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Mind the Gap in the Middle: A Call to Study Midlife

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Abstract

Although the study of midlife has increased somewhat over the last decade, middle-aged adults are often omitted from research on adult development and aging. Possible reasons for the lack of attention to middle age are considered and recommendations for ways to increase research on midlife are suggested to generate new knowledge and to dispel the myths. Findings related to the happiness curve and the midlife crisis are discussed in the context of addressing misconceptions. A model of midlife as a pivotal period in the life course at the intersection of growth and decline is presented. Closing the research gap in the middle of the life course will help to further our understanding of this understudied age period. The findings can inform interventions to promote well-being among the middle-aged with concomitant benefits for the welfare of those younger and older who depend on them.

Keywords

Middle age; midlife; happiness; midlife crisis; well-being

“The afternoon of human life must also have a significance of its own and cannot merely be a pitiful appendage to life’s morning

(Jung, 1933, p. 109).

One of the early proponents of a lifespan view of development, Carl Jung (1933), recognized the salience of middle age, what he called the afternoon of life. Some 80 years later, it is fair to say that of all the periods in the life course, the middle years, roughly ages 40 to 59, are the most overlooked. There are no journals or professional societies specifically devoted to midlife, yet all other age periods, infancy, childhood, adolescence, young adulthood and old age, have dedicated publications and organizations. The lack of scholarship on midlife is puzzling as this age group covers a large segment of the life course, represents 28% of the total United States population (US Census 2010), and plays a central role in the lives of those both younger and older. Careful research can help to address the misconceptions and myths about the middle years and provide a more accurate portrayal of this important life period. The limited scholarly work on midlife may in large part account for why there are no specialized journals or societies focused on this age range. My wish is for more research devoted directly to the middle years and embedded within the context of the life course. In this essay I provide a brief overview of the midlife field and suggest new

research questions and ways to advance the study of this period within a developmental framework.

The Gap

The first comprehensive review of midlife development, which appeared in 2004 in the *Annual Review of Psychology* (Lachman, 2004), called for more research on the middle years. To explore what has transpired over the 10 years since that article, we examined all the articles published in 2004 and 2014 in the two key developmental journals that focus on adulthood and aging, *Psychology and Aging* and *Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*. There were a total of 306 empirical articles in those two years and these included both new data collection and secondary analysis, as well as cross sectional and longitudinal designs. Of all the articles, only 4 focused exclusively on midlife. The largest percentage of articles was for those that included just older adults, ages 60 and over, 39% in 2004 and 43% in 2014. The next most frequent category included both young and old adults, but left out the middle-aged group, a design that was more common in *Psychology and Aging* and *JG:PS* compared to *JP:SS*. This two-group design included 31% of the articles in 2004 and 21% in 2014, showing evidence of a declining trend. There is other encouraging news in that the studies that included middle age, either middle alone, both old and middle, or young, middle, and old, increased from 30% of articles in 2004 to 36% in 2014. Although this shows some progress in that the number of studies that include middle-aged adults has increased over the past decade, the picture is still one of a relative dearth of research on middle age. And only 16% of the articles included young, middle-aged and older adults, a design consistent with a lifespan developmental approach.

Journals are one way to spur on research in an understudied area. Even if there is not enough research at this time to sustain a full journal on midlife from a developmental perspective, scholarship across multiple disciplines (biological, social, psychological, and economic) could be combined for special issues of existing journals or to start a new interdisciplinary journal.

Filling the Gap

There are some practical reasons for the limited work on midlife. Some researchers do not include those in middle age because it can be challenging to recruit them for research, given their busy lifestyles with multiple demands of work and family. I have heard many a student and colleague claim it is hard to get middle-aged participants, and they just focus on young students and retired older adults. One solution is to recruit the middle-aged online using sites such as Mechanical Turk, phone apps and internet programs, or by telephone or mail, so they can provide their data at their own convenience rather than coming into a lab. Another approach is to conduct secondary analysis of existing longitudinal studies. The participants of many major long-term longitudinal studies that began in childhood were continued into middle age and beyond. Although most did not start out with a focus on midlife, these rich studies offer a golden opportunity to look at the early childhood antecedents of midlife outcomes and to consider the possibilities for reversibility and plasticity in midlife (Lachman et al., 2015). Examples include the Terman study (Friedman & Martin, 2011) and

the Oakland and Berkeley Growth and Guidance Studies (Eichorn, Clausen, Haan, Honzik, & Mussen, 1981). Others such as the Harvard Study of Adult Development (Waldinger, Vaillant & Orav, 2007), which began with young adults, have followed them into old age and added the offspring to include multiple generations in midlife. Some studies have focused on those in the work force, which naturally included those in midlife even if developmental processes were not the central focus. For example, The Whitehall Study of Civil Servants in Britain (Sabia et al., 2010) has been a rich source of information about antecedents of health outcomes in the middle years.

