

The Psychology of Uncertainty: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Identity Reconstruction During Major Life Transitions

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Article Info

Article type:

Original Research

How to cite this article:

Rastegar Moghadam Ebrahimian, S. (2026). The Psychology of Uncertainty: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Identity Reconstruction During Major Life Transitions. *Journal of Assessment and Research in Applied Counseling*, 8(4), 1-21. <http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.jarac.5963>



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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to explore and interpret the lived experiences of uncertainty and the processes through which adults reconstruct their identities during major life transitions.

Methods and Materials: This qualitative study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Participants were 18 adults residing in Tehran, Iran, who had experienced a significant life transition within approximately six months to three years before participation. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure direct experience of identity-relevant transitions, including divorce, occupational change, relocation, educational transition, marriage, and changes in family or social roles. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 60–90 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using the systematic stages of IPA, including repeated reading, exploratory noting, development of experiential statements, clustering of related meanings, within-case analysis, and cross-case comparison. Reflexive notes, an audit trail, and repeated checking of themes against original transcripts were used to enhance analytic rigor.

Findings: Analysis generated five interrelated superordinate themes: the collapse of assumed continuity, living in an uncertain and suspended self, identity negotiation through relationships and social recognition, reclaiming agency through meaning-making, and the emergence of a reconstructed but unfinished identity. The findings indicated that major life transitions disrupted participants' established self-narratives and identity anchors, creating a liminal state between former and emerging identities. Identity reconstruction was facilitated by reinterpretation of the transition, re-evaluation of personal values, experimentation with new roles, and supportive social recognition. Greater adaptation was characterized not by elimination of uncertainty, but by increased tolerance of ambiguity and a more flexible, revisable understanding of selfhood.

Conclusion: Identity reconstruction during major life transitions appears to be a dynamic and recursive process in which uncertainty initially destabilizes self-continuity but can subsequently promote reflection, agency, and the development of a more flexible identity capable of integrating both continuity and change.

Keywords: Uncertainty, Identity Reconstruction, Major Life Transitions, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Self-Identity, Meaning-Making, Psychological Adaptation

1. Introduction

Major life transitions are among the most psychologically consequential periods in the human life course because they disturb the continuity through which individuals ordinarily understand who they are, where they belong, and what they can expect from the future. Transitions such as leaving education, entering or changing employment, marriage, divorce, migration, relocation, parenthood, retirement, bereavement, and changes in health or important relationships frequently require more than behavioral adjustment to new circumstances. They may challenge previously stable assumptions about personal identity, social roles, relationships, values, and anticipated life trajectories. Development itself includes periods in which established configurations of the self become less stable and new configurations must be negotiated; the transition from childhood to adolescence, for example, is characterized by simultaneous possibilities for development and vulnerability as biological, psychological, and social changes converge (Mastorci et al., 2024). Comparable processes continue across adulthood, as relationship, occupational, family, and social-role transitions repeatedly alter the contexts within which identity is constructed. Accordingly, life transitions can be understood not merely as external changes in circumstances but as psychologically significant moments in which continuity of self may be questioned and reconstructed.

Identity provides individuals with a relatively coherent framework for organizing personal experiences, commitments, social memberships, values, and expectations about the future. Yet identity is neither completely fixed nor independent of changing contexts. The concept of identity uncertainty refers broadly to ambiguity or instability concerning the characteristics, commitments, affiliations, or meanings that define the self ("Identity Uncertainty," 2010). Theoretical discussions of self-identity similarly suggest that uncertainty may emerge when established structures of self-definition no longer offer a sufficient basis for interpreting experience (Kleyberg, 2015). Wallace further situates identity in relation to uncertainty and possibility, emphasizing the conceptual importance of openness to alternative ways of understanding the self when established identities can no longer be assumed as inevitable (Wallace, 2012). From this perspective, uncertainty is not simply a lack of factual knowledge about what will happen next. It can be experienced at the level of selfhood, where individuals become unsure about which roles remain meaningful, which

commitments should be preserved, how past versions of the self relate to present circumstances, and what kind of person they may become in the future.

This problem is especially salient because identity continuity is often supported by relatively stable social structures that are taken for granted until they are disrupted. Occupations provide not only income but also status, routine, competence, social networks, and recognizable descriptions of the self. Intimate relationships organize belonging, expectations, responsibilities, and anticipated futures. Educational environments provide developmental pathways and emerging professional identities, while family roles locate individuals within systems of obligation and recognition. When these structures change, identity may become dispersed across competing roles and meanings. Burke's account of identity dispersion highlights the complex boundary between identity flexibility, uncertainty, and inconsistency, suggesting that variation across identities can represent adaptive flexibility in some circumstances while generating confusion or incompatibility in others (Burke, 2020). Thus, a major transition may require an individual to determine not only how to manage changed circumstances but also which elements of a former identity should be retained, relinquished, revised, or integrated into a new configuration of the self.

Empirical developmental research indicates that uncertainty and commitment are dynamically related rather than representing static personality characteristics. Longitudinal work with adolescents has demonstrated within-person associations between identity uncertainty and commitment-making over time, illustrating how day-to-day identity processes can accumulate within broader developmental trajectories (Becht et al., 2017). The importance of uncertainty for identity construction is also visible in educational and professional development. Tolerance of uncertainty has been identified as a relevant factor in the development of professional identity among university students, suggesting that the capacity to remain psychologically engaged in situations without fully determined outcomes may facilitate identity formation rather than merely reduce distress (Rozina et al., 2024). Academic contexts themselves provide resources that can shape adaptation, as psychological resources and forms of support are associated with students' engagement and ability to function within demanding educational environments (Haseli Songhori & Salamti, 2024). Taken together, such findings indicate that identity development frequently

unfolds under conditions in which roles, expectations, and future outcomes are not yet fully settled.

The relationship between uncertainty and identity has been developed particularly clearly within uncertainty-identity theory. This perspective proposes that uncertainty concerning the self can motivate individuals to identify with groups that provide clear prototypes, norms, boundaries, and prescriptions for thought and behavior (Wagoner & Hogg, 2017). Social identities can therefore reduce self-related uncertainty by supplying individuals with shared understandings of who they are and how they should act. Hogg's work extends this perspective by demonstrating the importance of self-uncertainty in social identification and leadership processes, particularly where group boundaries and intergroup relations become salient (Hogg, 2023). Organizational environments likewise provide identity structures through which uncertainty may be regulated, with self-uncertainty influencing social identity processes in settings characterized by changing roles, affiliations, and organizational expectations (Hogg, 2022). In uncertain organizational contexts, identity leadership and perceptions of procedural justice may further contribute to group identification and the restoration of collective predictability (Milesi, 2022). These perspectives are highly relevant to life transitions because transitions often weaken precisely those social categories and role structures that previously made identity intelligible.

The social regulation of uncertainty becomes particularly visible when individuals encounter ambiguous or changing group boundaries. Research on nested identities has shown that uncertainty may influence the extent to which individuals identify with particular levels of group membership (Jung et al., 2014). When the perceived coherence or entitativity of a group is threatened, uncertainty about group boundaries can translate into uncertainty concerning identity itself and may even influence intentions to leave the social context associated with that identity (Jung et al., 2019). Similarly, work examining Sardinian identity within Italy demonstrates that dimensions of uncertainty and the centrality of a social identity can shape demands for subgroup autonomy (Wagoner et al., 2018). Strategic behavior may also be influenced by perceptions of shared social identity when individuals are required to act under uncertainty regarding others' intentions (Duell, 2022). These findings collectively suggest that uncertainty is deeply relational: people construct a sense of who they are partly through categories, communities, and relationships that render social life interpretable. Consequently, major

transitions that alter membership, belonging, status, or relational positioning may unsettle identity because they weaken previously reliable social mirrors.

Broader social and economic instability can intensify these processes. During the Greek financial crisis, social identity uncertainty was linked to the interpretative environment created by collective circumstances and media narratives, illustrating how uncertainty about identity can emerge within large-scale socioeconomic disruption rather than only through private psychological events (Belavadi et al., 2023). Institutional environments characterized by asymmetrical power may similarly affect identity. Bosworth's analysis of detention links uncertainty, identity, and power, demonstrating how constrained and unstable environments may problematize individuals' ability to maintain coherent understandings of themselves (Bosworth, 2014). These perspectives are important because major life transitions rarely occur in a social vacuum. Their psychological meanings are shaped by cultural narratives about normality, success, age, gender, family, work, and appropriate life trajectories. An event may therefore become identity-threatening not only because circumstances have changed but because the individual's new position no longer corresponds with socially recognized expectations.

