# TURNING POINT ANALYSIS OF PERSONAL NARRATIVES BY IMPENDING COLLEGE GRADUATES

An essay submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for graduation from the

## Honors College at the College of Charleston

with a Bachelor of Arts in

Communication

Rachel Jaffe

May 2016

Advisor: Merissa Ferrara                    Secondary Reader: Jenna Abet

## Introduction

Throughout a lifetime, a person will retain innumerable memories. Of all of these memories, only a handful will contribute to one's personal narrative (McAdams, 2001). Personal narratives are part of how we define ourselves and are made up of a person's most distinctive memories. In social science and humanities research, these memorable moments are referred to as turning points. A turning point is "any event or occurrence that is associated with change in a relationship" (Baxter & Bullis, 1986). They refer to emotional and/or important events that shape and direct the course of a person's life.

Previous studies have utilized the turning point approach to analyze memories in a variety of disciplines, including performance studies (Langellier, 2013), relationship studies (Dailey, McCracken, Jin, Rossetto, & Green, 2013), and communication education studies (Docan-Morgan & Manusov, 2009). Each of these studies employs the turning points approach in order to understand what types of memories are distinct to specific groups of people, such as people in "on-again/off-again dating relationships"(Dailey et al., 2013). The present study analyzes a group yet to be examined using the turning point approach – college seniors in their final months before graduation.

The purpose of this study is to discover which memories college seniors classify as turning points throughout their lifetimes. Our goal is to uncover which defining moments resonate most with college seniors by conducting a contextual analysis of written autobiographies. The reason impending college graduates are an appropriate focus group for this study is because they are going through a major life transition. Additionally, the college seniors chosen for this study are all between the ages of 20 and 25. In her book *The Defining Decade: Why Your Twenties Matter--And How to Make the Most of Them Now*, Dr. Meg Jay argues that the twenties are the critical developmental period of adulthood (p. xxvi). The combination of this

major developmental phase with the inevitable transitional qualities of impending college graduation makes turning point research of this focus group a necessary addition to the field of communications research. While other studies have utilized similar demographic groups because of their inimitable combination of progression and uncertainty (Henscheid, 2008; McLean & Pratt, 2006), none have examined the turning points throughout the lifetime of solely college seniors.

**Turning points**

Studying a demographic group using turning points helps us to understand how "people differ from each other with respect to their self-defining life stories in ways that are not unlike how they differ from each other on more conventional psychological characteristics" (McAdams, 2001, p. 101). Because different people have different life paths and stories, their interpretation of turning points will also be different (Thomsen & Jensen, 2007). For example, the outcomes of a turning point may be similar even for differing life experiences. Experiencing a death in the family and receiving a rejection letter are two entirely different occurrences, but they may both constitute turning points resulting in distress, grief, or rehabilitation for different people. On the contrary, "some events may be perceived as turning points by almost everyone, perhaps testifying to the large impact of some events as well as cultural agreements about types of events that constitute turning points" (Thomsen & Jensen, 2007, p. 350).

The present study investigates whether or not rising college graduates would identify similar events as turning points. In our research, turning points were identified in written autobiographies. The identified turning points are now used to understand the development of college seniors' relationships with other people, their surroundings, and themselves. Understanding these relationships through "examination of the intensity, valence, and

sequencing of turning points" (Baxter & Bullis, 1986, p. 470) will allow us to theorize about the basic nature of relationship dynamics for our specific focus group.

**Narrative inquiry**

According to McAdams (2001), "the psychology of life stories may well be situated today to play an important integrative role in the scientific study of human behavior and experiences" (p. 101). In the present study, autobiographies, have been utilized to collect turning point data. This method was selected based on existing studies of narrative inquiry, including the work of sociologist Laurel Richardson who stated: "Narrative is the best way to understand the human experience because it is the way humans understand their own lives" (as cited in Bochner, 2012, p. 155).

The use of narrative inquiry and autobiography as research has been challenged in the past. According to Bochner (2012), "poststructuralists disputed the capacity of language and speech to mirror experience" because "no methods exist that can warrant a claim to describe reality as reality would describe herself if she could talk" (p. 156). The main concern in this argument is that the constitutive quality of language creates an unyielding barrier between reality and self-reflective interpretation despite the best efforts of humans to communicate effectively. Based on this understanding, all narrative inquiry based research lacks a certain level of connection with reality because it is based on interpretations of the human mind.

