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Gender, Social Class, and the Subjective Experience of Aging: Self-Perceived Personality Change From Early Adulthood to Late Midlife

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This study explored the applicability of previous research (obtained with groups of college-educated women) about the subjective experience of aging in midlife to men and less-educated people. Two-hundred fifty-nine men and women who graduated from a public high school in 1955-1957 retrospectively assessed their feelings of identity certainty, confident power, generativity, and concern about aging for their 60s, 40s, and 20s. Participants reported higher levels of identity certainty, confident power, and concern about aging at each age, and a leveling off of generativity in their 60s. There were some gender and social class differences. Although men and women recalled the same trajectory of these feelings, men reported higher levels of identity certainty and confident power across age. Non-college-educated men recalled the highest levels of concern about aging across age. We discuss how these findings add to our understanding of the experience of aging in these domains.

Keywords: *personality; gender; social class; aging; middle age*

Research has demonstrated that middle-age, college-educated women mostly do not see aging as a process of decline but rather as a process of gaining in positive feelings about the self. For example, Stewart, Ostrove, and Helson (2001) and Zucker, Ostrove, and Stewart (2002) found that college-educated women report feeling more certain about their identity, confident, powerful, and generative in midlife compared to earlier ages. Gender and social class may influence how individuals experience subjective aspects of aging (Cameron, 1970, 1973; Gatz & Karel, 1993; Lachman, 1986; Ryff, 1982). Yet, these and similar studies have relied exclusively on samples of well-educated women. It is therefore important to directly examine, as we do in this study, whether these

findings generalize to men and to less highly educated people.

We examined the four specific aspects of personality development—identity certainty, confident power, generativity, and concern about aging—that were assessed by Stewart et al. (2001) and Zucker et al. (2002). Identity certainty derives from Erikson's (1950, 1964, 1968, 1980) concept of identity as an affirmed sense of self and of one's place in the social world; confident power assesses feelings of mastery and competence (Helson & Wink, 1992; Neugarten, 1968); generativity reflects a preoccupation with a world beyond the self and a desire to make a contribution to future generations (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986); and concern about aging represents the popular conception of aging as a preoccupation with "time left," the approach of death, and decreased physical strength and attractiveness (Clausen, 1986; Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978; McAdams, 1985).

Retrospective Accounts of Aging

As did Stewart et al. (2001) and Zucker et al. (2002), we asked individuals to describe their feelings associated

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with aging both retrospectively (for their 40s and 20s) and concurrently (for their 60s—their current age). Thus, similar to previous work, this study relies on retrospective accounts for much of the data. Although there are a number of advantages of using retrospective designs, there are also disadvantages. For example, individuals may simply not remember their past. Retrospective techniques also have been criticized for being inaccurate because they are based on strong schema-based processing. For example, Ross and his colleagues (Conway & Ross, 1984; McFarland, Ross, & Giltrow, 1992; Ross, 1989) argue that people have implicit theories of aging that guide how people recall changing (or not) on some attribute over time. For example, when asked about how they have changed on some attribute, they argue that people either invoke a theory of change (in which case people overestimate the amount of change that has occurred) or stability (in which case people underestimate the amount of change that has occurred). Because of these possible theoretical biases, they argue that retrospective accounts of personality change and changes associated with aging may be inaccurate. Schwartz and Sprangers (1999) maintain that individuals also can undergo a “response shift,” or a change in internal standards, values, or conceptualizations associated with the self over time. These changes in the meaning of one’s self-evaluation may alter or bias people’s recollections of themselves over the life span.

Even though there are some disadvantages of using retrospective designs, they do have a number of advantages. For example, they can be helpful for understanding how individuals make sense of their lives and perceive themselves as having changed over the life course—in essence, how people tell the story of their life. This more subjective aspect of aging is what we were particularly interested in examining. That is, our primary aim was to examine how people *perceive* aspects of their personality associated with aging as changing over their life, rather than the accuracy of those perceptions. McAdams (1995) has argued that life stories, or the narratives that people have about their life, is one fundamental level of personality. In his life story model of identity, McAdams (1985, 1993, 1996) argues that people construct life stories to give their lives unity, purpose, and meaning. Thus, even though they are based on biographical facts, life stories are psychosocial constructions that people develop to make sense and coherence of their life. Retrospective designs, then, seem especially appropriate when a researcher is interested in subjective aspects of aging and perceptions of how one has changed over the life course. Retrospective accounts associated with aging also have been linked with well-being and adjustment (e.g., Gergen & Gergen, 1983), so understanding how people remember, construct, and

recollect their own experience of aging is an important area of study. Finally, because of the costly and time-consuming nature of longitudinal research, retrospective self-reports are often the only source researchers have for examining life span developmental processes, such as self-perceptions associated with aging.