Relational transitions provide a particularly clear example of the intersection between uncertainty and identity. Changes in intimate relationships can disrupt both interpersonal patterns and self-definitions formed within those relationships. Among women coping with infertility, identity uncertainty has been associated with relational turbulence and perceptions of partner communication, illustrating how uncertainty concerning the self may become intertwined with communication and relationship functioning during personally significant challenges (Yoon & Theiss, 2021). Sexual identity uncertainty may also interact with minority stress and relational decision-making, showing that uncertainty is embedded within social evaluation, identity legitimacy, and partner-related choices rather than occurring solely within the individual (Dyar et al., 2017). Research on nonreligious Americans likewise demonstrates substantial variation in whether identity narratives are organized around certainty, uncertainty, or relative indifference, emphasizing that uncertainty itself can be differently interpreted and incorporated into personal narratives (Frost, 2019). These studies indicate that identity uncertainty is not a uniform psychological state; its significance depends on the relational, cultural, and narrative contexts through which individuals make sense of it.

Transitions into and out of intimate and family roles remain psychologically consequential well beyond early adulthood. Recent research on transitions to singlehood in young adulthood and midlife underscores that relationship dissolution can occur within different developmental contexts and may carry distinct implications across the life span (Wahrung et al., 2025). Marital transitions in middle and later life likewise represent meaningful changes in relational status, social embeddedness, expectations, and personal routines (Monin & Newsom, 2023). Family identities may also be reorganized through generational transitions. The transition to grandparenthood can intersect with early retirement, illustrating how multiple role changes may occur simultaneously and reshape the organization of midlife (Bolano & Bernardi, 2024). Such transitions can produce layered uncertainty because one role may be disappearing as another emerges, making it difficult to distinguish loss from development or discontinuity from transformation. Identity reconstruction in such contexts may therefore involve coordinating multiple temporal versions of the self: the person one has been, the person one is becoming, and the person one expected to become.

Occupational and professional transitions similarly demonstrate that uncertainty may have both disruptive and generative functions. Career identity is associated with life satisfaction, while tolerance for uncertainty and affective experience may help explain how occupational self-understanding relates to broader well-being (Garrison et al., 2016). In professional learning, uncertainty may also function as a catalyst for reflective identity development. Research on designers has shown that uncertainty and reflection are integral to the development of professional identity, suggesting that uncertainty can prompt examination of assumptions and stimulate more deliberate understandings of professional selfhood (Tracey & Hutchinson, 2016). This dual character of uncertainty is theoretically important. Uncertainty can be distressing because it destabilizes predictability, yet it can also create an interpretative space in which previously unquestioned identities are reconsidered. A transition that removes an established role may therefore initially create confusion while simultaneously opening possibilities for alternative values, commitments, and forms of self-definition.

The demands generated by transition also include changing information needs. Individuals undergoing major life changes may require contextual information that allows them to understand both their circumstances and their potential courses of action. Research examining people with

obsessive-compulsive disorder during life transitions has demonstrated the importance of contextual information needs when individuals are attempting to navigate changing situations while managing psychological difficulties (Wu et al., 2024). Although the clinical circumstances of such individuals are distinctive, the broader implication is that transitions change the informational environment in which decisions are made. When former routines no longer provide sufficient guidance, individuals may actively seek narratives, explanations, advice, comparison points, and social information capable of reducing ambiguity. Yet information alone may not resolve identity uncertainty, because knowing available options is different from knowing which option is congruent with an emerging sense of self.

The depth of identity reorganization becomes particularly visible in transitions that involve movement between highly differentiated cultural worlds. Qualitative phenomenological work with military veterans transitioning from military culture to civilian life highlights the lived complexity of leaving a highly structured identity environment and navigating a context governed by different expectations, routines, relationships, and cultural meanings (Flores, 2025). Such experiences illustrate why transition cannot be reduced to a change in role title. Individuals may need to reinterpret competencies, values, habits, relationships, and self-descriptions that were previously embedded in a coherent institutional culture. The new environment may not recognize the former identity in the same manner, while the individual may not yet possess a stable narrative through which to understand the emerging self. This experiential “in-between” condition is particularly relevant to phenomenological inquiry because it concerns how people actually live through the interval between the erosion of one identity structure and the consolidation of another.

Despite the expanding literature on identity uncertainty, several limitations remain in how the phenomenon is commonly investigated. A considerable proportion of existing research focuses on specific developmental periods, group identities, organizational contexts, relationship conditions, professional identities, or defined populations. Such work has generated important knowledge about mechanisms of uncertainty and identification, but the subjective process through which individuals reconstruct identity across heterogeneous major life transitions remains less clearly understood. Quantitative associations can demonstrate that uncertainty is related to commitment, affect, relational turbulence, group identification, or

adaptation, yet they cannot fully reveal how individuals experience the collapse of familiar self-understandings, how they interpret contradictions between former and emerging identities, or how the meaning of uncertainty changes over the course of adaptation. Moreover, theoretical models often emphasize uncertainty reduction, whereas lived experience may involve learning to tolerate, reinterpret, or even incorporate uncertainty into a more flexible sense of self. The phenomenology of transition therefore requires attention not only to whether individuals feel uncertain but to what uncertainty means to them, how it is embodied in their narratives and relationships, and how they negotiate continuity amid change.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is particularly appropriate for addressing this gap because it prioritizes detailed examination of how individuals make sense of significant experiences. Major life transitions are not psychologically equivalent simply because they involve objective change; the same event may be experienced as liberation, loss, failure, opportunity, disorientation, or some combination of these meanings. An interpretative phenomenological approach makes it possible to examine this complexity without assuming that identity reconstruction follows a predetermined linear sequence. It also permits attention to the double interpretative character of the phenomenon: participants attempt to understand what their transitions mean for who they are, while the researcher seeks to interpret the structures through which participants make sense of those experiences. Such an approach is especially valuable when uncertainty itself is central, because experiences may contain contradictions, oscillations, unresolved meanings, and changing interpretations that are difficult to represent through predefined response categories.

Studying these processes in Tehran also provides an important sociocultural context for examining identity reconstruction. Major transitions occur within networks of family obligations, occupational expectations, educational trajectories, relationship norms, economic pressures, and culturally situated assumptions regarding appropriate life pathways. The meaning of becoming single, changing careers, relocating, altering educational direction, or redefining family responsibilities may therefore be inseparable from how these changes are interpreted by significant others and by the individual in relation to social expectations. Existing research shows that uncertainty and identity are influenced by social narratives, group memberships, relational communication, institutional

conditions, and perceived recognition (Belavadi et al., 2023; Hogg, 2022; Yoon & Theiss, 2021). Accordingly, examining lived experiences within a specific sociocultural environment can deepen understanding of identity reconstruction as both an intrapersonal and relational process rather than treating it as an exclusively individual adjustment.

Taken together, the literature suggests that uncertainty should not be conceptualized solely as an undesirable psychological state to be eliminated. Across developmental, relational, organizational, cultural, and professional contexts, uncertainty appears capable of destabilizing established identities while simultaneously creating the conditions for reflection, re-evaluation, and change. Identity reconstruction may consequently involve a movement from dependence on externally stabilized roles toward a more reflexive relationship with selfhood, without necessarily producing complete certainty. The critical unanswered questions concern how individuals experience this process from within: what it feels like when a previously coherent identity becomes unreliable, how people negotiate the interval between former and emerging selves, how relationships and social recognition affect this negotiation, and how individuals eventually create a workable sense of continuity despite the persistence of unpredictability. Addressing these questions can contribute to a more psychologically nuanced understanding of life transitions in which uncertainty is treated not only as a stressor but also as a condition through which identity may be reinterpreted and reconstructed.