Wolff-Michael Roth, who explored the use of autobiography as scientific research, disputes this concern, arguing that "autobiography… is legitimated as a strategy to arrive at intersubjectivity thereby avoiding false claims to objectivity and failure-prone inner (hyper) subjectivity" (p. 3). Using autobiography to collect turning point data is uniquely effective because of its ability to reconcile objectivity and subjectivity in an inherently personalized field

of research. In order to utilize autobiographies in collectively relevant research, we are reading and interpreting the autobiographies using an ethnographic lens. Autoethnography is defined as "research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political" (Ellis, 2004, p. xix). According to Roth, "auto/ethnography and auto/biography are genres that blend ethnographic interests with life writing and tell about a culture at the same time it tells about a life" (p. 4). Therefore, analyzing autobiographies will help us to understand the collective interpretation and impact of certain turning points for rising college graduates.

In addition, narrative inquiry has been identified as "an alternative to dominant psychological approaches to interpersonal communication" (Bochner, 2012, p. 156). Narrative inquiry allows the researcher to study what is happening in another person's mind, a necessary component when utilizing the turning points approach. "It is the way humans understand their own lives" (as cited in Bochner, 2012, p. 155), which is why autoethnography is an appropriate data collection medium when conducting this type of research. Personal narratives, or autoethnographies, have the characteristic of creating "a sense of meaning or integration of one's experiences and, thus, of oneself," popularly referred to as "meaning-making, integrative memories, integration, exploratory processing, and accommodation" (McLean & Pratt, 2006, p. 715). According to Mclean and Pratt (2006), "the commonality in these different terms is the use of a form of autobiographical reasoning to think about a life experience" (p. 715).

For this particular study, the relationship between memories and extended narrative is part of the concept in question. How do we use memories to compose personal narratives? What qualities differentiate collective turning points from individual turning points? How much does interpretation affect the construction and lasting impact of memories? Which factors contribute

to the identification of turning points? The present study utilizes autobiographies in order to reconcile these questions, as personal narrative is the most natural and effective way to share and understand interpersonal relationships (Bochner, 2012). While there are quantitative methods for studying this subject, qualitative research is the most distinct and personal way to understand the development of interpersonal relationships and their result on the human experience.

## Method

### Participants and Procedures

The participants of this study were initially recruited as students for a communication capstone course entitled "Wired and Inspired" at a small liberal arts college in the south. After a two-semester-long journey exploring goals, experiences, and life changes, students were assigned a culminating autobiography project. They were asked to compose an autobiography consisting of "six to eight memorable messages that define who you are and how you have gotten to this point." The resulting autobiographies from the assignment are the sources for the data used in this study. The typed autobiographies are 3-18 pages in length. For the purposes of this study, all autobiographies are anonymous. In the written autobiographies, the participants' names were changed to the letter "X." The anonymous participants are all between the ages of 20-25.

### Data Analysis

Once autobiographies were completed and graded for class purposes, the researchers collected 23 autobiographies for the present study. The researchers first read the written personal narratives with an open-mind, making notes relating to overarching categories of turning points. The second time the researchers read through the autobiographies, we used HyperRESEARCH

to extract turning point data. Specifically, we used coding in order to break the data down into categories and discrete properties while comparing similarities and differences among them.

The codes used to sort the data set are as follows: meaning-making, trauma, unsupportive/negative, supportive/positive, starting over, passion, role model, and cornerstone. This particular set of codes emerged as the most prevalent and recurring events discussed in the autobiographies. While certain codes describe the type of turning point (trauma, starting over, cornerstone), others refer to the general emotions or relevant context of the turning point (unsupportive/negative, supportive/positive). The remaining codes (meaning-making, role model, and passion) describe thematic elements of turning points that manifested during the research. According to McLean and Platt (2006), one "narrative characteristic that has been robustly associated with meaning is the emotionality of events" (p. 716). Because of the close relationship between meaning-making and emotion inducing events, all sets of codes are significant. For this particular study, we are focusing on why certain turning points emerge when college seniors reminisce as opposed to others. In other words, we are identifying which factors contribute to the identification of turning points. To elaborate, each of the codes will be specifically described in their respective sections.

