

Forty or Fifty Something

What we are like at mid-life

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ABSTRACT

Many teachers and human service workers are 40-50 years of age and this paper explores the formative influences, and the developmental characteristics, of workers who are presently middle-aged. This leads onto an examination of the importance of relationships and work to mid-lifers. In the concluding section of the paper, there is some consideration of the significance of having an older workforce for the success of the current policy innovations in special education.

Position Paper

Keywords

Family work relationship, human development, labour market, lifestyle, professional standards, special education, teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Many teachers and special educators are now in their forties and fifties, as are the members of a number of other professions. For instance, the average age of state primary and secondary teachers is presently 44, while social workers and nurses have a mean age of 45, and most psychologists are over 45 years of age. The ageing of these workforces has major implications for the continuing availability of social services in this country, and particularly as the move towards a global employment market continues apace. However, in this paper I would like to address the salient developmental features of middle age, a period that is frequently understood to span 40-65 years, as it is described in standard human development texts. With so many educators in their forties and fifties it is instructive to consider the abilities, aptitudes and other characteristics of this group in much the same way that we think of these things for the child populations that they serve. It is also important to speculate on the significance of an older workforce to the success of new policy initiatives in special education.

COMMON FORMATIVE EXPERIENCES

Cohort effects are a critical consideration in any developmental study because the historical period in which we grow up can have such a bearing on the people that we become. Today's mid-lifers were, arguably, massively impacted upon by World War II. They experienced the residual conformity of the war years, the startling and multifaceted rebellion of the 1960s and '70s, and the subsequent adjustments and other developments that typified the remainder of the 20th Century. In the post-war years teenage pregnancy was unexceptional rather than

indicative of some dysfunction, and there was a "right age" for most other life events. The overt authoritarianism in New Zealand at this time was probably also linked to the pervading egalitarianism, and it possibly explains why so many of us know quite a bit about guilt.

Many people who became parents in the late 1940s and '50s were concerned that their children proceed to higher education; they wanted degrees in the family but not necessarily the freedom of thought that can come with them. By today's standards, the baby-boomers have known financial restraints, as most families initially had little in the way of "discretionary funds", but they were a favoured group as well. A single income supported a household, School Certificate was an unquestioned rite of passage, there were virtually no university fees, undergraduate degrees translated into jobs, and for those who chose Government employment, there was an excellent superannuation scheme.

It's a popular adage that if you can remember the 1960s you probably weren't there but this preoccupation with particular manifestations of the age (sometimes collectively referred to as "pill, pot, and porn") can obscure the unprecedented social change of this period. Many of the leaders of today experienced and participated in the early environmental movement, the claims of gay rights, opposition to the conflict in Vietnam, contention over abortion, and the increasing emancipation of women. Knowing about these involvements may help us to understand their independence of mind, their valuing of choice and experimentation, and other aspects of their belief systems. From a sociological perspective, the developments altered our conceptions of work and family and it is likely, as Kail and Cavanaugh (2004) contend, that social change has generally been faster than our ability to think through the associated issues.

The 1980s and '90s saw some of the consequences of revolutionary change, and especially of the increased opportunities for women. There were marked increases in cohabitation, divorce, and single parenting, and the advent of what one authority describes as "conjugal succession" or "serial marriage" (Vander Zanden, 2000). For baby boomers, relationships today can sometimes appear conditional, with the emphasis being on the extent to which other people meet their present needs and help them to grow personally. The contexts in which relationships are now transacted, and specifically the workplace, also seem to have become more complicated and intense, with higher expectations and greater reliance on verbal and affective abilities.

THE DOMAINS OF DEVELOPMENT: BODY, MIND, AND PERSONALITY

The realisation that the body is deteriorating is unavoidable in middle age: There are just too many signs. Textbook writer John Santrock (2008) says 'Since a youthful appearance is stressed in our culture, many individuals whose hair is graying, whose skin is wrinkling, whose bodies are sagging, and whose teeth are yellowing strive to make themselves look younger' (p. 531). Women who are concerned about facial attractiveness are at a relative disadvantage to men because in women the oil-producing glands that combat wrinkles stop producing some ten years earlier (Hoffman, Paris, & Hall, 1994). It is undoubtedly unfair but some signs of ageing in a man can be considered to enhance his attractiveness whereas these signs in a woman are perceived as unattractive. Both sexes are more prone to put on weight as metabolism slows down. Indeed, in mid-life a powerful connection can appear between food ingested and permanent weight gain. The old adage can become depressingly true: "A second on the lips and forever on the hips".

On reflection, physical change and development in middle age is associated with a series of sobering paradoxes. In our early years, time drags and adult status seems to take forever to attain. Now time flies and additional signs of ageing continually take us by surprise. When we meet an age mate whom we have not seen for a while we can be shocked by his or her appearance, and it is a grim realisation that we probably appear old to them as well. There is little consolation in the fact that ageing is inevitable and universal since it affects us personally.

