

# Midlife Crisis: A Debate

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## Key Words

Midlife crisis · Time perspective · Social expectations · Life review

## Abstract

Without doubt, the midlife crisis is the most popular concept describing middle adulthood. Facing the limitation of the time until death, men in particular are believed to pause from actively pursuing their goals and review their achievements, take stock of what they have and have not yet accomplished, at times taking drastic measures to fulfill their dreams. This paper critically discusses the concept of a midlife crisis and the relevant empirical evidence, presenting arguments for and against a strict, a moderate, and a lenient conceptualization of the midlife crisis. Although a strict and even moderate definition of the midlife crisis does not seem tenable on empirical and theoretical grounds, a lenient conceptualization has the potential to stimulate new research directions exemplifying processes of the interaction of social expectations on the one hand and personal goals on the other, and their importance for developmental regulation.

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Tom, a 49-year-old man with a slight paunch and a receding hairline, has been married for 21 years and has 2 children who are about to leave home. For some time, he has been wondering if his marriage has run out of steam. He has been romantically interested in a female

coworker who is 24 years his junior for quite a while and they have been having a passionate affair for a few weeks. Tom has had a fairly successful career as a loan officer in a bank, but is thinking about making a career change as he feels he has got as far as he can in this line of work and finds the thought of spending the rest of his working life as a loan officer unsettling. He is also currently thinking about buying a sports car – a red convertible...

Most people would say that Tom seems to be going through a midlife crisis. All of the 'symptoms' appear to fit perfectly. But consider Tom's story again and imagine he were 29 instead of 49 years of age. Would the 'symptoms' of starting an affair with a 25-year-old woman, thinking about making a career change and about buying a fancy red convertible sports car seem odd? Maybe men of all ages are susceptible to the attractiveness of 25-year-old women, the possibilities of other jobs, and the lure of fast cars? On what basis, then, do people neglect the base rate of these wishes and behaviors at any point across adulthood and view them as symptoms of a crisis when they occur in midlife? One might argue that the same behavior takes on a different meaning when displayed under different circumstances and that the behavior of the 29-year-old Tom is perfectly in line with social expectations for young adulthood, whereas the behavior of 49-year-old Tom does not conform with age-related expectations for middle adulthood. In fact, one might believe that these behaviors are indicative of an underlying fear of aging.

In this article, we will discuss the pros and cons of the concept of the midlife crisis. In this discussion, we will

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review the theoretical and empirical arguments speaking for and against the fruitfulness of this concept. However, we will first clarify what age span signifies midlife.

### Characterizing Middle Adulthood

The definition of midlife seems straightforward: at the middle of a person's life. Based on the average human life expectancy, this is at age 32.5 for men and age 34.75 for women [1]. Even a cursory look at the popular press shows that age 30 is a cultural marker for leaving youth behind and becoming a fully fledged adult and having to take on all the responsibilities of adulthood in the domains of job, finances, and family. Nevertheless, most adults approaching or above age 30 in western, industrialized nations would probably not say that the early thirties should be considered 'middle age'. In fact, this reflects that life expectancy in most modern, industrialized countries lies around 80 years, locating midlife at around 40 years of age.

The middle of life, however, is a point in the life span and not the same as the *phase* of midlife. Reviewing the literature on middle adulthood, Staudinger and Bluck [2] conclude that middle adulthood is typically seen as starting at age 40 and extending to age 60, but with vague and fuzzy boundaries regarding beginning and end. In fact, the fuzziness of the boundaries of middle adulthood is apparent in the samples of studies on midlife that encompass ages 30–70 [3, 4]. Lachman et al. [5] found that the timing of midlife depends on the age of the person asked: for middle-aged and older adults, on average, midlife is seen as starting at age 40 (ranging from age 30 to 55) and ending at age 60 (again, with a large range from age 45 to 75). In contrast, for younger adults, middle adulthood is seen as being at a younger age, namely, between age 35 and 55. In a survey with of 374 young, middle-aged, and older adults that we conducted in Switzerland for the purpose of this article, respondents reported viewing middle adulthood as starting at age 35 and ending at age 53. Although there was a great deal of interindividual variability ( $SD = 7.5$  years for starting age and  $SD = 9.5$  years for ending age), the variability did not stem from systematic age differences of the respondents (fig. 1).

