

The Baby Boomers aren't Babies Anymore:

Contemporary Perspectives on Midlife

The movement of the post World War II "Baby Boom" generation through midlife presents the potential for discovery of new findings on this typically under-researched period of life. Up until the past decade, midlife was generally ignored in the developmental and general psychological literature. We had two models available for understanding midlife: the stability views of Freud and James and the proposition of a crisis or transition by Levinson. As new data and models become available, we are now in a position to evaluate the status of the baby boomers at midlife.

In this symposium, we will examine the latest research and theories on four significant aspects of midlife development: health, cognition, personality, and stress. All participants will present new data and perspectives that apply to the Baby Boomers as they now appear.

Aldwin, Shiraishi, and Levenson will begin the symposium by describing the complex relationships between illness patterns and stress in young, middle, and later adulthood. They found that compared to younger adults, the middle-aged group reported more minor illnesses but did not show greater vulnerability to stress due to better coping skills. Willis will

discuss longitudinal change in abilities during midlife and cohort differences in level of cognitive functioning during middle age. Whitbourne and Kaiser will present data on psychosocial functioning and its relationship to psychosocial development in midlife. They will show that patterns of changes in family and work domains relate to patterns of changes in generativity scores. Returning to the topic of stress, Almeida, Serido, and Horn will present data on the stresses of middle adulthood showing that, compared to earlier and later adulthood, midlife adults report the highest levels of disruptive stressors.

The findings reported in this symposium provide some fascinating insights into the complexity of psychological functioning in midlife. With the new and rich data sets that all participants will be drawing from in their presentations, we hope to stimulate discussion and future research on this relatively unexplored but important period of development in adulthood.

Stress and Health in Young Adulthood and Midlife

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Aldwin & Levenson (2001) suggested the relationship between stress and health outcomes is relatively weak because researchers have not typically examined age-specific illness patterns. We hypothesized that stress in young adulthood would be related to relatively minor illnesses while stress in mid-life would be related to chronic illnesses. We investigated this hypothesis in 641 participants in the Davis Longitudinal Study (162 young adults aged 25-34 and 479 middle-aged adults aged 45-54; 52% female) who responded to a mail survey in 1996 (response rate = 37%). This included a list of low points (Aldwin et al., 1996), stress ratings for the most recent one (scaled 1-7), as well as its chronicity (< one year or one year+), number of minor illnesses and number of chronic illnesses. Health-related stressors were omitted from the analyses.

Older adults reported more chronic illnesses $F(1, 633) = 11.41, p < .001$, and slightly more minor illnesses, $F(1, 633) = 3.406, p = .065$, but there were no age differences in the stress measures. Hierarchical regression equations examining the interaction between age and stress on health

outcomes showed that age and the three stress measures had health effects in the expected directions, but only two of the interaction terms were even marginal (for stress ratings and age for minor illnesses, $R^2 = .01$, $F(1, 632) = 3.688$, $p = .055$, and for age and chronicity of stress for chronic illnesses, $R^2 = .01$, $F(1, 620) = 3.623$, $p = .057$). While the middle-aged group reported more minor illnesses, the stress-illness slope was steeper in the young adults, suggesting that their minor illnesses are more responsive to stress. However, the interaction for age group and chronicity of stress for chronic illnesses was in the opposite direction expected – although older adults in general had more chronic illnesses, younger adults reported more chronic illnesses with longer-lasting stress.

Personality at Midlife in the Baby Boomers: Individual Patterns of Change

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Generativity is considered by Erikson's theory to be the major psychosocial issue faced in midlife. Although a number of researchers in the past decade have explored aspects of generativity, none have provided longitudinal data based specifically on Eriksonian theory. In the present paper, a sample of adults in their mid-50s who were in the leading edge of the Baby Boom generation completed the Inventory of Psychosocial Development first when they were in their early 20s. There were three data collections involving a total of 54 respondents, although a larger sample of 106 provided data in the most recent (2000-2001) testing.

Both analysis of growth curves through hierarchical linear modeling and multivariate analyses of variance revealed an overall picture of stability. Replication of the data in a younger cohort studied from ages 20 to 42 in the years 1977 through 2000 revealed a similar pattern of stability. These findings were in contrast to the predictions of Erikson's theory, according to which continued growth would be expected midlife in generativity scores.