Even though we did not specifically address the accuracy of people’s aging perceptions, it is important to note that many studies have found considerable similarity between retrospective and concurrent perceptions of personality change (Harker & Solomon, 1996; Helson & Wink, 1992; Ryff, 1982; Stewart et al., 2001; Zucker et al., 2002). For example, Zucker et al. (2002) found substantial overlap between concurrent and retrospective reports of feelings of identity certainty, confident power, generativity, and concern about aging (the domains examined in the present study). Moreover, the trajectory of aging reported by their participants was very similar to the trajectory recalled by the participants in the Stewart et al. (2001) study. In addition, Helson and Wink (1992) found that age 43 ratings were congruent with retrospective ratings at age 52 in some personality areas. These studies support the notion that current self-reports and retrospective reports can be consistent and that individuals can detect, at least to some extent, changes in their personality. Still, other research suggests that retrospective reports may overestimate the degree of actual personality change (Woodruff & Birren, 1972).

Theoretical and Empirical Work on the Four Personality Domains Associated With Aging

Stewart et al. (2001) found that middle-aged, college-educated women reported higher levels of feelings of identity certainty, confident power, generativity, and concern about aging in middle age compared to early adulthood. They also found that concern about aging was the least prominent of the four domains, suggesting that these women saw the aging process as substantially a positive experience. Zucker et al. (2002) reported similar findings in samples of educated women. It is unclear, however, whether men and non-college-educated individuals experience the same positive trajectory of feelings about aging. Some theoretical and empirical work suggests that people may experience subjective aspects of aging differently depending on their gender and social class, whereas other research suggests that the subjective experience of aging is not dependent on these factors. For example, some work suggests that men and women may experience aging similarly, whereas other work suggests that their experiences are very different. We review these findings below.

Identity certainty and confident power. Many theories of adult male development identify the paid work role as the most important source of men’s feelings of

confidence, power, and a strong sense of identity (Levinson et al., 1978; Vaillant, 1977) and suggest that changes in this role might negatively affect men's experience of getting older (Thompson, 1994). This work suggests that, unlike women (Stewart et al., 2001; Zucker et al., 2002), men may experience a decrease in feelings of identity certainty and confident power from mid-adulthood to late adulthood as a result of changes in the work role and impending retirement. For example, men whose feelings of personal power, confidence, and identity are derived from the work role may feel at odds with leaving paid employment and, as a result, may begin to question "who they are" and their personal worth.

Men also may experience feelings of identity certainty and confident power very differently depending on their social class status. For example, Neugarten and Peterson (as described in Neugarten & Datan, 1974) found that upper-middle-class men reported middle age as a period of productivity and increasing autonomy, whereas working-class men described middle age in terms of decline. Similarly, Farrell and Rosenberg (1981) found that upper-middle-class men dealt with stresses in middle age with a positive outlook. Working-class men, in contrast, dealt with their stresses less positively. These research findings suggest that working-class men may not experience midlife as positively as middle- and upper-middle-class men because they lack the financial resources that men in higher economic classes enjoy. Because American society, to some degree, defines "success" for men as having a high income, financial security, and the ability to "keep up with the Jones's," working-class men may begin to feel less sure and confident of themselves as they struggle to meet these socially defined measures of success. As a result, they may decrease in feelings of identity certainty and confident power from early adulthood to late midlife. This work also suggests that working-class men might not only experience lower levels of feelings of identity certainty and confident power in late midlife compared to earlier ages but that they might also report lower levels of these feelings compared to men in higher social classes across age.

In contrast to this hypothesized bleak trajectory for at least some men, research using concurrent and retrospective reports indicates that women feel more certain about their identity in midlife compared to earlier ages (Helson, Stewart, & Ostrove, 1995; Stewart et al., 2001; Zucker et al., 2002). Women also report increases in confidence and dominance from early adulthood to later middle age (Helson & Moane, 1987; Jones & Meredith, 1996; Wink & Helson, 1993). These results suggest that women may increase in feelings of identity certainty and confident power with age and that women may not be as distressed by midlife role changes as men have been hypothesized to be (Levinson, 1996). In fact, Gergen

(1990) found no evidence that changes in midlife roles (i.e., "the empty nest") lead to negative personality changes in women, and Cooper and Gutmann (1987) found that such changes might actually have a positive effect on women's personality. Moreover, it appears that identity continues to grow and develop with age, particularly for women (Zucker et al., 2002). Thus, midlife appears to be a particularly good time for women, perhaps because it is also a time of lessened parental obligations and increased occupational and personal achievement. Thus, women, regardless of social class, may experience heightened feelings of identity certainty, and also confident power, as they age. Still, we cannot ignore the fact that women in our society have less power and status than men. Thus, even though men may question their identity and feelings of power in late midlife, they may be able to take advantage of their status in society to buffer negative feelings about the self. As a result, women's levels of identity certainty and confident power may not be as high as men's at any age, even though men may show a decrease in feelings of identity certainty and confident power from their 40s to their 60s.

