A Life Span Developmental Perspective on Psychosocial Development in Midlife

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Research in life span development suggests that middle adulthood is a time of stability, discovery, and psychosocial growth. This review applies the life span developmental perspective to advance counselors' understanding of psychosocial development during middle adulthood, specifically, midlife adults' sense of self, perceptions of aging, developmental tasks, and contexts.

Keywords: middle adulthood, life span development, psychosocial development, midlife adults

The fields of life span human development and counseling share the goal of empowering diverse individuals and families in living healthy, satisfying, and meaningful lives (Geidner, 2009; Kaplan, Tarvydas, & Gladding, 2014). The life span developmental perspective studies patterns of development from conception to death to foster positive adaptation and resilience in people of all ages (Overton, 2015). Although middle adulthood (ages 40 to 65 years) spans about one third of the life span, it is little researched relative to childhood and older adulthood (Lachman, 2015). Myths about midlife abound, and it is often portrayed colloquially as a time of crisis and loss. Research instead suggests that middle adulthood is a time of stability, discovery, and growth (Lachman, 2015). This article provides an overview of the life span developmental perspective and its application in understanding midlife adults' sense of self and aging, developmental tasks, and immersion in a system of contexts. An understanding of psychosocial development in middle adulthood can aid counselors in their work with middle-aged adults as clients and family members.

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THE LIFE SPAN DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE

Development is a process of systematic changes and continuities occurring within a person from conception to death (Overton, 2015). It is multidimensional, consisting of multiple interacting domains of functioning (e.g., physical, cognitive, psychosocial). Changes in one area of development hold implications for other areas. For instance, physical changes in midlife, such as the need to use reading glasses, may influence psychosocial development, such as a sense of self (Wray, 2007). Developmental change is multidirectional and characterized by both gains and losses. For example, laboratory studies suggest that over midlife, adults begin to demonstrate mild cognitive declines in areas such as attention, working memory, and processing speed, yet simultaneously show longitudinal gains in knowledge, experience, and wisdom (Nisbett et al., 2013). Perhaps the most influential life span principle—consistent with most approaches to counseling—is that individuals are not islands unto themselves; they are immersed in context (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). That is, development is the result of multiple ongoing dynamic interactions between individuals and the system of contexts in which they are embedded, including family, peer group, and work.

The life span developmental approach can be applied to understand psychosocial development in middle adulthood, specifically, the dynamic interactions among individuals' self-constructions, developmental tasks, and immersion in multiple contexts. As shown in Figure 1, midlife adults' sense of self is multidimensional and influenced by their perception of aging, their sense of having aged, and their views of whether midlife is a time of crisis (Kornadt & Rothermund, 2015; Levy, 2009; Mock & Eibach, 2011). These aspects of self reciprocally influence adults' progression on developmental tasks central to midlife: identity, generativity, and the search for meaning (Erikson, 1959; Heintzelman & King, 2014). Adults are also embedded in multiple interacting contexts (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Overton, 2015).

