

Women's Midlife as Gendered Development: The Lived Experiences of Selected Filipino Women in Midlife

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Abstract

This study is a portrayal of women's midlife experiences, cognizant of their gendered nature. To address theoretical gaps in understanding women in midlife development, this study is premised on postmodern constructionism, thereby attempting to depart from the dominant male-centric theorizing and bring out a ground-level understanding of how women in midlife experience this particular stage given their multiple roles and emergent self-identities at this juncture. Focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted among three groups of women between the age range of 42–65, and five women from these groups were selected for in-depth interviews using the narrative identity approach. This study examined how women's midlife is characterized through two categories, namely (a) occupational roles and (b) affiliative roles. The major themes that emerged from the women participants in occupational roles include (a) peak of career status characterized by mastery, competence, and confidence; (b) head/leader position;

(c) skillful functioning in multiple roles within the occupational role; (d) pride and fulfillment in work; and (e) crisis in career leading to stock-taking and/or change. Related to their affiliative roles, the themes culled were (a) being relieved from a domestic role, (b) extending functions beyond the domestic, and (c) catching up on what was missed. Other themes emerged at the intersection of both work roles and affiliative roles, which include (a) how the mothering role continues in varied forms and (b) changes and shifts. The identities of women participants were summarily described by the themes (a) self-expansion in multiplicity and complexity and (b) changes and transition.

Keywords: women's midlife, occupational roles, affiliative roles

Introduction

The aging population has been a recent phenomenon. A generally lower fertility rate globally and increased life expectancy resulting from advances in health and medical science in an aging population have led to a notable increase in the number of persons in the 60 above age range (United Nations [UN], 2017). This resulted in a natural increase in attention to the late adulthood developmental stage. Relatively recent attention to research and theorizing of the midlife stage compared to the volumes of studies on other life stages has been pursued (Lachman, 2015) and eventually with separate attention to women's development as distinct from men's.

Lachman and others (2020) proposed a model conceptualizing the three things that characterize midlife in its pivotal role in human development: (a) as a balance and peak of functioning at the intersection of growth and decline, (b) as a linkage to earlier and later periods of life, and (c) as a bridge to younger and older generations. Similarly, White and Myers (2006) examined and identified how this transition experienced by a diverse group of midlife women is observed in the physical changes (through signs of aging and entering perimenopause), psychological changes (through an increase in inner focus), relationship issues (by

entering or ending committed relationships), vocational issues (by voluntarily leaving jobs, returning to school, or entering/reentering the labor market), and family issues (through the loss of a parent/s or children moving away from home). Generally, this reflected three transition contexts: personal, social, and vocational.

The biological model dominated studies on women in midlife, given that this stage coincides with menopause. Women's midlife as a category demarcated by chronological, social/cultural, and body time (Adam, 2004) is often equated with menopause and perceived as either medical or menopausal-oriented—often characterized by various phenomena such as hot flashes, osteoporosis, heart disease, estrogen replacement therapy decisions, and cessation of fertility. The dominance of this view that equates midlife to menopause runs parallel to a broader, more dominant cultural narrative of midlife in the media and popular discourse known as “midlife crisis” (Hoff, 1989). While it applies to both men and women, the onset of menopause for the latter signals the crisis triggered by dramatic changes in women's physical, emotional, cognitive, social, and occupational domains. Midlife crisis and its manifestations may begin with changes evident in the adult body as it ages, the realization that one is no longer young and active, the replacement by the younger generation in the workplace, and the inevitable thought that the future is limited and that death may come anytime (Colarusso & Montero, 2007).

This crisis perspective connoting major upheaval, serious discontent, turbulence, and high anxiety fits the stress framework which prevailed in the early studies of adult midlife stage—and for women in particular. This life stage, specific to women's gender role toward family members, shapes the kinds of life events that bring stressful experiences to midlife women (Sievert et al., 2018) such as events related to family, aging and/or sick parents, close friends, and personal/social and work issues. Furthermore, chronic stressors related to social life, finances, relationships, children, environment, and caring for young children and ailing parents simultaneously were significantly and positively related to women's levels of distress (Callhoun, 2020). A local study with fisherwomen by Pahila (2014) found that the onset of aging for people involved in hard labor, such as those in the fishing industry, occurs at

an even earlier age. For the older women of Suclaran—an agricultural and fishing-based barangay in Guimaras Island, Western Visayas—the signs show at 50 years old, when one's physical condition starts to deteriorate.

Such discourses that tend to equate women's midlife with menopause, crisis, and stress, emphasize their biological and physical decline. On the other hand, despite the stress and crises associated with midlife as a challenging life transition, this stage may also bring about positive changes and improved life satisfaction, well-being, and quality of life. This transition enables women to rebalance, restructure their relationship between work and nonwork, and develop new perspectives on midlife, which promote overall well-being (Gordon et al., 2002). Other influencing factors include inheritance, early retirement, and new religious insights (Shallenbarger, 2005). Vandewater and Stewart (2006) named the significant predictor of well-being in later midlife particularly for women: identity development as a determinant of role quality (in work role and family role) in early adulthood, which in turn secures well-being in later midlife.

Women's Midlife From a Postmodern View: Multiple Socially Constructed Selves and Gendered Development

The postmodern view reflected in social constructionism is the framework on which this study is anchored. It argues that knowledge is better accounted for from heterogeneous subject positions of individual and plural social groups, instead of a homogenous and unitary standpoint.