Generativity. The popular conception of aging assumes that all people desire to "leave their mark" as they get older. These contributions can be oriented toward caring for and fostering the development of others or contributing to the larger society and culture in some way. For example, research indicates that productivity and teaching expertise are important components of generativity (Kotre, 1984; Peterson & Stewart, 1990). Kotre (1984) holds that the transfer of specific skills, such as cooking or reading, represent forms of *technical generativity*. Vaillant and Milofsky (1980) further maintain that wisdom and the preservation of culture represent aspects of generativity.

Erikson (1950) emphasized parenting as the most common expression of generativity. It is presumed that because women are often more involved than men in raising children, they also might report more generative concerns than men throughout the life course. However, men do report both generative behavior and preoccupations (Levinson et al., 1978; Snarey & Clark, 1998; Vaillant & Milofsky, 1980) and both men and women see themselves as most concerned with generativity in middle age (Ryff & Heincke, 1983). Moreover, both middle-aged men and women report significantly higher levels of generativity than young adults (McAdams, de St. Aubin, & Logan, 1993). Together, this work suggests that there may not be a gender difference in feelings of generativity.

It is less clear how social class might shape feelings of generativity. Snarey and Clark (1998) argue that generativity transcends class boundaries and is not only reserved for the upper classes. For example, they found

that working-class men who cared for their children's emotional development reported greater happiness at midlife and were also likely to be generative beyond the family domain. In contrast, Keyes and Ryff's (1998) findings suggest that educational attainment (or lack thereof) shapes generative feelings and behavior in that those in higher social classes are more likely to be generative. They argue that because education is linked to having resources (i.e., money), those with less education may feel less able to assist future generations. Thus, it may simply be that those with the resources to be generative are more likely to report generative feelings and behavior.

These findings suggest that both men and women will report higher feelings of generativity in late midlife compared to earlier ages. How social class is related to feelings of generativity is less clear. Some research suggests that feelings of generativity are unrelated to social class, whereas other research suggests a link between social class and feelings of generativity.

Concern about aging. As individuals age, they also often become more concerned about their physical strength and attractiveness, the amount of time left to accomplish life goals, and the approach of death (Clausen, 1986; Levinson et al., 1978; McAdams, 1985; Stewart et al., 2001; Zucker et al., 2001). Especially in late midlife, people begin to realize that they have less time ahead than time behind them. Consequently, they may begin to think about where they've been and where they're going and to question whether their aging body can get them there. Some researchers (e.g., Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Gullette, 1997) have argued that there may be gender and social class differences in how concerned individuals are about getting older, however. For example, Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) suggest that declines in physical attractiveness may be more deleterious for women than men because female beauty is so highly valued in American society. It also has been assumed that changes in women's reproductive potential would pose a challenge to women's sense of purpose in midlife. Research by Gergen (1990) and Montepare (1996) suggests, however, that women may not be as concerned about aging as has traditionally been thought. Unlike women, men are assumed to be relatively unaffected by aging. Research by White (1988) shows that this may not be the case. She found that, to some extent, both men and women become more concerned about aging in midlife compared with earlier ages. Gullette (1997) argues that a focus on decline in midlife is inevitable for both men and women because our culture is saturated with negative messages of aging that both internalize.

Little work has examined whether individuals of different social classes are concerned about aging to the same extent. Gullette (1997) asserts that advertisers tar-

get the older man who may be concerned about losing his job to a younger man and promote the illusion that their products can help men maintain their class status. Thus, it is often those in the higher income brackets who may be most targeted. But working-class men and women, she suggests, may be psychologically worse off because they are unlikely to be able to afford the many lifestyle acquisitions designed to fend off aging—such as expensive gym memberships and cosmetic procedures—that middle- and upper-middle-class individuals can.

Past research suggests, then, that men and women will report higher levels of feelings of concern about aging in late midlife than in early adulthood, although there may not be significant gender differences in concern about aging for any age. It remains unclear how social class might influence feelings of concern with aging, although it has been hypothesized that working-class individuals may report the highest levels of concern about aging when compared to middle- and upper-middle-class individuals.

Hypotheses

We tested several hypotheses about people's retrospective reports of the four domains of personality and feelings associated with aging, based on the findings of Stewart et al. (2001), Zucker et al. (2002), and other related theoretical and empirical work. These hypotheses focus on three areas for each domain: pattern of aging, gender differences, and class differences (sometimes pertaining only to men or to women). In addition, some predictions address potential gender differences in pattern of aging. We made similar predictions for identity certainty and confident power and for generativity and concern about aging.

Identity certainty and confident power. (a) Pattern of aging: Identity certainty and confident power will increase from the 20s to the 40s to the 60s; (b) Gender differences: Men will report significantly higher feelings of identity certainty and confident power than women across age; (c) Class differences: College-educated men will report significantly higher levels of identity certainty and confident power than non-college-educated men across age; and (d) Gender differences in pattern of aging: Men will report significantly higher feelings of identity certainty and confident power for their 40s than for their 20s but lower feelings of identity certainty and confident power for their 60s than for their 40s; women will report significantly higher feelings of identity certainty and confident power in their 60s compared to earlier ages and in their 40s compared with their 20s.