AGING AND THE MIDLIFE SELF

Midlife adults' awareness of aging and their attitudes about aging hold implications for their sense of self and their views of their aging process (Kornadt & Rothermund, 2015). Aging is often depicted negatively, as something to avoid, dread, and counteract (Degges-White, 2001). Adults of many cultures associate negative physical and mental traits with old age (Löckenhoff et al., 2009), and negative attitudes toward old age tend to peak in midlife (Davis & Friedrich, 2010; McBride & Hays, 2012). Aging stereotypes often exist without awareness yet can become internalized by midlife adults as self-fulfilling self-stereotypes that may determine adults' aging process (Levy, 2009). The degree to which
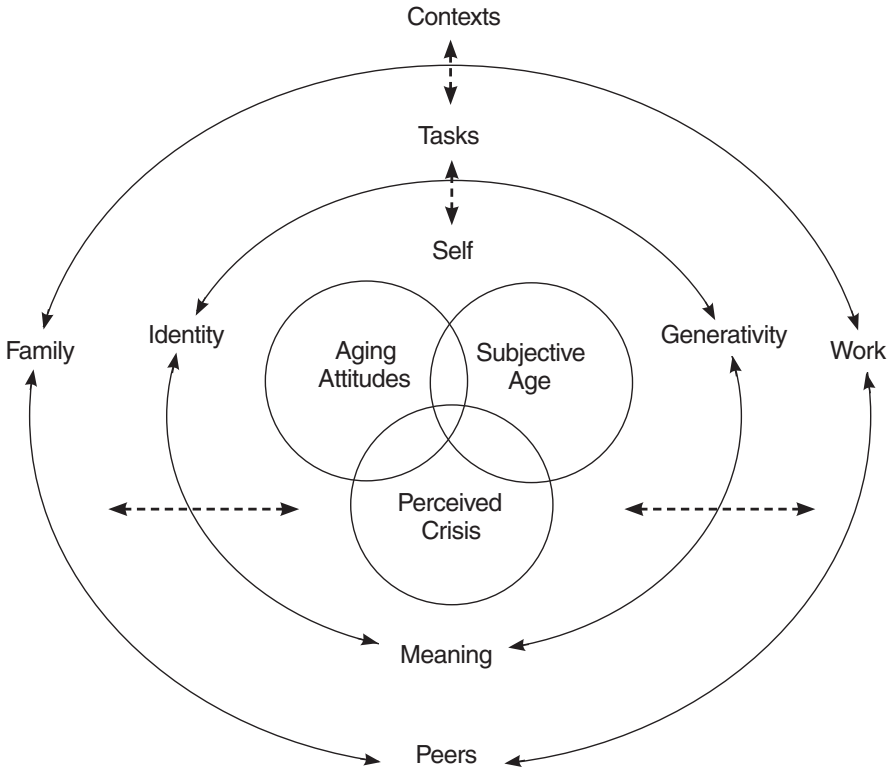
Contexts

Tasks

Self

Family   Identity   Aging Attitudes   Subjective Age   Generativity   Work

Perceived Crisis

Meaning

Peers

FIGURE 1

**Life Span Developmental Perspective on Psychosocial
Development in Midlife**

middle-aged adults internalize aging stereotypes may depend on their sense of having aged (Mock & Eibach, 2011).

Subjective age, how old one feels, is a major component of the sense of self that varies across the adult years. Adults tend to view themselves as younger than their years, and the discrepancy between subjective and chronological age increases over adulthood (Barrett & Montepare, 2015). This pattern has been observed in 18 countries, suggesting that perceiving oneself as younger than one's chronological age may serve an adaptive function in development, perhaps as a compensatory strategy to counteract the negative cultural messages associated with aging (Weiss & Lang, 2012). Midlife adults who view themselves as younger than their chronological age tend to score higher on measures of well-being, mental health, and life satisfaction (Ryff, 2014). Subjective age

and attitudes about aging interact; an older subjective age predicts poor life satisfaction when adults have negative attitudes about aging, but not when they report more positive attitudes (Mock & Eibach, 2011).

The most enduring belief about midlife with the potential to shape adults' self-conceptions is that it is a time of turmoil as adults recognize their mortality. However, the research literature suggests that tumult is the exception rather than the rule, with estimates of as few as 10% of adults experiencing a midlife crisis (Robinson & Wright, 2013). Middle-aged adults vary in the extent to which they experience turmoil, rooted in their characteristics and contexts. Adults who experience a crisis in midlife have often experienced personal upheavals and psychological problems earlier in life (Freund & Ritter, 2009). Most individuals who experience a crisis by the age of 50 tend to attribute it to challenging and confusing life events, such as career and marital transitions, rather than age (Wethington, Kessler, & Pixley, 2004). Changes in circumstances and contexts (e.g., job loss, illness, residential change) occur at all times in adulthood, triggering responses that some adults and their families interpret as midlife crises and others as turning points in life (Beutel, Glaesmer, Wiltink, Marian, & Brähler, 2010). Regardless of whether adults experience change as a turning point or crisis, research suggests that midlife is a time of increasing life satisfaction, self-esteem, and well-being (Lachman, 2015).

DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS OF MIDLIFE

Central to life span developmental theory is the assumption that individuals face developmental tasks all throughout life. Adults' physical, cognitive, and psychosocial capacities influence their approach to developmental tasks, as do their self-constructs and the contexts in which they are embedded (Overton, 2015). In midlife, adults face the psychosocial tasks of finding a sense of meaning in life, revising and reconstructing a sense of identity given the life lived, and developing a sense of generativity.