Social constructionism in psychology, advocated by Kenneth Gergen in 1985, aims to account for the ways in which phenomena are socially constructed. Gergen and Gergen (2000) challenged the prevailing models in both the science and culture norms that support negative stereotypes regarding the aging population. They argue that "the extensive research demonstrating deterioration of physical and psychological functioning during the latter span of life is not a simple reflection of what is there" (p. 4) but is, rather, a cultural construction.

Drawing further from Gergen's (1985) postmodern rendition of psychology, one can observe how women midlifers' self-identity becomes

constituted as multiple selves. This ties up with the feminist lens of viewing the gendered nature of women's midlife development which resulted in how women's roles in both the private and public domains have constructed her. Today's women are situated in the contemporary zeitgeist dictated by an economic and cultural mandate that places them in multiple roles. Women, more than men, act out and juggle multiple roles in the domestic sphere, including relational, caregiving, organizational, financial, and integrative roles. They equally fulfill their roles in the economic, social-affiliative, and political spheres, including (but not limited to) being a spouse or partner, parent, grandparent, adult-child, sibling, friend, coworker, caregiver, and agent of their community and religion (Lachman et al., 2020). Lachman and others (2020) also contend that the number of role constellations that middle-aged adults navigate and balance differs from those in young adulthood or old age. Women and the multiplicity of their roles have been fraught with challenges brought about by their gender. Hence, women's lifespan development digresses to a large extent and is distinct from that of men.

While major theorizing of human developmental stages assumes a general model for both men and women, discounting the gendered nature of development and the unique experiences of women and further negating their inequities and differential challenges, the need to frame women's development through a gender lens serves as a response and challenge to predominant human development models.

On Women's Multiple Roles

The concept of multiple roles represents women in the contemporary milieu in which daily functioning involves the different and concurrent roles performed in the occupational, family, and various relational roles in the community and the larger society. Two formulations of this concept have been offered, where one invokes scarcity and another, enhancement (Barnett & Baruch, 1986). The former view holds that well-being is compromised when involvement in multiple roles is accompanied by overload, strain, and/or conflict. In contrast, the enhancement view presents the gains of involvement in multiple roles.

The “triple role” by Moser (1993) corresponds to the multiple role view applied to women. The phenomenon of sexual division of labor defined as the practice of ascribing tasks, roles, and responsibilities on the basis of sex underlies the sex-typed role differentiation between (a) productive work and (b) reproductive work (Moser, 1993). The former is the income-earning work and includes the production of goods and services that correspond to income value. Both men and women may do productive work, but the respective types of work between genders are not equally valued. *Reproductive work*—mostly performed by women—refers to the care and maintenance of the household and its members, including childbearing and care of family members, building and maintaining shelter, and thereby, ensuring the maintenance of present and future workforce or labor capital. A third role included in the “triple role” framework introduced by Moser (1993) is the *community work* role which refers to the collective organization of social events and services and volunteer participation aimed at improvement of the community.

Along this line, two role categories in this study are emphasized. These are the *occupational role*, which categorizes women according to their employment status, and the *affiliative role* which refers to the many roles in the women’s various personal relationships such as being a wife, mother, daughter, daughter-in-law, sister, colleague, leader, to name some. These terms used as organizing concepts are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Research Questions and Objectives

This study would like to investigate how women in midlife describe their current life viewed from the multiple roles and the postmodern milieu that embed their present lives. Towards this, the research asks:

1. How do women characterize their midlife given their diverse and multiple roles, such as occupational roles and affiliative roles?
2. How does the women’s life course determine their self-identity at this particular juncture? How are the identities portrayed in the telling of their lives being a woman in midlife? What

themes identify their self-portrayal as embedded in their life narratives?

Furthermore, this study inquires into the context of gender as gleaned from women's life narratives regarding their experiences of midlife. It argues and proposes that this developmental course is unique to contemporary women and gives rise to an evolving self-identity—which may not be as possible in other life stages—and a product fashioned by the contemporary sociocultural context.

Hence, this study attempts to fill the gap in the literature on women in midlife by advancing women's self-multiplicity as cornerstones of midlife and postmidlife development. The imperative to study aging women within this lens in order to address the gap in terms of balancing myths and constructions on aging women cannot be overstated.

Research Methods

This study utilized the focus group discussion (FGD) and narrative life story methods to collect rich and meaningful information on how women in midlife experience, construe, and give meaning to the midlife stage. The FGD method allows for flexibility, complexity, multiplicity of voices, diversity, and richness of experience in the exchange between and among the participants and the facilitator. Meanwhile, the narrative interviews with selected participants from the FGDs were also conducted to deepen the discussion on their knowledge and experiences relevant to midlife. The narrative life story method takes after how MacAdams (2006) studied and proposed to describe self-identity. The self-identity, according to him, is understood and embedded within the personal narratives we tell of our lives and what self-portraiture is crafted from the integration and confluence of the layers of narration told of our lived experiences.

Participants

The participants included three focus groups of conveniently sampled 15 Filipino women aged 40–65. The selection of the focus group members

was ensured to maximize demographic representativeness in terms of midlife stage (early, middle, late), civil status, rank, area/field of profession, etc. My personal contacts from two universities I have previously worked in—one in Pampanga and another in Bulacan—helped in recruiting three groups of participants, which were part of preexisting groups. They were: (a) five wives of military officers from the National Capital Region (NCR), (b) four college faculty from a university in Bulacan, and (c) six personnel from a university in Angeles City, Pampanga. The group of women from NCR came from the same community and had a common status of being wives of military officers. The group from Bulacan consisted of faculty members in one college department. Given the personal nature of the research questions and the qualitative approach of unstructured and open-ended narrative discussion, it was necessary to conduct the FGD among participants with a preexisting level of familiarity and comfort. It is believed that the study's qualitative aim for in-depth, rich narratives could be better attained when group members have a level of familiarity with each other to facilitate rapport for comfortable sharing of personal stories.

