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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

THE EXPERIENCE OF MIDLIFE CRISIS: A DEVELOPMENTAL
CONTEXTUAL PERSPECTIVE

by



SHIRLEY DUMBECK

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND
RESEARCH IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

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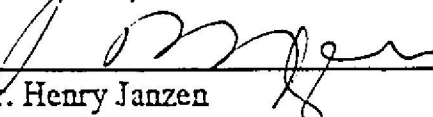
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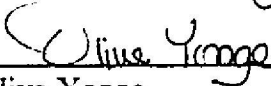
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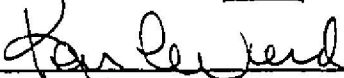
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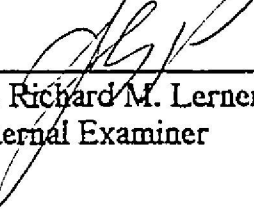
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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the co-researchers who participated in the study. Without your courage, openness, and willingness to share your experience, this work would not have been possible. You have contributed to my life and learning. Your contribution will also enrich the lives of others in many ways. To each one of you, I offer my gratitude and my heartfelt thanks.

Abstract

This research explores midlife crisis as it is experienced by both men and women. Midlife crisis is a time of painful inner turmoil and conflict with the external world. The experience has a dramatic impact on individual lives, yet midlife crisis is neglected in adult development literature. A review of the literature suggests that prevailing theories of adult development are based on research grounded in organismic metatheory. Traditional theories fail to address the complexity of human development and are criticized by feminist researchers for ignoring salient aspects of women's experience. Proposed models of women's adult development, however, also have significant shortcomings. Psychology is moving towards conceptualizing human development within a contextual worldview and focusing on the dynamic relations between individuals and their contexts.

In this study, it is proposed that: 1) the experience of midlife crisis is best understood within the metatheoretical perspective of developmental contextualism; and 2) the fundamental experience of midlife crisis is shared by men and women. The basis for the research question is drawn from an analysis of the contrasting metatheories, and what is known about adult development, midlife transitions, developmental crisis and midlife crisis. The research question is: **What is the meaning of the experience of midlife crisis?**

Existential-phenomenological research methodology is used in this study. Transcripts of interviews with the co-researchers, twenty men and women experiencing midlife crisis, are analyzed to develop a phenomenological description of the experience. Data analysis involves a hierarchical thematic analysis resulting in a synthesis of the structure of the shared experience. Four structural themes emerge: the onset of the experience, the disruptive nature of the experience, the revealing power of the experience, and developmental change in relation to the experience. Results are discussed within a developmental contextual perspective.

The intent of this work is to enable educators, clinicians, and the general public to gain an understanding of the experience of midlife crisis in order to maximize the opportunities presented in this experience while minimizing or avoiding the inherent dangers. Implications of the results for education, clinical practice, and adult developmental theory are discussed.

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With all my heart, I thank my parents, Case and Johanna Vandersteen, who gave me the gifts of life and love, and who continue to inspire me to make the most of these gifts.

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Chapter 1

MIDLIFE CRISIS: A DISCOVERY OF SELF

Introduction

In midlife crisis, women and men grapple with the fundamental existential issues of life. This intense psychological struggle spills over into all aspects of a person's life and often comes as a complete surprise. There is a commonly held assumption that the lengthy span of adulthood holds few developmental challenges. And, although it is acknowledged that there are numerous tasks which need to be accomplished after adolescence and prior to retirement, it is assumed that the process of adult maturity is gradual and hardly noticeable. The popular literature suggests that midlife crisis is a humorous and primarily male phenomena wherein a man desperately clings to a fading youth and masculinity. To recapture the virility of youth, men engage in adolescent behavior, have an extramarital affair, or buy a sports car. Women's emotional difficulties at midlife are attributed to the empty nest or the decrease in female hormones at the onset of menopause. The prescription for a woman suffering from midlife crisis is usually the suggestion of activities to keep her busy, or simply patience until the grandchildren arrive to once again fulfill her maternal needs. Those who experience midlife crisis, however, vehemently deny that it is merely about getting older or having too much time on hand. For those who experience midlife crisis, it is not amusing at all.

The co-researchers of this study, who are in midlife crisis, present a very different picture of this experience. They describe the experience as compelling and frightening. They vividly portray their sense of isolation and insecurity at suddenly finding their worlds turned upside down. The co-researchers describe a process of losing themselves and losing their ways in the world. As they respond to an inner and growing need to express who they are, they feel lost and confused. They experience little compassion, understanding or support from others. They feel out of control and often make impulsive decisions - some of which have lifelong implications - in order to try to bring some sense of order back into their shattered lives. Indeed, they find nothing funny about the experience of midlife crisis.

