To preface our class discussions on middle and later adulthood, we should note that increases in U.S. life-expectancy (and other countries’ life-expectancy) have blurred the boundaries of different life-stage labels. For example, age 65 used to signal retirement and “old age,” but now many people work into their 70s and 80s.

Basic Issues (Lachman, 2004)

- Middle adulthood considered by many scholars to be the least-studied part of the lifespan
- Ages 40-60 “typically considered middle-aged” (p. 311), but 10-year buffer on either end
- Sizable proportions of people 65-69 (~50%) & in their 70s (~33%) consider themselves middle-age
- Middle-age individuals may simultaneously consider themselves to be thriving in some ways, but declining in others (see upcoming slide on the book Life Reimagined)
- Key concerns at midlife:
  - Health (“generally good,” but medical conditions increase over time; menopause)
  - Cognitive functioning (Lachman doesn’t use the terms “fluid” and “crystallized” intelligence, but she discusses similar ideas)
  - Work/retirement, finances
  - Family (“Empty Nest,” grandparenthood, caring for elderly parents/“Sandwich Generation”)
  - Generativity (Erikson; guiding younger generations, imparting one’s wisdom)
- Caution re aging vs. cohort effects (see Figure 2 and prior paragraph in linked article)

• Notion of a “midlife crisis” (MLC)
  o Consists of phenomena such as “existential angst,” “panicked dread of death,” “unattained dreams,” and “fumbling journey to reclaim [one’s] youth” (p. 21)
  o Research from 1960’s & ’70’s suggested MLC was quite widespread (e.g., 80% of men; Levinson, 1978)
  o More recent, refined measurements suggest ~ 10% have MLC
  o Percent with MLC may be inflated if respondents define it in terms of negative events in midlife (e.g., job loss, divorce), rather than psychological/behavior states described above

• Positive aspects of midlife (quoting Lachman): “It typically can be the peak of earnings, ...the peak in terms of respect and being looked up to and being able to reason and solve problems... ...[P]hysically, people are typically doing pretty well, too. For many people, it really is the best years of life” (p. 26).

• Even with these positive developments and relative rarity of actual MLC’s, self-reported happiness dips in midlife, yielding a U-shaped pattern of happiness throughout the lifespan (here, here, and here).

• How to reconcile happy and unhappy aspects of midlife? Hagerty suggests a “mixed happiness, a certain poignancy that recognizes that things are not perfect, nowhere near as perfect as you thought they’d be when you were twenty-one, but they are pretty good” (p. 29).

• Quote from lifespan researcher George Vaillant: “Even a hopeless midlife can blossom into a joyous old age” (p. 40).
Focus on Generativity

Mid-life stage of Erikson’s theory of the lifespan

Hagerty (Life Reimagined) defines generativity as:

…altruism in a specific phase of life, one that can put more runs on the board than the altruism of youth or old age… anyone can volunteer at any point in life… The type of generativity I favor draws on skills, passions, and character honed over four, five, six decades, which make each of us a unique individual with distinctive assets and ideas to pass along. I will call this “platinum generativity”… (pp. 274-275).

Loyola Generativity Scale (McAdams & colleagues)

Generativity within a broader perspective on personality: Traits (e.g., shyness, creativity), motives/goals (including generativity), and narrative identities:


Work and Retirement

- Labor force participation by age group and year
- Percent of people retiring at different ages
- Effect of financially supporting grown children on parents’ retirement
- Retirement Preparation Checklist (Kentucky Teachers Retirement)
- Deciding when to retire (here, here, here, and here)
Dating, Relationships, Marriage, and Divorce at Midlife

U.S. Marital Status by Age
(Never-Married, Married, Divorced-Separated, Widowed)


Internet Resources

- MIDUS (Midlife in the U.S.) dataset, publications