Generativity and concern about aging. (a) Pattern of aging: Men and women will report higher feelings of

generativity and concern about aging both in their 60s than their 40s and in their 40s than in their 20s; and (b-d) Gender and class by pattern of aging: We made no predictions for gender or class differences in feelings of generativity and concern about aging and note that the literature is contradictory about whether gender and social class should matter and how.

METHOD

Participants

In the summer of 1999, questionnaires were sent to 660 people who were students in the classes of 1955-1957 of an urban public high school in a midsized, Midwestern city. We were particularly interested in this school because it was located in a fairly typical American city and was diverse in terms of social class and gender. Of the 660 potential participants, 104 were unreachable due to a wrong or incomplete address and 5 questionnaires were returned uncompleted by the family members of deceased individuals. This left a total pool of 551 possible participants. Of those who probably received the questionnaire, 259 questionnaires returned completed (134 men, 125 women), indicating a 47% response rate. This response rate is comparable to other studies utilizing similar data collection methods. Two individuals refused to participate. There was no difference in the race or gender composition of the respondent and nonrespondent groups; no other data were available on nonrespondents.

The mean age of the participants was 61. The racial breakdown was 93% White, 5.4% African American, .4% Hispanic, and 1.2% other or unspecified. Participants' names and addresses were obtained through the class reunion committee name and address lists. Potential participants were contacted through the mail and received (a) a letter inviting them to take part in a study of how students from the 1950s are experiencing middle age and (b) a questionnaire assessing "feelings about life," psychological and physical well-being, and demographic characteristics. The letter explained that participation was completely voluntary, that all information would be treated as confidential, and that only group trends and averages would be reported.

Measures

Social class. Social class can be defined and measured in a number of ways. Income, educational achievement, and occupation are thought to be the most relevant and representative indicators of social class (Coleman & Rainwater, 1978; Hollingshead & Redlich, 1958). In the present study, participants were asked about their education, thus providing one of the most standard social class

indicators. We asked participants to indicate the highest level of education completed on a 5-point scale, with choices ranging from *some high school* to *graduate degree*. A two-category educational level variable was created based on this information. Some high school, high school, and some college were combined into a "non-college-educated" category ($N = 134$; 75 women, 59 men) and college degree and graduate degree were combined into a "college-educated" category ($N = 101$; 41 women, 60 men).¹ Because more than half of the participants did not complete college, the present study is based on a population that is more diverse in terms of social class compared to many other studies of the aging process.

Feelings about life in middle age. Participants completed a measure assessing "feelings about life" based on the one used in the Stewart et al. (2001) and Zucker et al. (2002) studies. The measure included statements to which participants responded on a 3-point scale indicating the extent to which each statement *describes me well at that age* to *does not at all describe me at that age*. We asked them to rate the items for their descriptiveness "now" (i.e., in their 60s) and retrospectively for their 40s and 20s. A mix of negatively and positively worded items was included to reduce response set bias.

The four scales included in the measure—identity certainty, confident power, generativity, and concern about aging—are based on theories about adult development and personality. We chose items from the scale used by Stewart et al. (2001) and Zucker et al. (2002), which were based on their theoretical significance in the literature to reflect four domains found to be important at midlife (Helson & Moane, 1987; Helson & Wink, 1992). We also chose items that could be easily understood by a range of education levels and that would be applicable to both men and women (i.e., we did not include the items "feeling passé" or "feeling men aren't interested in me" in the present study). The resulting measure included a total of 23 items; all items appear in the appendix.

Seven identity certainty items were chosen to operationalize Erikson's (1950, 1964, 1968, 1980) concept of identity as an affirmed sense of place in the social world resulting from a process of searching and self-definition. Examples of identity certainty items include "a sense of being my own person" and "feeling secure and committed." Six confident power items were chosen to operationalize the conceptualization of mastery and competence, both of which have been referred to as "executive processes" (Helson & Wink, 1992; Neugarten, 1968). Examples of confident power items include "feeling powerful" and "feeling I have the authority to do what I want." Four generativity items were

TABLE 1: Correlations Among Feeling Domain Subscales

Subscale	1	2	3	4
1. Identity certainty	—			
2. Confident power	.34***	—		
3. Generativity	.16*	.48***	—	
4. Concern about aging	-.37***	-.05	.07	—

NOTE: Subscales are averaged across age.

