

## Article 1

# Continuity, Discontinuity and Turning Points: What Works for Positive Human Development

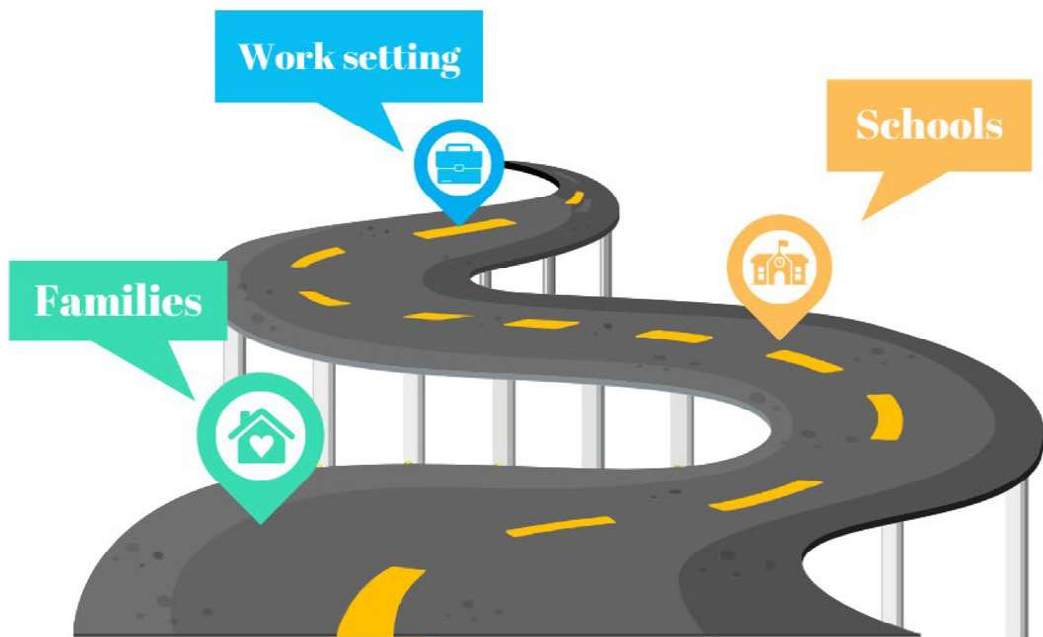


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In the study of human behaviour development, we find a significant continuity of behaviour from childhood to adulthood. This is not entirely unexpected. Yet, what is intriguing is that we also find discontinuity and turning points in many life stages.

Traditional Chinese folklore wisdom says that our life path is determined to a significant degree very early in our life (i.e. “三歲定八十” which means the character of a person is shaped at a tender age). Empirical longitudinal studies have lent a great deal of support to this saying. Yet, discontinuity and turning points do manifest themselves in parallel. This is because the mechanism of continuity is not a direct impact of a distant past to a remote future. Instead, early past events set off a series of chained behaviour, moving in gradual steps toward a particular pathway of development. For instance, childhood adversities like poverty or an unhappy marriage between parents may disrupt normal parenting. The parents are either too stressed out by poverty or by their marital discord so that they are unable to provide their children with the guidance and affection required. This sets off a downward negative spiral. First, lacking affection from parents will leave the children feeling unhappy, bitter, and angry. Coupled with missing guidance from parents, the children will misbehave impulsively in reaction to their negative moods, including engagement in anti-social behaviour. Furthermore, one main developmental task for every child is schooling, learning both the academic skills to read and write, and the social skills to relate with others. Success with these tasks will give the children the much-needed life skills as well as the self-confidence and self-esteem to face the challenges of growing up. Once again, without parental guidance, including direct involvement and motivational support, it is not easy to cope with the keenly competitive school environment. School

failure may lead to both personal frustration and rejection from others. The children may play truancy, staying away from schools to avoid facing daily failure and rejection. Outside of the schools and homes, they easily fall prey to the triad societies, luring them with money, entertainment, companionship, and employment, etc. In other words, the triad societies are offering them an alternative pathway in life away from the mainstream society, namely, a criminal career. Continuity is thus the result of a series of steps, accentuating in each increasingly defined direction. Various factors intermingle to play a role, including, for example, truancy, cutting short of educational/vocational opportunities, falling out with peers and social support from schools, or impulsive co-habitation with deviant peers met outside of schools which makes marital discord/breakdown more likely, etc.