**Starting over.** Starting over is defined as "a new beginning." This involves any number of events that qualify as either a literal new beginning or a perceived new beginning. For example, moving homes or switching schools are included in this category. In certain cases, break ups and new relationships are included, as well as moments when the authors identified a new starting point in his/her life. While turning points are mostly categorized based on content, the language used by the authors can also indicate a moment of starting over. For example, the phrases "I wanted to start my own life" (Autobio_2), "You leave your old self behind, and

become someone else" (Autobio_1), and "the excitement of starting my own new adventure was thrilling" (Autobio_14) all indicate starting over turning points.

**Trauma.** Moments coded as trauma include any turning point where a distressing event occurred that could potentially have lasting impact. Trauma is defined by the American Psychological Association as:

> An emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea. While these feelings are normal, some people have difficulty moving on with their lives." ("Trauma," 2016).

While reading the autobiographies, the researchers paid special attention to these post-trauma symptoms to see if our identification of trauma was consistent with the American Psychological Association's definition.

This definition helps us to understand the significance of focusing on trauma for this particular study. First, these events are significant because trauma turning points "are often about the first time one is faced with personal, or a close other's, vulnerability, often leading to an exploration of life and death, thoughts about one's place in the world, or a reevaluation of one's values" (McLean & Pratt, 2006, pp. 715-716). Second, the goal of this study is to uncover which defining moments resonate most with college seniors in order to better understand personal narrative as a means for research as well as personal growth. By studying the relationship between trauma and a person's perception of their past and present, we can identify themes amongst participants that could be applicable to future research.

**Cornerstone.** The cornerstone turning point describes a moment that emerged as a common life-defining experience for many of the participants. Cornerstones are moments identified by authors where they felt a sense of importance, especially of their personal beliefs or passions, or where they felt truly listened to for the first time. For some, the confirmation comes from a mentor or role model. For example, one participant wrote of a time she presented an art project in elementary school:

> The class lit up, wanting to see my pictures, and my teacher was beaming with pride. "X, you should absolutely be an artist," she exclaimed, giving me a hug for a job well done. My heart was full and I felt pride in myself for one of the first times I can remember. (Autobio_4).

For others, it happens during a one-time encounter. For others, it can even be confirmation from a school of thought or religious figure. The most important commonality that connects all of the cornerstones is that the authors identified these moments as life changing. For example, one participant wrote: "If it hadn't been with her, I'm sure I would've followed some of my other friends and left private school for public, joined a gang or dropped out entirely. To her I owe my life" (Autobio_7). Despite the different details of each of the cornerstone turning points, the distinct defining characteristics (confirmation of selfhood, life changing) are all the same, "perhaps testifying to the large impact of some events as well as cultural agreements about types of events that constitute turning points" (Thomsen & Jensen, 2007, p 350).

**Unsupportive/Negative and Supportive/Positive.** Events that affected the participants either negatively or positively were also very prevalent throughout the autobiographies. These codes applied to any events or situations described that did not explicitly fit into another category, but had either a positive or negative effect on the participant. According to Adams,

Berzonsky, and Keating (2006), "supportive, constructive, and positive interactions…have been found to be associated with progress in dimensions associated with psychosocial maturity such as moral development, personal independence, emotional autonomy, social integration, a sense of well-being, persistence, and so forth" (p. 83). The researchers hypothesize that similar but opposite associations would be found with unsupportive, unconstructive, and negative interactions, making them both equally relevant to this study.

One difficulty when applying this code was deciding whether or not the effect of an event is long-lasting. Though participants thoroughly described their experiences in their autobiographies, some events happened too recently to determine whether or not their impact would endure while others were simply described without the effects being explicitly stated. For example, one participant recalls: "Mrs. Wall didn't think that I was ready for the program. I believe she said that I wasn't mature enough for it. To me, this was devastating. I got to watch my other friends go have fun in this special class, while I had to stay behind" (Autobio_13). While this event clearly merits significance, as the participant found it important enough to include in his/her composition, it does not explicitly state the impact of the event or his/her reasoning for including this turning point. Thus this turning point was coded "unsupportive/negative." Similarly, positive experiences that were described but did not fit into another one of the event categories were coded "supportive/positive." For example, a participant describes winning a swimming race: "I won! At the time this was the most terrifying experience and in the end, I didn't just finish, but won! It was the ultimate triumph. I just conquered my fear, anxiety, and completed a goal. It was so much adrenaline and excitement and a moment of accomplishment I will never forget" (Autobio_6). The supportive/positive code applies to this

turning point because it is a moment of positivity that is distinct enough in the participant's mind that he/she felt it necessary to include in their life narrative.

