

ARTICLES

## Women at Midlife: Implications for Theories of Women's Adult Development

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*Research on midlife transitions in women is reviewed, and implications for theories of women's adult development are discussed. Findings on menopause, the postparental period, and the roles of women at midlife are presented. Research on women at midlife suggests that new theoretical models of women's adult development should continue to emerge to accommodate the diversity of women's experiences at midlife. Several theoretical approaches are discussed in light of the research findings, and recommendations are made for future research on women's adult development. Implications for counselors working with women at midlife also are discussed.*

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The literature on women's adult development would benefit from a more thorough and accurate understanding of midlife transitions because "there is a lack of an integrated body of developmental theory and research from prior studies that is relevant to today's midlife women" (Fodor & Franks, 1990, p. 446). Considering the major studies on adult development at midlife, Gergen (1990) observed that it seems only men survive past the age of 40. In addition, certain myths about phenomena thought to occur for women during midlife, such as the menopausal change of life and the empty-nest syndrome, have little scientific basis (Azar, 1996). Another fundamental problem associated with relating the existing research findings to women today is a growing lack of agreement about how midlife should be defined. For example, does midlife "occur" during the same chronological age range for every woman regardless of her ethnicity, religious orientation, sexual orientation, marital status, employment status, or physiological makeup? Although specific age ranges and physiological changes have been proposed as midlife markers, some researchers have concluded that it is ultimately the individual who defines middle age (Sands & Richardson, 1986). Thus, "when" and "what" defines midlife seems to be quite complex for today's women.

Many of the research findings on women at midlife are essentially descriptions of the psychological effects of the transitions women tend to face between 40 and 60 years of

age (Barnett & Baruch, 1978; Berkun, 1986; Hunter, 1990; Raup & Myers, 1989). However, it has been difficult to draw conclusions from the findings because of the vast individual differences in women's experiences at midlife.

For many women, the middle years represent a wonderful chapter in life's story. They can be a time of enhanced self-esteem and self-acceptance, of gratification at having launched a family, and satisfaction at having fulfilled early career aspirations. . . . For other women, the middle years of 40-60 may be less positive. Children may be refusing to abandon the nest, elderly parents may require time and attention, and long-married partners may have lost their youthful appeal. Work can be drudgery rather than joy, and there may be less vocational success and achievement than one had hoped for. (Leiblum, 1990, p. 495)

Attempting to explain these vast differences has driven much of the recent research on women at midlife. Instead of continuing their futile attempts to identify what is commonly experienced among women at midlife, researchers have begun to investigate what factors may influence the different ways women experience these transitions. Much of this research has focused on menopause or the climacteric, and the empty-nest or postparental period. There is also a large body of research that has examined women at midlife from a role perspective. The following review highlights recent findings from these areas of research and suggests implications for emerging theories of adult women's development on the basis of these findings. In addition, implications for counseling women at midlife are also presented.

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It should be noted that the majority of research on women at midlife has investigated women who are White, married to men, and have children. Although some cross-cultural studies have been conducted and are reported here, there is a noticeable gap in the literature with respect to studies on women at midlife who are childless, single, disabled, lesbian, ethnic minorities, or members of extended family networks. Therefore, many of the conclusions drawn about women at midlife are only generalizable to women who fit a rather narrow profile. The following discussion demonstrates the ongoing need for research that considers varying lifestyle choices and circumstances of women at midlife.

## MENOPAUSE

Menopause has perhaps been the most thoroughly and frequently studied life transition associated with women at midlife. Berkun (1986) reported that researchers have generally viewed menopause as (a) increasing vulnerability to psychic breakdown, (b) a disease of deficiency, or (c) a normal event influenced by social factors such as culture and sex roles. Part of the explanation for these divergent views relates to the controversy around whether the decline in reproductive hormones during menopause leads to adverse symptoms and changes in psychological characteristics. Matthews et al. (1990) studied 541 midlife women for 3 years and found that menopause led to few changes in psychological characteristics. Only a decline in introspectiveness and an increase in reports of hot flashes were apparent. Thus, they concluded that the majority of healthy middle-aged women did not have negative mental health consequences related to menopause.

