

A Critical Examination of Middle Adulthood

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Introduction

Developmental theories are instrumental to the field of social work as these theories have not only provided explanations for the complexities of human life but have given social work a foundation for interpreting the situations that occur in the field. While these theories may not be all-encompassing, they do provide extensive information that can be applied strategically. One theory in particular that has provided a significant framework for conceptualizing and understanding development is the life span theory. With increasing life expectancy, social workers are more frequently needing to strategically utilize this theory to compensate for the corresponding societal changes affecting people's development (Hutchison, 2015). One life stage, in particular, middle adulthood, has been considerably affected by the growing life expectancy and societal changes, and social workers are increasingly turning to this theory for solutions. Therefore, this paper will investigate middle adulthood by critically examining three "middle adults" using life span theory through frameworks of relationships, employment and biological, physical and mental health changes.

Background

As noted earlier, due to increasing life expectancy rates and changing social climates, this group of individuals is facing new challenges that are affecting their development. As a result, it is important to examine the ways in which their spirituality, relationships, and biological, physical and mental health changes have significantly influenced the development of middle adults. For the purpose of this paper, middle adulthood will be considered anyone from 40 to 64 years of age and Hutchison's definition of the life span theory will be utilized to formulate the analysis. According to Hutchison (2015), the life span theory is the idea that

development is continuous and based upon lifelong interactions between the person and their environment as well as the understanding that development is a combination of gains and losses.

Foundational Understanding of Middle Adulthood

Relationships

By applying the life span theory to middle adulthood and using a relationship framework, it is evident the main challenges for this group corresponds with increasing life expectancy. Increasing life expectancy has created the contemporary cultural phenomenon that has dubbed middle adulthood as the "sandwich group" (Hutchison, 2015). This "sandwiching" is the idea that middle adults are between two generations, the growing youths and older adults (Hutchison, 2015). While this phenomenon seems positive at face value by having multiple generations living at the same time, it has introduced new stressors to middle adulthood and as a result affected their development (Hutchison, 2015). Previously, older members of a family or community were solely tasked for the most part with caring for the young. However, now it seems many people in middle adulthood are given additional responsibility and are having to care for their parents along with their children. Additionally, along with the increasing caretaking responsibilities, middle adults are now further tasked with mediating the cultural differences between the two generations as well. This responsibility is further exacerbated for middle adults in "mixed families", where older adults may have been born outside the U.S. and youth in the U.S. causing significant cultural tension in the household (Hutchison, 2015) As a result, when viewing middle adulthood through a relationship lens, it seems this "sandwiching" has had a negative effect on this group's development. This increasing responsibility has led to increasing stressors which in turn have ultimately created higher levels of mental and physical fatigue for many middle adults (Hutchison, 2015).

Employment

Additionally, while middle adulthood was widely known as a period in which people were at peak points in their jobs, this is widely no longer the case. By incorporating an employment lens to middle adulthood, it is evident that increasing unemployment pressures have fueled ageist bias toward this group in the U.S. (Applewhite, 2016) Group members increasingly finding themselves isolated in the workplace and unable to find work once they lose their jobs (Applewhite, 2016). According to Applewhite (2016), while people between 50 and 65 years of age have relatively the same unemployment rates as youths leaving college, it takes them about three times longer to find employment. Additionally, the majority make a fifth of what they did previously when they do find employment (Applewhite, 2016).

Biological, Physical, and Mental Health Changes

With increasing household responsibilities and difficulties in the workplace, there has been a complex culmination of effects relating to this group's biological, physical, and mental health status. These societal changes have led to an increase in the negative physical and mental stressors for this age group. High unemployment rates and increased family responsibilities have been linked to increases in anxiety and depression rates (Hutchison 2015; Applewhite, 2016). Many middle adults especially those of color, suffer higher rates of chronic illness such as high blood pressure, hypertension, and high cholesterol levels (Hutchison, 2015). Much of these stressors can be traced back to chronological biological decline and environmental factors such as caretaking stress (Hutchison, 2015). In fact, the responsibilities involved in caretaking have been described as so strenuous, that caretakers on average die about seven years earlier

(Applewhite, 2016). Middle adults also face significant physical decline, they may experience joint pains, changes in their skin, and loss of muscle mass (Hutchison, 2015).