The majority of men and women at mid-life are concerned about developing health problems. It is the time when we fear death the most, and this anxiety may be provoked by the passing of a parent or another older relative. However, health is generally good during these years and with the extended life span a woman might expect to live half of her adult life after menopause (Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2007). Middle age gives us insights into what we will be like in old age and it is still possible through exercise and diet to influence the quality of the remainder of our lives.

Drewery and Bird (2004) caution us against accepting a young/old dualism, and an unbalanced emphasis on the biological changes of midlife can tend to support such a dichotomy. People compensate for physical losses and, according to a cognitive perspective, many mature adults are in their prime. The English novelist George Eliot said that it is never too late to be what we might have been. This encouraging sentiment is true in parts. It is highly unlikely that a mid-lifer could make the All Blacks or the Silver Ferns but it is fairly probable that they will practice their profession or trade more adroitly.

Kail and Cavanaugh (2004) describe the two defining attributes of middle age cognition as enhanced expertise and the ability to solve practical problems. Expertise is dependent on accumulated knowledge, which allows those who have it to bypass the many intermediate steps that the novice must take. In effect, thinking strategies and professional knowledge merge, or are encapsulated, and this can make it difficult for the expert to explain how he or she arrives at an

interpretation or solution. The expert case worker just knows what is happening for a particular child or family and what assistance is needed.

Practical problem solving ability is also essential to successful practitioner performance in the social services. Take any day of the working week; it will involve continual reprioritising of tasks, maintaining relationships with others who have different interests to serve the needs of common clients, balancing ethical, organisational, and more immediately human demands, and a host of other equally complex and challenging tasks. There is no one correct approach or answer to these sorts of work engagements but theorising and research in human development suggests that people at mid-life more often take the more optimal choices and actions.

Expertise and practical problem solving ability can be difficult to measure in organisational contexts. For instance, they do not show up on intelligence tests or most aptitude scales. It may be that the importance of problem solving, advanced expertise, and institutional memory (which is related to the personal capacities) only really becomes apparent when these functions are threatened or diminished, and when workplace mistakes and complaints multiply. At the least, it is interesting that there is an evidence-based case for having a human service workforce that contains mature practitioners.

The domains of human development are closely interconnected and cognitive awareness of physical decline can have significant implications for mid-life personality and socioemotional development. Carl Jung suggested that we respond to the prospect of death by turning inwards and by reflection, and it is a fact that for many people there is a reawakening of religious faith in their mid-fifties. Erik Erikson, another psychodynamic theorist, took an opposing tack and contended that we attempt to deal with our own mortality by reaching out and furthering the interests of succeeding generations. This generativity, which can contrast with self-preoccupation and stagnation, reflects a fundamental belief in the human enterprise (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2004).

How much do we change at midlife? It is probable that most of us do assume new priorities but the essence of who we are remains intact. Some stage theorists propose that there is a universal crisis in middle adulthood but this has not been confirmed by longitudinal studies. Indeed, it is usually more accurate to think of mid-life *consciousness* rather than *crisis* (Santrock, 2008). As our physical bodies change, and as the situational demands that we are subjected to alter, we endeavour to obtain new adaptations between ourselves and the world. In turn, at middle age we need to revise the visions that we have of our various personal identities (e.g., career, leisure, relationships, and spirituality) as we did in early adulthood, and as we will have to do again in old age.

The stability-change issue is probably of less interest to readers than the question of whether mid-life is a good time to be alive. However, the human development texts give mixed answers on this. The dominant view is that it is a highly rewarding and satisfying period. After age 50, in particular, there is unparalleled productivity and

accomplishment for both women and men. Nevertheless, there are also numerous stage-specific pressures (many of which have financial implications) and middle age is often our most stressful time. Interpersonal tension is the most salient stressor that people over forty experience (Santrock, 2008) and, as has been suggested above, this aspect of their daily lives could be intensifying.

THE IMPERATIVES OF ADULTHOOD: RELATIONSHIPS

Good social relationships are not additional or discretionary aspects of a satisfying and prudent life. For instance, Papalia et al (2007) observe that 'Relationships are the most important key to well-being' (p. 603). Similarly, Vander Zanden (2000) states that 'Close and meaningful social relationships play a vital part in human health and happiness' (p. 500). Women typically have a far better understanding of this than men do and they often contribute much more to the maintenance of the relationships they participate in. Middle-aged mothers are kinkeepers who arrange family celebrations and ensure family members remain in contact. Women make special investments in their relationships with their partners, with their mothers, with their daughters, with their siblings, and with their friends. Apparently, the present generation of mid-life women is the first group to give equal regard to same sex friendships as to heterosexual attachments (Vander Zanden, 2000). Perhaps in keeping with a better appreciation of relationships, women end unsatisfactory associations more readily than men.