Chronological age, then, might not be the best definitional criterion for middle adulthood. According to Staudinger and Bluck [2], this phase is better defined in terms of the main developmental events or tasks. As reported by Borland [3], however, there is substantial dis-

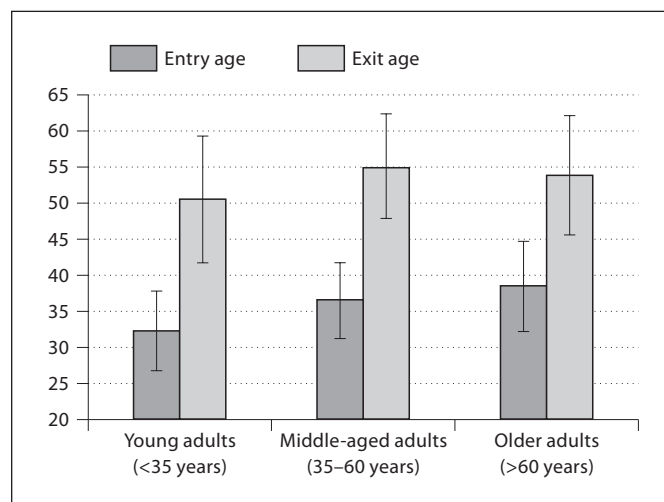


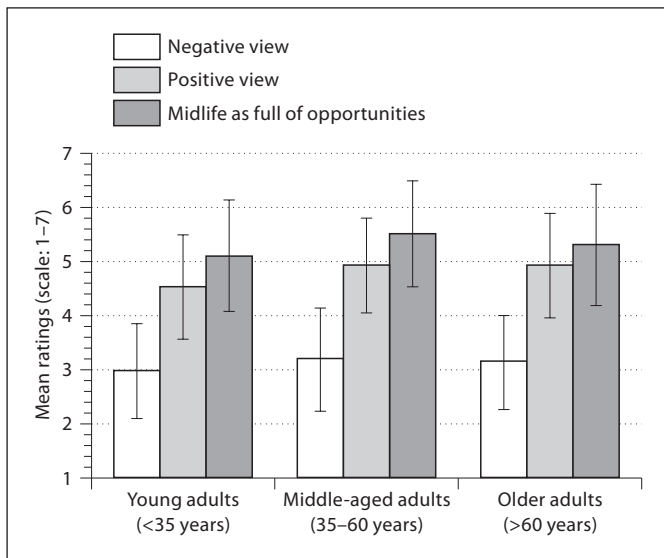
Fig. 1. Entry and exit age for middle adulthood as rated by young, middle-aged, and older adults.

agreement about which of the following better describes middle adulthood: Is it a time of increased financial responsibility for one's children as well as one's parents; a decline in physical stamina and health; a professional plateau accompanied by disappointment, boredom, and frustration; emotional loss as one's children leave home and/or one's parents die; a phase of married life lacking in excitement? Or is it more a time of personal freedom with peak performance and higher workplace status, good physical health, satisfying marital life after one's children have left home, and expanding social networks?

Although recently progress has been made with respect to research on middle adulthood, kindled primarily by 'MIDUS', a large-scale study on successful midlife development [4, 6, 7], Levinson's [8, p. x] 30-year-old assessment still appears to be valid: 'Middle age is usually regarded as a vague interim period, defined primarily in negative terms. One is no longer young and yet not quite old'.