Yet, despite these disadvantages, people in middle adulthood do experience significant positive health changes as well. While it is commonly acknowledged that people in this age group are going through a "midlife crisis" or perpetually in a menopausal state, many are experiencing increases in their physical and mental capacities (Gurney, 2011). Although, as mentioned earlier, difficulties and challenges do arise as they tend to in any developmental stage, by no means do the majority of people experience a high level crisis and women are not perpetually going through menopause at this stage (Gurney, 2011). Additionally, middle adulthood despite ageist stereotypes has been recorded as the peak of ones "inductive reasoning, spatial orientation and verbal memory" (Hutchison, 2015, p. 333). Also, a study in Germany determined that middle adults have increased levels of crystallized intelligence (Hutchison, 2015). Therefore, it seems evident that despite many of the difficulties that have arisen due to environmental changes, whether it be familial or related to employment, middle adulthood is a developmental period of complexity, one with significant positive resilience and advancements.

Interview Context

Based on this foundation of contemporary middle adulthood, interviews were performed with three individuals in this age group. The three individuals will be asked six of the following questions:

1. How do you experience your age?
2. How does your age define you?
3. How does your age interact with other facets of your identity?
4. How does your age impact your relationships?

5. How would you define your health status?
6. How does your age interact with labor and employment?
7. Do you feel like your age? And what does that mean to you?
8. What would you change about the past?
9. How do you envision your future?
10. What do you want people to know about middle adulthood?

The responses to these questions were not only intriguing but validated some of the earlier content mentioned about middle adulthood. However, while much of the information and understandings about middle adulthood were validated, they did represent the complexity and diverse experiences of middle adulthood.

Information of Participants

All of the participants were native-born, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied and white. Two were male, J.A. and M.D., and the last female R.D. J.A. is 62 and identifies as German-American, upper-middle class, and single and is the caretaker of his mother whom he lives with. M.D. is 47 and R.D. is 49. They are married to each other, have a combined income that categorizes them as middle class, and are Italian-Americans who have two kids. They are also caretakers for R.D.'s parents who live with them as well.

R.D. Interview Summary

R.D.'s experience of her age was certainly complex and immensely tied to her practices being part of the "sandwich" group. For one, while she seemed to consider aging as a natural phenomenon, she also associated it with being a debilitating process as well. It is likely her standpoint on aging is represented by her identities as a woman and caretaker. As a woman, she was very explicit in her desire of reflecting a youth-oriented appearance, which may be tied to

the way our society polices femininity and vilifies aging standards of beauty (Colleen, 2014; Applewhite, 2016). She stated, "I die my hair weekly now and use a lot of beauty facial crèmes" indicating her desires to mask her aging (D. R., personal communication, April 7, 2018).

Additionally, the majority of her conversation revolved around the caretaking of her father. It seemed the effort of taking care of her father has contributed to her negative view on aging which has been compounded by societal standards of femininity. In addition, almost ironically, while R.D. had just received employment in the last few years, she seemed almost exclusively viewed middle adulthood and especially aging negatively.

M.D. Interview Summary

M.D.'s experience of his age was similar but for different reasons. While M.D. viewed middle adulthood as "boring", he seemed to internalize family highly. This provided significant positive affirmation to his aging process (D. M., personal communication, April 7, 2018). He states "You want to know what my age means? It means work, eat, and sleep. That's the jest of it"(D. M., personal communication, April 7, 2018). However, unlike R.D. he did not view his role as a negative or debilitating factor. He expressed that being around his family is when he feels the happiest. Like many middle adults from immigrant backgrounds, family and community was highly valued and seemed to have served as a protective factor for M.D. (Hutchinson, 2015). Additionally, unlike R.D. who seems to be physically and mentally exhausted from caretaking, M.D. appears to enjoy physical labor. In fact, he described his employment as having a positive influence on his health: "who needs the gym when you have two jobs and a family" (D. M., personal communication, April 7, 2018). While his manual labor jobs may be tiring they may, in fact, be maintaining his health, which is evident by the research that states physical activity as

being a way to offset much of the biological and physiological declines that occur during the aging process (Hutchison, 2014).