Interestingly, one of the early studies of old age, the Kansas City Study, included a major emphasis on middle-aged adults. Bernice Neugarten (1968) in her classic book *Middle Age and Aging* was among the first to highlight this period, although mainly as a contrast to later adulthood. The largest longitudinal study in the U.S. with a direct focus on middle age is the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS; Brim, Ryff, & Kessler, 2004), started in 1995 with over 7,000 adults from a probability sample using random digit dialing. The broad age range of 25 to 75 was selected to examine midlife in relation to earlier and later periods in the life course, from a lifespan developmental perspective. The study has continued with new data collected in 2004–2006 and 2013–2014, providing 20-years of information about transitions into and out of midlife and alternative pathways to health and illness. Data from this study are available to the public for analysis and more information can be found on the website (<http://www.midus.wisc.edu/>).

Midlife Trajectories

One key issue is to what extent developmental processes in midlife are continuous or distinctive from other age periods, and more research will help to address this. Jung's view, articulated in his essay on the stages of life, suggests there is discontinuity: "Thoroughly unprepared we take the step into the afternoon of life; worse still, we take this step with the false presupposition that our truths and ideals will serve us as hitherto (1933, p. 108)." Midlife has long been thought of as a period of quietude between the turmoil of adolescence and emerging adulthood and the losses and declines of old age. The main exceptions to the assumption of stability are the menopausal transition and the crisis, which are commonly associated with the midlife period (Lachman, 2004).

There are many possible age patterns and adult trajectories, some linear and others nonlinear (Lachman et al., 1994; Staudinger & Bluck, 2001). In some cases there is stability across adulthood, in other cases midlife is at the peak or at the nadir. Other patterns show that those in midlife are similar to younger adults and in some cases midlife and old age are more similar. The two age-group design (young and old), commonly used in cognitive and social psychology, is not an ideal design methodologically or statistically and is not informative about the middle years. Assumptions about what happens between young and older adulthood are often made and these may lead to incorrect conclusions about midlife. For example, only two data points would likely lead to erroneous inferences about the course of self-esteem, which peaks in midlife (Orth et al. 2012), and life satisfaction (Stone et al., 2010), which some studies show is at a low point in midlife.

Many studies have documented that happiness and life satisfaction reach their nadir at midlife (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2008; Frijters & Beatton, 2012; Stone et al., 2010; Ulloa et al., 2013), often called the u-bend. Most of these studies are cross-sectional, although some use accelerated longitudinal designs. Across studies and in many countries, there is indeed a fairly consistent finding that the middle years, usually between ages 30 and 50, show the lowest level of life satisfaction or happiness. Nevertheless, some have found a linear increase from young adulthood to midlife (Galambos et al., 2015) and declines in old age (Baird, Lucas, & Donnellan, 2010), and some have suggested the u-bend results are due to cohort differences not age, or are explained by covariates such as marital and occupational status (Ulloa et al., 2013). Although statistically significant and meaningful due to the large samples and consistency and repeatability across countries and data sets, the age differences in happiness are nevertheless very small, on the order of .2 to .7 on a 10-point scale.

It is important to note there is variability around the age group means, and not everyone in midlife is down in the dumps or depressed, nor is everyone in later life gleeful and happy. This variation within age groups is of great interest to lifespan developmental scientists interested in finding out why some are happier than others, and understanding interindividual differences in change. The importance of a greater understanding of this period is dramatically illustrated by the recent findings showing that the suicide rate peaks in the middle years (Hempstead & Phillips, 2015). However, more longitudinal work is needed to determine to what extent this is a cohort effect tied to the babyboomers or a phenomenon tied to the middle years of life, per se (Phillips, Robin, Nugent, & Idler, 2010). The take home story from the life satisfaction work is usually one of surprise and delight that older adults are the happiest especially in light of aging-related declines in health and cognitive functioning, the so-called paradox of aging (Lachman et al., 2015). Yet, often there is little recognition or concern for what the lower scores mean for those in midlife or for the family members and co-workers for whom they are responsible.

The longitudinal findings on life satisfaction from the MIDUS study tell a somewhat different story than the u-bend. They show that a majority of middle-aged adults are satisfied with their life and stay that way or even improve over a 10-year period. They also expect their future satisfaction to be even higher, and this optimism can motivate them to achieve their goals and strive for growth or improvement (Lachman et al., 2008). One possible explanation for the lower scores often reported in cross-sectional studies is that those in midlife have not yet met their goals and aspirations, and they see room for improvement and growth. In contrast, older adults may be closer to their peak in terms of goal attainment. Indeed, whereas present satisfaction is on the rise, and has not yet reached its peak in midlife, projected satisfaction about the future is on its way down, and has not yet reached the nadir which does not occur until old age (Lachman et al., 2015). In both early and middle adulthood, the future looks brighter than the present. In contrast, in old age, although present life satisfaction is at its height, the future is expected to be worse.