A similarly designed study revealed significant but small increases in depressed mood for women experiencing menopause (Hunter, 1990). However, careful analysis of the data further revealed that cognitive and social factors together with past depression accounted for 51% of the variance in depressed mood reported by menopausal women. The author concluded that "polarized theoretical views and methodological problems have impeded research on the menopause . . . and either biological or socio-cultural explanations have been sought [to explain the presence of depressive symptoms]" (Hunter, 1990, p. 357).

Krieger (1995) reported several research findings that suggest that the way women experience menopause is related to cultural factors. For example, Japanese women reported fewer physiological symptoms (such as hot flashes and night sweats) than did American women, rural Mayan women tended to look forward to menopause because it brought them relief from childbearing, and Swedish women tended to gain self-esteem and a stronger sense of identity after menopause (Krieger, 1995). In societies in which women's worth increases with the cessation of menstruation, women tend to savor and look forward to this phase of their lives (Berkun, 1986). Yet, although cultural and social influences cannot be underemphasized, "a rigid view that the ills of middle-aged women, both emotional and

physical, are all in the psyche, all in the hormones, or all in the environment is injurious to women" (Berkun, 1986, p. 383). The implication is that physiological, psychological, cultural, and environmental factors all need to be considered when attempting to explain a woman's experience of menopause.

It is rather ironic that menopause continues to be researched with such vigor. In an article published over 16 years ago, Notman (1979) concluded that menopause does not seem to be the central event for women at midlife. Rather, she argued that "midlife stresses are the result of a combination of personal, family, social, and biological variables" (p. 1270). One explanation for the continued emphasis on menopause in the literature is that women have traditionally been defined in terms of their biological capacities (Gergen, 1990). Thus, reproductive milestones have been stereotyped as being central and dominant when social and psychological factors may play equally significant roles in women's experiences in midlife (Notman, 1979). Mansfield and Voda (1993) also found that among White, middle-class, highly educated women, there was a serious shortage of accurate information about menopause and an absence of any sense of achievement or gained status associated with menopause. Destigmatizing menopause, providing positive role models, and disseminating information about what is physiologically "normal" during menopause (i.e., reducing the view of menopause as a disease) have all been suggested as ways to reduce inaccurate and stereotypical views of menopause (Mansfield & Voda, 1993).

The significance of menopause for women at midlife must not be minimized, however. It has been suggested that the myth of menopause as a difficult transition has been replaced by a myth that menopause is easy (Dan & Bernhard, 1989). In reality, however, "the truth for most women is somewhere in between" (p. 63). The individual differences in how this event is experienced are due to the complex interaction of many factors. Thus, a theory of women's development that allows for and explains this variation in experiences is needed.

## POSTPARENTAL PERIOD

The period of a woman's life after children have moved out of the home is referred to as the *postparental period*, or the *empty nest*. Raup and Myers (1989) cautioned against using the term "empty nest" to describe this phenomenon because, just as women have been referred to as "chicks" or "old hens," the term "empty nest" contributes to this "language of the barnyard" that promotes sexist and agist attitudes (Oliver, 1982, as cited in Raup & Myers, 1989, p. 180). Despite this observation, the empty nest has either been the focus of or mentioned in several studies published within the last decade (Adelmann, Antonucci, Crohan, & Coleman, 1989; Cooper & Gutmann, 1987; Mitchell & Helson, 1990).

Many feelings and reactions are frequently thought to occur in conjunction with the postparental period, including grief, depression, anxiety, worry, freedom, relief, and guilt.

However, the socialization of women, the mother role, and each woman's individual adaptation to that role are thought to contribute to how this period is experienced (Raup & Myers, 1989). Current societal norms and conditions also have been shown to play a significant role in how women describe their feelings during the postparental period. Adelman et al. (1989) conducted a study that compared the postparental experience of women from two cohorts, one born between 1898 and 1917 and the other born between 1917 and 1936. They found that well-being was equal for the two cohorts who were not experiencing the postparental period. However, for women who were experiencing the postparental period, it was found to be a negative experience for those in the earlier-born cohort but a positive experience for the later-born cohort. The authors believed that historical factors, such as the advent of the women's movement occurring when the later-born cohort reached middle age, affected how this developmental period was experienced.