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

chosen to operationalize Erikson's concept of generativity as a preoccupation with the world beyond the self and a desire to make a lasting contribution to future generations (Erikson et al., 1986). Examples of generativity items include "effort to ensure that younger people have a chance to develop" and "influence in my community or area of interest." Finally, six concern about aging items were chosen to represent a preoccupation with "time left," the approach of death, and declines in strength/capacity and physical attractiveness (Clausen, 1986; Levinson et al., 1978; McAdams, 1985). Examples of concern about aging items include "feeling less attractive than I used to be" and "feeling I can't keep up with younger people." For ease of exposition, we refer to people's *reported* levels of these feelings at different ages, but it should be emphasized that for the 20s and 40s, these reports are *retrospective*.

The validities and internal reliabilities of these four scales have been reported elsewhere (Stewart et al., 2001) and were shown to be adequate. In the present study, internal reliability (α) coefficients for the scales, averaging across the three age periods, were as follows: identity certainty = .70, confident power = .67, generativity = .55, and concern about aging = .55. The identity certainty and confident power scales showed moderately high internal reliabilities. The generativity and concern about aging alphas, however, are lower than desirable. These lower figures are probably lower because in the present study we included fewer items to represent each scale than in previous studies to reduce the overall length of the questionnaire. These scales also assess very broad, qualitatively different aspects of aging. For example, items included in the concern about aging scale include both physical (i.e., "looking old") and psychological concerns (i.e., "thinking a lot about death"). These internal reliability estimates are, however, comparable to published research by Stewart et al. (2001) and Zucker et al. (2002) utilizing similar measures. Even though the alphas for the four scales are not as high as is desirable, we retained the scales so we could compare our findings to this past work. Alphas did not differ by gender and social class groups.

Table 1 displays the correlations among the four feeling domains. In general, the subscales were only moderately correlated, suggesting that even though these

TABLE 2: Feeling Domains Across Age, by Gender and Education Level

Feeling Domain and Gender/Education Subgroup	Age					
	20s		40s		60s	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Identity certainty						
Men	2.22	.45	2.47	.37	2.68	.32
College	2.20	.47	2.49	.38	2.67	.32
No college	2.24	.44	2.46	.36	2.69	.32
Women	2.12	.52	2.30	.48	2.64	.37
College	2.17	.49	2.26	.55	2.61	.35
No college	2.10	.54	2.32	.43	2.65	.38
Confident power						
Men	1.80	.46	2.24	.39	2.47	.39
College	1.79	.42	2.23	.40	2.44	.38
No college	1.81	.51	2.24	.39	2.51	.39
Women	1.70	.49	2.09	.43	2.41	.38
College	1.77	.52	2.09	.44	2.50	.32
No college	1.66	.47	2.08	.43	2.37	.41
Generativity						
Men	1.81	.53	2.31	.42	2.38	.43
College	1.77	.55	2.33	.44	2.37	.46
No college	1.85	.52	2.29	.39	2.38	.40
Women	1.94	.55	2.38	.46	2.42	.46
College	2.00	.57	2.44	.41	2.48	.42
No college	1.92	.53	2.34	.48	2.39	.48
Concern about aging						
Men	1.18	.23	1.41	.32	1.92	.45
College	1.15	.22	1.38	.32	1.80	.45
No college	1.20	.25	1.44	.33	2.04	.43
Women	1.16	.22	1.37	.29	1.95	.48
College	1.13	.15	1.35	.30	1.99	.46
No college	1.18	.25	1.38	.28	1.94	.49

NOTE: For men, $N = 119$ (60 college, 59 no college); for women, $N = 116$ (41 college, 75 no college).

aspects of subjective aging are related (as would be expected given that they are conceptualized as different aspects of psychological aging), they also represent independent domains.

RESULTS

We performed a series of three-way, repeated-measures ANOVAS on each of the four scales using gender and education as between-subject factors and age as the repeated within-subject factor. Table 2 displays the means and standard deviations for the four feeling domains across age by gender and educational level.

There was a main effect for age on feelings of identity certainty, $F(2, 224) = 80.75$, $p < .001$, displayed in Figure 1. Contrasts revealed that participants reported significantly higher feelings of identity certainty for their 60s than for their 40s and 20s and for their 40s as compared to their 20s. There was also a significant main effect for gender, $F(1, 225) = 6.51$, $p < .05$; men reported higher feelings of identity certainty than women across age.

Figure 1 Feeling domains across age.

NOTE: IC = Identity Certainty, CP = Confident Power, GEN = Generativity, CAA = Concern About Aging.

Figure 2 Age $\times$ Gender interaction on feelings of confident power.

The results for confident power were similar to those for identity certainty. The means for confident power are shown in Table 1. There was a main effect for age on feelings of confident power, $F(2, 220) = 164.74, p < .001$, displayed in Figure 1. Contrasts revealed that participants reported significantly higher feelings of confident power for their 60s than for their 40s and 20s and for their 40s as compared to their 20s. There was also a significant main effect for gender, $F(1, 221) = 4.37, p < .05$; men reported higher feelings of confident power than women across age. The main effects were qualified by an Age $\times$ Gender interaction, $F(2, 220) = 3.76, p < .05$, displayed in Figure 2: Men and women reported similar levels of confident power for their 60s but divergent levels for their 20s and 40s. Thus, women's feelings of confident power reached men's by age 60.