  **Meaning-making.** A prior coding system for self-defining memory narratives was adopted to measure meaning in the turning points that were coded "meaning-making." The turning points were first identified if they offered a lesson or insight. The coding system labels turning points using a categorical system of no meaning, lesson, or insight. A linear coding system (1-3) previously adapted by McLean and Thorne (2001) was then used to categorize the turning points. A score of 1 was given to turning points with a lesson reported. A lesson is defined as "meaning that were often behavioral and did not extend the meaning beyond the recalled event" (McLean & Pratt, 2006, p. 717). For example, a participant reported the following lesson from elementary school, "At the end I illustrated what had finally come together for me: I wanted to be an artist" (Autobio_4). A score of 2 was given to turning points with vague meaning. These contain a level of meaning-making in between lesson and insight where "meanings…were slightly more sophisticated than lessons, but not as specific as insights" (McLean & Pratt, 2006, p. 717). For example, a score of 2 was given to this participant's turning point: "Ever since Harbor City Fest I have learned to let go, put my worries aside until tomorrow, and live in the moment" (Autobio_8). Finally, a score of 3 was given to turning points with insights. Insights are defined as "meanings that extend beyond the specific event to explicit transformations in one's understanding of oneself, the world, or relationships" (McLean & Pratt, 2006, p. 717). For example, one participant wrote:

   This experience restarted a fire in my heart. And I realized I was missing opportunities

   because I'd been too focused on working hard. My identity shouldn't be found in

   accomplishments but should be found in experiences. (Autobio_9).

Measuring meaning in each of the turning points individually is vital to the impact of this study. While all turning points involve some level of meaning-making, this additional coding system adds another layer of insight to the experiences had by impending college graduates. As previously stated, a goal of this study is to evaluate the similarities and differences between turning points identified by college seniors. With the added component of meaning-making analysis, we can evaluate the level of impact of the events described by the study participants.

**Passion.** This code refers to any overarching component within an autobiography that is used to describe or contextualize multiple events. It also refers to any activity, interest, or event that is designated by the autobiography's author as a passion. This component is significant to the overall findings of this study because it helps us to understand how turning points are chosen. The author's perception of the event is then contextualized by the overarching passion. For example, one participant wrote about a high school research presentation: "I have worked hard on this project, I've read articles and books, watched documentaries and conducted interviews, I have become my subject, I feel like I'm an expert. I am passionate about Africa, about girl's rights, about education, about the environment" (Autobio_11).

This phenomenon can potentially be explained by multiple communication and psychology theories, attribution theory, which will be considered further in the discussion section of this study. Not only do characteristics of this code converge with existing theories, they also lend themselves to the researcher's understanding of the participants. Since a major part of this study is to decipher what factors lead an impending college graduate to designate certain memories as turning points, examining instances in which turning points are contextualized using an overarching passion is relevant to our study.

**Role model.** Role model figures emerged in multiple autobiographies. Whether they were mentioned in passing or were a common thread throughout the narrative, they often played a vital role in the autobiographies. In our preliminary research, we hypothesized that role model figures would be a component of shared turning points within the narratives. Role model figures are significant to our research because they help us to understand the perspective by which the autobiography's author views the event. For example, one participant wrote: "I stopped talking about my feelings to my mom when I was a freshman, not because we weren't close enough but because I wanted her to think I was strong like she was, and I knew she had more important things to worry about" (Autobio_5). This event was included in the role model code because the participant's description is based on the role model's presence in this memory.