According to Gallos (1989), experiencing a postparental "syndrome" (i.e., prolonged negative feelings in reaction to children leaving home) seems less likely with the changing expectations for women's careers and professional advancement. Women who continue working during child rearing may be adequately investing themselves in other roles that may lessen the impact of their children's departure from home (Raup & Myers, 1989). It is also likely that for women of lower socioeconomic status or who are members of an ethnic minority culture, strong extended family networks may diffuse any potentially negative effects of the postparental period (Raup & Myers, 1989). Thus, experiencing an "empty" home (i.e., empty nest) may not be applicable to some women at all. In fact, many women may feel burdened by caring for aging parents or other dependent relatives even after their children have left home. Sands and Richardson (1986) observed that the primary caretakers for the young as well as the old are middle-aged women.

Thus, the postparental period often may be experienced as a normative stressor rather than a syndrome, and identifying the variables that affect adjustment is especially important. Some of these individual variables include depth, breadth, and personal meaning of the maternal role; investment in alternative roles; level of self-esteem; opinion regarding children's success or lack of success with independence; and marital satisfaction (Raup & Myers, 1989). Consideration of multiple factors supports the finding that the postparental period does not seem to be universally problematic, but instead may act as a "trigger event" for some women by unveiling other issues, such as unresolved losses or poor coping skills (Black & Hill, 1984). It has been suggested, therefore, that researchers and clinicians focus on identifying the variables that put some women at risk for experiencing psychological distress during midlife (Black & Hill, 1984; Hunter, 1990; Raup & Myers, 1989). This consideration of social, cultural, and individual factors to explain women's experiences of the postparental period is reminiscent of the conclusions drawn with respect to un-

derstanding menopause as a similarly complex event. That is, there is a need for a perspective that can explain the diverse array of feelings experienced by women during this transition.

### ROLES OF WOMEN AT MIDLIFE

In reviewing the research on women, some theorists have looked beyond menopause and the postparental period in their analyses of women at midlife. Barnett and Baruch (1978) asserted that menopause and the postparental period have received disproportionate attention in the literature, and that focusing on women's reproductive role has ignored the importance of their role patterns. With respect to research on women's roles, Baruch and Barnett (1986) referred to the *scarcity hypothesis*, which suggests that women's well-being at midlife is impaired by role overload. In contrast, they described the *enhancement hypothesis*, which suggests that well-being at midlife benefits from multiple role involvement. Adopting a focus different from merely examining the quantity of roles, Baruch and Barnett conducted a study that measured occupancy and quality of the roles of paid worker, wife, and mother, with respect to the well-being (measured by indexes of self-esteem, depression, and pleasure) of midlife women. Controlling for age, education, and income, they found that role *occupancy* was unrelated to well-being, except occupying the role of paid worker significantly predicted self-esteem. Role *quality* significantly predicted well-being, except for the quality of the role of mother, which did not significantly predict pleasure.

Results of this study emphasize the need to examine the quality as well as the quantity of roles when determining psychological well-being of midlife women (Baruch & Barnett, 1986). Another study supported this conclusion by showing that, after age 21, increasing the number of roles women held did not have significant effects on well-being, but the quality of those roles, as assessed by marital satisfaction and status level achieved in the workforce, was associated with contentment and effective functioning (Helson, Elliot, & Leigh, 1990). Thus, it seems that well-being can be predicted only by considering the multiple factors that influence a woman's experience of her roles. In other words, it is not just how many or which roles a woman assumes, but the quality of her experience in those roles that accurately predicts her well-being. Biological, social, and psychological factors all affect the quality of the experience a woman has in a particular role. Findings such as these, which emphasize the importance of examining quality of roles as well as quantity of roles, provide further support for a flexible perspective of women's development.