J.A. Interview Summary

J.A. understands aging as a multifaceted combination of gains and losses. He experiences work solely as a function of survivability. He expresses extreme eagerness to reach retirement age and leave the workforce completely. Interestingly, unlike the other participants who did not speak about their mental capacity much, J.A. expressed significant mixed feelings. He was deeply concerned with his memory and inability to remember and learn tasks as quickly as he used to. Although, he does try to offset this mental decline by challenging himself. In fact, J.A. invests in a lot of the newest 21st-century technology, which he states many of his younger coworkers believe is "strange". In addition, while he does express significant challenges with adapting to new world realities like the technological advancements, he appreciates the "enlightenment and advancement" middle adulthood has added to his life. He expressed his nephew coming out as a gay man, as allowed him to reach an existential level of being and understanding where he can accept and integrate old and new ways of the world and create a cohesive way of living.

Analysis of Interviews

Interestingly enough all of the interviewees validated the increasing complexity and diversity of experiences that could arise during middle adulthood. What one person internalized as a loss another attributed as a gain. It demonstrated that while these people were at the same stage developmentally, their identities, associations, and experiences within their environment had an immense impact on their internalization and experience of their age. Not only did their environment and their corresponding experiences influence the way they felt about middle

adulthood, it seemed to affect their internalization of the past and future as well as their biological, physical and mental statuses. Even though work is often attributed to extreme fatigue and debilitation, it was evident in M.D.'s interview that while his work was not entertaining it did ameliorate a lot of the difficulties that do arise from aging and physical decline (Hutchison, 2014). Additionally, it is evident that while J.A. recognized how age has begun to affect his mental capacity regarding his memory, he learned to healthily cope and internalize a manifestation of learning in a new way to give precedence to the aging process. It seems to him that while he did not remember things as well, learning about new things such as sexual orientation, from his gay nephew, opened up his world, and changed his experience of aging and his learning abilities. It is evident that middle adulthood does not eliminate learning, it transforms it. With R.A. it is evident, how detrimental the "sandwich" phenomenon and caregiving was to her role as a middle adult. While caregiving certainly had a debilitating effect on her health, physically and mentally, it speaks to much larger social and systemic issues. An examination of R.A.'s understanding of middle adulthood makes it evident that if healthcare and health services for those who are elderly and disabled were more accommodating and efficient, she would have a much different experience of her life and view of the aging process.

With this analysis of middle adulthood, it is evident how these experiences can be contextualized using the framework of lifespan theory (Hutchison, 2015). Individuals in this group are all continuously going through significant changes developmentally despite their age orientation and it is clear that their changes were motivated by societal and environmental factors (Hutchison, 2015). It could also be suggested that J.A.'s learning enlightenment could be represented by Jung's theory of balance, which proposes middle adulthood as an area for discovery and reclamation (Hutchinson, 2015). J.A's transformative internalization of aging was

clearly attributed to his social exposure to different sexualities and utilized that as a springboard for discovery during his development. Additionally, all interviewees certainly affirmed Erikson's theory of generativity which suggests that there is a concern for future generations (Hutchison, 2015). All participants whether they placed a high value on supporting family members like, R.D. and M.D. or J.A. who saw youth as a vessels cultural enlightenment, see the potential and importance of providing and supporting future generations. In addition, one could argue that risk and resiliency theory could be applied to these individuals as well (Hutchison, 2015). They all despite setbacks, whether biological, physiological, mental, environmental, or financial, demonstrated high levels of strength and willingness to support and live (Hutchinson, 2015).

Conclusion

However, while it is evident that lifespan theories are useful in understanding people's development, they do not fully encompass the wide ranges of experiences that exist in the world. There are still many unexplained behaviors, actions, and experiences regarding these individuals. It speaks to the fact that middle adulthood is not solely a monolithic group of people of a certain age but also a culmination of complex different experience, abilities, skills, and lives. Therefore, it is evident how significant the multifaceted ways the environment and identities function within larger contexts of relations, work life, and even biological, physical, and mental changes. Ultimately, it is important to understand people's development not solely within frameworks of pathology but one of humanness and understanding.

References

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