Middle Adulthood: Psychosocial Development

General Information

Middle adulthood usually is characterized by:
- Most authority/power
- Highest income
- Most responsibility of lifetime
Also true that roles are less constricting than before

Potentially Troubling Changes

- Recognition of growing old
- Death of close relative from next older generation, or friend/colleague just a few years older
- For parents, adjustment to children growing older
- May reach limits of vocational potential
- Questions regarding decisions about generativity

Midlife Crisis?

Midlife crisis—a period of unusual anxiety, radical reexamination, and sudden transformation widely associated with middle age, but probably more related to developmental history than to chronological age

Personality Throughout Adulthood

Personality is a major source of continuity
- Provides coherence and identity
In other words, people seek, interpret and react to life events in ways that reflect their distinctive traits, and these remain stable throughout adulthood, even in the face of sometimes dramatic changes in peoples’ lives.
- There are five basic traits that characterize personality and that become stable by midlife.

Stable Traits: The Big Five

- Extroversion = outgoing, assertive, and active
- Agreeableness = kind and helpful
- Conscientiousness = organized, deliberate, and conforming
- Neuroticism = anxious, moody, and self-punishing
- Openness = imaginative, curious, artistic, and willing to have new experiences

(It is also true that as people grow older, they tend to become a little less neurotic and open, and a little more agreeable and conscientious)

Traits determined by
- Genes
- Culture
- Experiences during early childhood
- Experiences and choices made during adolescence and early adulthood

Ecological niche = the specific lifestyle and social contexts adults settle into that are compatible with their personality needs and interests. In other words, people make choices that fit their personality.
Gender convergence—a tendency for men and women to become more similar as they move through middle age

Gender crossover—the idea that each sex takes on the other sex’s roles and traits in later life.

In general, men become more nurturant, considerate and tender (less “masculine”) and women become more assertive and self-confident (less “feminine”).

Family Relationships in Midlife
- Family is most important support system
- If one’s own family is not doing that job, “fictive kin” may be found
  - treated as family by this group

Partners
- Having an intimate relationship is a source of happiness, comfort, and self-respect
  - Achieved through marriage for 70 percent of middle-aged Americans
  - For some divorced, widowed, or never-married middle-aged adults, intimacy may be achieved by cohabitation (~5%)
  - Friendships also are important to single adults

Marriage
- During middle adulthood, couples often regain some of the closeness of early marriage
  - less stress from kids
  - higher incomes
  - more time together
- In general, marital relationships are likely to get better over time (with every year of marriage, divorce becomes less likely)

Divorce
- after years of marriage, divorce has more impact
  - reduces income, weakens family ties when long-term social bonds especially needed
- Most divorced remarry within 5 years
- Second marriages end in divorce more often than first marriages do

Aging Parents
- Relationships with parents improve with time as middle-aged adults develop a more balanced view of this relationship (forgiveness/admission of mistakes by both sides are relevant)

Siblings
- Siblings often become closer to each other in the second half of life than in early adulthood

Adult Children
- Relationships improve with maturity of “children”
- Seven-nation survey: 75 percent of middle-aged parents communicated with adult children several times a week

The Myth of the Sandwich Generation
- Sandwich generation—generation of middle-aged people who are supposedly “squeezed” by the needs of the younger and older generations
- Some do feel pressured, but most are not burdened by such obligations
  - they enjoy filling needs or—
  - may choose to take on some (or no) responsibilities
- Most choose not to provide financial or caregiving help to older generation
  - one study shows less than 20 percent provided help of any kind