Therefore, the present study aimed to explore and interpret the lived experiences of uncertainty and the processes of identity reconstruction among adults undergoing major life transitions in Tehran using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design based on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how individuals experience uncertainty and reconstruct their sense of identity during major life transitions. IPA was selected because the study sought to obtain an in-depth understanding of participants' subjective experiences, personal meanings, emotional responses, and interpretations of changes that challenged previously established perceptions of the self. Consistent with the

phenomenological orientation of IPA, particular attention was given to the ways in which participants made sense of transitional experiences and to how uncertainty influenced the continuity, disruption, and subsequent reorganization of their personal identities. The interpretative dimension of the approach also acknowledged that participants actively interpreted their own experiences while the researchers, in turn, engaged in a systematic interpretation of participants' accounts. The study population consisted of adults living in Tehran, Iran, who had experienced a major life transition involving a substantial change in personal circumstances, social roles, relationships, occupational status, family structure, educational trajectory, or living conditions. Using purposive sampling, 18 participants were recruited on the basis of their direct experience of a significant life transition and their capacity and willingness to describe that experience in detail. The participants included individuals who had undergone transitions such as marriage or divorce, migration or relocation, major occupational changes, unemployment or retirement, entry into or completion of higher education, changes in important interpersonal relationships, and other experiences that had substantially affected their established sense of self and future direction. To ensure that participants had sufficient experiential proximity to the phenomenon while also having had an opportunity to reflect on it, eligibility required that the major transition had occurred within approximately six months to three years prior to participation. Additional inclusion criteria were being at least 20 years of age, residing in Tehran at the time of the study, identifying the experienced transition as personally significant, being able to communicate fluently in Persian, and providing informed consent to participate in an in-depth interview. Individuals whose circumstances prevented sustained participation in an interview or whose reported experience did not involve a meaningful perceived change in identity or life direction were not included. Recruitment continued until the researchers determined that the collected accounts provided sufficient experiential depth, richness, and convergence to permit a comprehensive interpretation of the phenomenon while preserving attention to individual differences. Because IPA emphasizes detailed idiographic analysis rather than statistical representativeness, the sample was intentionally limited in size to enable close examination of each participant's account before identifying patterns across cases. Efforts were nevertheless made to obtain variation in age, gender, educational background, occupational situation, and type of life transition so that different manifestations of

identity reconstruction could be examined within a shared phenomenological context. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the nature of the interview process, confidentiality of their information, their right to decline to answer any question, and their right to withdraw from the study without consequence. All identifying information was removed from transcripts, and pseudonyms or participant codes were used during analysis and reporting to protect confidentiality.

2.2. Instruments

Data were collected primarily through in-depth semi-structured phenomenological interviews, supported by a brief demographic and contextual information form. The demographic form was used to obtain basic information relevant to the interpretation of participants' experiences, including age, gender, educational level, occupational status, marital status, type of major life transition experienced, and the approximate time elapsed since the transition. The principal data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview guide developed in accordance with the objectives of the study and the principles of phenomenological inquiry. The interview questions were deliberately open-ended and flexible so that participants could describe their experiences in their own terms rather than being restricted by predetermined categories. The interviews initially focused on the circumstances surrounding the major life transition and participants' perceptions of their lives and identities before the transition. Subsequent questions explored the subjective experience of uncertainty, disruption of familiar roles and expectations, emotional reactions to change, alterations in self-perception, perceived loss or instability of identity, changes in interpersonal relationships, and participants' attempts to redefine themselves during and following the transition. Particular attention was given to participants' experiences of ambiguity regarding the future, feelings of continuity or discontinuity between their former and emerging selves, perceived changes in personal values and priorities, and the strategies they used to create meaning and regain a sense of psychological coherence. Participants were also invited to describe critical moments in which they became aware that their understanding of themselves had changed and to reflect on factors that either facilitated or obstructed the reconstruction of identity. Probing questions such as requests for clarification, concrete examples, descriptions of thoughts and emotions, and explanations of the personal meaning attached to particular experiences were

used when necessary to deepen the accounts while avoiding the imposition of researchers' assumptions. The semi-structured format ensured consistency in the broad areas explored across participants while allowing each interview to follow the unique experiential trajectory of the individual. Interviews were conducted individually in a quiet and private setting appropriate for confidential conversation, either in person in Tehran or, when necessary, through a secure online audio or video communication platform. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. With participants' permission, all interviews were digitally audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim in Persian. Field notes were prepared immediately after each interview to document contextual information, notable emotional expressions, pauses, changes in tone, nonverbal observations when available, and the researcher's preliminary reflections. These notes were used as supplementary material during interpretation rather than as independent data. The interview guide was reviewed before formal data collection to ensure clarity, relevance, and compatibility with the phenomenological orientation of the study, and minor adjustments to wording and sequencing were made when necessary to facilitate deeper narration. Data collection and preliminary analysis proceeded concurrently, allowing insights emerging from earlier interviews to sensitize the researchers to areas requiring further exploration in subsequent interviews without transforming the process into a predetermined categorical inquiry.

2.3. *Data analysis*

The interview data were analyzed using the systematic procedures of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, with an emphasis on both idiographic examination of individual cases and the identification of meaningful patterns across participants. Analysis began with repeated reading of each verbatim transcript while listening to the corresponding audio recording when necessary in order to develop familiarity with the participant's account and retain sensitivity to the context, tone, and sequence of the narrative. Each transcript was initially treated as an individual case, and the researchers avoided premature comparison across participants so that the distinctiveness of each person's experience could be preserved. During the first stage of analysis, detailed exploratory notes were produced in the transcript margins. These notes addressed descriptive content concerning what participants reported, linguistic features concerning how experiences were articulated, and

conceptual reflections concerning the psychological meanings that appeared to underlie the narratives. Particular attention was given to expressions of uncertainty, identity disruption, perceived loss of control or continuity, changes in self-definition, contradictions between past and emerging identities, shifts in social roles, and attempts to establish new sources of meaning and stability. In the next stage, exploratory notes were transformed into concise experiential statements that captured psychologically significant aspects of participants' accounts while remaining closely connected to the original narratives. These statements were then examined for patterns of similarity, difference, complementarity, temporal sequence, and conceptual relationship. Related experiential statements were clustered to form broader thematic structures representing central dimensions of participants' experiences of uncertainty and identity reconstruction. The analysis moved iteratively between individual excerpts, emerging interpretations, and the transcript as a whole so that themes remained grounded in the context of each participant's narrative. Once the analysis of one case had been completed, the researchers proceeded to the next transcript while attempting to bracket, as far as practically possible, the thematic structure developed from previous cases. This procedure was intended to preserve IPA's commitment to idiographic analysis and to ensure that new experiences could emerge without being forced into previously identified patterns. After all 18 cases had been analyzed individually, patterns were examined across cases to identify recurrent themes as well as meaningful divergences. Themes were retained on the basis of their experiential significance, interpretative richness, recurrence across participants, and relevance to the research question rather than solely on the basis of numerical frequency. Through repeated comparison and refinement, related themes were organized into higher-order themes and subordinate themes describing the psychological processes through which participants encountered uncertainty, questioned established self-conceptions, negotiated competing identities, and gradually reconstructed a more coherent or revised understanding of themselves.

To enhance methodological rigor, the analytic process incorporated strategies addressing credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transparency. The researchers maintained an audit trail containing interview records, field notes, analytic memos, evolving thematic structures, and documentation of decisions made during the interpretation process. Reflexive notes were maintained throughout data collection and analysis to identify researchers' assumptions,

expectations, and possible interpretative influences, particularly because IPA recognizes the researcher's active role in the double-hermeneutic process. Emergent themes were repeatedly checked against the original transcripts to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts and did not extend beyond what could reasonably be supported by the data. Selected transcripts, coding decisions, and thematic interpretations were reviewed within the research team, and disagreements concerning theme boundaries or meanings were resolved through discussion and re-examination of the relevant narrative material rather than through mechanical calculation of coding agreement. Negative or divergent cases were actively considered in order to prevent the findings from presenting identity reconstruction as a uniform or linear process. Analytic attention was therefore given not only to shared patterns but also to differences in the intensity, direction, and meaning of uncertainty across participants. The final thematic structure was developed through repeated cycles of interpretation, comparison, refinement, consolidation, and return to the original data. Illustrative verbatim excerpts were subsequently selected to demonstrate the experiential basis of each theme and to preserve participants' voices in the presentation of the findings. Through this iterative and reflexive analytic process, the study sought to provide a psychologically nuanced account of how major life transitions destabilize established assumptions about the self and how individuals interpret, negotiate, and reconstruct identity while living through conditions of uncertainty.