### TOWARD NEW THEORIES OF WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT

Women's roles are changing and expanding rapidly. Can the existing theories of women's development keep pace? Gergen (1990) wondered whether *any* existing theory can

do justice to grandmothers in graduate school, new mothers at 40, and women with multiple careers and relational histories. Gergen partly blamed developmental psychology's failure to provide a more well-differentiated and enriched theory of women's development on the youth of the field. Gilbert (1993) added that women have been traditionally viewed as "uninteresting" to study because of the apparent predictability of their lives. But, more recently, the trajectory of a woman's life is far from predictable. For example,

Some women in their 40s and 50s are peaking in their careers, others have returned to school after rearing children, and others are struggling as single parents in a competitive workplace for which they may not be prepared educationally. Still others are having a first child or are caught in the "sandwich" of caring for children at home and aging parents. And still others are choosing other women as romantic and sexual partners. (Gilbert, 1993, p. 110)

Various new and existing theories have been referred to in explaining the diversity of women's experiences at midlife. For example, in a study of 30 Finnish women investigating the significance of their 50th birthdays, Niemela and Lento (1993) found that, for these women, reaching the age of 50 seemed to begin a process of *self-focused individuation*, which they defined as taking a step toward becoming independent from their husbands, children, and close friends and becoming able to forge more equal relationships with others. They observed that a woman's 50th birthday is one of many turning points in her life-long separation-individuation process (Niemela & Lento, 1993). In contrast, the self-in-relation theory rejects the necessity of the separation-individuation process and stresses instead the continued importance of relationships throughout women's lives (Surrey, 1991). This view of *relationship differentiation* refers to women growing within relationships and involves being "challenged to maintain connection and to foster, adapt to, and change with the growth of the other" (Surrey, 1991, p. 60).

Is one of these views "right" and the other "wrong?" Do women experience either separation individuation or relationship differentiation? It seems plausible not only that a particular woman's experiences may be better explained by one process than the other, but also that the very same woman may experience aspects of each process during the same transition! For example, it seems likely that a woman would report experiencing both a sense of loss (of relationship) and a sense of freedom (to individuate) when her last child leaves home. Thus, it is helpful to integrate multiple perspectives and approaches when attempting to accurately represent women's experiences at midlife.

Gallos (1989) described three possible approaches to the study of women's adult development. First, there is the institutional or structural perspective that focuses on social roles, policies, and conditions. Second, there is the social, anthropological perspective that focuses on cultural images and role expectations that shape choices. Third, there is the individual or "developmental" perspective that focuses on gender-specific ways people make sense of the world. Research on women at midlife reveals a great need for inte-

gration among these perspectives. It has been argued that multiple theoretical lines often advance understanding better than adherence to one theory (Turner, 1994). To appreciate the complexity of women's experiences at midlife requires perspectives that can integrate what has already been learned from the existing theoretical approaches.

Instead of pursuing the futile search to describe "the way things are," theorists need to continue to identify what factors influence how a woman experiences the middle years of her life. For example, for a particular woman, is menopause likely to be particularly problematic or experienced with relative ease? Given a particular set of biological, social, and psychological circumstances, emerging theories should be flexible enough to explain how these interact and result in a unique developmental path. Constructing theories that can consider all of these factors is admittedly a complex task, but given the multitude of roles and experiences that currently color women's lives, the continued emergence of new theories of women's adult development seems appropriate and necessary.

There have been many noteworthy attempts to promote new theoretical approaches to women's development that allow for flexibility and diversity. These fresh perspectives are often found in the research on gender and gender differences, yet they have important implications for theories of women's development. One example of a viewpoint that could possibly lay the groundwork for a new theory of women's development is the reciprocal perspective, which is an integration of individual and contextual perspectives on gender (Cook, 1993). According to Cook, the individual perspective conceptualizes gender as both an inborn and learned property of an individual, whereas the contextual perspective focuses on gender as it is socioculturally prescribed. The reciprocal perspective considers elements from both the individual and contextual perspectives by considering "how individuals deal with their ever-developing selves as women or men and the demands placed on them by their own evolving life circumstances" (Cook, 1993, p. 7). This perspective demands that multiple individual and sociocultural factors, as well as the interactions between them, be considered when understanding development through life as a woman (or a man).