The means for generativity are shown in Table 1. There was a main effect for age on feelings of generativity, $F(2, 221) = 96.78, p < .001$, displayed in Figure 1. Contrasts revealed that participants reported significantly higher feelings of generativity for their 40s than for their 20s but not for their 60s as compared to

Figure 3 Age $\times$ Gender $\times$ Social Class interaction on feelings of concern about aging.

their 40s. There was also a trend for women to report higher feelings of generativity than men across age, $F(1, 222) = 3.11, p = .08$.

The means for concern about aging are shown in Table 1. There was a main effect for age on feelings of concern about aging, $F(2, 219) = 306.91, p < .001$, displayed in Figure 1. Contrasts revealed that participants reported significantly higher feelings of concern about aging for their 60s than for their 40s and 20s and for their 40s as compared to their 20s. This main effect was qualified by an Age $\times$ Gender $\times$ Education interaction, $F(2, 219) = 4.25, p < .05$, displayed in Figure 3. This figure shows that all groups reported higher feelings of concern about aging from their 20s to their 40s. In addition, women in both groups and non-college-educated men reported a sharp increase in feelings of concern about aging from their 40s to their 60s; college-educated men did not show as sharp an increase in these feelings. Particularly striking is the finding that non-college-educated men reported the highest levels of concern about aging from young adulthood through late middle age and college-educated women reported the lowest levels of concern about aging in young adulthood and middle age.

In sum, participants reported significantly higher levels of identity certainty, confident power, generativity, and concern about aging for their 40s as compared to their 20s and for their 60s as compared to their 40s, with one exception. Respondents did not report significantly higher feelings of generativity for their 60s as compared to their 40s. In addition, men reported significantly higher feelings of identity certainty and confident power than women across age. Finally, non-college-educated men reported the highest levels of feelings of concern about aging across age, college-educated women reported the lowest levels of concern about aging in their 20s and 40s, and all participants but college-educated men reported a sharp increase in concern about aging from their 40s to their 60s.

DISCUSSION

The goal of the present study was to extend the findings of Stewart et al. (2001) and Zucker et al. (2002) and examine whether men and less highly educated people experienced subjective aspects of aging as middle-aged, college-educated women do. Similar to their findings, we found that participants perceived higher levels of feelings of identity certainty, confident power, and concern about aging for their 60s than for their 40s and for their 40s as compared to their 20s. Once again, it should be emphasized that whereas the reported feelings for the 60s are concurrent, those for the 20s and 40s are retrospective. Results also showed that participants recalled higher levels of feelings of generativity for their 40s than for their 20s. Furthermore, we also found some gender and class differences in these four domains.

The results of this study suggest several implications for thinking about self-perceived personality change and the subjective experience of aging from early adulthood to late midlife. First, aging through middle age seems to be experienced similarly in many ways by men and women of working- and middle-class backgrounds. For example, both men and women, and college-educated and non-college-educated people, all reported higher levels of feelings of identity certainty and confident power compared to earlier ages. Participants also recalled feeling more generative in their 40s compared to their 20s. It may be, then, that regardless of gender and social class, it is the accumulation of life experience that leads to increases in self-knowledge so that individuals feel more certain about who they are, more confident, and more aware of what and how they can provide for future generations. These feelings were not all positive, however. The participants also reported being more concerned about aging in their 60s.

We also found some specific similarities and differences between men and women in their experience of aging. Past theoretical and empirical work has suggested that men and women may experience subjective aspects of aging very differently. Because the work role has been seen as particularly important to men's feelings of identity and power over the life course (e.g., Levinson et al., 1978), it has been argued that men may experience a decrease in feelings of power and identity certainty in midlife because of changes in or absence of the work role (Thompson, 1994). The findings from the present study, however, suggest that this may not be the case. Regardless of real or impending changes in the work role, and regardless of social class, men reported higher levels of feelings of identity certainty and confident power for their 60s compared to earlier ages, similar to the findings for women in the present study and other work (Stewart et al., 2001, Zucker et al., 2002).

An interesting difference between men and women did emerge, however. Although both men and women reported significantly higher levels of these positive feelings, men were consistently higher than women across age. This may be a result of the fact that men in our society—regardless of social class—have more access to power and privilege than women. Indeed, even working-class men can take advantage of accrued male superiority and privilege. Thus, men, generally because of their gender, may be more confident, powerful, and self-assured than women at all ages as a result of their status.