3. Findings and Results

Eighteen participants who had experienced a major life transition participated in the study. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 54 years, with a mean age of 36.72 years ($SD = 8.94$). Ten participants (55.6%) were women and eight (44.4%) were men. In terms of marital status, seven participants were married, six were single, four were divorced or separated, and one was widowed. Educational backgrounds varied, with three participants holding a diploma or associate degree, eight holding a bachelor's degree, five holding a master's degree, and two holding a

doctoral degree. Occupationally, participants included employees in governmental and private organizations, self-employed individuals, university students, homemakers, and individuals who were temporarily unemployed or had recently experienced a significant change in their occupational status. The transitions represented in the sample were intentionally diverse in order to capture different manifestations of uncertainty and identity reconstruction. Five participants had experienced major occupational transitions, including job loss, career change, or withdrawal from a long-standing professional role; four had undergone divorce or the dissolution of an important intimate relationship; three had experienced migration or significant relocation; two had undergone major educational transitions; two had experienced marriage or substantial restructuring of family roles; and two described other major transitions involving the loss of a significant social role or a substantial reorganization of their personal circumstances. The time elapsed since the identified transition ranged from approximately 7 months to 34 months. Although the objective of the study was not to compare demographic subgroups statistically, variation in age, gender, educational level, relationship status, occupational background, and transition type provided a sufficiently heterogeneous experiential context for examining common psychological processes underlying uncertainty and identity reconstruction.

The interpretative phenomenological analysis generated five superordinate themes encompassing fifteen subordinate themes. The five superordinate themes were the collapse of assumed continuity, living in an uncertain and suspended self, identity negotiation through relationships and social recognition, reclaiming agency through meaning-making, and the emergence of a reconstructed but unfinished identity. These themes did not represent rigid or universally sequential stages. Rather, they reflected interconnected experiential processes through which participants attempted to understand the disruption created by major life transitions and reorganize their identities within changing personal and social circumstances. Participants commonly moved back and forth between these experiences, particularly between uncertainty, attempts at control, reinterpretation of the past, and experimentation with possible future identities.

Table 1

Superordinate and Subordinate Themes Emerging from the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Superordinate theme	Subordinate themes	Central phenomenological meaning
The collapse of assumed continuity	Disruption of the taken-for-granted life narrative; Loss of familiar roles and identity anchors; Confrontation with the unpredictability of life	The transition destabilized participants' assumptions that their lives, relationships, occupations, or social roles would continue in a predictable direction, producing a rupture between the familiar past and an uncertain present.
Living in an uncertain and suspended self	Feeling "between" former and future selves; Ambivalence and emotional oscillation; Uncertainty about decisions and future possibilities	Participants experienced a liminal period in which the previous identity no longer adequately described them, while a new identity had not yet become sufficiently coherent or credible.
Identity negotiation through relationships and social recognition	Changing interpersonal mirrors; Tension between personal and socially prescribed identities; Selective withdrawal and redefinition of belonging	Participants' sense of self was strongly affected by how significant others responded to their transition, requiring them to renegotiate belonging, social expectations, and the legitimacy of emerging identities.
Reclaiming agency through meaning-making	Reinterpreting the transition; Re-evaluating values and priorities; Small acts of choice and experimentation	Participants gradually regained psychological agency by constructing meaning around the transition, questioning inherited assumptions, redefining priorities, and testing new ways of acting and understanding themselves.
The emergence of a reconstructed but unfinished identity	Integrating past and present selves; Greater tolerance of uncertainty; Identity as an ongoing process rather than a fixed state	Identity reconstruction involved neither a complete return to the former self nor the creation of an entirely new self, but an evolving integration of continuity and change accompanied by greater acceptance of uncertainty.

As shown in Table 1, the findings indicated that identity reconstruction began not simply with the occurrence of an external life event but with the destabilization of assumptions that had previously organized participants' sense of continuity. Participants frequently described their pre-transition identities as embedded in roles, routines, relationships, future expectations, and taken-for-granted beliefs about what their lives were supposed to become. When these structures were disrupted, the resulting uncertainty was experienced as an existential disturbance rather than merely a temporary lack of information. Participants described not knowing how to interpret themselves, how others would perceive them, or which future version of themselves was realistic. This experience produced a psychologically suspended condition in which the former self remained emotionally present but no longer fully corresponded to current circumstances. Identity reconstruction subsequently occurred through interaction between intrapersonal reflection and interpersonal recognition. Participants reconsidered values, social expectations, relationships, personal capacities, and previous life choices while simultaneously evaluating whether significant others accepted or resisted their changing identities. Over time, many participants described developing a more flexible understanding of identity, characterized by greater recognition that the self could be revised without necessarily invalidating previous versions of the self. Importantly, the final theme did not indicate the complete disappearance of uncertainty. Instead, participants increasingly described uncertainty as something that could coexist with agency, meaning, and a viable sense of identity.

The Collapse of Assumed Continuity

The first superordinate theme captured participants' experiences of a rupture in the continuity of their personal narratives. Before the transition, many participants described their identities as closely organized around assumptions concerning work, marriage, family responsibilities, educational progression, social status, place of residence, or established interpersonal roles. These assumptions had rarely been consciously examined because they were experienced as ordinary components of life. Participants generally knew who they were partly because they believed they knew what would happen next. Major transitions challenged this implicit connection between identity and anticipated continuity. Career loss or career change disrupted the assumption that professional identity would remain stable; divorce challenged expectations regarding relational permanence and future family life; relocation destabilized familiar social and cultural contexts; and educational or family transitions changed previously established positions within social systems. The first subordinate theme, disruption of the taken-for-granted life narrative, therefore reflected a breakdown in participants' ability to connect past, present, and anticipated future within one coherent storyline.

For several participants, this rupture was described as more psychologically consequential than the practical demands of the transition itself. Losing employment, for example, was experienced not only as loss of income or routine but also as the disappearance of a familiar explanation of who the person was. Similarly, participants who experienced divorce emphasized that the disruption

extended beyond the loss of the marital relationship to the loss of an imagined future self. What had disappeared was not only a partner or social role but a personally meaningful projection of the future. This was accompanied by the second subordinate theme, loss of familiar roles and identity anchors. Participants repeatedly referred to occupational titles, marital status, family roles, social routines, established friendships, and places as structures that had previously stabilized identity. Once these anchors were weakened or removed, participants reported a sense of psychological disorientation. Some described being surprised by the extent to which their identities had depended on social roles they had previously regarded as secondary or purely practical.

The third subordinate theme, confrontation with the unpredictability of life, reflected a more fundamental change in participants' assumptions about control and certainty. After experiencing a major transition, several participants reported that they could no longer believe in the predictability of previously assumed life trajectories. This realization often produced anxiety and vigilance, particularly during the earlier phases of the transition. Participants described questioning decisions that had once seemed obvious and becoming increasingly conscious that relationships, careers, plans, and social identities could change unexpectedly. Yet this confrontation with unpredictability also later became a source of psychological reorganization. For some participants, awareness of uncertainty eventually weakened rigid expectations about how life "should" develop and created space for alternative identities that had previously been excluded from consideration.

Living in an Uncertain and Suspended Self

The second superordinate theme concerned the subjective experience of existing between identities. Participants frequently described the transitional period through spatial or temporal metaphors suggesting suspension, incompleteness, or being positioned between two states. The previous identity had become difficult to sustain, but an alternative identity had not yet become sufficiently established. This condition was captured in the subordinate theme of feeling between former and future selves. Participants often retained emotional attachment to their former roles while simultaneously recognizing that these roles no longer reflected their present situation. A divorced participant, for example, might continue thinking and behaving through assumptions developed during marriage while also attempting to construct an independent identity. Participants who had changed careers described continuing

to evaluate themselves through the standards of their former profession even after choosing a substantially different occupational direction. This created a sense of temporal overlap in which earlier identities remained psychologically active during the formation of new ones.

Ambivalence and emotional oscillation constituted another central component of this suspended identity. Participants did not describe transition in a simple movement from distress to adaptation. Instead, their narratives contained repeated shifts between relief and grief, excitement and fear, freedom and insecurity, confidence and self-doubt. Some participants reported feeling liberated by the end of an unsatisfactory relationship or occupational situation while simultaneously mourning the identity associated with it. Others described enthusiasm about new possibilities but also a strong desire to recover the familiarity of their former lives. These apparently contradictory emotions were interpreted as characteristic of identity reconstruction because the transition simultaneously represented loss and possibility. Participants were therefore not merely adapting to new external circumstances but negotiating competing meanings attached to what had ended and what might emerge.

Uncertainty regarding decisions and future possibilities intensified this experience. Participants frequently questioned whether they had made the correct decision, whether the transition would ultimately improve their lives, and whether the identities they were attempting to construct would be socially or practically sustainable. Future-oriented uncertainty was particularly prominent among participants whose transitions disrupted socially structured expectations concerning marriage, stable employment, age-related achievement, or family responsibility. For these participants, uncertainty was not simply the absence of a plan; it involved uncertainty about the criteria by which future decisions should be made. Previously, choices had often been guided by stable roles or expectations. Once these structures weakened, participants were required to develop new internal standards for determining what was meaningful or appropriate.