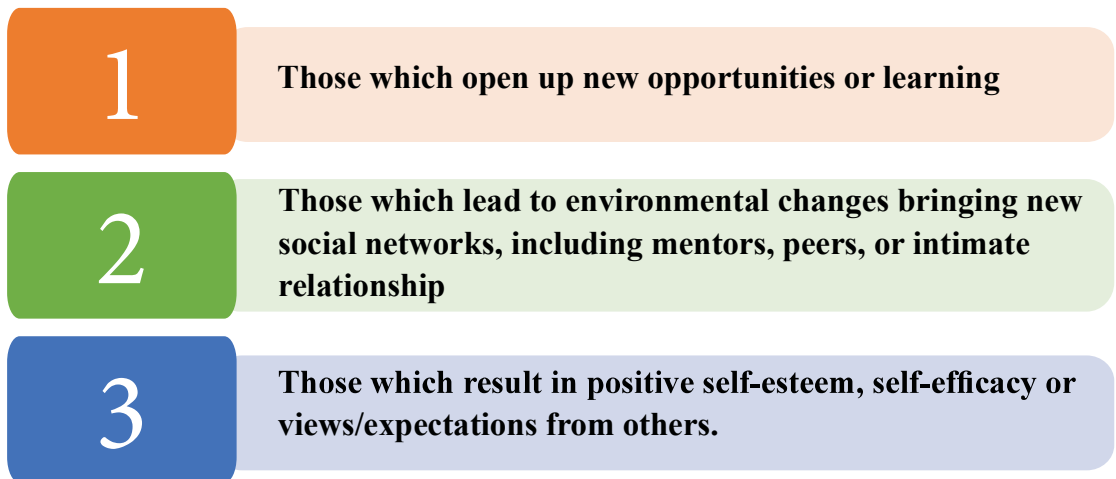


*Figure 1. Major discontinuity and turning points in human behaviour development*

Yet, there is no absolute continuity or determinism. Each step in one's life, as described above, provides an opportunity for discontinuity and turning points. Let me cite two well-researched examples. After families, schools represent the second social institution which children spend a great deal of time year after year. Despite adversities at home with parents who are stressed out, physically unavailable or even behaviourally abusive, children can find alternative guidance and affection from good teachers at schools. Research has

demonstrated that the good fortune of meeting supportive teachers and peers at schools will introduce discontinuity and constitute a turning point for a different life path. After the school years, the third institution that one spends considerable time on is the work setting. Research has found a significant drop in anti-social behaviour including offending behaviour during early adulthood when an individual enters the job market. Once again, a good fortune entering a stable work setting with supportive bosses and colleagues plus timely on-the-job training constitutes another turning point for discontinuity.

Our current behaviour is an accumulation of our life experiences so far. There is considerable continuity since each step in life leads to the next pointing in a similar direction. Yet, once in a while, an individual has the good fortune entering an environment which offers some very different experiences can shape an alternative life course, bringing discontinuity and turning points. In



*Figure 2. Three broad categories of experiences potentially incur a turning point for positive human development*

As professionals in offender rehabilitation, we will not be passively waiting for the good fortune to bestow on our fellow human beings. Instead, we should proactively intervene to create turning points to re-chart a different life course for a law-abiding lifestyle. Each step in life, as described above, is a potential turning point which we can promote alternatives to effect changes. *Nothing is cast in stone.*

# *Insights*

## **1. Continuity, Discontinuity and Turning Points**

In the study of human behaviour development, empirical longitudinal studies find a significant continuity of behaviour from childhood to adulthood. Yet, what is intriguing is that we also find discontinuity and turning points in many life stages.

## **2. Learning Opportunities, New Network and Positive Self-Esteem**

Three broad categories of experiences potentially incur a turning point for positive human development: (1) those which open up new opportunities or learning such as those potentially encountered at schools or work settings; (2) those which lead to environmental changes bringing new social networks, including mentors, peers, or intimate partners; and (3) those which result in positive self-esteem, self-efficacy or views/expectations from others.

## **3. Create Turning Points for Offender Rehabilitation**

As professionals in offender rehabilitation, we should proactively intervene to create turning points to rechart a different life course for a law-abiding lifestyle.

## *References*

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