Participants also reported significantly higher levels of feelings of generativity in midlife (for their 40s) and late midlife (for their 60s) than in early adulthood (for their 20s). This is consistent with cross-sectional research findings showing that both middle-age men and women report significantly higher levels of generativity than young adults (McAdams et al., 1993) and with longitudinal findings that have shown that women report higher feelings of generativity in midlife compared to earlier ages (Stewart et al., 2001; Zucker et al., 2002). Participants did not report significantly higher feelings of generativity in their 60s compared to 40s but rather a leveling-off pattern identical to the findings of Zucker et al. (2002) in three samples of women. These findings suggest, then, that men and women may experience a similar increase and then leveling-off in feelings of generativity as they age. Individuals also may experience similar increases in feelings of generativity from early to late adulthood regardless of social class. Although it has been suggested that social class factors such as educational attainment might shape generative feelings and behavior (e.g., Keyes & Ryff, 1998), our findings are in line with the view held by Snarey and Clark (1998) that feelings of generativity transcend class boundaries. We found no significant differences between college-educated and non-college-educated individuals in feelings of generativity. Thus, our work suggests that economic resources alone do not account for feelings of generativity in midlife.

Participants reported feeling significantly more concerned with aging from early adulthood to late midlife. However, in contrast to the findings for identity certainty, confident power, and generativity, feelings of concern about aging may depend on the combination of gender and social class. We found that non-college-educated men reported the highest levels of concern about aging across age and that college-educated women reported the lowest levels of concern about aging for their 20s and 40s. That non-college-educated men reported the highest levels across age, and educated women reported the lowest levels for early- and mid-adulthood is interesting given that women in our

society are assumed to be especially sensitive to signs of physical aging. Gullette (1997), however, would argue that this finding is not so surprising. She maintains that both men and women are exposed to the negative cultural messages of midlife aging and begin to fear the process of aging. Thus, men also can be, and our findings show are, concerned about aging. She also suggests that working-class individuals may be the most vulnerable to these messages, a view consistent with our finding that non-college-educated men are the most concerned about aging. One relevant factor may be that non-college-educated men are more likely than women and college-educated men to be in blue-collar occupations that are more dependent on physical strength and capacity than white-collar and female-dominated occupations. As a result, they may be concerned that physical changes associated with aging may influence their ability to compete in the blue-collar labor market. They may also find blue-collar work more laborious and physically taxing with age. That college-educated men were the least concerned about aging in their 60s supports this explanation. The finding that college-educated women were the least likely to report being concerned about aging in early- and mid-adulthood is also in contrast to popular conceptions about women's feelings about aging. Perhaps these women, because they had a college education, were particularly likely to focus on their own personal goals and achievement rather than getting older. Future research should explore the relationships among aging, gender, and social class to better understand these connections.

In sum, our findings suggest that the subjective experience of aging in these personality domains is essentially a positive experience that follows a general trajectory, with individuals generally reporting higher feelings of identity certainty and confident power and an increase followed by a leveling-off of generativity. That this trajectory was similar for individuals regardless of gender or social class in no way precludes the possibility that these social structural factors may be important in the development of other personality aspects over the life course, however. For example, gender and social class may be especially important in the development and expression of agency and communion, emotional affectivity, optimal experience (flow), optimism, or personal efficacy from early adulthood to late midlife. Moreover, it is possible that the life experiences that produce this trajectory may be different, although individuals experience the path similarly.

Limitations

Like any research, this research is not without its limitations. First, similar to that of Stewart et al. (2001) and

Zucker et al. (2002), the present study partially relies on retrospective accounts. Retrospective accounts of personality change have been criticized for their inability to accurately assess actual changes in personality over the life course (i.e., Ross, 1989). However, more than the accuracy of people's perceptions of how they have changed, we were interested in, through recall and recollection, how people perceive themselves as changing as part of a larger self-narrative or life story (McAdams, 1995). In addition, many studies have found consistency between retrospective and concurrent perceptions of personality change (e.g., Helson & Wink, 1992; Zucker et al., 2002), and other evidence (e.g., Jones, 1999) suggests that there is congruence between self-reported personality changes and other indices of actual life span personality change. These findings suggest that individuals can accurately detect and recall changes in their own personality. Even so, the link between perceived personality change and actual personality change remains an important issue for longitudinal research to address.

Second, we included a very crude measure of social class (i.e., educational attainment). This measure may have been somewhat limited in its ability to detect relationships given the way it was computed for the analyses (i.e., as a categorical, "not-college-educated," "college-educated," variable); using a continuous measure of social class may more accurately detect relationships between social class, gender, and the subjective experience of aging.

In addition, other aspects of social class, such as social class background or social class mobility, also may be important in the subjective experience of aging. For example, one's financial situation growing up may affect subjective feelings of aging over the life course. For example, it is possible that individuals from middle- and upper-class backgrounds have a stronger sense of identity and feel more powerful than individuals from poor and working-class backgrounds as a result of their privileged class status. Moreover, middle- and upper-class individuals often have opportunities open to them that poor and working-class individuals do not (i.e., a college education). As a result of these resources and opportunities, individuals with a more privileged background may feel more confident, powerful, and certain about themselves from an early age compared to individuals from less privileged backgrounds.