An issue for many middle-aged women, and to a lesser extent for middle-aged men, is that they are simply surrounded by too many demanding relationships. According to Vander Zanden (2000), the average American woman will devote 17 years to raising children and 18 years to providing assistance for aged parents. These commitments frequently coincide, and hence mid-lifers are often referred to as the "sandwich generation". There is now also a tendency for adult children to return to live with their parents after completing their education, or after a relationship breaks up, and this inevitably compromises the privacy of both parties. Approximately fifty percent of young adults return to their parents' home at some point in the United States, and we are likely to see more of this in New Zealand, if difficulties of first home ownership continue. Interestingly, an adult son or daughter is much more likely to become "a boomerang kid" when his or her parents are in good health and where they continue to do the bulk of the household tasks (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2004).

Relationships with children and grandchildren are very important to middle-aged people. For example, Ryff and colleagues (1994) found that parents' well-being at mid-life is closely related to how they think that their adult children have turned out (cited by Kail & Cavanaugh, 2004). Nevertheless, it is a "developmental task" for mature parents to accept their older children for who they are and not allow earlier hopes and dreams to compromise current relationships. Significantly, research has also found that the launching of adult children, and the consequent "empty nest", is not a problem for most parents and, in fact, it is associated with feelings of freedom and with increases in marital satisfaction (Santrock, 2008).

Grandparenthood is usually an exciting and a meaningful role for mid-lifers but whether it transpires depends on the inclinations of sons and daughters. From an academic perspective, there are all sorts of interesting aspects about grandparenting. For instance, it is one of the few situations where our society permits cross-age touching. Contemporary lifestyles contain special challenges for grandparenting and included here is the greater mobility of parents, threats to the grandparent/grandchild relationship through a son or daughter's divorce, the acquisition of step-grandchildren by a remarriage, and the possibility of grandparents becoming custodial caregivers.

THE IMPERATIVES OF ADULTHOOD: WORK

Work is a self-defining activity, as evidenced by the fact that when people first meet there are often questions about occupations. Vander Zanden (2000) says that 'For many people, work is a search for meaning – making sense of the world, themselves, and others by giving a sense of order to what might otherwise be a very unstructured existence' (p. 514). As a cohort, today's mid-lifers have had a lot to cope with in terms of changes to the workplace. When many of them began, a career and a job appointment were often for the duration of a person's working life. Organisational restructuring changed that and it is now seen as enterprising to change jobs, rather than being indicative of an inability to settle as it may once have been. Other significant changes in work include a greater priority being given to interpersonal aspects, the advent of computers, the need to continually upgrade job skills, and new workplace values, such as a willingness to question authority and an expectation that work will be fulfilling.

There is a strong body of research which shows that job satisfaction increases as we age and that older adults feel better about their jobs than younger adults (Vander Zanden, 2000). Interestingly, many men are less committed to their work in their fifties while some women seem to develop a "post-menopausal zest", as Margaret Mead defined it (cited by Drewery & Bird, 2004), and become more involved in work. For other women and men at mid-life there is significant occupational stress, alienation, and burnout. This is especially common in the caring professions and its effects can be devastating on an individual's personal and family life. Among workers generally, involvement in leisure activities is an important way of dealing with stress. Mid-life can be an opportunity to pick up new leisure interests and these activities can also function as a bridge into retirement.

CONCLUSION

Today's mid-lifers were the first television generation and as a group they have evolved distinctive tastes and inclinations in everything from socialising and entertaining to deodorants and (more recently) appearance medicine. Some members of the cohort can have difficulty accepting physical ageing but, in an increasingly age-irrelevant society, 40 has become the new 30, and 50 years of age now has many of the connotations of being 40 a little while ago. Many people in middle age have enhanced cognitive competencies and, in terms of personality development, it is a time for looking back and looking forward and for meaning making. The Freudian injunctions to love and to work contain the sources of many of our greatest satisfactions and of our deepest

sorrows. It is important that there is understanding of the experiences and preferences, and of the developmental domains and imperatives of middle age. Forty- and fifty-year-olds predominate in teaching and the social services. They are the "establishment" of our society and they are as deserving of study as school students or any other client group.

There are also strong organisational imperatives in special education to continue to listen to the voices of the many 40-65 year-old psychologists, speech and language therapists, early intervention teachers, resource teachers of learning and behaviour, and other occupational groups. As we know, it is the intention of the Ministry of Education's (2006) *Better Outcomes for Children* to improve services for young people by instituting a nationally consistent, evidence-based, approach by 2011. A very real problem is that the older generations who predominate in special education have participated in seemingly endless change, they have witnessed many wasted opportunities (like Behaviour Education Support Teams), and they have suffered in the trivialisation of innovation, in schemes such as open plan offices. It seems reasonable, in this age of accountability, that administrators should be expected to consult closely with middle-aged staff, and be required to provide the resources to ensure that their maturity, generativity, expertise, and practical problem solving abilities are used to full advantage. Otherwise, only superficial changes could be achieved in special education and the hopes for better outcomes are unlikely to be realised.

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