A meaningful life has purpose and makes sense to the person living it (Heintzelman & King, 2014). Although adults of all ages seek to make sense of their experiences and find meaning in their lives, middle-aged adults tend to report greater immersion in the search for meaning than do young or older adults (Ko, Hooker, Geldhof, & McAdams, 2016). Turning points in life, the significant transitions often interpreted as crises, may spark meaning-making attempts (Park, 2010). For example, research with over 43,000 people from 100 countries suggested that adults tend to report searching for a sense of meaning before milestone birthdays (e.g., years that end with zero, signifying exiting and entering a new decade of life; Alter & Hershfield, 2014). Self-reported sense of meaning in life tends to increase from midlife into old age and predicts well-being, self-reported health, life satisfaction, and enthusiasm for life (Heintzelman

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& King, 2014). Adults who have found a sense of meaning in life perceive their lives as having inherent value or worth, which can influence how they navigate other developmental tasks such as consolidating a sense of identity.

First encountered in adolescence, individuals revisit the task of identity development throughout the life span (Erikson, 1959). The experience of turning points and normative age-related changes in midlife can prompt growth and change in identity (Moen & Wethington, 1999). Midlife changes often trigger reflection, the tendency to look back on accomplishments in light of youthful goals. Adults make sense of their experiences, views, and purpose by generating narratives in which they tell the story of their lives, uniting the past and imagined future, and instilling a sense of order and meaning into their lives (McAdams, 2014). As compared with young adults, midlife adults tell more sophisticated autobiographical stories and express deeper insights into how their experiences have shaped them (Pasupathi & Mansour, 2006). Adults who narrate their lives as stories of personal redemption with both failure and growth tend to clarify their sense of identity (McAdams, 2014). Adults with a secure sense of self may look beyond themselves to consider how to help others, awakening their drive toward generativity.

Generativity is the quintessential task of midlife, characterized by a concern for and commitment to giving back to the world and promoting the well-being of future generations (Erikson, 1959). Adults fulfill generative needs through parenting, teaching, mentoring, and community service. Generativity concerns rise over the midlife years for adults in many cultures, with middle-aged adults reporting more concern for others, providing more emotional support and unpaid assistance to others, and expressing a greater interest in civic responsibility than young adults (Hofer et al., 2014). Generativity holds benefits for the midlife adult, including positive affect, life satisfaction, work satisfaction, and well-being (Schoklitsch & Baumann, 2012). Although all adults experience shifts in their sense of self as they face the normative tasks of midlife, their approach and achievement of these tasks is influenced by the sociocultural contexts in which they are embedded (Moen & Wethington, 1999).

MIDLIFE CONTEXTS

Throughout life, individuals are immersed in multiple contexts that intersect and interact dynamically (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Overton, 2015). Perhaps the most prominent context for midlife adults is family. Midlife adults are faced with a unique set of transitions that occur as children become adults, parents age, and spouses retire. The timing of family role transitions and the degree to which they are expected influences adaptation (Moen & Wethington, 1999).

Most adults ages 45 and older are married, including about one half (53%) in first marriages and 16% in second marriages (Aughinbaugh, Robles, & Sun, 2013). Couples with adolescent children tend to experience high levels of marital

conflict and lower levels of marital satisfaction relative to other periods in life (Cui & Donnellan, 2009). Marital satisfaction fluctuates, but it tends to increase as children move out of the home—a period of life when household income tends to rise and spouses have more time to spend with each other and get better at understanding each other (Duba, Hughey, Lara, & Burke, 2012; Gorchoff, John, & Helson, 2008). Although divorce has become more common in midlife, rising 14% since 1990 for adults ages 40 to 49 and 105% in adults over age 50, middle-aged adults are half as likely to divorce as young adults (Stepler, 2017).

Parenting tasks shift in midlife as children move out of the home. Rather than evoke crisis, the empty nest is often accompanied by a sense of personal freedom, reflection, and goal pursuit (Bouchard, 2018). The return of adult children to the nest poses adjustment challenges for midlife parents (Mitchell, 2016). In contrast, births to midlife mothers are increasingly common. For example, births to women ages 40 to 44 increased 11% over the last decade (Martin, Hamilton, & Osterman, 2017). Adults who experience first-time parenthood in midlife may find that their experiences do not match those of other parents or those of their same-age peers. The advantage to off-time parenthood is that many midlife parents report feeling better prepared and more satisfied with life upon the birth of their children than younger parents (Mac Dougall, Beyene, & Nachtigall, 2012).