#### Time Perspective

Neugarten [9] proposed a change in time perspective as one of the main psychological characteristics of middle adulthood. According to Neugarten, middle adulthood is characterized by a switch from perceiving one's life primarily as 'time since birth' to 'time left to live'. To our knowledge, there are no empirical studies investigating this proposed switch or whether a substantial group of



**Fig. 2.** Middle adulthood is seen primarily as a positive time of life and full of new possibilities. Mean ratings, SDs,  $n = 364$ .

middle-aged people feel that they have just as much time left as has already passed. However, empirical evidence that future time perspective changes across adulthood does exist. With increasing age, future time perspective decreases [9, but see 11 for evidence suggesting a longer future time perspective in middle adulthood]. According to Nuttin [12], time perspective is a central motivational dimension. Future perspective is important for life planning and the selection of personal goals as well as the evaluation of the present [13, 14]. When perceiving the future as open-ended, people set goals that are oriented towards gaining new information and accumulating more resources. In contrast, when perceiving the future as limited, people set goals that help them regulate their emotions [15]. Maybe, one could argue, the so-called midlife crisis is an attempt to regulate one's emotions stemming from the realization that death is no longer an abstract fact of life, but a personal event that will end one's life in the foreseeable future. This constitutes what Jacques [16] termed the 'midlife crisis' in his 1965 article entitled 'Death and the midlife crisis', which was primarily a historical analysis of the works of artists and some psychoanalytic case studies.

#### *Motivational Changes*

If, as Neugarten [9] proposed, middle-aged adults perceive their future as being limited, they should also experience a motivational shift from an orientation towards

achieving gains to one towards maintenance and the avoidance of loss [17]. In the eyes of the young, maintenance might be seen as a sign of stagnation rather than the conservation of something positively valued and worth preserving. Realizing that the future is not open-ended and that it might become more and more difficult to set new life goals and to achieve ever higher levels of functioning could create in some the feeling of a lack of options concerning how to lead one's life, of being stuck with the choices one has made earlier in life, of being trapped by the demands and obligations in one's job and family (fig. 2). In keeping with this theme of middle adulthood as the beginning of decline, one of the metaphors frequently used for the middle of life is that of 'being over the hill' [e.g. 18]. This is the perspective of the midlife crisis. The popularity of the midlife crisis concept is illustrated by data from our internet survey. 92% of the respondents said that they believed in the existence of a midlife crisis. 71% reported that they personally knew somebody who either has had or is having a midlife crisis. The mean age for experiencing a midlife crisis was placed at 47.5 years (SD = 8.06 years).

#### *Characterizing the Midlife Crisis*

According to Brim [19, p. 6, 20] 'the concept of 'crisis', in mid-life and at other times, implies a rapid or substantial change in personality..., which is dislocating with respect to one's sense of identity – his usual reference groups, his role models, his principles, his values, his dyadic relationships. So the whole framework of his earlier life is in question'.

Why should such a crisis be more likely to occur in middle adulthood? Whereas young adulthood is typically conceptualized as the phase of beginnings (e.g. finding a life partner, founding a family, starting a career), middle-aged adults are expected to have settled down, established a career, and have a firm sense of identity. Tamir [20] proposed that this might be the first time in a man's life when he reflects upon himself and measures his achievements according to the standards that he set when he was young ('The Dream', as Levinson [8] calls it). Re-viewing and seriously evaluating one's life for the first time 'may constitute a significantly new and potentially stressful experience for the man who has been so self-contained' [20, p. 161]; Tamir assumes here that women are more self-reflective by nature and hence not rattled when entering middle adulthood. Such a reflection and the realization that one's reality does not measure up to the dreams and goals one had in young adulthood might then lead to the pressure of changing one's life while there

is still time to do so. Levinson et al. [21, p. 49] proposed that the re-evaluation of one's life up to middle adulthood is accompanied by depression, anxiety, and 'manic flight'. Note that this concept of a crisis is clearly a negative one. Resolving the crisis, however, is believed to further development (similar to Erikson's [22] notion of development as a succession of crises that have to be solved at a certain age).