Additionally, five women participants were conveniently selected from the focus groups for the individual narrative interviews, also based on their willingness and availability for individual interviews. This was undertaken in order to provide more space for breadth and depth of responses.

Procedure

The FGDs were conducted at agreed meeting places within the participants' locale. The FGDs started with a briefing of the mechanics and logistics of the method, including the FGD guide's contents to be used in the discussion. The conduct of the FGD took about 2 hours.

Additional schedules were arranged for the individual narrative interviews. Each interview was arranged at a time and location convenient to the participants. The extent of details provided in the women's responses influenced the length of the interviews. As such, on average the interviews were an hour to 90 minutes in length. The course of the narrative interview was done in such a way that it was the women's voices

that informed the breadth, depth, course, and richness of the interview. For instance, open-ended leads (e.g., “What is going on with your current life?”) rather than specific direct questions led the process to create and encourage as many and varied stories as possible.

Data Analysis

Data generated from individual narrative interviews and FGDs were transcribed and prepared for thematic analysis. Intercoder analysis was utilized to generate codes and themes. Two other coders—one a college faculty with an advanced graduate degree in Education, another a Psychology graduate student—took part in several sessions to read, reread, and analyze the interview transcriptions to lift out initial codes, themes, and the organizing framework.

The process of analysis took several steps beginning from familiarization and immersion with the data, to generation of initial codes that represented concepts and ideas relevant to the research questions and objectives. This was followed by grouping of initial codes and deriving themes that captured the meaningful patterns, and organizing the themes into a coherent framework or structure encompassing specific subthemes or organizing themes based on the research questions. Further review and refining of analysis were undertaken, as well as seeking feedback from peers and experts to enhance the validity and reliability of the analysis.

Ethical Considerations

In observance of ethical practices, I sought the participants' informed consent with a letter that stated the objective of the study, procedure, risks and benefits, confidentiality, audio recording of the interview, the voluntary nature of participation, and the participants' right to end the interview at any time. Stipulated as well was a provision for an assurance to the participants that a session with a counselor could be scheduled to address risks involved and that their confidentiality would not be violated.

Strict adherence to observing confidentiality of the participants' information and data required utmost care in the handling of data in

all the research processes, such as audio recording, transcription, encoding, and analysis. The laptop and computers used for writing and documenting were password-restricted, and all identifying information was only within the main researcher’s access. Hence, codes and pseudonyms that were accessible only to the main researcher were used for identification in order to secure the confidentiality of all data. The transcriber was completely restricted from access to any identifying information and data (i.e., access was given only to the data files assigned to them for transcription), and was required to sign a nondisclosure agreement. Data were kept in the office/residence of the investigator, where she was the only one who had access to all data at any given time. Furthermore, all traces of research data files in both hard and digital forms will be deleted permanently 5 years after the final write-up of the thesis manuscript.

Findings

Table 1 shows that, of the total number of participants, eight are employed in educational institutions as head administrators and/or college faculty. Four of these women are full-time homemakers. Ten of the women are married, two are separated, two are single, and another one is a widow.

Table 1
Profile of Participants

Participants	Age	Number of children (ages)	Occupational status	Civil status	Educational attainment
P1	56	2 (33, 32)	Formerly self-employed, now retired	Married	BSc Management
P2	42	5 (24, 23, 21, 12, 9)	Unemployed	Married	Second year college
P3	51	2 (15, 14)	Unemployed	Married	BS Business Administration

Participants	Age	Number of children (ages)	Occupational status	Civil status	Educational attainment
P4	52	3 (25, 23, 14)	Self-employed (business owner)	Married	AB, MA Psychology
P5	51	2 (one died at age 5; 7)	Unemployed	Married	BS Chemical Engineering
P6	45	2 (9, 14)	Employed (college professor)	Separated	MA Education
P7	65	1 (3)	Employed (college professor)	Separated	MA
P8	55	1 (3)	Employed (college professor/ former head)	Married	MA PhD units
P9	40s	3 (14, 11, 9)	Employed (head librarian)	Married	MA
P10	50s	1 (7)	Employed (college dean)	Single	MA
P11	40s	1 (7)	Employed (college dean)	Married	MA
P12	40s	2 (15, 11)	Employed (director of guidance)	Married	MA
P13	52	0	Employed (principal)	Widowed	MA
P14	46	0	Missionary nun	Single	Bachelor's degree
P15	56	1 (21)	Self-employed (part-owner of school)	Married	Bachelor's degree

The discussion that follows attempts to give a description and analysis of women's midlife from their diverse roles at their work, as well as in their different relationships.

I. How Do Women Characterize Their Midlife From Their Multiple and Diverse Roles?

In Their Occupational Roles

The majority of women participants' descriptions of their current life have articulated their work (both productive and reproductive) and/or career as a major preoccupation, both in the quantity of expended effort as well as the value and meaning attached to it. The major themes that emerged from their productive work roles include (a) peak of career status described by head/leader position, mastery, competence, and confidence; (b) skillful functioning in multiple roles within the work role; (c) pride and fulfillment in work; and (d) crisis in career leading to stock-taking and/or change. Mastery of the work they do is especially seen in how they handle multiple roles within their work as it involves several work positions and/or tasks. As dean of a college handling collegiate classes and serving as consultant for a company at the same time, a respondent shared this:

In terms of work, umm . . . I have so many responsibilities . . . aahhh, *dito sa* school . . . being the dean of the hospitality management with 2,500 students 'no . . . I need to attend to the needs of the students, the faculty . . . I have to attend seminars, conventions . . . etc. . . . Aside from that, I have to manage this university's travel services which is getting on my time, my patience and all . . . haha . . . and umm . . . It's packaging tours actually and taking full responsibility of all the tours here in [University X] . . . umm and then I also handle [Café 1] which is a restaurant café here that caters to this university managed by our students . . . So *tatlo na po 'yan* (that's already three). (P11)

This stage is when they are at the peak of their career/work status in terms of position/rank and leadership roles, along with their attendant duties, additional demands, responsibilities, and challenges. The sense of pride and fulfillment in the work they do is reflected from the mastery and skillful work with years of experience.