### Results

The autobiography data revealed a rich array of events that were associated with life changes, or turning points. Within the 23 autobiographies, a total of 242 turning points were identified, with a mean of 10.52 events per respondent account and a range of 4-25 events. Meaning-making had the highest overall frequency with 58 codes throughout the 23 autobiographies. Cornerstone had the lowest frequency with only eight codes among the autobiographies. This was anticipated as the nature of the code does not allow for more than one cornerstone per respondent account.

| Code | Total | Min | Max | Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cornerstone | 8 | 0 | 1 | 0.35 |
| Meaning-making | 58 | 0 | 7 | 2.52 |
| Passion | 24 | 0 | 4 | 1.04 |
| Role model | 13 | 0 | 3 | 0.57 |
| Starting over | 26 | 0 | 5 | 1.13 |
| Supportive/positive | 52 | 0 | 5 | 2.26 |
| Trauma | 19 | 0 | 3 | 1.58 |
| Unsupportive/negative | 42 | 0 | 6 | 1.83 |
| **Total** | 242 | 4 | 25 | 10.52 |

**Meaning-making.**

The data also revealed a wide range of meaning-making results that will contribute an additional factor to our analysis of the narratives. Of the 23 autobiographies, 22 contained meaning-making data. There were 58 total meaning-making codes with an average of 2.52 reported per autobiography. As previously stated, the coding system labels turning points using a categorical system of lesson, vague meaning, or insight. The data were coded on a scale of 1-3, with 1 being a lesson or "meaning that were often behavioral and did not extend the meaning beyond the recalled event" (McLean & Pratt, 2006, p. 717). A score of 2 refers to meaning slightly more refined than lessons, but not as specific as insights and a score of 3 designates insights or "meanings that extend beyond the specific event to explicit transformations in one's understanding of oneself, the world, or relationships" (McLean & Pratt, 2006). Of the 58 meaning-making moments, 13 received a score of 1, 22 received a score of 2, and 23 received



Average Meaning in Autobiographies
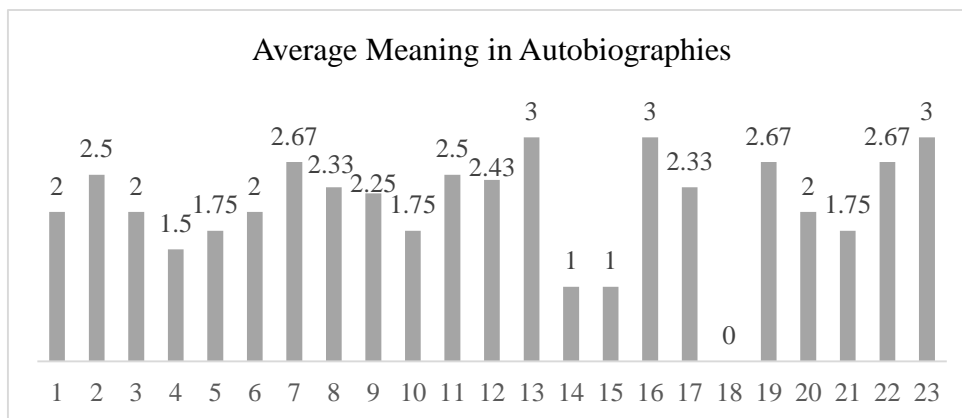
score of 3. The collective average score was 2.09, while the averages per autobiography ranged from 1.00 to 3.00. Of the 23 autobiographies, 15 averaged at or above 2.0 on the meaning-making scale. The score 2.0 is significant because it includes any meaning-making that incorporates an understanding beyond the specific event being discussed, contributing to identity development rather than contextualizing a fleeting moment.

**Discussion**

This study showed that the 20-25 year olds experiencing the transitional phase of college graduation who participated in this study tend to have similar categories of turning point experiences. It is also significant that the same types of experiences were identified by individuals with different backgrounds and preferences. Since the medium for data collection were self-reporting personal narratives, the turning points that are included (as opposed to those that are omitted) are highly significant. During the research process, themes that suggest why certain categories of turning points are most prevalent emerged. Meaning-making results also explain the "why" aspect of the identification of many turning points. In terms of story components, this study converges with previous research, suggesting that different event types allow more opportunities for meaning-making (McLean & Pratt, 2006).