Many attribute the concept of 'midlife crisis' to Levinson, although it was originally proposed by Jacques [16]. One of the reasons for this might be that Jacques' theorizing is strongly psychoanalytic and based on historical analyses of famous artists and a few clinical case studies. In contrast, Levinson's work was based on more systematic interviews with larger samples of nonclinical adults (although his samples were also neither representative nor, according to common standards, large) and embedded in a more general theory of development. In short, Levinson [e.g. 23] proposed that development occurs in consecutive stages characterized by specific developmental tasks and linked by equally important transition phases lasting about 5 years. According to Levinson, the developmental stages and their connecting transition phases are strongly age-linked. The midlife transition links the era of early and middle adulthood and occurs between age 40 and 45. This phase is characterized by a re-appraisal of one's past and a modification of one's life structure with respect to marital relations and work. Re-appraising the past, according to Levinson, is a painful process because it means 'de-illusionment' and is related to disappointment or even a cynical attitude towards life. Some men might even 'feel bereft and have the experience of suffering an irreparable loss' [8, p. 193]. This phase of internal and external turmoil and change is what Levinson calls the midlife crisis and it constitutes a necessary and important step towards entering middle adulthood.

An alternative to Levinson's [8] conception of the midlife transition as a period of crisis is the perspective that middle adulthood is a phase of peak functioning in both the social and the professional domains [e.g. 9]. According to a third perspective on middle adulthood primarily put forth by personality psychologists [e.g. 24], not much happens in middle adulthood: this is a phase of stability, development having been completed when adulthood was reached. According to this perspective, high neuroticism increases the likelihood of a crisis at any transition point, including middle adulthood.

In the following, we will discuss the usefulness of the concept of 'midlife crisis' from a theoretical as well as an empirical viewpoint. We will start by presenting three

conceptualizations of midlife crisis that vary in their degree of specification and leniency. We will examine each of these conceptualizations with respect to how fruitful each of them is for understanding life span development in general and midlife in particular.

According to the strict definition of the term 'midlife crisis' as proposed by Levinson, the transition from early to middle adulthood (a) is normative (i.e. the majority of people experience it), (b) is temporally bound to a specific age range, and (c) comprises structural markers that distinguish it from other transitions. A moderate conceptualization defines 'midlife crisis' as a troublesome transition phase that occurs normatively during middle adulthood, but is not necessarily distinct from other forms of crises that occur at other times during the life span such as adolescence. This conceptualization only includes two of the definitional criteria (a and b). A lenient conceptualization of the term 'midlife crisis' assumes that some, but not all, people experience a difficult transition into middle adulthood, thus including only one of the definitional criteria (b).

### Strict Definition of the Term 'Midlife Crisis'

#### *Proponent*

The strict definition of 'midlife crisis' (namely, normative, bound to a specific phase in the life span, and structurally different from other crises) is in line with one of the main assumptions of life span development, namely, that development is a lifelong process and that there is no primacy of one developmental phase over another [25]. It is also in line with the assumption that development can best be understood as the interplay of personal goals and external structures, such as opportunity structures and social norms [26, 27]. Based on these assumptions, it is possible to establish characteristics that distinguish the midlife crisis from other transitions and show how this crisis is linked to a specific time in the life span.

#### *Evaluation of Goal Achievement*

The personal goals of younger adults typically reach into middle adulthood [28, 29]. Prototypical examples are 'starting a career' or 'starting a family'. Hence, middle adulthood can be regarded as the temporal target area of young people's personal long-term goals. This time frame suggests that, at some point during middle adulthood, people very likely revisit their goals and evaluate their accomplishments with respect to these standards and assess whether the emotional gratification obtained from



