, 2010). Many interview participants had made career changes when they perceived no realistic alternative. For example, reflecting past research (Bizet et al., 2010), former teachers who had not held permanent positions changed careers in response to the need for job and financial security. Significantly, it was notwithstanding their fear and uncertainty, that many participants in the present study pursued new career paths, and was not dissimilar to the lack of agency which Cooper and Davey (2011) observed in interview responses of teachers who had considered and rejected career change.

A number of recommendations to address ruptures flowed from the findings of this study. Police officers and teachers who had left their careers during a time of dissatisfaction and crisis were in the majority. When personal responsibilities and career commitments could not simultaneously be met, participants opted to abandon the careers. These findings are consistent with research on managing multiple roles suggesting that demands in domains of home and work could contribute to role strain and work burnout (e.g., Perrone & Civiletto, 2004; Peeters, Montgomery, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2005). Crises by definition are temporary,
and therefore, when support is made available, it might be possible to retain staff beyond the conclusion of these periods. Police officers and teachers may have benefit from having support when personal and work responsibilities clash (e.g., when a family member needs care through an illness). Relevant and appropriate support offered by police and education departments includes time on leave without pay, reduced workload (e.g., through job-share), or provision of psychological services.

Treatment from management in relation to injuries and illness was a major concern for participants in both careers, but in policing in particular. Despite the frequency of occurrence of both physical and psychological injuries to police officers, these events were still accompanied by a sense of shame, fear of accusation of malingering, and a sense of being forced out, unceremoniously dumped, or “got rid of.” Following injury, early intervention and return to appropriate work are not only key to successful rehabilitation, but are also cost-effective workplace practices (Audit Office of NSW, 2008). Policing and teaching organisations do offer support such as employee counselling, and various forms of leave; it is critical that staff are made aware of the availability of support and helped to access it in times of need. Although changes in personal circumstances made people vulnerable to leaving careers, however, this was by no means the case for all who left.

In an overwhelming number of participants’ cases, the reason for feeling undervalued was because of unfair or differential treatment by management, corroborating the findings of previous studies (Griffeth et al., 2000; James & Hendry, 1991; Troman & Woods, 2000). Conversely, for many, positive experiences in both former and new careers involved good management and belonging to a supportive team with shared goals. Therefore, it is appropriate that organisations be encouraged to give high priority to people-management training.

To facilitate access of desirable opportunities within policing and teaching careers, it is
essential that individuals recognise their repertoires of job-related skills. In a culture characterised by increased career change expectations (Orrange, 2003) and interviewing strategies which require applicants to describe how they handled past situations, this recognition of skills is increasingly important. Development of skill awareness in police officers and teachers can be facilitated from the outset in schools and universities by careers advisors. Given that teacher shortages may be limited to certain geographic locations and specialist teaching areas (Williams & Forgasz, 2009), it would be helpful to prospective teachers if education departments and universities collaborated to provide graduates with projected vacancies, along with clear suggestions of other fields for which an education degree or graduate teaching qualification may prepare them. Similarly, universities and other institutions which provide policing degrees and courses could emphasise the applications of their training in other related fields.

The use of a life course research design led us to consider transition into the new career. Focus on the transition revealed that many participants experienced low self-confidence and a lack of awareness of the transferability of their skills to other occupations. Psychologists can help clients to develop coping skills and increase clients’ perceptions of coping efficacy (Perrone & Civiletto, 2004). Assistance in appraising knowledge, skills, and abilities; and in information-gathering to assess the match in other fields, may be complemented by narrative approaches that empower clients to re-evaluate and construct their future careers and identities (Savickas et al., 2009) from a holistic perspective inclusive of past aspirations and present realities. Given the importance of career to participants’ sense of identity, the career style interview (Savickas, 2009) may enhance the development of self-confidence and career direction (Rehfuss, Del Corso, Galvin & Wykes, 2011).

Many approaches to using a life course research design to examine career change are possible; we presented but one. We demonstrated the utility of the design to understanding
career change in previously traditional, lifelong careers now characterised by higher employee attrition. In this research, we used case studies to generalise a contextual model. In this example, we opted for breadth rather than depth across two occupations. Our participant recruitment processes may have resulted in a sample which maintained greater interest in their former careers than the typical former employee. Future research can add detail to contextual phases, explore the transition process in greater depth, or explore other careers.

Overall, our study revealed some common elements of the process of career change and associated meaning-making of police officers and teachers who had left their chosen careers. Our findings highlighted the importance to career professionals in teaching and policing of work as a location of meaning in their lives. The findings emphasised the need for people to feel valued within their workplaces. These outcomes are useful to psychologists working both with police and education departments to develop interventions to retain experienced professionals; and to assist police officers and teachers in career and transition planning.
References