As previously stated, it is notable that many of our participants experienced similar turning points. The converges with existing research considering "several studies have now shown that the type of event is important to whether…emerging adults report meaning in their narratives" (McLean & Pratt, 2006, p. 720). Expectedly, "meaning-making" was the most prevalent code, which speaks to the analytic quality of personal narratives. As previously stated, 15 of the 22 autobiographies that reported meaning-making scored a 2.0 or above. When analyzing the data, no significant differences emerged between the types of events reported by those autobiographies that scored a 2.0 or above as opposed to those who scored below a 2.0. However, it is significant to note that the average total number of turning points reported for autobiographies that scored below a 2.0 was 14.14 whereas the average total number of turning points reported for autobiographies that scored a 2.0 or above was 8.94. It is reasonable to infer, because of length, that the autobiographies which included more turning points also reported less

meaning because there was less overall in-depth analysis as opposed to general descriptions of turning points.

The type of event that was most frequently reported by our participants after "meaning-making" was "supportive/positive" followed by "unsupported/negative." It is significant that messages of support or moments of achievement tended to be more common than other shared experiences, such as trauma or starting over. According to McLean and Pratt (2006), achievement stories often lack opportunities for meaning making. However, these moments are clearly significant for other reasons because of their high frequency in this study. As previously stated, "positive interactions…have been found to be associated with progress in dimensions associated with psychosocial maturity" (Adams, Berzonsky, & Keating, 2006, p. 83), which suggests that the autobiographies coded as "supportive/positive" most often are from the participants that are the most mature psychosocially. It also suggests that this data could be further utilized for psychosocial development research.

As previously stated, the self-reporting aspect of data collection offers a unique insight to the development and self-identification of turning points. The turning points that are included have an added layer of significance, seeing as the omitted events "may not have a high degree of personal importance and so may not emerge in one's life story at all" (McLean & Pratt, 2006, p. 720). As previously discussed, the self-reporting aspect of the written personal narratives allow for thorough qualitative research. However, previous research has concluded that the omitted events may reveal as much about the subject as the included events, perhaps contradicting the benefits of self-reporting personal narratives (McLean & Pratt, 2006). To expand on this research, a further study could compare a person's actual life story with their reported life story in order to uncover the discrepancies and analyze the significance of omitted events.

**Related theories**.

Throughout the autobiographies, there are innumerable opportunities for applications of communication and psychology theories and explanations. These theories and explanations can potentially vindicate the phenomena observed. Certain concepts, such as hindsight bias, apply to the overall nature of the self-reported personal narratives. Others, such as confirmation bias and attribution theory, are more applicable to specific codes within this study.

Hindsight bias refers to the "memory distortion [that] occurs when participants make a set of judgments, receive feedback (e.g., correct judgments), and recall their original judgments being more similar to the feedback than their original judgments actually were" (Calvillo, 2014, p. 394). Within the autobiographies, multiple instances occurred in which the author's language suggested that their perspective on a situation has changed now in their remembered version of the event as opposed to when it actually took place. For example, one participant wrote: "Looking back on it now, it was blessing that I got to spend that whole summer with her and I will always cherish those mornings on the back patio" (Autobio_21). While our results on the effect of hindsight bias on impending college graduate's personal narratives are inconclusive, the research does present itself as valuable to future understanding of memory formation and recall for young adults.

Confirmation bias is applicable to this study as a whole, but especially applicable to cornerstone turning points. It states that "people have a propensity to notice and interpret evidence in a way that is supportive of their pre-existing beliefs, expectations or hypotheses" (Frost et al., 2015, p. 238). Confirmation bias is a potential explanation for the recurring phenomenon of the cornerstone turning point. As previously stated, cornerstone refers to events identified by authors where they felt a sense of importance, especially of their personal beliefs or

passions, or where they felt truly listened to for the first time. Cornerstones also have the quality of being identified as life-altering moments. Confirmation bias potentially explains why a turning point of this nature is a shared defining moment for multiple participants in this study. Since people are seeking information that supports their pre-existing beliefs, the first or most memorable time that they encounter a figure who will provide external confirmation will remain critical to their self-understanding.