Ngayon na being head, kasi noon di ko siya lahat nagagawa, dito ginagawa ko lahat . . . Mas lalo akong nag-enjoy kasi mas marami akong nalalaman . . . Lahat ng trabaho ng being talagang librarian nagagampanan ko na siya ngayon, from the acquisition hanggang sa lending out. Unlike noon naka-confine ka lang sa section mo, ngayon nagagawa ko na siya, mas nag-e-enjoy ako. (Now as the head—unlike before when I couldn't do everything—I enjoy this more, I'm learning a lot. I know all tasks involved in being a librarian now—from acquisition to lending out, unlike before when I was only confined to a section. Now I do it. I'm enjoying it.) (P9)

For the women who were not employed, two themes relating to their reproductive work role emerged: (a) extending functions beyond the current demands of reproductive work, and (b) catching up on what they missed out on due to working fully at home. These women had been freed from the demands of raising children in their earlier life stages and thus had more time and space to pursue more social activities in the form of volunteer work, charity, mentoring, and indulgence in aesthetic and artistic interests. These involvements expanded their preoccupation beyond routine domestic duties which notably brings them joy and fulfillment, as can be inferred below:

Sa Women's Club naman, marami akong bagay na natutunan na hindi ko matututunan nang nasa bahay lang ako. Kaya nag-enjoy naman ako sa mga natutunan ko. (In the Women's Club, I learned a lot of things that I wouldn't have when I was just at home. So I enjoy what I learn.) (P2)

P3 is considering catching up on what she was not able to experience or learn earlier in her life given her domestic duties, such as career skills and driving.

Ang hindi ko lang talaga na-experience, 'yung maging career woman, pero di pa huli ang lahat. Pwede pang mag-aral ulit. (The only thing I haven't really experienced is being a career woman, but it's not too late. I can study again.)

Ngayong malalaki na mga anak ko, may time na 'ko. Di pa naman huli ang lahat. Gusto ko ring mag-aral mag-drive. 'Yun ang aking next project. (Now that my children are grown, I have time. It's not too late. I also want to learn to drive. That's my next project.)

In Their Affiliative Roles

Women's lives are best characterized by the skillful juggling of several affiliative roles in tandem with their occupational roles. These are the simultaneous roles of being a mother, wife/partner, daughter/daughter-in-law, grandmother, and being in the "sandwich generation."

Mother Roles. When asked of their relationship with their now-grown children, the mothers among the participants shared that their now-grown children are less dependent on them, and they have a more mature adult relationship with them; as mothers, they have become less instructive and would more often take on the role of an adviser to their children. It turns out that a general feeling of ambivalence—oscillating between being relieved and nostalgic for the time their children were younger, accompany such dynamics in the mother-child relationship:

'Yun lang, may part na malungkot na kasi parang gumagawa na rin sila ng sarili nilang buhay. Ganoon pala 'yun kapag lumaki na sila. Noon, akala ko masaya na kapag nakapag-work na sila pero nakakalungkot din pala. (It's just that there's a sad part because it seems like they're creating their own lives. I now realize that's how it is when they grow up. At that time, I thought it would be happy when they'd be able to work, but it turns out to be also saddening.) (P2)

The centrality of the mothering role is reflected in all women participants, even amidst the midlife stage, and even for those who did not have children. The role continues in attending to grandchildren, and for the single women to their extended family, as gleaned below:

Una, nag-aalaga ng mga apo kasi 1 year na 'kong resigned. Thirty-three years ako sa opisina. Wala akong pahinga noon. (First, I am taking care of my grandchildren since I resigned from work. I've worked for 33 years. There was never a chance to rest.) (P1)

I'm actually looking at . . . 'pag yung bunso kong pamangkin 'dun sa talagang sister ko. Sabi ko 'pag namatay ako, 'yung nasa age na siya na naiintindihan niya na. Kasi ngayon parang ayokong mamamatay na thinking na siya 'yung . . . hindi niya kayang gawin, kasi I'm close to my nephew and nieces sa sister ko . . . dalawa lang kami talaga. (I'm actually looking at my youngest niece from my actual sister. I said when I die, that she would be at an age when she would understand. Because now it's like, I don't want to die thinking that she is . . . she can't do it, because I'm close to my nephew and nieces from my sister . . . it's really just the two of us.) (P13)

Wife/Spouse Role. At midlife, where marital relationships apply, the participants are in either of the following relationship statuses: (a) decades-long married, (b) married but conflicted, or (c) separated or widowed. They describe their relationships by the following diverse themes, depending on the trajectory of the marital course: (a) rekindling the bond and rediscovering each other, (b) mastery of the intimacy in the relationship, (c) breaking free from gender-typed norms, and (d) power relations.

For the women who are separated from their husbands, their midlife is characterized by them recreating a life and a self of their own. These women believe and have made the decision that there is no more reason to keep a relationship with their husband. They continued and built lives of their own, independent of the men. These women upheld the responsibility of raising their children, with or without financial support from the father.