It is also possible that social class mobility would influence feelings associated with aging. For example, individuals who come from a poor or working-class background but who are currently in the middle or upper class (i.e., experience upward class mobility) may experience higher levels of identity certainty and confident power than individuals from upper- and middle-class

backgrounds who are currently in the working-class or poor (i.e., who experience downward class mobility). Because our culture teaches people that with hard work and persistence they can achieve upward mobility, individuals who do not move up (or individuals who move down) the economic "ladder" may feel less powerful, confident, and have a weaker sense of self because they have not met the societal expectation of upward mobility. Future research should examine these possibilities and the role that different aspects of social class play in the subjective experience of aging.

Third, the sample is somewhat limited in its generalizability. For example, the sample was almost entirely White and findings may not generalize to other racial-ethnic groups. Although we did not specifically examine racial and ethnic differences, racial-ethnic background may be important in the experience of aging in the four personality domains. For example, community-centered ethnic groups may offer a sense of identity and power through strong ties with family, friends, and community. On the other hand, cultural barriers to power and privilege may negatively affect subjective feelings of aging; a lifetime of discrimination and prejudice may counteract the benefits of strong communal ties. Thus, the subjective experience of aging for people of color may vary from that of White men and women.

The findings from the present study also may not generalize to other generations. Helson (1997) has suggested that middle age can have different meanings in different times and for different individuals. Thus, the four aspects of aging studied here may vary as a function of birth cohort. The individuals in this study were born between 1935 and 1940. As with any age cohort, their experiences and self-perceptions were undoubtedly influenced by the historical time period in which they lived. American women today are not only more likely to participate in the paid labor force compared to women in the past but to see the work role as an important aspect of their identity and important source of feelings of power and self-respect. Women also may be able to be more generative, or generative in different ways, as a result of having more resources that come from being financially independent. Thus, changes in women's roles in the past few decades may make identity-formation and generativity easier for women (Stewart et al., 2001). In addition, men today are generally more involved in parenting and more connected with children and family than men in the past. They may therefore report stronger feelings of generativity over the life course. Indeed, research studies suggest that parenting may be associ-

ated with feelings of generativity for men (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992; Snarey & Clark, 1998). Even so, research (for a review, see Stewart & Ostrove, 1998) has shown repeatedly that college-educated women report an increased sense of identity, personal confidence, generativity, and concern about aging, regardless of birth cohort. Thus, the pattern of subjective aging found in the present study is remarkably similar to that found for college-educated women, suggesting that our findings are not cohort specific. The present study, then, extends these past findings and suggests that college-educated and non-college-educated men and women from a different birth cohort experience a similar trajectory.

Finally, the trajectory of feelings associated with aging found in the present study may be very different for individuals in non-Western, nonindustrialized societies. Indeed, cultural scripts and cultural constructions associated with aging vary considerably across the globe, and different countries have different views on the elderly and aging. For example, countries differ substantially in the extent to which they value (i.e., China) or devalue (i.e., the United States) the old and aging. Individuals internalize these aging scripts from the larger culture and thus may report very different feelings associated with aging as a function of the society in which they live. Cultural comparisons also necessitate the examination of how cultural norms regarding interpersonal relationships, work patterns, religion, and dominant culture values influence these processes (Jackson, 2002). Differences in how material, social, and health resources between and within societies influence subjective aging processes also should be examined. Future work should examine cross-nationally and cross-culturally the aging processes examined in the present study (Jackson, 2002).

CONCLUSION

The pattern of findings in this study extends those of Stewart et al. (2001) and Zucker et al. (2002) and suggests that the subjective experience of "middle aging" is substantially positive into the middle 60s. Moreover, changes over time in identity certainty, confident power, generativity, and concern about aging appear to be general processes that may result from an accumulation of life experience and acquisition of self-knowledge, while also depending, to some extent, on gender and social class. Future research should examine what factors might alter or influence these broad patterns of subjective aging.

APPENDIX

Feelings About Life Subscale Items

Identity Certainty

- A sense of being my own person
- Excitement, turmoil, and confusion about my impulses & potential
- Coming near the end of one road and not yet finding another
- Feeling my life is moving well
- Searching for a sense of who I am
- Anxiety that I won't live up to opportunities
- Feeling secure and committed

Confident Power

- Feeling powerful
- Feeling I have the authority to do what I want
- Not holding back when I have something to offer
- Having an accurate view of my powers and limitations
- Feeling I understand how the world and other people work
- Feeling respected

Generativity

- Feeling needed by people
- Effort to ensure younger people get their chance to develop
- Influence in my community or area of interest
- More productive or effective

Concern About Aging

- Looking old
- Thinking a lot about death
- Knowing there are things I'll never do
- Feeling less attractive
- Feeling I can't do things I used to
- Feeling I can't keep up with younger people

NOTE

1. Because not all of the study participants revealed the highest level of education completed, the analyses reported were carried out on 235 participants.

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