Finally, attribution theory is concerned with how and why people explain events as they do based on his/her motive to find a cause. As previously stated, the role model code emerged as turning points where the autobiography's author views and interprets the event through the perspective of a role model. According to attribution theory, this recurring model for turning points are the authors' attempts to contextualize and justify using their previous knowledge. This theory extends beyond the role model code as well. On multiple occasions, participants connected events or ideas even though they are seemingly unrelated. For example, one participant wrote: "When you're good other athletes like you, they want to be your friend" (Autobio_5). As researchers, this attribution seems skewed – how does being a good athlete relate to having friends? This example of the attribution theory is one of many discovered throughout the autobiographies. Additionally, many autobiographies framed phases of life based on the people they knew or the places they lived. While framing may be necessary to memory organization, one could argue that attribution theory is the rationale for participant understanding of their own memories. It would be valuable to analyze the connection between hindsight bias, confirmation bias, and attribution theory in memory and personal narrative research.

**Limitations.**

We now present several limitations of this study. First, while written autobiographies were necessary to our research, there may be more effective prompts to which participants respond. Second, the role model code proved to be less relevant to turning point research and promisingly more relevant to memory and attribution research. Third, our study lacks a diverse focus group. Because of the convenience of the sample and specificity of the focus group, we failed to incorporate more diverse participants, which future studies could benefit from. Fourth and finally, a point of comparison would provide an added dynamic to this research that is lacking in this study.

The first limitation of this study is in the written autobiographies. A major difficulty when conducting this study was extracting data from the respondent accounts. While they are all thoroughly written and contain an outline of events, some fail to clearly identify events as turning points rather than periods of time in their lives. For example, many of the autobiographies are organized based on the few years that the participant lived in a certain city or dated a certain person rather than a specific event that happened in that place or with that person. For future studies, I would instruct participants to write individually about certain events. Even though they were directed to compose an autobiography consisting of "six to eight memorable messages that define who you are and how you have gotten to this point," the story-telling nature of personal narratives is conducive to participants writing about periods of time in-between memorable messages as well. While these were interesting to read and perhaps lent themselves to understanding the participants, they were not contributory to the coding of turning points.

On a similar note, the role model code ended up applying to much of this filler text that was not directly discussing a turning point. For example, one participant wrote: "My dad will always be my greatest inspiration" (Autobio_15). While this most definitely constitutes role

model coding, it does not refer to a turning point event. The role model code potentially lends itself better to other research rather than turning point analysis. While this code adds significance to turning point memory research because it helps to understand how the participants assimilate turning point moments with their existing knowledge, it also adds potential new questions to this study. What events are role models critical to? How do the autobiographies with multiple role models identified compare to those with few to none? How do people contextualize their memories based on the people around them at the time? How does this effect self-reported memories? Studying the significance of role models within personal narratives would be a major contributing factor to a future study regarding the effects of relationships on memory construction.

Another limitation of this study is the lack of diversity in the focus group as well as the small sample size. However, there are certain qualities that are specific to this focus group that do not allow for diversity. First, all participants are in their early 20s, which is a given seeing as a purpose of this study is to learn about turning point memories for young adults in their critical development phase of adulthood. Second, all participants are impending college graduates. Similarly, this is a parameter of our focus group. However, due to convenience, all of our participants were attendants of the same university. In future studies, we might expect more expansive results if the focus group includes students from multiple colleges. This study does not report ethnicity, gender, race, religion, or place of origin, among many other demographics. While this information was irrelevant to our particular research, there may be benefits to adding this aspect so as to make applications to various demographic groups.

Finally, adding a point of comparison would also help to make further applications of this research. Adding a point of comparison would help to further contextualize these

autobiographies and understand the thought process of the participants. As previously stated, had we compared a person's actual life story with their reported life story, we may have expected to uncover discrepancies between the two. Another potential point of comparison is to revisit these participants in the future. In doing this, one could not only revisit the autobiographies the participants have already written, one could potentially ask the participants to continue their autobiographies and consequently observe the differences in their self-reporting styles.

**Conclusion.**

In conclusion, this study provides evidence of shared turning points for impending college graduates. While certain limitations prevent this evidence from being universally applicable, this study provides evidence that can be utilized in future turning point research. Being the first study to analyze lifetime memories of college seniors, this research also provides a foundation for studying memory construction and conducting turning point analysis for this previously under-studied demographic. This study suggests that there are shared turning points among college seniors. It also suggests that supportive/positive messages resonate more in the memories of emerging adults than unsupportive/negative messages. Finally, it converges with previous research (McLean & Pratt, 2006) to suggest that meaning-making occurs on multiple levels within a person's personal narrative.