Questions about the experience of midlife crisis have frequently surfaced for me in my own life, in my relationships with friends and colleagues, and in my work. In my work with clients in private practice, many of whom are in middle age, I am aware of the complexity of issues that lead them to seek counseling. At the same time, I am struck by the similarity of the existential issues that appear to underlie the unique presenting problems. These are: death, freedom and responsibility, immediate and existential isolation, and a search for meaning or purpose. These deep philosophical concerns have always intrigued me. In working with clients, another theme has consistently emerged - in order to experience growth producing change, individuals seem to have to alter their worldview or paradigm. Many clients resist this "deep structure" change,

and search for a satisfactory cosmetic or superficial change. These simple changes seldom, if ever, reduce or eliminate the psychological conflict over an extended period of time. When a client does engage in a deep level change, it is as if a transformation in self has occurred. It is this type of change that appears to be involved for those who experience midlife crisis. I am left wondering why it is that some people experience midlife crisis while others don't. There are likely many factors which contribute to the propensity to separate oneself from the stream of life and to re-examine one's perspective. Perhaps it is related to level of ego development as suggested by O'Connor and Wolfe (1991). It does appear that this process requires an ability to think about and view one's life from an abstract perspective; it requires somewhat of an introspective nature; an ability to engage in dialectical and relativistic reasoning (Kramer and Woodruff, 1986); and for many, an initiating internal or external event which precipitates a crisis. Whatever the factors involved, I do believe that midlife crisis reflects a healthy and normal process of adaptive psychological functioning.

Midlife is a unique time in the life course because numerous factors converge upon the individual that set the stage for a potential paradigm shift. The bulk of the population in the Western world is in the midlife age range - between 35 and 55 years. This is the generation that has always wanted to change the world, that has a history of searching for world peace and for inner peace. These are the "baby boomers" who are now moving into positions of leadership and control in the world. Closer to home,

however, I and many of my friends, colleagues and clients are in midlife and I am fascinated by the process of self discovery and personal empowerment that is often the outcome of midlife crisis. Not only will a greater understanding of this phenomenon contribute to my personal growth but it will greatly benefit my work with midlife clients.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of the present study is: 1) to understand the subjective experience of midlife crisis in terms of common themes or patterns in the relations between the multiple levels of context; 2) to frame this understanding within a developmental contextual perspective; 3) to synthesize the research on men and women in midlife by highlighting similarities rather than differences; and 4) to discuss the implications of the findings for education, research and clinical practice with individuals at midlife.

The experience of midlife crisis exists for a substantial number of individuals, resulting in significant inner turmoil and conflict with the external world. While there is general agreement regarding the multitude of factors which contribute to the stress of midlife, much of the research has been limited in scope primarily because it has been conducted within an organismic perspective. In addition, the actual experience of midlife crisis is largely unexplored. The purpose of this study is to examine the meaning of the experience of midlife crisis within a contextual perspective.

The developmental contextual perspective, as presented by Richard M. Lerner (1991), was chosen to provide the metatheoretical framework for the results of the study because this perspective fully acknowledges the multiple levels of context in dynamic interaction as a basic process of development. The individual and the world are viewed as co-constituting one another. The focus is not on the individual or on the context as separate entities, but on the participants' experience of the "goodness of fit" of the person-context relations.

Midlife crisis, like other aspects of human experience, is a phenomenon which is deeply embedded in the relational and dynamic world of the individual. The phenomenological method of research is utilized in this research because this method enables the researcher to access the human experience and to bring to view the structural components through which experience is formed (Polkinghorne, 1981). To completely understand the subjective experience of midlife crisis, one must enter the phenomenal world of the individual and enable him or her to explicate the implicit structures given in the experience itself. The researcher is able to observe and articulate the common themes in the relations between an individual and the multiple levels of context in such a way that the meaning of the experience is not destroyed, distorted, decontextualized, trivialized or sentimentalized (Bergum, 1986). The phenomenological approach used in this study reflects the contextual worldview (Lyddon, 1989).