their accomplishments matches their expectations. As has been convincingly shown in the context of research on the hedonic treadmill, the positive effects of reaching one's goals are typically short-lived (for an excellent review, see [30]). Moreover, people have been shown to mispredict their future experience by overestimating the impact of an affective event such as goal achievement [31] and often fail to make choices or set goals that actually make them happy [32]. The temporal distance of goals set in young adulthood also affects the cognitive representation and affective evaluation of these goals. From the distant perspective of youth, the goal is represented in abstract terms and carries a positive overall value, whereas from the closer distance of middle adulthood, the representation is more concrete and more negative details come to the fore [33]. For example, the anticipated joy of having a family might be clouded by sleepless nights due to a newborn family member. For these reasons, it seems likely that people will feel less fulfilled in middle adulthood than they thought they would when they were younger – even if they have reached the goals they set for themselves when they were younger.

#### *Setting of New Goals*

Given the loss of cognitive as well as physical resources that people face in middle adulthood and the changes in social expectations [e.g. 34], they also have to set new goals in line with the internal and external changes characterizing middle adulthood. The setting of new goals might be stressful because of the central role of goals for development. Personal goals are a primary source of meaning and direction for an individual [e.g. 35]. They structure the life course, provide value and motivation for actions over time and across situations and contribute to psychological well-being and life satisfaction across adulthood [26, 36, 37]. Having to revise old and set new goals is potentially highly stressful because during such a transition phase the old goals are no longer operative, but new goals that could guide behavior and provide meaning do not yet exist.

Apart from the temporal loss of guidance and the meaning provided by personal goals and the ambivalent results of the achievement evaluation, the setting of new guiding goals in middle adulthood might also be difficult. In contrast to young and middle adulthood, older adulthood is less structured by developmental tasks and opportunity structures, providing less external support for the setting of new goals [14, 38].

A restricted future time perspective further complicates the setting of new goals in middle adulthood [9]. A

limited future time perspective might be associated with the knowledge that repairs of mistakes or revisions of goals become more and more difficult or even impossible. Whereas central goals are safeguarded until middle adulthood by temporal resources that allow for revisions, compensation for setbacks, or even new attempts in case of failure, goals for the second half of life are associated with increasing scarcity of temporal resources and the finality of decisions. The selection of goals, then, might feel much more consequential in middle adulthood. This insecurity might lead people to set the very same kinds of goals with which they have gained security about their life path in young adulthood, namely what career they want to pursue, what kind of a romantic relationship they want to have and with whom. According to Erikson [22], this can be regarded as a form of stagnation.

Although the strict conceptualization of the midlife crisis based on personal goals proposed here is somewhat different from traditional accounts of midlife crisis [8, 16], the phenomenology is strikingly similar: increased introspection and self-evaluation, awareness of time passing, and considerations of forgone or missed chances and opportunities [39]. In their study on midlife crisis in men, Hermans and Oles [40, p. 1419] concluded that midlife crisis is 'characterized by a discontinuity between the achievements in the past and the expectations for the future'. Moreover, men in a midlife crisis associated more negative and less positive affect with their personal future and ambivalent feelings regarding the personal past. This very well fits the hypothesis that a midlife crisis is associated with an ambivalent evaluation of past accomplishments and the struggle for new personal goals.

#### *Counterpart*

Using a goal perspective to conceptualize the strict definition of the midlife crisis has a number of problems that render doubtful its fruitfulness for understanding development across adulthood. The first argument concerns the view that goals set during adolescence and young adulthood are used as standards of comparison for assessing one's achievements in middle adulthood. This is highly unlikely for two reasons. First, goals are dynamic and change over time. Personal goals can be seen as cognitive representations of future desired or undesired states that are to be achieved or avoided [e.g. 41]. These representations, however, are not fixed, but change depending on various factors such as temporal distance [see above, 33], availability of resources and age [e.g. 17], and the likelihood of achievement [e.g. 36]. As elaborated by Brandtstädter and Greve [42], people constantly adjust

their level of aspiration and the content of their goals depending on changes in themselves or their environment. The adjustment of goals that might even occur outside of conscious awareness is not bound to a specific point in one's life, but typically occurs gradually over time. Therefore, it is extremely unlikely that people will recall the exact formulation of their goals from adolescence and hold them as yardsticks against which they measure their achievements. Instead, their goals will have changed throughout adulthood.