Daughter and/or Daughter-in-Law: Intergenerational Reversal of Roles. Now in their midlife, the women relate to their parents not through a singular role as they used to (i.e., being an offspring dependent upon them). Rather, their relationship oscillates between the role that used to define them (as offspring) and reversing roles with their parents (being the offspring but also “parenting” them). Narrations are suffused with their involvement as daughter or daughter-in-law, and the demands and burdens of such a role affecting them the most.

“Sandwich Generation” Role. Women have always been in multiple roles, but this particular stage finds some women in positions not present in their early adulthood, by their intersecting gender-age status. This stage is at the point between three generational roles of being parented (as offspring), being “parents” or caregivers to parents, and parenting their own children.

Steiner (2015) referred to such circumstances as the *sandwich generation*, pertaining to these multigenerational caregiving roles both to one’s parent/s and one’s own family/children. Midlife women generally tend to find themselves in such a position, as their age coincides with their parents’ old age and declining health status. Steiner (2015) found that the transition to such a role made their experience focus on expansion and growing challenges as caregivers.

The Overlap of Occupational and Affiliative Roles: The Double Burden

Mothering and mothering-related experiences imbue and pervade the narrations and interviews among women, whether directly or indirectly, that these seem to be a central part of women’s midlife journey—even for those who have advanced in their professional careers.

For instance, four women whose supervisory work level required multiple, complex, and demanding functions have to grapple with work-family conflict, as in the case of a respondent who, as dean of a college, enumerates several work roles, including managing the university café, managing a university travel agency, and recently being assigned as program coordinator at the graduate school of business. Despite being able to afford a house help, given her higher-

paying work status, she is still drawn into a mother role upon returning home each day:

'Yung gabi ako na . . . 'yung pagliligpit and all . . . Pero feeling api pa rin ako kahit na hahaha . . . kasi I have to tend to my daughter, 'yung assignment niya . . . 'yung kahit pagod ako dito sa school . . . emotionally and physically . . . (At night, it's on me . . . the putting away and all . . . But I still feel beaten down even though hahaha . . . because I have to tend to my daughter, her assignments . . . even though I'm tired here at school . . . emotionally and physically . . .) (P11)

This goes on as well late into the night after everyone in the family are in bed and she has all the time to herself to become more "productive," as she described:

Kasi naman, I have this tendency to really work during 9:00 p.m. and up kasi that is when I am more productive . . . Parang 'yung thoughts ko kasi tuloy-tuloy and there's no distraction . . . For example, "Mommy, pakibalat mo naman ito," "Mommy, I like apple . . . slice mo 'ko . . ." (Because, I have this tendency to really work during 9:00 p.m. and up because that is when I am more productive . . . It's like my thoughts go on and on and there's no distraction . . . For example, "Mommy, please help me peel this" or, "Mommy, I like apple, please slice one for me . . .") (P12)

Women's life statuses have been characterized by work overload, double burden, and multiple roles (Barnett, 1993) and, as observed of the women in this study, such description has further extended to midlife stage.

II. How Does the Women's Present Life Course Determine Their Self-Identity at This Particular Juncture?

What emerged as the identity of women in midlife represented by this group of participants may be summed up into two main themes: (a) self-expansion in multiplicity and complexity and (b) changes and transitions.

Self-Expansion

The self-expansion that comes in many forms is the common ground that binds together the differences in trajectories among all of these women. This particular stage is when expansiveness is clearly evident in their functioning, particularly with employed and career women who are either at advanced/supervisory levels, which demand more complex skills and the mastery of needed competencies. These skillful mastery and competencies are acquired with long years of work experience and may not have been achievable in the earlier adult stage, as gleaned from one respondent:

Well, I said it's a tough job, it's tough . . . uhh teaching classes because it is a lecture lab and for the laboratory aspect, you have to manage everything because they are in the danger zone in the first place. And the moment you get something, somebody hurts, get ready to be called upon, to be sued even, by the parents should there be some accidents that are very, very grave I understand because I have been used to that kind of scenario because that was my course And because I've proven that I could manage. (P7)

The many roles of women in midlife are complex both in number and in kind; hence, the multiplicity of roles is common. Midlife also seems to be their most involved level, which would probably not be the case during earlier or later life stages. While women in earlier life stages have been taking on multiple roles, women in midlife who have come of age and taken on higher executive/supervisory positions are not comparable to women in early adult stages who are either beginning or still building a career. This resonates with Mitchell and Henson's (1990) finding that, among a sample of 700 women aged between 26–80, the group of women in their 50s compared to other age groups more often describe their lives as first rate. Accordingly, this study distinguishes women in their early 50s as *prime women* and characterizes them as such for their confidence, involvement, security, and breadth of personality. Being in the prime of life is evidenced in the combination

of engagements with people, careers, community service, and satisfaction. A similar study comparing women of three age groups in their 30s, 40s, and 50s found parallel results resonating with Mitchell and Henson's (1990) prime women sample, particularly on measures of identity certainty, generativity, and power confidence. Stewart and others (2001) found that the 40s and 50s groups not only mark transition, but their personality development is marked with a more solid sense of self, greater generative engagement, and more secure confidence compared to other age groups. These findings sit well with views of women's midlife development such as those offered by Muhlbauer's (2007) expansive view that comes to women in midlife who are engaged with growth, development, opportunity, and confidence-building. Supporting this is Barnett and Baruch's (1989) *enhancement hypothesis* which states that women's multiple roles benefit their wellbeing.