Previous research on midlife crisis has generally addressed the experience of either men or women. As will be illustrated, research which

emphasizes maximal gender differences has a detrimental effect on the sociocultural roles of both men and women and further entrenches cultural stereotypes and ideologies. By utilizing an existential - phenomenological approach within a developmental contextual perspective, this study highlights the similarities in the structure of the experience of midlife crisis shared by men and women, while granting that several levels of contextual variables are obviously different for the subgroups of men and women as they are different for each individual.

The major implications of this study are for general public education and for clinical practice. While clinicians generally take into account the developmental history of the adult client, the issues confronted in therapy are not always considered within the framework of adult development. Too often the questioning and exploratory behaviors of those experiencing midlife crisis are viewed as irrational, a temporary aberration, or as symptoms of mental illness. Rationalist approaches to therapy, which view the symptoms of crisis as pathological and which focus on eliminating or controlling the symptoms, are guided by first-order, or behavioral assumptions about change (Lyddon, 1989). In contrast, the developmental contextual perspective is based on the assumption that individuals actively construe or create their personal and social realities. Counseling, within the contextual perspective, is guided by second-order assumptions about change wherein, "client and counselor engage in a search for patterns and process in the understanding of old meanings in the creation of the new" (Carlson, 1988, p. 92). The emphasis, within a developmental contextual

perspective, is on a shift in paradigm rather than the modification of the surface structure content or symptoms. The explication of the "deep structure" meanings of the person-context relations of midlife crisis in this study will serve as a guide to clinicians in their work with clients in midlife.

The results of this study will also have implications for public education in adult development. The presentation of a coherent person-context structure of the experience of midlife crisis is one step towards a putting back together of "the whole that analytical science, over the past 300 years, has rent asunder" (Bevan, 1991, p. 481). Previous theory and research have relied on hierarchical models of simple, relatively static systems which have exacerbated the dichotomy between research and practice. By looking at the broader varieties of order in human experience, psychology can work towards more interactive models of complex dynamic systems - models which more adequately reflect the human phenomena with which psychologists deal on an ongoing basis (Lerner, 1993; Lerner and von Eye, 1993). The intent of the present study is: to capture the complex and dynamic nature of midlife crisis as it is experienced by individuals, to provide a necessary link between research and practice, and to provide the general public with an understanding of midlife crisis which is grounded in human experience.

Much of what the general public understands about human development is derived from popularized versions of developmental theory or fictional accounts of human nature and behavior. Bevan (1991) maintains that "behind the worlds we construct, coloring both our logic and our rhetoric,

are the ideologies that give our worldviews their dominant cast" (p. 478). This study recognizes the insidious nature of cultural, scientific and personal ideologies as part of the context of human experience. The vast majority of literary accounts of human psychological growth reflect the predominant cultural ideologies and depict human beings as one-dimensional and as following a linear, predictable path through life. Like much of the research in adult development, these versions are unable to adequately capture and communicate the rich tapestry of human developmental processes. As a result, our definition of "normal" has become far too narrow and does not adequately represent human experience. Many people feel "different", isolated, and unable to understand or adapt to the developmental challenges of life. A greater knowledge of midlife crisis will enhance professional and public education of this adult developmental process, and hopefully foster a recognition and appreciation of the existing diversity of developmental outcomes.

Organization

Chapter 2 of this study provides a review of the metatheoretical approaches to adult development, and specifically examines the research on midlife crisis. An analysis of the contrasting metatheories in relation to what is known about midlife crisis forms the basis for the research question.

Chapter 3 describes how the existential-phenomenological research methodology was employed in this study to explore the experience of

midlife crisis. This chapter also explains the criteria for assessing phenomenological research.

Chapter 4 describes the experience of midlife crisis within an existential-phenomenological perspective. The primary themes which emerged during the research, and the structure of the experience of midlife crisis are the essential components of the results of this study.

Chapter 5 briefly summarizes the results of this study and frames the meaning of the experience of midlife crisis within the developmental contextual perspective. This chapter also discusses the implications of the results for education, clinical practice, and adult development theory.