At the same time, the pattern of stability provided refutation for the notion of a midlife crisis, a concept that has generally been discarded in the adult development literature.

In contrast to the personality test data, examination of life changes in the domains of family and work revealed considerable shifts from the 20s through the early 50s for many participants in the sample. To examine the possibility that these life patterns were related to individual differences in generativity scores, cluster analyses were performed on generativity scores across the three test occasions. Five clusters were identified in this manner. A chi-square analysis of the cluster scores by groupings based on job and family stability vs. change identified groups with changes in generativity corresponding to these life changes, $\chi^2(12) = 20.81, p < .05$. Thus, although midlife scores in generativity revealed overall stability, there were individuals with changing scores corresponding to changing life experiences. These findings support the psychosocial element of Erikson's theory in linking changes in social context with changes in the component of personality predicted to reach ascendancy during the middle adult years.

Cognitive Functioning in Middle Age: Long and Short-term

Perspectives

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There is the common perception that there is considerable stability in cognitive functioning, particularly with regard to basic mental abilities, in middle age. Examination of average levels of performance from longitudinal data has tended to support this perception. However, the trajectory of cognitive functioning becomes more complex when multiple abilities are considered and short term (within middle age) versus long term (young adulthood to old age) time perspectives are considered.

A long term perspective indicates that the trajectory varies dramatically for different cognitive abilities. Perceptual speed demonstrates almost a negative linear trend beginning in young adulthood. Thus, on average, adults in middle age are functioning at a reliably lower level on speeded tasks compared to their performance in young adulthood. In contrast, the trajectory for crystallized abilities is a positive linear trend with peak level of performance on abilities such as vocabulary being reached in middle age. Middle aged adults are functioning reliably above their

performance in young adulthood. On average, fluid abilities such as inductive reasoning are showing stability in middle age, with relatively little improvement from young to middle adulthood. Verbal memory on average is stable from young to middle adulthood.

A somewhat modified perspective occurs if trajectories are examined within seven-year intervals in middle age, defined as 39 to 60 years. While there is modest improvement from the thirties to the forties on fluid abilities, very modest, non-reliable change is evident in some fluid abilities in the fifties.

Finally, significant cohort differences between parents of the baby boomers and baby boomers in ability functioning in middle age are evident. On all but numerical ability, baby boomers are functioning on average at a higher level than their parents at the same chronological ages. There is some suggestion of cohort differences in rate of decline.

Discussion will focus on whether in subjective assessments of cognitive changes in ability, middle age adults take the long term (from young adulthood) or short term (within the past seven years) perspective.

Daily Life More Stressful During Middle Adulthood?

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Midlife may best be characterized by change or adaptation in multiple arenas or life domains including the social world (e.g., caregiving for sick parents), the physical realm (e.g., increased risk of chronic diseases), and the work world (e.g., going back to work, beginning or changing careers). One way to chart these multiple paths is to examine the day-to-day stressors that coincide with such changes during adulthood. In this paper, we focus primarily on stressors that distinguish middle adulthood from earlier and later periods of adulthood.

Respondents were 1031 adults (aged 25-74) who completed short telephone interviews on each of eight consecutive evenings. Daily stressors were assessed two ways. First, trained coders rated open-ended descriptions of daily stressors into type of stressors (e.g. arguments, overloads) and who was involved in the stressor. Second, the appraised meaning of stressors

was assessed through respondents' ratings of severity of stressors as well as what was at stake for them as a result of daily stressors.

Overall, analyses showed that young (25-39 years) and middle-aged individuals (40-59 years) reported more frequent daily stressors than did older individuals (60-74 years). However, compared to both younger and older adulthood, midlife adults perceived their stressors as more severe, experienced a greater proportion of overloads, and were more likely to appraise stressors as disrupting their daily routines and altering how others felt about them. In addition, midlife was a time during which there were significant increases in the proportion of stressors posing financial risk, and in stressors involving children. Finally, midlife adults reported fewer frustrating stressors (i.e., stressors in which they felt little or no control).