Furthermore, the demands, tasks, and duties within each role can be broken down further into various components. One example is the case of P11, whose administrator role is further divided into several subroles. Another case is that of P9, who, as a college professor, is also given headship duty in the laboratory and takes on her teaching as a maternal and personal adviser; thus, the advice she imparts goes beyond the scope of the academic curriculum and extends to personal and life skills that accompany students far into their life journey.

This role multiplicity is true as well in the affiliative roles, as described earlier. This stage is characterized by a multitude of roles, which include being a mother, wife, daughter, worker, head, home manager, provider, caregiver, and volunteer (not to mention the subroles within each of these).

Meanwhile, the nonemployed women who have become freed from the preoccupation of raising their children have shifted their focus to becoming volunteers; they engage in, lead, and organize civic, educational, and health projects benefiting communities.

These women's narratives are imbued with self-acquired confidence, which also translates into their identification and dedication. Hence, pride and fulfillment with their work become evident, as shown here:

And because I've proven that I could manage, so up to this time, while it is tough, you need more time, you need more patience, still bottom line is still happy . . . I feel happy with those years that I gave teaching. Return of investment for teachers . . . *Doon ako* happy (That's what I'm happy with). I did my job well. After all, we are savers of life. (P7)

When I'm given a task . . . for example, "Tess, you need to prepare a module on this." . . . I can work on it . . . I can execute given the topic of course . . . given . . . as long as I know the objective . . . I know what umm . . . module made for example, I can execute it. That is one thing that I can be proud of myself . . . *na 'pag binigyan ako* ng task (that when I am given a task) . . . *'yun* (there) . . . as much as possible. (P9)

This same self-expansion reflects their life states of being at their optimal competence, mastery, and confidence.

Parallel and similar mastery is evident in their marital relationships. It is by no stroke of luck that they have reached a level of comfort, a deep sense of secure attachment with their spouses, and a spiritually intimate, mutual knowing, exclusive connection like no other. This skillful mastery regarding marital relationship includes intimate communication of a more nuanced and transverbal type, that mutually evolved in the long years of living together, as reflected below:

Ngayon nasa stage na yung challenge kung paano mo ia-adjust yung sarili mo depende sa mood niya kasi nagkakaedad na rin. Pero sa haba na rin ng pagsasama namin, alam mo na kung paano ka magre-react o kung paano lalambingin lalo na kapag galit na yung asawa mo. (This is now the stage when the challenge is in adjusting depending on his mood, as we are getting old. But with the long years of togetherness, we just know how to react, or disarm when angered—we just know.) (P2)

After 31 years, I know what he is thinking; he is now angry, he has a problem. When I hear his voice on the phone, I know the sound of his voice and what he feels. (P15)

This level of intimate knowing is the kind that can be gleaned from the above, when the closeness born from long years of living together as a couple make them know each other so deeply as to be able to read and communicate beyond words.

Noon kasi spoiled ako sa asawa ko, lagi kang sinusuyo, sweet. Ngayon di ka na masyadong sinusuyo. Dati dinidibdib ko pa yun, pero nung nagka-anak kami, sa anak na lang ang focus. Di ko na iniintindi yung mga ganoon. (I used to be spoiled by my husband; he would always appease me, always sweet. Now he is not as romantic as before. It used to really affect me before, but when we had kids, the kids preoccupied me. I no longer worry about those things.) (P3)

When asked what their reaction to this is, several women responded in agreement that:

Tapos na kami sa chapter na yon. Nalampasan na namin yung mga ganon. (We're done with that chapter. We've been there and crossed that stage.) (P2)

Getting to this stage still together must have made these women master the complexity and intricacy of sustaining a marital relationship. The long years of living together have defined and redefined intimacy. The romance and its emotional roller-coaster demands that used to be part of the process in building intimacy seems to no longer hold, but has been transformed into a permanence, as hinted below:

... dun sa pagka-active parang meron swit-sweetness pa, ganun ... pero ngayon hindi ... para na lang kaming magkasama sa bahay na mag-best friend na. (When it comes to being active ... the sweetness used to be there, but now, it's no longer that ... but as companions ... we have become best friends.) (P9)

For those whose marital relationships were either interrupted or shifted to separated status, self-expansion is even more evident given the challenges they have been confronted with by the change of marital status.

P6, as a case in point, became separated from her husband and took sole custody of their children. This changed status called for expanding herself to parent her children in both mother and father roles, and to live on their own, independent from her former spouse.

These women had to first wrestle with the separation issues, to resolve and move on to overcome attachment from former spouses. Their previous status of having a shared life with a spouse in contrast to their new autonomous, separate status—and with no one to intimately share life with—necessitated being complete in one's self, thus fostering self-expansion.

Expansion for these midlife women is also seen in their aspirations, immediate and future plans, and personal projects/vision of what is yet to be accomplished or obtained. Those who are nonemployed try to pursue a career, while those who are employed seek out and plan their goals—future-securing and better work, graduate and postgraduate degrees, obtaining a professional license, and learning life skills they have not yet acquired (such as driving). Their personal projects, visions, and aspirations extend not only to themselves and their current life status but to the significant others in their lives: the mothers, for their children; the single nonmaternal women, for other children (such as plans for an orphanage by P13); and trips abroad for their parents (P9), among others.

Changes, Transitions, and Letting Go

On the other hand, such developments toward expansion in midlife women coincide with the tension brought by changes, shifts, limitations, and letting go. Two women from the employed group were confronted with unexpected changes, both personal and social. The seeming impasse in their career direction was a crisis confronting them at that time.