Chapter 2

MIDLIFE: A TURNING POINT IN ADULT DEVELOPMENT

Overview

Traditional theories of adult development highlight the significance of midlife as a crucial turning point in adult development. "Middle crisis", a term first used by Jacques (1965), is a familiar descriptor of the psychological and psychosocial stress experienced by many adults as they struggle through this pivotal time of their lives. While traditional theories of adult development view development as a maturation process with growth proceeding in a uniform, linear and sequential manner, these theories have been heavily criticized in recent years for failing to address the complexity and diversity of human developmental processes. Feminist researchers in particular have challenged the prominent age/stage conception of adult development as well as the related concept of midlife crisis (Baruch, 1984; Gilligan, 1982). They argue that: the theoretical, clinical and empirical concepts of adult development arose out of studies of males only; the complexity and variety of women's developmental paths cannot be encompassed within linear, sequential, and inherently male models; and the unique experience of women is ignored or devalued in these theories. In spite of the many endeavors to articulate the developmental path of adult women, the resultant research has come under the same criticism as has been levied against the traditional theories. The

outcome of this dialectical process, however, has been a major shift in the metatheoretical approach towards understanding adult development. The limitations of the organismic worldview, which has been the prevailing worldview in developmental psychology, are being recognized.

Contextualism is replacing organicism as the primary metatheoretical paradigm in developmental psychology. This shift in metatheory has shed new light on the concept of developmental crisis, and in particular, the transitional period of midlife crisis.

The Organismic Approach to Adult Development

The traditional theories of adult development are inherently biased and incapable of addressing the complexity and diversity of human experience in adulthood. These theories have been significantly criticized by feminist researchers for ignoring the unique aspects of women's development. The recent emphasis in research on women's adult development has attempted to respond to this bias, however, this research has its own shortcomings. First, there is little theoretical research on women in midlife. Second, the research that exists, while acknowledging the significance of midlife transition in women's development, has also been criticized as being restrictive, negative, and limited in scope. The research on women in midlife carries with it vestiges of the traditional view that women are defined in terms of their biology or in relation to men and children. The growing complexity of women's lives, along with a rejection of the traditional male oriented theories, has made it extremely difficult to capture

and articulate a common developmental trajectory of women in the adult years.

It has become increasingly apparent that research emphasizing gender differences has a negative impact on both men and women. Stereotypes, social roles and the social power hierarchy become entrenched and restrict the development of both sexes. Further, the dialectical nature of this form of inquiry precludes the investigation of the common experience of men and women in their adult years. One of the major purposes of this study is to examine the common experience of men and women in midlife. This view does not ignore differences between the sexes, but also does not focus on gender alone as an explanatory concept. The assumption is that a multitude of situational and sociohistorical factors create observed gender differences (Eagley, 1987).

While the proposed models of the female life course have inadvertently contributed to the perpetuation of restricted roles of women in our culture, they have had a tremendously positive influence on the metatheoretical level in psychology. It is interesting to note that the recent criticisms of models of women's development are similar to the criticisms levied against traditional theories. Because of this evaluative and critical discourse, feminist research has contributed to search for new paradigms and methodologies that will adequately and comprehensively address the human developmental experience. Psychology is now questioning the need for two sets of gender developmental theories (Brittan, 1989; Lerner and von Eye, 1992) and recognizes that individual development is embedded within a

multilevel context. Many theorists are suggesting that the unit of analysis become the relational process rather than the individual (Lerner, 1990; Gergen and Gergen, 1988; Rosnow and Georgoudie, 1986). Actions, personality traits, and the ongoing development of the individual are seen as being derived in relational processes and cannot simply be attributed to autonomous, internal processes. The developmental contextual perspective, as formulated by Lerner (1990), addresses the multitude of intra- and interpersonal factors which contribute to human development. This perspective, which will be described in a later section, offers an exciting and viable alternative to the traditional approaches to understanding human development.

Traditional Theories

Traditional theories of adult development conceptualize development as a maturation process with growth proceeding through a series of hierarchical stages. These theories stem from an organismic worldview (Lyddon, 1989; Pepper, 1942). Human development, within an organismic worldview, is generally perceived as a systematic, linear process in which individuals progress from immature stages of lesser organization and differentiation to more mature, complex and adaptive integrations. These stage-based developmental progressions are clearly evident in Piaget's (1975/1985) theory of cognitive development, Kohlberg's (1984) theory of moral development, Havinghurst's (1953) theory of developmental tasks,

Levinson's (1978) and Erikson's (1963) theories of psychosocial development, and Jung's (1971) life stages.