Misconceptions and Stereotypes

One key reason for increasing attention to middle age is to address the misconceptions and stereotypes, which can have negative health consequences. Often, especially in the press, the u bend is interpreted as evidence for the midlife crisis. Exposure to negative images of aging (Levy, 2009) and negative attitudes about aging have damaging effects on health (Levy, Zonderman, Slade, & Ferrucci, 2009). Little is known about the impact of stereotypes on midlife, but the midlife crisis is one misconception that is bound to have a profound influence. Those in midlife are faced with juggling multiple responsibilities and dealing with physical and cognitive signs of aging, and they may experience a good deal of stress trying to handle it especially if accompanied by financial difficulties. Yet midlife can also be a peak time in many areas, including earnings, position at work, leadership in the family, decision-making abilities, self-confidence, self esteem, and contributions to the community.

The midlife crisis is a ubiquitous stereotype that is often depicted in the media and is the subject of countless jokes. The empirical evidence for a midlife crisis as a regular occurrence is weak at best, with between 10 and 20 percent of adults reporting one (Wethington, 2000). Of those that say they had a midlife crisis, it does not even always occur during middle adulthood. Moreover some adults seem to be crisis prone and have them at multiple points over the life course. Research suggests that the crisis may be tied more to a neurotic personality than to a particular age period (Lachman et al., 1994). Of those who do have a crisis in midlife, about half say it involves inner turmoil or angst associated with getting older. For the rest it is tied to events such as divorce, job loss, or health problems, which can occur at any age period.

Although many find it amusing, there are potentially serious effects of promoting this erroneous image of a midlife crisis. It can promote a widespread assumption that the crisis is a natural, inevitable part of middle age, and such expectations can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy. The crisis can be used as an excuse for bad behavior and as an explanation for a negative mood or a change in goals. The notion of a normative crisis may be comforting in that those who are suffering and miserable are in good company and are not personally responsible for their state. It could also be misleading and result in misdiagnosis and lack of treatment for a more serious condition such as depression, fatigue, hormonal deficiencies, or disease. If the midlife crisis were indeed a common occurrence, it could wreak havoc on the lives of those younger and older who depend on the middle-aged.

Midlife as a Pivotal Period

To advance our understanding and make progress in filling the midlife research gap, a key goal is to develop theoretical and empirical models of developmental processes that include the middle years of life. As one example that can guide future research, we have presented middle age as a pivotal period in the life course (Lachman et al., 2015). The word, *pivotal*, according to the dictionary definition means: “of crucial importance in relation to the development or success of something else, vitally important or critical.” We characterize midlife as pivotal in terms of (a) a balance and peak of functioning at the intersection of growth and decline (b) its linkage with earlier and later periods of life, and (c) as a bridge to

younger and older generations (Lachman et al., 2015). This perspective takes into account that midlife plays a central role in the life course of the individual and also at the family and societal levels.

Midlife falls at a critical juncture at the intersection of upward and downward trajectories in many domains, which we propose can lead to an optimal balance of strengths and weaknesses. Midlife also is a prime period for connections across earlier and later periods of the life course. This operates at the individual level, in linking childhood experiences with midlife health and lifestyle in midlife with health in old age. It also plays out at the interpersonal, intergenerational levels through roles such as parenting, caregiving, and mentoring. Not only do the middle-aged have an impact on the well-being of those they care for, their own well-being is also affected by the circumstances of those around them. At the end of the semester I ask my students to reflect on what they learned about themselves and another person, either a family member or a friend. One student remarked that learning about generativity helped her to understand that her parents' deep concern for her is a part of their own developmental journey, and not a reflection of their lack of trust for her decisions. This example nicely illustrates how understanding more about the nature of middle age could contribute to intergenerational harmony.