Becoming a grandparent is a common milestone for adults in their late 40s and early 50s (on average, age 49 for women and 52 for men in the United States; Leopold & Skopek, 2015). The grandparent role brings new responsibilities and challenges, such as expectations for child care and the provision of emotional, tangible, and, often, financial assistance. Adults may juggle the grandparent role alongside career, romantic relationships, friendships, and other family relationships, with the potential for added stress (Antonnucci, Birditt, Sherman, & Trinh, 2011).

As their parents age, midlife adults shift into new roles. An egalitarian relationship in early midlife may transition to a caregiver partnership in late midlife. Middle-aged adults are often described as sandwiched between raising children and caring for aging parents (Grundy & Henretta, 2006). The sandwich metaphor is partially true. Although adult children are twice as likely as elderly parents to receive financial support from midlife adults, most adults report providing emotional support to multiple generations (Friedman, Park, & Wiemers, 2015). Emotional support exerts a toll, and midlife adults are vulnerable to role overload, which is associated with anxiety, exhaustion, depression, and a reduced sense of control (Wang, Shyu, Chen, & Yang, 2011). Those whose caregiving responsibilities increase, such as in the care of a family member with dementia, may be especially vulnerable.

The nature of emotional and physical support that midlife adults provide varies with cultural norms (Haberkern & Szydlik, 2010). For example, Hispanic and Latino families often emphasize the value of *familism*, placing family before all else and recognizing the duty of family members to care for one another,

regardless of personal, financial, or legal issues (Carlo, Koller, Raffaelli, & De Guzman, 2007). Ethnic minority and immigrant families and those in contexts of low socioeconomic status are more likely to live together in three-generation households, influenced by cultural norms and often necessity (Casper, Florian, Potts, & Brandon, 2016). Likewise, grandparent involvement in financial and caregiving roles is high in many minority households, including those of Chinese, Korean, Mexican American, Native American, and Canadian Aboriginal heritage (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Grandmothers may take on caregiver, mentor, and disciplinarian roles. Contextual differences in caregiving norms extend beyond childhood. African American, Asian American, and Hispanic and Latina/o adults at all income levels are more likely than European American non-Hispanic adults to provide aging parents with financial and caregiving assistance (Montgomery, Rowe, & Kosloski, 2007).

The family context tends to take center stage, yet adults interact in other contexts that influence their development, most notably peer and work contexts. Midlife adults turn to close friends for support with life transitions, turning points, and everyday hassles such as workplace stress (Birditt, Antonucci, & Tighe, 2012). Although middle-aged adults spend less time with their friends and have fewer friends as compared with younger and older adults, friendships continue to be important sources of social support and are associated with well-being, positive affect, and self-esteem (Wrzus, Zimmermann, Mund, & Neyer, 2016). As adults' future time perspectives shrink, they tend to emphasize meaning in their relationships, become more selective, have smaller social circles, and have more fulfilling friendships (Fingerman & Charles, 2010). The peer context serves as an important buffer to work and family-related stressors; however, sustaining supportive relationships in the face of multiple demands is challenging.

The work context is often central to adults' sense of competence and achievement and integral to the construction of self. Middle-aged adults are more likely to be employed than young adults (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017), but earn less and are less financially secure than prior generations (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Despite financial instability, job satisfaction tends to increase in middle adulthood (Dobrow Riza, Ganzach, & Liu, 2016). Whereas young adults tend to gravitate toward extrinsic rewards, middle-aged employees tend to place greater importance on the intrinsic rewards of work, such as friendships with coworkers, job satisfaction, self-esteem, and the sense that one is making a difference (Kooij, De Lange, Jansen, Kanfer, & Dikkers, 2011). This shift corresponds to midlife adults' increasing search for meaning and advances in generativity (Allan, Duffy, & Douglass, 2014).

IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELORS

An understanding of midlife adults' views of their aging process and supports can aid counselors in providing care that addresses adults' developmental

needs. Human growth and development is a core area of counselor education (Kaplan et al., 2014), but middle adulthood is an understudied period of the life span (Lachman, 2015). Given that myths about midlife and negative stereotypes about aging proliferate, it is important that counselors carefully assess their knowledge and beliefs about middle age (McBride & Hays, 2012). In constructing an identity, counselors integrate their personal and professional selves; personal views and knowledge about midlife are implicit to professional activities (Degges-White & Stoltz, 2015). Graduate seminars and continuing education can provide advanced education about normative adult development, including changes in physical, cognitive, and psychosocial domains. Continuing education can aid counselors in constructing developmentally appropriate expectations for midlife clients and establishing a framework for fostering wellness across the life span (Fullen, 2016). Transformative learning experiences that immerse participants in casework, reflective writing, and group discussions promote self-reflection and prompt counselors to recognize the feelings and meanings they ascribe to midlife development and aging (Shuler & Keller-Dupree, 2015). In turn, counselors can educate clients about normative development and use reflective methods to encourage clients to explore their attitudes and biases about aging and interpret their experiences in ways that promote the construction of a healthy, meaningful, and adaptive sense of self (Duba, Kindsvatter, & Priddy, 2010).

Counselors can apply narrative approaches to support midlife adults in finding meaning, revising identity, and fostering generativity. Individuals are naturally driven to create, retrieve, and tell self-narratives, stories of their past, present, and future (Burgin & Gibbons, 2016). The life stories constructed in early adulthood shift with experiences, including adversity, milestone events, and the biological and psychosocial changes associated with aging. The counselor's role is to listen for contradictions and exceptions in the story, pose questions comparing past, current, and future selves and goals, and help clients integrate exceptions and construct alternative stories (Bohlmeijer & Westerhof, 2013). An awareness of midlife adults' changing sense of self and the major psychosocial tasks of middle age can frame discussions and interpretations of client narratives. For example, counselors may help adults reframe life stories that emphasize negative experiences into turning points for growth and opportunities to demonstrate resilience, constructing meaning from adversity and encouraging a more complex and integrated sense of identity. The ultimate goal is to help the client find continuity between the past and present and gain insight into how they have developed over their lives and become the person they are now (Bohlmeijer & Westerhof, 2013). Adults who successfully navigate the psychosocial tasks of midlife can integrate and make sense of positive and negative life events to construct empowering life stories that enhance growth.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Although it is afforded less attention than other periods in life, middle adulthood is a vital time of psychosocial growth (Lachman, 2015). Research needs center on understanding the dynamic interactions among adults' sense of self, developmental tasks, and their immersion in contexts. Middle-aged adults' perspectives on aging and sense of having aged influence their self-constructions (Barrett & Montepare, 2015). Although negative attitudes toward old age are common, it is unknown whether adults characterize midlife with aging stereotypes or how such stereotypes might be internalized and influence subjective age. Adults' self-constructions reciprocally influence their approach to and success in achieving developmental tasks, such as achieving a sense of generativity. The biological indicators of aging or developmental milestones of midlife, such as a child leaving home, can trigger a reconfiguration of identity and a search for meaning in life (Alter & Hershfield, 2014). Further work is needed to understand the processes of meaning making in middle adulthood, as well as how the search for meaning interacts with the development of identity and generativity.

Contextual factors, such as differences in family composition, responsibilities, and support, hold implications for how adults experience and adjust to the challenges and tasks of middle adulthood. Although it is conceptually clear that culture, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status influence how people progress through midlife (Wray, 2007), scholars know little about how diversity interacts with the developmental tasks and roles of midlife (Lachman, 2015). That is, not only is middle adulthood understudied relative to other periods in life, but research with diverse populations of adults is limited (Evans & Ramsay, 2015).

The most well-researched proximal context for midlife adults is the family, with emphasis on changing relationships with children, spouses, and parents. However, off-time parenting—specifically, becoming a parent in midlife—is understudied. Similarly, there is much to learn about the peer and work contexts of middle adulthood. For example, research indicates that during adulthood, individuals shift toward emphasizing quality over quantity in relationships; however, much of this research is with older adults (Fingerman & Charles, 2010). Likewise, research on the work context tends to be insular, focusing on person-centered factors such as job satisfaction and well-being. Given the dynamic cascading effects of context on development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Overton, 2015), research highlighting person–context and context–context interactions is essential.

CONCLUSION

From a life span perspective, adaptation in middle adulthood is influenced by multiple domains of development, success in navigating developmental tasks,

and individuals' interactions in a dynamic web of contexts. At all ages, people influence their own development as they engage in the various settings in which they are immersed. Each of these exchanges offers opportunities for growth, adaptation, and plasticity. A life span perspective and an awareness of the many facets of midlife development can help counselors as they work to empower clients in all the settings in which they live.

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