Identity Negotiation Through Relationships and Social Recognition

The third superordinate theme demonstrated that identity reconstruction was not experienced as a purely private psychological process. Participants' narratives repeatedly indicated that identity was negotiated through relationships and the responses of others. The subordinate theme of changing interpersonal mirrors reflected the importance of

social recognition in sustaining or challenging emerging identities. Participants frequently evaluated themselves through the reactions of family members, friends, colleagues, partners, and broader social networks. Supportive responses could strengthen an emerging identity by making a new self-understanding feel legitimate, whereas criticism, pity, skepticism, or repeated references to the former identity could intensify uncertainty.

Participants who had changed careers described particular difficulty when family members continued to define them according to the prestige, security, or expectations associated with their previous occupation. Similarly, participants who had experienced divorce reported that social interactions could repeatedly reactivate identities they were attempting to revise. Questions about marital status, judgments concerning separation, or expectations concerning reconciliation sometimes made participants feel that their personal reconstruction was being evaluated through social standards they no longer fully accepted. Participants who had relocated described comparable experiences when returning to familiar social groups. Others frequently interacted with them as though they remained the same person who had left, while participants themselves felt substantially changed by experiences associated with relocation and transition.

The second subordinate theme, tension between personal and socially prescribed identities, was especially prominent when participants' emerging priorities conflicted with family or cultural expectations. Several participants described becoming increasingly aware that parts of their previous identities had been organized around social

approval rather than personally endorsed values. During the destabilization created by transition, these previously unquestioned expectations became more visible. Participants began differentiating between identities they experienced as internally meaningful and identities they believed they had maintained primarily to fulfill expectations concerning success, marriage, occupational prestige, family obligation, or gendered social roles. This distinction was often psychologically difficult because rejecting an externally prescribed identity could threaten belonging and approval even when the identity no longer felt personally authentic.

Selective withdrawal and redefinition of belonging represented a third interpersonal process. Several participants described temporarily reducing contact with individuals who repeatedly reinforced unwanted versions of the self. This distancing was not always permanent or conflictual; in some cases, participants regarded it as necessary psychological space for experimenting with alternative identities without continuous external correction. At the same time, participants increasingly valued relationships in which uncertainty could be expressed without immediate pressure to resolve it. Supportive relationships were described as important when significant others allowed participants to change, reconsider decisions, or acknowledge confusion without defining these experiences as failure. Thus, identity reconstruction involved not only redefining the self but also renegotiating the relational environments within which the self could be recognized.

Table 2

Distribution of Superordinate Themes Across Participants

Superordinate theme	Participants demonstrating the theme (n)	Proportion of sample	Pattern across transition experiences
The collapse of assumed continuity	17	94.4%	Particularly evident following divorce, job loss, major career change, and relocation, where established expectations regarding future continuity were directly disrupted.
Living in an uncertain and suspended self	16	88.9%	Appeared across nearly all transition categories and was especially pronounced when the new role or life direction remained unclear.
Identity negotiation through relationships and social recognition	14	77.8%	Most explicit when transitions altered socially visible roles, including marital, occupational, family, and relocation-related identities.
Reclaiming agency through meaning-making	16	88.9%	Common among participants who had begun actively reconsidering values, priorities, and future possibilities rather than focusing exclusively on restoration of the former life.
The emergence of a reconstructed but unfinished identity	13	72.2%	More apparent among participants with greater temporal distance from the transition, although some participants described this process within the first year.

Table 2 illustrates the recurrence of the superordinate themes across the 18 individual accounts; however, these frequencies should be interpreted as indicators of experiential convergence rather than as quantitative measures of prevalence or statistical importance. The collapse of assumed continuity was identified in 17 participants, making it the most broadly shared experiential pattern. Sixteen participants described a suspended or uncertain sense of self, and the same number demonstrated active attempts to regain agency through meaning-making. Identity negotiation through relationships and social recognition was clearly represented in 14 accounts, suggesting that social responses became particularly salient when the life transition changed an externally recognizable role. Thirteen participants provided sufficiently developed accounts of an emergent reconstructed identity. Participants who had not yet reached this form of reconstruction generally described themselves as continuing to search for a stable interpretation of their experience or remaining strongly attached to restoration of their former identity. A noteworthy pattern was that the emergence of a reconstructed identity appeared more clearly in narratives of participants whose transitions had occurred earlier, although elapsed time alone did not determine adaptation. Some participants with relatively recent transitions demonstrated substantial reinterpretation and agency, whereas others with longer elapsed periods remained psychologically organized around loss. This suggested that identity reconstruction was associated not only with chronological time but also with the extent to which participants were able to reinterpret the transition, revise values, experiment with alternative roles, and integrate the changed circumstances into a viable personal narrative.

Reclaiming Agency Through Meaning-Making

The fourth superordinate theme reflected the transition from experiencing uncertainty primarily as destabilization toward using uncertainty as a context for reinterpretation and choice. Participants did not necessarily eliminate uncertainty before regaining agency. Instead, agency often re-emerged while uncertainty remained present. The first subordinate theme, reinterpreting the transition, involved a gradual change in the meaning attributed to what had happened. During earlier phases, participants often described the transition using the language of failure, loss, rejection, interruption, or being forced into unwanted circumstances. Over time, some participants began constructing more complex interpretations. A job loss could eventually be understood as revealing dissatisfaction that had been

previously ignored; the end of a relationship could become associated not only with abandonment but with recognition of previously neglected personal needs; and relocation could be interpreted not simply as disconnection from familiar surroundings but as an opportunity to discover dimensions of the self that had remained constrained within the previous environment.

This reinterpretation did not imply denial of suffering. Participants commonly emphasized that the transition continued to contain painful or unwanted elements even when they had developed a more constructive understanding of it. The important psychological shift was that the transition ceased to be interpreted exclusively as something that had happened to them and increasingly became an experience through which they could make choices about who they wanted to become. This shift was closely connected to the second subordinate theme, re-evaluating values and priorities. Participants described asking questions that had previously been obscured by routine: whether professional status was genuinely central to their identity, whether remaining in particular relationships reflected personal values or fear of change, whether social approval had been prioritized over personal meaning, and what kinds of relationships, work, or lifestyles they considered sustainable.

This re-evaluation frequently involved separating internal values from external markers of identity. Some participants described realizing that they had previously defined success through occupational position, financial stability, marital status, or recognition by others. During the transition, these markers became unreliable, forcing participants to identify sources of self-worth that were less dependent on stable external circumstances. In several accounts, the resulting identity became more internally referenced, although participants did not describe becoming independent of social influences altogether. Rather, they reported greater awareness of when their decisions were shaped by fear of judgment and greater willingness to tolerate disagreement with significant others.

The third subordinate theme, small acts of choice and experimentation, captured the behavioral dimension of regaining agency. Identity reconstruction was rarely described as a single decisive transformation. Participants instead reported testing new activities, relationships, routines, professional possibilities, educational interests, living arrangements, and forms of self-expression. These experiments functioned as practical ways of discovering whether a possible identity felt psychologically viable. For

some, enrolling in a new course or applying for a different type of job represented more than a practical action; it was evidence that they could imagine themselves differently. For others, establishing new interpersonal boundaries, spending time independently, reconnecting with neglected interests, or changing daily routines helped create a sense of authorship over life following a period dominated by uncertainty.

Failure or reversal remained part of this experimentation. Participants sometimes returned to familiar habits, questioned new decisions, or discovered that anticipated identities did not feel appropriate. Nevertheless, these unsuccessful experiments were often incorporated into the broader process of reconstruction. As participants became less committed to finding one immediately correct future identity, experimentation itself became psychologically tolerable. This represented an important change in the meaning of uncertainty: uncertainty shifted from evidence that something was wrong to a condition within which exploration could occur.

The Emergence of a Reconstructed but Unfinished Identity

The fifth superordinate theme reflected participants' descriptions of a more coherent but still evolving sense of self. Importantly, identity reconstruction did not culminate in a complete replacement of the former identity. Participants who described greater adaptation generally retained important elements of their earlier selves while revising the meanings attached to them. This process was captured in the subordinate theme of integrating past and present selves. Participants increasingly viewed previous identities not as false or wasted but as contextually meaningful versions of themselves associated with earlier circumstances, knowledge, and needs. Such integration reduced the pressure to decide whether the former or current self represented the "real" identity.