This particular life stage presents situations and experiences which accompany this particular life phase, such as one's changing physical condition. This is concomitant with the expansion of work and other functions common to several women who revealed that:

Ngayon hindi na kaya mag-multitask. Pagod na. Marami nang physical na sakit. Physically nagde-deteriorate na rin ang health. Madali nang mapagod. Mababa na ang energy level. Currently 52 years old na 'ko. (Now I can't multitask anymore. I'm tired. A lot of physical pain. Physically, health is deteriorating. I easily tire. My energy level is low. I am currently 52 years old.) (P4)

Such patterns of health concerns are observed concerning physical development. Additionally, discussions regarding a self-conscious focus on appearance and looking good have emerged:

Kahit di ka maganda basta confident ka, gaganda ka. Kaya ako, naniniwala akong maganda ako. (Even if you are not beautiful as long as you are confident, you will be beautiful.) (P4)

Protocol *'yan* (That's the protocol). You have to be beautiful all the time. (P3)

Lalo na kapag social gatherings, kailangan naka-makeup at maayos. (Especially during social gatherings, you need to be well-groomed and have some makeup on.) (P5)

With physical changes now more apparent, midlife women give particular attention to the mantra, "Be beautiful."

In sum, there are limiting effects of changes in energy level and in physical and health status that coincide with self-expansion in this particular life stage. Thus, the self-expansion gained is accompanied by physical changes, the immediacy of approaching old age, and time limitations. Such are the dialectics representing what characteristics stand out the most, in so far as observations from these women participants show.

Discussion

I posed the question of how women characterize their midlife experience with the basic categories of occupational and affiliative roles they do as an organizing scheme. In the analysis of women's discussions and interviews, I paid attention to the experiences of the women in those role categories and subcategories.

The overall findings on the main objective are representative of both employed and nonemployed women midlifers. Women from both groups can be generalized to be actively and highly engaged with life at this particular juncture. While this activity and engagement level is not homogenous for all women, those who face several functions and complex demands as required by multiple roles are at their optimal and competent performance wherein their mastery and self-fulfillment are evident. Gergen's (2000) rendition of women's multiple selves viewed from socially constructed postmodernism resonates here. Rather than the prevailing model in support of deterioration and decline with age, women's midlife experience in this study portrayed richly diverse multiplicity and complexity. Even some women whose career status did not turn out to be rewarding chose to recalibrate their career path and search for better opportunities that they can proactively engage in. While the height of active life and self-expansion is more evident among the employed women, those who are nonemployed—either because they are already retired or work full-time at home—also actively engage with their ongoing life experiences after most of their children (now adults) have left the home and now lead separate lives. Volunteer work, extended mothering, and for some, claiming and catching up on what was previously missed characterize what preoccupy their daily experiences.

When it comes to affiliative roles, mothering still predominates the discussion, but with changing dynamics. Different roles across the family structure, such as the mother-daughter role reversal as well as the sandwich generation role, are more evident for some women. For those experiencing the relative absence of children—being in the empty nest stage—a new form of mothering role continues with their grandchildren and extended families.

Married life for women in midlife was described as taking different directions. Most of the women talked about the relative relief from previous financial burdens and child caregiving; hence, the joy it affords them and their husbands paved the way for them to rekindle their marital bond. Other women, meanwhile, had reached a turning point in their marriage and had resolved to be separated in order to venture into a better life direction.

Another encompassing theme is seen at the intersection of both productive and reproductive roles of women—the mothering role functions in its many forms, as described earlier. This function crosses over into the public sphere. For most of the women, the mothering role is so ingrained in them that it crosses over to their occupational work sphere and extends beyond biological motherhood, as in the case of the teacher, aunt, and administrator. They continue in a mothering role during the midlife stage—for their grandchild/children, for their extended family, for mentees and students, for their grown-up children, and for cause-oriented organizations. The significance of how women are relationally oriented is parallel to Gilligan's (1982) assertion of women's development based on the ethics of care. In a similar vein to the concept that “care-focused feminist scholars have repeatedly linked caring practices to mothering behaviors” (Moran, 2014, p. 55), Gilligan (1982) considers women to have a more affiliative and relational orientation, hence characterizing a differentiated developmental nature. Compared to men with developmental tasks relating to autonomy and independence/separateness, Gilligan (1982) saw women's development taking place within relationships.

When it comes to physical changes, a number of women also shared how they are paying attention to looking beautiful in the midst of changes in their bodies. This expresses what may be interpreted as similar to Kaufman's (1994) *ageless self*, or the idea of a continuous self regardless of age. Yet similar to women in Hofmeier and others' (2017) study on women in late midlife who adhere to such views and “less to societal expectations, but still felt challenged by societal consensus of beauty and value regardless of age” (p.10), some women in this study expressed agreement with sociocultural beauty prescriptions for their gender, with

one respondent (P3) saying, “Protocol ‘*yan* (That’s the protocol). You have to be beautiful all the time.” This is a view articulated in the study of Ridout (2012) that described how the biological changes that women in midlife undergo become especially challenging for them in a society where women’s personal worth is often based on sexist standards.

Women’s stories found in this study are woven with life, energy, engagement, drive, and movement. Yet upon further probing—not of separate roles, but of the intersection of their reproductive and productive roles—those who wrangle with work-family conflict would show that themes of self-expansion, peak competence, and mastery also coincide with health concerns and the struggles of keeping up with multiple load demands. Women in supervisory ranks confronted by work-family conflict are further challenged by the changing health conditions accompanying midlife. On top of the intersectional experiences, there is the biological mark of women’s midlife, specifically the physical changes coinciding with menopausal matters—be they pre-, during, or postmenopausal health concerns—in addition to sociocultural experiences associated with menopause (e.g., cultural stereotypes). It is women in midlife who have to grapple more with work-family conflict brought by the double/multiple burden phenomenon and the socioculturally hegemonic ideology of motherhood and supermom (Moran, 2014).