Another emerging perspective that seems to hold promise for conceptualizing women's experiences at midlife is the personal construct model of adult development (Viney, 1992). This model is based on the constructivist approach that asserts that all people are constructors of their own reality and use personal constructs, or mental representations, to interpret and predict events (Viney, 1992). Kelly (1955) originally proposed his psychology of personal constructs as a theory of personality to guide practicing clinicians. This theory suggests that each person construes reality by making choices among dichotomous constructs (i.e., alternatives) that allow the person to further expand and define his or her construction system (Kelly, 1955). According to Viney, three assumptions underlie this theory: (a) Reality is construed and therefore variable and changing, not singu-

lar and stable; (b) thoughts and emotions are different but complementary ways of knowing; and (c) development occurs through an ongoing process of refinement of one's mental representations. Viney observed that these assumptions create a framework that supports a variety of changing developmental patterns throughout life. She added that

during transition, life events require change in both construing and behavior. . . . People create stories about these events and about their lives generally. These stories help them to find meaning and order and allow them to present themselves to others. The concept of narrative—the telling of one's own stories to both self and others—is thus important to this model of development. So is the socially construed or shared nature of these stories about development. (Viney, 1992, p. 73)

One notable strength of this approach is that it tends to avoid some of the traps that hinder other developmental theories. For example, it is historically and socially embedded, and it does not have the prescriptive focus of more traditional theories (Viney, 1992). Hare-Mustin and Marecek (1990) noted that the constructivist framework answers the questions of "Which is right?" and "Which is best?" by asking other questions such as "Right for whom?" and "Best for whom?" This approach seems to fit where research on women at midlife is today. That is, predicting how a woman will experience her midlife transitions is no longer a simple task of identifying what most women generally experience and assuming that will be true for her. The personal construct approach to women's adult development provides a flexible framework that can be used to understand and explain a woman's unique experience at midlife. At the same time, the theory is sensitive to socio-cultural influences that naturally affect both the process and content of how women construe their reality.

According to Hare-Mustin and Marecek (1990), postmodernism challenges the notion that there is one single truth or meaning of reality. By asserting that people invent their reality, constructivism challenges positivistic approaches that maintain that reality is fixed and uninfluenced by its observers (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1990). The constructivist approach can, therefore, be classified as a postmodern perspective. Postmodernism accepts and acknowledges "multiplicity, randomness, incoherence, indeterminacy, and paradox; . . . [it] describes a system of possibilities . . . [and asserts that] we are both the observers and creators of gender" (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1990, p. 56). Postmodern perspectives acknowledge the complexity involved when people are observing, creating, and constructing meanings with respect to "reality." If one's goal is to accurately represent the richness and diversity of women's developmental paths, postmodern perspectives offer a framework for understanding the complexity of the processes involved.

Although new theories of women's adult development continue to emerge, it is imperative that methodologically sound research on women at midlife continue to be conducted and the results used to validate newer, more flexible perspectives. Experiences of middle-aged women have

been overlooked often, or researchers have merely focused on the implications of their reproductive role. Fodor and Franks (1990) noted that "for today's older women, there is no guideline or even relevant lifespan developmental literature . . . hopefully the current generation of midlife and older women will provide some framework for the coming generations" (p. 445). There is a need not only for more research in general, but also for more thoughtful research on women at midlife that represents the diversity of today's women.

The field would benefit from future studies that investigate the applicability of emerging theories, such as the reciprocal perspective and the personal construct model, to women at midlife. Viney (1992) observed that the personal construct model of development suggests numerous hypotheses about how people conceptualize life events, but few of these hypotheses have been tested. There is a growing need to identify which theories most accurately describe what women of different lifestyles and ethnic backgrounds report about their experiences during their middle years. Knowing which theories are flexible enough to apply to women at midlife who are single, lesbians, just married, students, biracial, or of low socioeconomic status would be an important contribution to the study of women's adult development. Strengths from existing theories also should be identified and improved on as theoretical approaches continue to be refined. In essence, research on women's adult development would benefit from going beyond merely asking "Which theory is best?" and ask instead, "Best for whom?"

### IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELING

As discussed previously, the research on midlife transitions for women indicates that when and how development in middle age will be experienced is due to the interaction of individual, biological, and sociocultural influences. Thus, counselors treating women at midlife should be careful not to make assumptions about how these transitions are affecting their clients. Counselors need to identify and weigh the complex forces operating in the client's world to help the client better understand her unique experience of midlife and its transitions. This requires adopting a complex perspective and moving beyond existing theories of women's development that make outdated generalizations about how women experience midlife.

Sands and Richardson (1986) stated that resolving developmental conflicts is the goal of clinical practice with middle-aged women, and this involves an awareness and integration of contradictory feelings often associated with various midlife transitions. Given the mixed cultural messages and changing status of women in U.S. society, it is not surprising that women often report ambivalence about the changes they experience at midlife. A woman who has been juggling career and family may simultaneously experience a sense of loss and a sense of freedom when her children leave home. Such contradictions can lead to feelings of confusion, guilt, or self-doubt, so counselors should be sensi-

tive to the complexity within individuals, as well as the complexity among individuals as discussed here. Clients should be assured that their experiences at midlife can be both unique and similar to the experiences of their peers, and the various factors that may be contributing to their feelings should be explored (i.e., "My friend Jane had no trouble when her kids left home. Why is this such a struggle for me?"). At the same time, clients who report feeling contradictory emotions should be assured that ambivalence may be quite appropriate given their particular circumstances. For example, a mother of 10 children may understandably report feelings of loss and relief with the onset of menopause. The crucial point for counselors to keep in mind is to resist making assumptions about how a particular woman is experiencing a midlife transition. Instead, as the personal construct model would suggest, counselors should invite women to tell their stories and provide support for them during their meaning-construction process.

Raup and Myers (1989) pointed to the need for assessment tools and intervention strategies to identify and assist women at risk for experiencing difficulties during the postparental period (i.e., women who lack social support). In addition, Cook (1995) asserted that to understand a woman's experience in midlife, it is important to consider the personal meanings of the midlife events to her and how these meanings relate to her self-concept. This focus on construction of meaning is a critical component of the emerging perspectives discussed in the previous section. To help counselors facilitate this meaning-making process with women clients at midlife, Cook (1995) suggested the following strategies:

1. Consider whether broader psychological issues have been activated (i.e., childhood trauma).
2. Analyze the nature of events and personal meaning.
3. Identify challenges to the self and the life story.
4. Empower through
  - (a) analyzing the sociocultural context,
  - (b) strengthening personal resources, and
  - (c) providing support.
5. Support loss of role by
  - (a) affirming the commitments in their lives,
  - (b) exploring new ways to continue the lost role,
  - (c) helping to replace the role, and
  - (d) grieving the loss.
6. Assist in revised meaning-making through self-exploration.

These strategies are particularly useful because they are familiar to most counselors and are applicable to women of diverse backgrounds and lifestyles. For example, consider a childless, lesbian woman who seeks counseling because of conflicting feelings at the onset of menopause. She may benefit from a counselor who can assist her in considering what personal meaning the event has for her, help her examine the relevant sociocultural influences, support her in affirming the commitments in her life, and encourage her to revise the meaning she attributes to the event.

Women's experiences in today's society are more diverse than at any previous time in history. Women are gradually becoming freer to more fully embrace their own cultural backgrounds, career paths, and lifestyle choices. As Gilbert (1993) noted, "midlife women are myth-defying in their complexity" (p. 113). Thus, counselors must remember to examine their own myths and beliefs about women at midlife. Fodor and Franks (1990) stated that

we need to ask whether midlife and beyond is to be feared as a loss of youth and opportunity, a time for closing down and drying up; or is it a new prime of life, a time for renewal, getting rid of youthful preoccupations with appearance and body, a time to seek out new challenges, valuing wisdom, maturity, and new possibilities for growth and change? (p. 447)

Counselors should be prepared to encounter women at midlife whose situations and experiences seem foreign to them or are unexplained by existing theories of women's development. They should be able to "identify the unique constellation of factors comprising an individual's experience, with the goal of empowering her to face the challenges of her life with confidence and energy" (Cook, 1995, p. 1). As more women at midlife tell their stories and have them listened to and affirmed, appreciation of the complexity of women's midlife transitions will surely deepen.

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