This was particularly evident among participants who had initially expressed shame or regret regarding past decisions. As reconstruction progressed, some described developing a

more compassionate or contextual interpretation of the person they had been. They recognized that previous decisions had been made within particular relational, social, emotional, and informational conditions. This reinterpretation allowed continuity to be restored without requiring a return to the previous life. The past could therefore remain part of identity while no longer determining the future.

A second subordinate theme involved greater tolerance of uncertainty. Participants who demonstrated more developed reconstruction did not necessarily report greater certainty about external outcomes. Several remained uncertain about future relationships, employment, financial conditions, place of residence, or long-term personal goals. The difference was in their relationship to not knowing. Earlier narratives frequently portrayed uncertainty as evidence of danger, failure, or lack of direction. Later narratives more often described uncertainty as uncomfortable but manageable. Participants reported greater confidence that they could respond to future changes even when outcomes could not be predicted in advance. This suggested that psychological adaptation involved a shift from seeking certainty in circumstances to developing confidence in one's capacity to function without certainty.

The final subordinate theme, identity as an ongoing process rather than a fixed state, represented one of the most important interpretative findings of the study. Participants who had developed greater integration increasingly rejected the assumption that they needed to discover a final, stable, and permanent version of themselves. Instead, identity was described as something constructed and revised through experience. This perspective appeared to reduce the distress associated with inconsistency or change. Rather than viewing changes in priorities as evidence of instability, participants increasingly understood them as responses to new knowledge and circumstances. The reconstructed identity was therefore "unfinished" not because adaptation had failed, but because participants had developed a more dynamic understanding of selfhood.

Table 3

Representative Participant Accounts and Interpretative Meanings Associated with the Main Themes

Superordinate theme	Representative participant account	Interpretative meaning
The collapse of assumed continuity	"The hardest part was not losing the job itself. I had worked for years with the idea that this was who I was. Suddenly, when people asked me what I did, I did not know what answer felt true anymore." (P4, male, 41 years, occupational transition)	The loss of an occupational role disrupted an identity anchor that had previously provided continuity, social recognition, and a stable narrative of self.
Living in an uncertain and suspended self	"I knew I was no longer the person I had been in that marriage, but I also had no clear idea who I was without it. It felt like I had left one	The participant experienced identity as liminal, with separation from a former relational self

	place but had not arrived anywhere else.” (P7, female, 35 years, divorce)	occurring before a coherent independent identity had been established.
Identity negotiation through relationships and social recognition	“I was trying to accept the new direction, but every time I met some relatives, they spoke about my old career as if I had made a mistake. I would leave those meetings doubting myself again.” (P11, male, 38 years, career change)	Social responses functioned as mirrors that could destabilize emerging self-understandings and reproduce attachment to socially preferred former identities.
Reclaiming agency through meaning-making	“At first I kept asking why this happened to me. Later the question changed. I started asking what I wanted to do now that my old plan was gone. That was when I felt I had some control again.” (P2, female, 32 years, relationship transition)	Agency re-emerged when attention shifted from explaining loss to constructing future-oriented choices and personally meaningful possibilities.
The emergence of a reconstructed but unfinished identity	“I do not think I found a new final version of myself. I think I became less afraid that I might change again. I know myself differently now, but I also know that this can change.” (P16, female, 46 years, relocation and family-role transition)	Reconstruction involved increased tolerance of identity flexibility and uncertainty rather than achievement of a permanently fixed self-definition.

The participant accounts presented in Table 3 illustrate the experiential depth underlying the thematic structure and demonstrate how uncertainty was intertwined with identity rather than functioning merely as an emotional reaction to external change. The first account shows that occupational disruption became identity disruption when a socially recognizable role ceased to provide a stable answer to the question of who the participant was. The second account captures the liminal quality of transition, in which separation from a former identity preceded the emergence of a coherent alternative. The third demonstrates the relational dimension of identity reconstruction and the capacity of social responses to reinforce or destabilize new self-definitions. The fourth illustrates a transition in psychological orientation from passive explanation toward active authorship, with agency becoming possible before uncertainty itself had been resolved. Finally, the fifth account represents the most integrative form of reconstruction identified in the analysis: rather than replacing uncertainty with certainty, the participant developed a more flexible relationship with change and a less rigid understanding of identity. Across these accounts, reconstruction was therefore characterized by a movement from dependence on stable external structures toward a more reflexive, internally negotiated, and flexible sense of self.

Taken together, the findings indicated that uncertainty during major life transitions operated at multiple psychological levels. At the most immediate level, participants experienced uncertainty concerning practical outcomes such as employment, relationships, social position, financial stability, or future plans. At a deeper level, however, uncertainty concerned the self that would inhabit those future circumstances. Participants were not only asking what would happen next but also who they would become as a consequence of what had happened. This distinction was central to the phenomenological structure identified in the analysis. Practical uncertainty became

psychologically disruptive when it undermined assumptions that had previously supported a coherent identity narrative.

The findings further suggested that identity continuity before a transition was often maintained by structures that remained largely invisible until they were disrupted. Occupational roles, relationships, routines, family expectations, places, future plans, and social recognition provided continuity partly because participants did not normally need to question them. When these structures changed, participants became more conscious of how their identities had been constructed. The resulting disruption therefore had a paradoxical quality. It initially weakened coherence but also exposed previously unexamined assumptions and created conditions for reflection. Participants could see more clearly which aspects of their identities had been personally chosen, which had developed through adaptation to others, and which were maintained largely because they had never been challenged.

A central interpretative pattern concerned the transition from certainty-based identity toward reflexive identity. Earlier in the transitional process, participants often attempted to restore certainty by recreating previous routines, obtaining immediate answers, making rapid decisions, seeking reassurance, or comparing themselves with expected social trajectories. These strategies could provide temporary stability but did not always resolve deeper identity uncertainty. More enduring reconstruction appeared when participants became able to remain engaged with uncertainty long enough to reconsider the assumptions organizing their lives. This did not mean that certainty became irrelevant; rather, certainty ceased to function as the primary condition for psychological coherence.

The accounts also demonstrated that reconstruction was not exclusively cognitive. Participants did not reconstruct identity simply by developing new interpretations of the transition. New identities became more credible when enacted through behavioral choices and recognized within

relationships. Small actions, including pursuing new interests, creating new routines, establishing interpersonal boundaries, entering new social environments, developing occupational competencies, or making previously avoided decisions, provided experiential evidence that participants could inhabit identities different from those associated with their former circumstances. Identity reconstruction therefore involved reciprocal movement between interpretation and action: participants acted according to possible versions of themselves, evaluated the resulting experience, and revised their self-understanding accordingly.

Interpersonal relationships played an equally important role. Participants' narratives demonstrated that the self could not be reconstructed entirely independently of social recognition. Even when participants wanted to redefine themselves according to personally chosen values, reactions from important others could either support or undermine the legitimacy of emerging identities. Relationships that allowed uncertainty, experimentation, and change appeared to facilitate reconstruction, whereas relationships that repeatedly insisted on restoring a former identity could intensify self-doubt. The process of identity reconstruction consequently included renegotiating not only "Who am I?" but also "Who am I allowed to become in relation to others?"

Another important finding was the absence of a simple linear pathway from disruption to reconstruction. Participants could simultaneously exhibit elements of several themes. A person might demonstrate considerable agency in occupational decisions while continuing to experience strong uncertainty within intimate relationships. Another might intellectually reinterpret a transition positively while remaining emotionally attached to a former identity. Participants also described periods of apparent progress followed by renewed grief, doubt, or desire to return to previous circumstances. These fluctuations were not interpreted as failures of reconstruction but as part of the recursive nature of adaptation to major life change.

The final experiential pattern was a transformation in participants' relationship with uncertainty itself. At the beginning of many narratives, uncertainty was described as something that had to be eliminated before a coherent life could resume. Participants wanted answers concerning what they should do, whether they had made the right choices, how others would respond, and whether their future would become stable again. In the more reconstructed accounts, uncertainty remained present but had acquired a different psychological status. Participants increasingly understood that complete predictability was unavailable and that identity

did not require permanent stability. What replaced certainty was not indifference to the future but a stronger sense of psychological authorship and confidence in the capacity to respond to future change.