In keeping with this pivotal model, midlife falls at the crossroads of gains and losses for many aging-related processes and life domains (Lachman et al., 2015). Using cognitive abilities as an example, experience and knowledge-related abilities (crystallized intelligence, pragmatics) are on an upward path, whereas the acquisition of new knowledge especially under speeded conditions (fluid intelligence, mechanics) are on a downward path (Salthouse, 2010). As illustrated in Figure 1, the intersection of these upward and downward trajectories occurs in midlife. Thus, midlife is at a particularly beneficial position in the life course with a balance of changing strengths and limitations. We represent this with a structural model derived from a double-exponential function, as depicted by the solid line that illustrates the combined effect of the decreases and increases. This function has the property that people start low on experience in young adulthood and it increases exponentially. And they start with maximal processing abilities in young adulthood, which declines exponentially from there. The combined effect shows a peak in midlife, when both losses and gains are at their midpoint. Thus, the middle years of adulthood are endowed with a good deal of experience while still maintaining moderate levels of processing abilities, perhaps the ideal combination. Further work is needed to test this model and to see how well it fares with empirical scrutiny in multiple domains such as decision-making, productivity, creativity, and leadership. This will be possible if my wish for more research on midlife is granted. In that case there will be a great deal more theory and research on development during the middle years within the context of the life course.

Midlife in the Future

The proposed goals to delineate midlife in the context of other periods of human development can have long term implications for optimizing the aging process. If we can identify early warning signs for poor mental or physical health, it may be possible to delay, minimize, or even prevent some of the changes in biological, psychological, and social

functioning that typically occur in later life. It is also important to determine whether the knowledge we have and will gain about midlife is tied to specific cohorts such as the baby boomers. International, cross-cultural, and multigenerational perspectives are needed to shed light on the universals and the extent to which our current knowledge base can be generalized across time and place.

Further understanding of how adults in midlife are able to manage multiple roles effectively and maintain good health can shed light on ways to optimize development throughout life. Closing the research gap in the middle of the life course will help to further our understanding of this largely understudied age period and inform interventions to promote their well-being. This can also have important implications for those younger and older who, to a large extent, depend on midlife adults for their own welfare.

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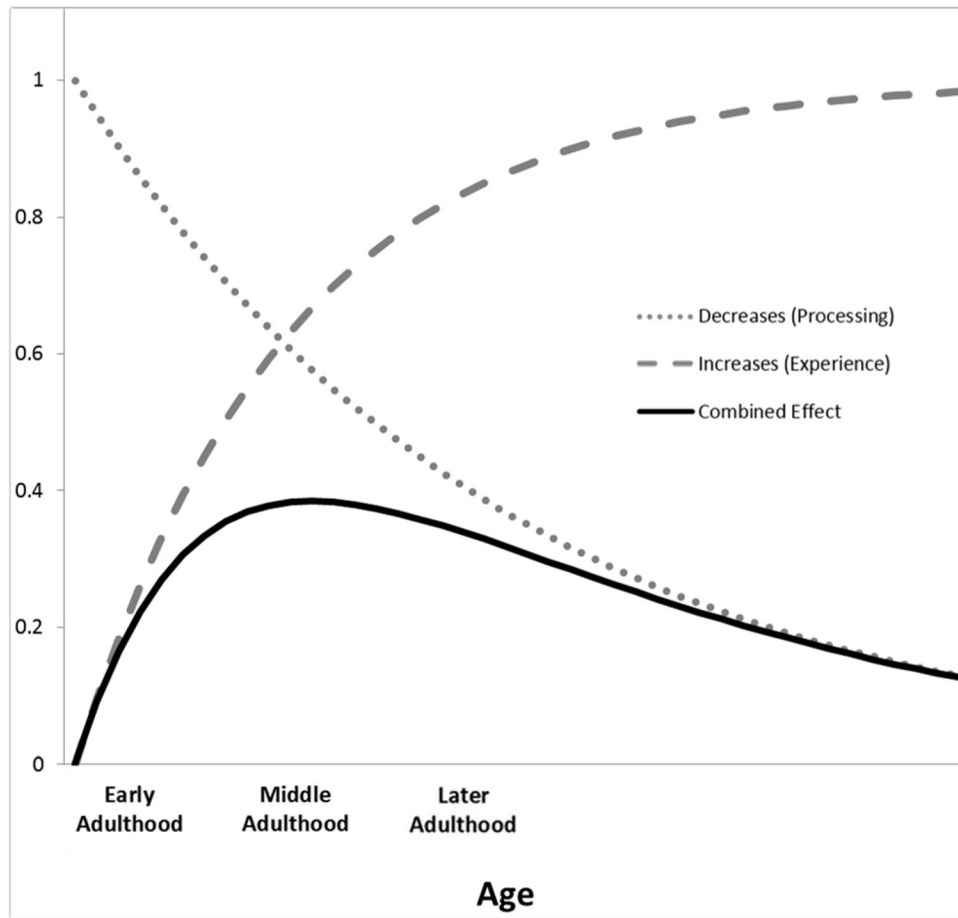


Figure 1. Midlife at the intersection of growth and decline: A double exponential function shows a peak in midlife. Dotted line shows the decrease path (e.g., processing new information), the dashed line show the increase path (e.g., knowledge and experience), the solid line is the combined effect of gains and losses.