Second, the assessment of success or failure is often difficult due to the abstractness of long-term goals. For instance, what are the criteria for success for the goal 'having a happy family'? For some, this might entail having fun on outings with one's spouse and children; for some, the main criterion might be the level of disclosure; for others it might be that the children do not take drugs. Again, these criteria are not set once and for all. In fact, the more abstract a goal, the less clear the criteria for success. As has been shown in the context of evaluating one's memory performance, changes in criteria according to one's achievements allow people to attain and maintain a fairly positive overall evaluation of themselves [42]. Also, most people hold a positive view of themselves and are fairly satisfied with their lives throughout the life span, including middle adulthood [e.g. 43]. This finding speaks against the proposition that middle-aged adults view their accomplishments as falling short of their earlier standards and as insufficient.

The third argument is directed against the proposition that it might be difficult to set new goals in middle adulthood because old age is less well structured by social norms and expectations. In fact, there are clear social expectations regarding both the family and the professional domain in middle adulthood. Therefore, the setting of personal goals in middle adulthood is guided by age-related social norms and expectations. It is old age that is the least well structured and hence places the greatest demands on the individual regarding the selection of personal goals [for a more detailed discussion of changes on demands on goal setting across adulthood, see 14]. If at all, a crisis regarding goal setting, then, should not occur in middle but in late adulthood, when people retire and no longer have children or parents to take care of.

A fourth problem with the strict conceptualization of 'midlife crisis' is the assumption that people basically decide upon the same kinds of goals in midlife that they selected in younger adulthood (i.e. professional career, romantic partnership, lifestyle). When the future time perspective is perceived as limited, as is the case in middle

adulthood, it is more likely that people adopt maintenance goals instead of starting afresh with goals aimed at new achievements. Empirical research by Ebner et al. [17] has shown that middle-aged adults are more likely than younger adults to adopt maintenance goals. In contrast, younger adults show a clear preference for personal goals that aim at achieving new gains. Moreover, this switch in goal orientation seems adaptive. In middle (but not younger) adulthood, maintenance orientation (but not gain orientation) is positively associated with subjective well-being. It seems, then, that middle-aged adults successfully adjust their goals in accordance with their future time perspective.

One line of criticism of the research on midlife crisis is geared at empirical studies. Schaie and Willis [44] see two major problems with midlife crisis research. First, the majority of studies rely on qualitative interview data, little of which has been cross-validated using standardized instruments. Second, most of these interview data are cross-sectional. The very concept of a crisis, however, necessitates following a sample over time in order to determine whether or not a certain event changes subjective well-being, problem behavior, or the setting of drastic new goals. Using a cross-sectional design, in which cohort and age effects are confounded, one cannot investigate the effects of events or transitions on individuals. Another criticism that has been raised is that the samples are typically very small and not representative. In fact, most samples, and most prominently the ones used by Jacques [16] and Levinson [8], have been highly selective (biographies of artists and clinical case studies in the first case, and white, middle-class males in the second).

One of the often-criticized features of the strict definition of 'midlife crisis' is the stage view of development. There is no evidence in support of strongly age-associated, nonlinear, qualitative changes in various functional domains that are indicative of delineated developmental phases. Instead, as summarized by Baltes [25, 45], at all ages, there is a substantial amount of interindividual variability and, moreover, there are interindividual differences in intraindividual change, which lead to highly diverse developmental trajectories that also vary across cultures. In addition, life span psychology has shown that development is both multidirectional as well as multifunctional, which contradicts the assumption of unidirectional development put forth by stage theories. Therefore, most developmental theories have abandoned the assumption of distinct phases of life.