Thus, the interpretative phenomenological analysis suggested that identity reconstruction during major life transitions can be understood as an evolving negotiation between continuity and change. Participants initially encountered uncertainty as a threat to the coherence of the self because the roles and assumptions that had organized their identities were destabilized. They subsequently entered a liminal period characterized by ambivalence, self-questioning, and an incomplete sense of belonging to either a former or future identity. Reconstruction developed through relational negotiation, reinterpretation of the transition, re-evaluation of values, and experimentation with new forms of action. For many participants, the most significant outcome was not the recovery of a completely stable identity but the development of a more flexible sense of self capable of incorporating discontinuity. In this respect, adaptation involved moving from the question of how to restore the person one had previously been toward the more open-ended question of how to construct a meaningful identity under conditions in which change and uncertainty could not be permanently removed.

4. Discussion

The present study explored the lived experience of uncertainty and identity reconstruction among adults undergoing major life transitions in Tehran. Interpretative phenomenological analysis revealed five interconnected superordinate themes: the collapse of assumed continuity, living in an uncertain and suspended self, identity negotiation through relationships and social recognition, reclaiming agency through meaning-making, and the emergence of a reconstructed but unfinished identity. Collectively, the findings suggest that major life transitions are experienced not simply as changes in objective circumstances but as disruptions to the interpretative structures through which individuals understand who they are, where they belong, and what their lives are expected to become. Participants initially described uncertainty as a destabilizing force that weakened established roles, routines, expectations, and future narratives. As the transition unfolded, however, uncertainty increasingly became a context within which participants reconsidered values, renegotiated social identities, experimented with new

possibilities, and developed a more flexible understanding of selfhood. Importantly, reconstruction did not culminate in the elimination of uncertainty. Rather, participants who demonstrated greater adaptation described becoming more capable of maintaining a coherent sense of self while accepting that future circumstances and identities could remain partially open and unfinished.

The first major finding, the collapse of assumed continuity, indicated that the psychological impact of life transitions was closely tied to disruption of participants' anticipated life narratives. Participants did not experience occupational change, relationship dissolution, relocation, or other transitions solely as isolated events; rather, these events destabilized assumptions about the expected continuity between past, present, and future. Their identities had often been implicitly sustained by relatively stable roles and commitments, and the disruption of these structures created questions about who they were independently of them. This finding is consistent with conceptualizations of identity uncertainty as ambiguity concerning the meanings, commitments, and characteristics that define the self ("[Identity Uncertainty](#)," 2010). It also corresponds with Burke's argument that identity dispersion may involve flexibility, uncertainty, or inconsistency when multiple identities cannot be maintained within a coherent organization of the self (Burke, 2020). The present results extend these perspectives by illustrating phenomenologically how uncertainty becomes personally significant when previously taken-for-granted identity anchors cease to provide continuity.

The findings are also compatible with longitudinal evidence showing that identity uncertainty and commitment-making are dynamically interconnected. Becht and colleagues demonstrated that fluctuations in identity uncertainty were associated with changes in commitment processes over time, indicating that identity development includes repeated negotiation between certainty and reconsideration rather than a once-completed achievement (Becht et al., 2017). Although that research focused on adolescence, the present findings suggest that comparable dynamics may re-emerge during adulthood when established commitments are disrupted by consequential life events. Participants frequently described having previously regarded occupational, relational, educational, or family identities as settled, only to discover that these identities were contingent upon circumstances that could change. This observation supports the broader proposition that self-identity remains vulnerable to uncertainty whenever

established structures lose their ability to organize experience (Kleyberg, 2015). It also resonates with Wallace's emphasis on the relationship between identity, uncertainty, and possibility, because participants' loss of a predictable future initially generated distress but eventually created space for alternative forms of self-understanding (Wallace, 2012).

The second superordinate theme, living in an uncertain and suspended self, reflected the liminal quality of identity reconstruction. Participants repeatedly described themselves as existing between a former identity that no longer adequately represented their lives and a future identity that had not yet acquired sufficient clarity or legitimacy. Emotional oscillation between grief and relief, fear and excitement, and attachment and separation was common. This finding suggests that identity reconstruction should not be understood as an immediate replacement of one identity with another. Instead, individuals may inhabit an extended transitional space in which competing self-definitions coexist. The experience is consistent with Frost's observation that identity narratives may be organized around differing degrees of certainty, uncertainty, and indifference rather than a simple certainty-uncertainty dichotomy (Frost, 2019). The present findings add that such orientations may fluctuate within the same person across the course of a major transition.

This liminal state was particularly evident when participants faced uncertainty not only about what would happen next but about which criteria should guide future decisions. This distinction is important because it indicates a deeper form of uncertainty than practical unpredictability. When previous roles lost their organizing power, participants also lost familiar standards for evaluating what constituted appropriate or meaningful choices. Research on professional identity supports the importance of the capacity to function under such conditions. Tolerance of uncertainty has been identified as relevant to the development of professional identity among university students (Rozina et al., 2024), while career identity has been associated with life satisfaction partly through tolerance for uncertainty and affective processes (Garrison et al., 2016). Likewise, Tracey and Hutchinson showed that uncertainty can stimulate reflection during designer identity development rather than serving only as an impediment to professional growth (Tracey & Hutchinson, 2016). The present findings similarly indicate that uncertainty can initially weaken coherence while later becoming a condition under which participants reconsider previously unquestioned assumptions.

The third theme, identity negotiation through relationships and social recognition, demonstrated that reconstruction was profoundly relational. Participants frequently described emerging identities as becoming more or less credible depending on how they were recognized by family members, partners, colleagues, and other significant people. Some experienced support that legitimized change, whereas others encountered reactions that repeatedly returned them to a former role or implied that their new direction represented failure. This finding is strongly compatible with uncertainty-identity theory, which proposes that self-uncertainty can motivate individuals to seek identities that provide clearer norms, prototypes, and social definitions (Wagoner & Hogg, 2017). Hogg similarly emphasizes that self-uncertainty can strengthen the psychological importance of social identity because group memberships provide guidance regarding who one is and how one should behave (Hogg, 2022, 2023). In the present study, major transitions often weakened exactly these socially available sources of certainty, making participants more sensitive to how others interpreted their changing identities.

The social nature of identity uncertainty is also supported by studies showing that changes in group boundaries and collective contexts can destabilize self-definition. Uncertainty regarding nested identities has been associated with patterns of group identification (Jung et al., 2014), while threats to group entitativity can increase identity uncertainty and influence intentions to leave an existing social environment (Jung et al., 2019). Wagoner and colleagues likewise demonstrated that identity centrality and dimensions of uncertainty are related to the pursuit of subgroup autonomy (Wagoner et al., 2018). At a broader societal level, media narratives during the Greek financial crisis were associated with social identity uncertainty, illustrating that identity insecurity can be generated and interpreted through collective narratives (Belavadi et al., 2023). The participants in the present study similarly appeared to construct their transitions through social narratives concerning appropriate careers, marital trajectories, family obligations, stability, achievement, and acceptable life pathways.

The importance of social recognition was especially visible among participants undergoing relationship-related transitions. Divorce, separation, changing family roles, and relocation did not simply alter interpersonal circumstances; they changed the social categories through which participants had previously understood themselves. This is

compatible with evidence that identity uncertainty can influence relational turbulence and perceptions of partner communication during difficult relational experiences (Yoon & Theiss, 2021). Research on sexual identity uncertainty similarly demonstrates that self-definition, minority stress, and partner-related decisions are intertwined with interpersonal and social contexts (Dyar et al., 2017). More broadly, transitions to singlehood in young and middle adulthood can involve substantial psychological reorganization (Wahring et al., 2025), while marital transitions in mid and later life alter relational roles and social embeddedness (Monin & Newsom, 2023). The present study suggests that a crucial aspect of adapting to such transitions is not merely developing a private sense of change but renegotiating how the changed self is situated within relationships.

The fourth theme, reclaiming agency through meaning-making, represented an important turning point in participants' narratives. Participants who described greater adaptation gradually shifted from asking why the transition had happened toward asking what they wanted to do in response to it. This did not eliminate grief or uncertainty, but it changed participants' relationship to them. Reinterpretation of the transition, reassessment of personal values, and engagement in small behavioral experiments helped participants move from a position of perceived passivity toward one of authorship. This finding accords with the view that identity development involves active reflection and reconstruction rather than passive adjustment. Tracey and Hutchinson's work is particularly relevant because it shows how uncertainty can trigger reflective processes through which professional identity is reconsidered (Tracey & Hutchinson, 2016). Likewise, greater tolerance of uncertainty may facilitate professional identity formation by allowing individuals to continue developing commitments despite incomplete predictability (Rozina et al., 2024).