The second question posed examined how women’s present life course defines their self-identity. Two themes emerged describing women’s self-identity in midlife: (a) self-expansion in multiplicity and complexity and (b) changes and transition. Self-expansion, which takes many forms, holds the common ground that ties up the different trajectories in women’s lives. This particular stage is when one’s location in one’s lifespan offers transformative experiences that support self-expansion, as found in role multiplicity, complexity, mastery, and competence in both work (employed and nonemployed) and relationships, immediate and future aspirations and personal projects, and self-identity, as well as the shifts and transitions that need resolution. This self-expansion, found in different forms across diverse roles, coexists with the tension brought by physical, personal, and social changes experienced by women, such as changes in their marital, career, biological, and health status.

The themes of a mothering role (being extended and expanded), role multiplicity and self-expansion, and continued adherence to beauty prescriptions for women are characteristic of Lachman and others' (2020) model of midlife as a pivotal period in the life course—where the pivotal role described includes a balance and peak of functioning and its linkage with earlier and later periods of life. Developmentally speaking, these themes continue in midlife, but if there is reason to consider that the midlife stage of women is unlike any other stage—taking into account the constellation of their present status at work in the public sphere, in the private sphere with affiliative roles, and with current physical and health changes—a totality unique to their gender is what characterizes women in midlife.

Limitations, Conclusion, and Recommendations

Some words on the composition and demographic characteristics of the participants are called for, as these relate to the limitations of the findings. Much of the findings come from predominantly middle-class women, and more than half are employed in academic institutions, limiting the class, context, and background within which this study was situated. In addition, the women with unemployed status ($n = 5$) come from a homogeneous group, all of whom are wives of middle-ranking military officers residing in the community. The personal nature of the research questions and the qualitative approach necessitated the conduct of the FGD among a group of participants with an existing level of familiarity and comfort, which made the discussion openly accessible to members with mutual trust.

As a highly qualitative study, this one subscribes to reflexive and interpretive suppositions, as any textual analysis is interpretive. The analysis of data presented here in the form of verbal and nonverbal communication is just as true. These limitations, while observed with care and rigor, can only be reckoned vis-a-vis our own worldviews, backgrounds, and biases. Admittedly, my academic background served as an influencing factor in this study. For instance, while care was observed in representing different departments/field units, the selection of

participants was preponderant toward the field of Education. Similarly, the same bias is true in the absence of women representation from the lower economic sector—another limitation posed by the economic background that I belong to. To a large extent, the general economic profile of selected women participants in this study presented midlife experiences of women limited to the lower to upper-middle-class sector. Follow-up studies on a similar track could gain much by collaborating with fellow researchers who are more immersed in other cultures and subcultures.

Educational institutions with predominantly female employed professionals have reasons, as the findings support, to consider, value, and foster the growth and development (both personal and professional) of the women workforce—particularly those in the midlife stage who have accumulated valuable experiences, exposure, work ethic, and stock knowledge. Their expertise, given the long years of mastery in their profession, is a rich mine with the potential for harnessing many productive endeavors in facilitation, training, faculty development, mentoring, consultancy, and the like. Thus, the extent of their services and capabilities could expand even beyond their own organization, thereby opening doors to more opportunities.

Due to the limited demographic selection of women participants in this study, doing further studies involving women in other demographic groups would be fruitful so that diverse voices are given representation and spaces.

More studies that use the lens rejecting the totalizing views of aging women are strongly recommended in order to balance the sociocultural depictions of decline in women midlifers, when, as this study found, this is a stage of optimal engagement with and productivity in life. Further, research in support of educative health uniquely addressed to women in later life stages is highly needed to help mitigate the challenges of aging and advocate the optimization of healthy living. Such studies would increase awareness and foster actions toward crafting policies focused on protecting and promoting the interests of later-stage women.

The findings showed that women's mothering/caretaking (reproductive) role continues even at the peak of their productive role. The reproductive role stays with the productive role, past and beyond

the family life cycle mothering stage, while the former may take on a new phase (mother to their extended family, grandchildren, their own adult children, spouses, students, and even to a cause as well as other aspirations). Meanwhile, those who opt to be in the reproductive role in the earlier life stages tend to aspire and plan to take on a more productive role (by volunteering in cause-oriented projects or training to catch up on a career path). Some, on the other hand, welcome the change of being relieved of the restriction brought about by caregiving (of their children), allowing opportunities for further career development.

Furthermore, this gender position may still be better understood as it intersects with the midlife stage. It is at the intersection between gender and age that midlife as a gendered development becomes more pronounced. Women in midlife are better portrayed when the gendered context that embeds their particular position in the entire lifespan and social milieu is acknowledged.

In light of the dominant developmental formulations concerning women in midlife, these findings are a different, if not new, contribution to the understanding and conceptualization of women's lifespan development. They give some hints and raise questions as to the linear, stage-based formulation of lifespan development. Progression, decline, aging, and fixed stages in development do not exactly represent and reflect the case of midlife women. Rather, multiplicity, diversity, and multidimensionality are, at best, what depict this group, particularly as their stage intersects with their gender role that fosters such developmental status. I put forth such analysis that it is this particular phase intersecting with woman gender that brings forth the layers and textured multiplicity characterizing this stage.

Lastly, women in midlife who are the immediate and direct stakeholders of this study can be invited to see within them, in a different light, a celebration of some losses (youthful years) that give birth to gains (mastery and competences).

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