Most adult development theory traces back to Jung's (1933) recognition that personality development continues throughout the adult years. Jung compares the life course to the rising and setting of the sun, with midlife providing the "noon" of existence. Based on his work with adult patients, Jung described the first half of life as a time when attention is focused on becoming established in the external world, i.e., home, family, work. At midlife, the individual must begin to come to terms with the inner world. As the first half of life entails the making of choices and going down one path instead of another, the second half often entails a re-evaluation of the roads not taken. The inward emphasis is on spiritual and philosophical concerns and the reclamation of formerly suppressed values or aspects of the personality. Jung accounted for the problems so often associated with midlife transition as the inability to make this shift in values and concerns. He called this process the path of individuation. The process of individuation is directed towards finding meaning in life and wholeness of self in order to come to terms with a growing awareness of mortality. This move toward introspection and interiority in midlife has also been emphasized by Buhler (1953) and Neugarten (1964).

While Jung (1933) stressed the intrapsychic dynamics of midlife transition, Erikson's (1963) principal focus was on the relationship between the individual and the social world. In his theory of psychosocial development, the seventh stage of generativity vs. stagnation corresponds to

middle adulthood. Although Erikson describes a gradual evolution of meanings throughout the life cycle, meaning in the midlife stage is acquired through self-transcendent ventures. Individuals in this stage must orient themselves toward establishing and guiding the next generation, or face a sense of stagnation and personal impoverishment. Contrary to Jung, Erikson maintains that the attention must move from internal, self-centered concerns to external and more global or universal concerns. The major virtues which are to emerge in successfully negotiating this stage are care and responsibility for what has already been created - whether it be children, ideas or works. He suggests that, while society has a responsibility to promote the emergence of the values of each stage in development, the individual in the adult stages must be responsible for choosing the positive polarity in each stage. Failure to do so in this midlife stage involves an implicit rejection of a universal sense of values and a lack of awareness of the collective life of mankind. These implicit intrapsychic issues are similar to Jung's themes of life meaning and wholeness within the global context.

Havinghurst (1953) applied Erikson's (1950) psychosocial tasks to the various age periods in his model of specific developmental tasks. Havinghurst, however, stipulated two principle sources of developmental tasks: the biological changes of the body (which present the individual with new opportunities, needs and problems of adjustment), and the expectations of society (which present the individual with a number of social roles that change with age). Changing biological development and social

expectations "give direction, force and substance to the development of personality" (Havinghurst, 1973, p. 11). Havinghurst identified middle age as the period in which men and women have optimal influence on society, and as when society makes its maximum demands on adults for civic and social contributions. The specific developmental tasks of midlife are: 1) achieving civic and social responsibility; 2) establishing and maintaining economic stability; 3) assisting teenage children to become responsible adults; 4) developing leisure activities; 5) relating to one's spouse and oneself as an individual; 6) accepting physiological changes in oneself; and 7) adjusting to aging parents. It is apparent that some of these tasks are no longer considered to be age-related normative tasks. For example, it is not uncommon for middle age parents to have very young children or children who have already left home. Both Havinghurst's and Erikson's developmental theories, however, are significant for their recognition of the need to understand developmental growth of the individual within the context of the demands, constraints and opportunities provided by the social environment.

Perhaps the best known study of midlife as a major turning point in adult development is Levinson's "Seasons of a Man's Life" (1978). Utilizing a life structure framework to conceptualize developmental changes, Levinson incorporates both the psychosocial and developmental task notions of Erikson (1963) and Havinghurst (1953). Levinson also credits Jacques (1965) for much of his understanding of the midlife period. Jacques identified the "middle crisis" as a normal developmental period starting in

the late thirties and continuing for several years. Jacques suggested that the growing awareness of one's mortality is the core intrapsychic conflict which must be confronted at this time of life. Levinson expands on this central conflict and delineates several other major issues which men must come to terms with during the "midlife transition". Levinson explains that during midlife transition a man must "work on the polarities that animate and divide him" (1978, p. 245). Like Jung (1933), he believes that individuation is the central underlying theme of midlife. He describes individuation as consisting of four polarities: young/old, destruction/creation, masculine/feminine, and attachment/separateness. The young/old polarity addresses the age related concern of being neither young nor old; there is a growing realization of the circumscription of life. The destruction/creation polarity describes a realization of the inherent powerful forces of death and destruction within the individual coupled with the desire and awareness of the potential for creativity. Similar to Erikson's concept of generativity, the desire for creativity involves participating in the societal enterprises that advance human welfare and contributing to the coming generations. The masculine/feminine polarity emphasizes the need to recognize and integrate the repressed or antithetical parts of the personality. Finally, attachment/separation involves the ongoing resolution of the need for connection to others and the equally important need for separateness and autonomy. Levinson states that a failure to confront these polarities during the crucial midlife transition period will result in "a progressive withering of the self and a life structure minimally connected to the self"