## Moderate Definition of the Term 'Midlife Crisis'

### *Proponent*

Adopting the moderate definition of 'midlife crisis', which is not based on a stage view of development, one could argue that middle adulthood is a phase of taking stock and reviewing one's previous accomplishments. Here, too, the life course is well-structured and based on age-related social norms and expectations. As has been shown by Settersten [46], most of the social expectations for developmental transitions in the professional and family domains converge in middle adulthood as the time of having attained important developmental milestones such as starting a family and achieving one's professional peak. Therefore, it is very likely that middle adulthood is a time of being evaluated by oneself and others with respect to these expectations. Lachman [4, p. 310] draws a similar conclusion: 'When in the middle, it is natural to look back to see what has come before or to evaluate what has been accomplished and to look ahead to determine what comes next or remains to be done'. Although not a stage in the strict sense, then, middle adulthood can be viewed as a phase in the life course that is associated with taking stock of one's accomplishments. Admittedly, middle adulthood is not the only time for people to review and revise their personal goals. Nevertheless, the very popularity of the concept of the midlife crisis suggests that there is a strong social expectation that people review and revise their goals during middle adulthood. Most likely, people will not have reached all of their goals yet, which may bring about feelings of inadequacy. In addition, as pointed out above, the necessity of abandoning old goals and setting new ones is likely associated with a lack of directionality and guidance. Therefore, a moderate definition of 'midlife crisis' predicts that the transition from old to new goals is a challenging period.

One of the most critical issues with respect to the strict definition of 'midlife crisis' is whether middle-aged adults experience a crisis upon reviewing their accomplishments and realizing their shortcomings and missed chances as posited by the strict definition. The empirical evidence appears to contradict the hypothesis of middle adulthood being a time of crisis. According to the moderate definition, however, middle adulthood is just a particularly challenging phase of life. Costa and McCrae [24] found that neuroticism is related to a higher likelihood of experiencing difficulties during middle adulthood, so perhaps the challenges of middle adulthood only result in a crisis for vulnerable people. In addition, it remains to

be explained why most people do not experience a crisis and which – individual as well as societal – protective factors buffer against it.

### *Counterpart*

Even the broadest definition of 'midlife crisis' predicts that middle-aged adults encounter more or age-specific psychological problems than those in other age groups. Otherwise, the notion of an age-associated crisis would lose its meaning. The empirical evidence, however, does not support this hypothesis. As pointed out by Hunter and Sundel [47, p. 17], 'Epidemiologists have also found little support for midlife being a time of excessive negative events such as career disillusionment leading to career change, diminished sexuality, divorce, death anxiety, alcoholism, neuroticism, depression, or suicide. In fact, it is often during other periods of life when these events peak, if ever'. Data from the MIDUS study on the age people would prefer if they had the choice suggests that middle adulthood might actually be a peak phase in life. Older adults (65–84 years) preferred middle adulthood over any other phase in the life span [5]. We confirmed this in our own Swiss internet study: most older adults reported that they did not wish they could be young again and that middle adulthood was their preferred age. Summarizing the literature on middle adulthood, Reid and Willis [48] concluded that the midlife crisis has been overdramatized; on the whole, the notion of a crisis in midlife is neither based on nor supported by empirical evidence.

To argue that the lack of empirical evidence for middle adulthood as a time of crisis is in itself the phenomenon that needs explanation seems rather problematic. The most parsimonious explanation is that there simply is no crisis. Adopting a more complex explanation for a null finding runs counter to the well-established scientific principle called Occam's razor, which states that, all other things being equal, the simplest theoretical model with the fewest assumptions is the best. To introduce protective factors when there is no evidence that people encounter a problem contradicts the law of parsimony [see 49, for a similar argument against the so-called 'well-being paradox' in old age].