The role of agency also helps explain why identity reconstruction was not determined simply by the passage of time. Some participants whose transitions were relatively recent had already begun constructing new meanings, whereas others with more temporal distance remained strongly oriented toward restoration of their former selves. Psychological resources and supportive contexts may therefore be more important than chronological distance alone. Research in educational settings indicates that psychological capital can mediate the relationship between available academic support and engagement (Haseli

Songhori & Salamti, 2024), suggesting more generally that adaptation depends partly on the psychological resources through which environmental conditions are interpreted. Organizational research likewise indicates that identity leadership and procedural justice can strengthen identification in uncertain contexts (Milesi, 2022). Although these studies concern different settings, they support the broader interpretation that uncertainty becomes more manageable when individuals possess psychological and social resources that allow them to establish meaning, belonging, and direction.

Participants' small acts of experimentation were particularly important in restoring agency. Trying new occupational activities, setting interpersonal boundaries, entering unfamiliar social environments, returning to neglected interests, or revising routines enabled participants to test possible identities through action. This suggests that identity reconstruction is enacted rather than solely cognitively formulated. Participants did not first achieve a fully coherent new identity and then begin behaving accordingly; instead, action helped produce the identity being explored. This interpretation is compatible with research demonstrating that shared social identities influence behavior under strategic uncertainty (Duell, 2022). It also parallels findings that changing cultural environments require individuals to actively negotiate new meanings and practices. The phenomenological study of military veterans transitioning from military to civilian life illustrates how movement between highly differentiated cultural systems requires reinterpretation of roles, routines, values, and personal identity (Flores, 2025). In both settings, reconstruction involves learning how to inhabit a different social and psychological position before it becomes fully familiar.

The fifth theme, the emergence of a reconstructed but unfinished identity, represents perhaps the most important theoretical contribution of the findings. Participants who appeared further along in reconstruction did not necessarily report restored certainty. Instead, they increasingly described identity as flexible, revisable, and capable of incorporating change. Former identities were not simply rejected; rather, participants sought to integrate earlier and current versions of themselves into a broader autobiographical narrative. This distinction is consistent with Burke's differentiation between flexibility and problematic inconsistency in identity organization (Burke, 2020). The emerging self could accommodate multiple experiences without requiring that one version invalidate all

others. Identity reconstruction thus appeared to involve increasing capacity to maintain continuity while allowing transformation.

This greater tolerance of uncertainty also parallels findings from research on transitions across the life course. The movement from childhood to adolescence involves simultaneous vulnerability and developmental opportunity as previously established patterns are reorganized (Mastorci et al., 2024). In midlife, the transition to grandparenthood may coincide with retirement decisions, demonstrating how several role changes can intersect and reorganize identity simultaneously (Bolano & Bernardi, 2024). Similarly, changes in marital status during young, middle, and later adulthood may challenge established routines and self-understandings (Monin & Newsom, 2023; Wahring et al., 2025). The present findings suggest that such transitions may be psychologically manageable not when individuals eliminate uncertainty altogether but when they become capable of understanding identity as an ongoing developmental process.

The results also illuminate the importance of information and interpretative resources during transitions. Participants frequently described uncertainty as involving not only emotional instability but also difficulty understanding available possibilities and deciding which options corresponded with their emerging selves. Research on people experiencing life transitions while coping with obsessive-compulsive disorder has highlighted the contextual information needs that arise when individuals face changing circumstances (Wu et al., 2024). However, the present findings suggest that information alone may be insufficient because identity uncertainty concerns meaning as much as knowledge. Individuals may know what choices are available while remaining unsure about which choice represents the person they want to become. Accordingly, psychological adaptation may require narrative and relational resources in addition to practical information.

The broader context of uncertainty must also be considered. Participants' experiences indicated that identity reconstruction is constrained by social expectations and power relations rather than occurring as unrestricted personal choice. Bosworth's analysis of uncertainty, identity, and power demonstrates how institutional conditions may undermine individuals' capacity to sustain coherent self-definition (Bosworth, 2014). Likewise, collective instability can shape social identity uncertainty through public narratives (Belavadi et al., 2023). In the present study, participants' efforts to reconstruct identity

were often negotiated against expectations concerning employment security, marriage, family responsibilities, social reputation, and conventional pathways of adulthood. Thus, the capacity to reconstruct identity may depend partly on whether social environments permit alternative self-definitions to become legitimate.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the findings suggest that uncertainty during major life transitions should not be conceptualized only as a deficit state that requires rapid reduction. Uncertainty was undoubtedly distressing when it disrupted identity anchors and future expectations, but it also created conditions for reflection, differentiation between personal values and social prescriptions, experimentation with possible selves, and the development of greater psychological flexibility. The process identified in this study was recursive rather than linear: participants moved repeatedly among disruption, ambivalence, social negotiation, meaning-making, and renewed uncertainty. The endpoint was therefore not a permanently certain identity. Rather, successful reconstruction appeared to involve the ability to sustain a coherent yet revisable self-narrative while accepting that personal identity and future circumstances remain partly open. This interpretation extends uncertainty-identity perspectives by emphasizing that uncertainty may sometimes be adapted to rather than merely reduced and that major life transitions can transform the individual's relationship with uncertainty itself.

6. Limitations & Suggestions

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the present findings. First, the study involved a relatively small purposively selected sample of 18 adults residing in Tehran, which is appropriate for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis but limits the transferability of the findings to individuals living in different cultural, socioeconomic, or geographical contexts. Second, the sample included participants experiencing several different forms of major life transition. This heterogeneity enriched the analysis by revealing common experiential processes across transition types, but it may also have obscured transition-specific dynamics associated with divorce, migration, occupational change, family transitions, or educational change. Third, the study relied primarily on retrospective self-report interviews, and participants' accounts may have been shaped by current emotional states,

memory reconstruction, and the meanings developed after the transition rather than representing their experiences exactly as they occurred. Fourth, participants differed in the amount of time that had elapsed since their transitions, meaning that some were interviewed during relatively active periods of uncertainty while others had already developed more coherent interpretations. Finally, because phenomenological interpretation necessarily involves interaction between participants' accounts and researchers' interpretative perspectives, complete elimination of researcher influence was neither possible nor theoretically consistent with the analytic approach, despite the use of reflexive procedures and systematic checking of interpretations against the original transcripts.

Future studies could extend these findings by examining specific types of transitions separately and comparing whether the processes of identity disruption and reconstruction differ across divorce, migration, career change, retirement, parenthood, bereavement, educational transition, and other major life events. Longitudinal qualitative designs would be especially valuable because they could follow participants from the initial disruption through later stages of adjustment and thereby clarify how uncertainty, agency, relational recognition, and identity coherence change over time. Future research could also compare individuals from different age groups, socioeconomic backgrounds, cultural settings, and family structures to determine how social context shapes the meaning of uncertainty. Mixed-method studies could combine phenomenological interviews with validated measures of intolerance of uncertainty, identity commitment, psychological flexibility, well-being, social support, and meaning in life in order to investigate relationships between subjective experiences and broader psychological patterns. Further research should also examine why some individuals remain strongly oriented toward restoration of a former identity while others become more willing to explore alternative selves, and whether factors such as perceived control, attachment security, social support, economic resources, personality characteristics, or narrative flexibility influence these divergent trajectories.

The findings have practical implications for psychologists, counselors, career practitioners, educators, social workers, and other professionals supporting individuals during significant life changes. Interventions should avoid treating uncertainty merely as a symptom to be removed as quickly as possible and should instead provide clients with a psychologically safe context in which

uncertainty, contradictory emotions, and incomplete identities can be explored without pressure for premature resolution. Practitioners can help individuals distinguish the practical problems created by a transition from the deeper identity questions activated by the loss of familiar roles and anticipated futures. Therapeutic and counseling work may be particularly useful when it supports reconstruction of a coherent life narrative, clarification of personally endorsed values, integration of former and emerging versions of the self, and gradual experimentation with new roles and behaviors. Attention should also be given to relational environments, because family members, partners, colleagues, and significant others may either facilitate or hinder reconstruction through the ways in which they recognize the changing person. Programs designed for people undergoing divorce, career transition, relocation, retirement, educational change, or other major transitions should therefore combine practical guidance with opportunities for reflective meaning-making, social support, identity exploration, and development of tolerance for uncertainty. The ultimate objective should not necessarily be to restore a rigid sense of certainty but to strengthen individuals' capacity to maintain agency, continuity, and psychological coherence while adapting to a life that remains open to further change.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who cooperated in carrying out this study.

Declaration of Interest

The author of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

Authors' Contributions

Not applicable.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, I have used the language model ChatGPT.

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