One can also question the interpretation of the finding that neuroticism is associated with the likelihood of encountering problems in middle adulthood. This would only speak in favor of a broad definition of 'midlife crisis' if it could be shown that neuroticism is significantly more likely to be related to the experience of problems in middle adulthood than in other phases of

the life span. However, neuroticism is related to lower levels of psychological as well as physical well-being throughout the life span [e.g. 50]. This finding clearly contradicts the hypothesis that it is more challenging to master one's life in middle adulthood than in other phases of the life span. Moreover, abandoning old goals and setting new ones might also be positively experienced as a form of liberation.

## Lenient Concept

### *Proponent*

Let me first address if Occam's razor should be used to diagnose whether middle adulthood entails conditions that make it an especially challenging phase in the life span. The subjective experience of people (i.e. 'I am currently encountering a difficult time or a challenging problem') is not a valid and by no means the best criterion for whether they are encountering challenges and problems. Although one ought to be careful when assuming processes or conditions that fail to have an observable impact, there are cases in which there are good reasons for such an assumption. For example, when someone shows no signs of physical exhaustion after a demanding physical activity like a bicycle race, it is reasonable to search for the lack of exhaustion (e.g. training conditions, involvement of drugs). The search for factors contributing to the lack of exhaustion is reasonable because there is empirical evidence as well as theoretical predictions that activities such as a bicycle race consume physical resources that lead to exhaustion. If we have theoretical and empirical reasons to assume that a certain variable has an impact on psychological well-being and this impact fails to occur, the absence of the impact (or 'null finding') calls for an explanation. It seems reasonable to assume that the specific challenges in middle adulthood are, in fact, such a case. That there is no evidence for heightened ill in middle adulthood does not disprove the existence of challenges that need to be mastered. This notion of middle adulthood as a time of challenges to life management is at the core of a lenient concept of the midlife crisis.

The lenient conceptualization of 'midlife crisis' does not regard the occurrence of a crisis in middle adulthood as being normative. By giving up normativity, this conceptualization no longer posits a general theory of adult development. Nevertheless, a lenient conceptualization of 'midlife crisis' is potentially useful for understanding life span development, viewing middle adult-

hood as a time during which people are confronted with age-associated challenges. These challenges arise primarily from life-review and social-comparison processes triggered by being a certain age. Due to strong social expectations that middle adulthood is a time for reviewing one's accomplishments, people are more likely to compare their actual self-image with their ideal self-image as well as with social expectations of what one ought to have achieved by middle adulthood. Moreover, because middle adulthood is commonly viewed as the middle of life, the change in future time perspective as the time until death [9] is likely to highlight the limited remaining time for redirecting or correcting one's personal developmental path. Even if this process does not lead to a crisis, it poses a developmental challenge that needs to be mastered.

This perspective of the midlife crisis might be useful for understanding midlife development. The lenient definition of 'midlife crisis' could serve as a paradigmatic case to investigate the influence of social expectations on developmental regulation. If, as argued by Lachman [4], the position in the life course is especially salient at midlife, social and personal beliefs about the midlife crisis might be a better predictor of successful development during this phase of life than subjective beliefs about development at other phases of the life span.

## Conclusion

Although the arguments against the strict and the broad conceptualizations of 'midlife crisis' seem difficult to counter and have been voiced by a number of critics, such as Brim [19], Hunter and Sundel [47], Lachman [4], Reid and Willis [48], or Whitbourne and Angiullo [51], and although one might want to continue the debate of whether looking for factors contributing to resilience in the absence of empirical indicators of the stressfulness of experiences related to middle adulthood [see 49], we maintain that there are some reasons why a lenient definition of the midlife-crisis might still be fruitful. On a theoretical level, a lenient definition is compatible with current concepts of life span development that stress the importance of the interplay between social expectations and personal goals for developmental regulation [e.g., 26, 27, 36, 45, 52, 53]. Therefore, we propose that the debate between the proponents and the opponents of the concept of 'midlife crisis' can be resolved by adopting a lenient concept. On an empirical level, we hold that such a



lenient conceptualization has the potential to stimulate new research directions exemplifying processes of the interaction of social expectations on the one hand and personal goals on the other, and their importance for developmental regulation.

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