

The Transition from Adulthood to Early Midlife: The Experience of Middle Aged working women

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According to the development theorist's midlife can be a time of crisis in terms of development of the individual but it is similar to all other stages of an individual's life and each of us would undergo similar experiences. The present study aims to explore the experiences of women when they undergo a transition from adulthood to early midlife in various aspects of their life like familial role, perception of self etc. through purposive sampling 13 women aged between 45-55 years of age from the region of Chandigarh were recruited for the study. Semi structured interview was used to obtain the subjective experience of their transitional phase which were then later thematically analysed. Factors indicating initiation of midlife, changes in relationship with the partner, changes in familial role and feelings during the transition were the major factors that majorly affected the experiences of the women when they transit from adulthood to midlife.

Keywords: Transition from adulthood to early midlife, Factors indicating initiation of midlife, changes in relationship with the partner.

In the context of women most of them don't pay much emphasis on their life and its different stages but in the modern times a change has been noted where women are becoming more aware about their quality of life and spend a notable time to take care of themselves. This can be credited to the feminist movement which recently took place and debates over the gender equality.

Dated long back to ancient times, people used to associate midlife with negative experiences and a time of crisis (Kakar, 2009). According to the development theorist's midlife can be a time of crisis in terms of development of the individual but it is similar to all other stages of an individual's life and each of us would undergo similar experiences. But this notion was disputed by the theorists later on which had put forward the idea that biological, historical and cultural factors also affect how individuals will experience their midlife.

Until recently midlife remained an unexplored phase in an individual's life mainly in Indian context because many Indians do not perceive it as a major phase of their life (Kakar, 2009). Lachman (2004) found that major perceptions about midlife in an individual's mind is basically

formed based on shared cultural beliefs which can even be wrong. In Indian culture midlife is not given much importance as it is seen as an entry towards the declining age. According to sacred Hindu texts, man should move away from his family during this age and should also renounce the world in order to unite with the ultimate GOD. This causes distress in them as they have to renounce their sexual life as well. Moreover in case of women they fear that the younger women will take over the authority from them (Kakar, 2009). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) initially used to define middle age as 40-60. The DSM 5(2013) revised the definition upwards to age 45-65 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). An important factor that affects how individuals define the age range of midlife depends on their birth cohorts. Birth cohorts refers to the individuals which are born together during the same time period. Due to different societal, environmental and life experiences across different time periods due to which the timing of middle age seems to be linked to the chronological age.

Midlife has been referred as the afternoon of life by Jung (1933) in his essay, "the stages of

life". The midlife integration of thinking, sensation, feeling and intuition that Jung describes, passes through the steps of accommodation, separation, liminality, reintegration and culminates in individuation. In accommodation the individual tries to adapt to the environmental demands and tries to make more meaning out of his self-based on what he considers to be more adaptive, in the next stage of separation the individual tries to pay more attention to his fundamental beliefs and checks whether is aligned to his present accommodated self which he had portrayed to the world. Due to greater distance between the accommodated self and fundamental beliefs crisis emerge in an individual's life. In the next stage of liminality in individuals where there is greater distance between the accommodated self and fundamental beliefs, the individual rejects his accommodated self and work towards reestablishment of who they are. During reintegration the individuals identify with a different persona, for some individuals it is aligned with their previous responsibilities, roles and qualities but for other individuals it might not be congruent with their earlier persona which can lead to the development of conflict in their self and then gradually leading to crisis.

Erikson used the term epigenetic principle to describe the process which guides the development of an individual. According to this principle each individual develops through a predetermined manner such as a blue print for his growth. Erikson (1963) held that people in middle adulthood that is the 7th stage according to the stages of life he proposed; undergo a struggle to find new meaning and purpose to their own lives. As portrayed in his epigenetic theory, successful resolution of early life tasks is a prerequisite for reaching the midlife tasks level. Central tasks of middle adulthood described here include concerns regarding; expressing love through more than sexual contacts, maintaining healthy life patterns, developing a sense of unity with mate, help growing and grown children to be responsible adults, accepting children's mates and friends, being proud of accomplishments of self and mate/spouse, reverse roles with aging parents, achieving mature, civic and social responsibility and adjusting to physical changes of middle age."

Valliant (1977) formulated two additional sub stages for the midlife period. Valliant suggested that after intimacy and before the generativity stage, there exist a time for career consolidation, before achieving ego integrity as a sequel to the generativity stage. To represent the focus of transmission of values to the society, he included a sub stage called the "keepers of the meaning."

During the midlife many women face a lot of issues concerning their health and well-being. They get concerned about their identity, self-esteem and physical vulnerability to various diseases. Moreover, they feel insecure about their social attractiveness due to declining age. They try to be satisfied in their marriage by giving importance to other aspects like emotional closeness, intimacy etc. (Lodge & Umberson, 2012). Loss of sexual interest is also attributed to the physical changes that occur due to menopause during this age. They experience sexuality as being holistic and complex.

As the life experiences of women change during midlife thus they also impact their sexual experiences (Patricia & Phyllis 2002). Women in their midlife feel vulnerable and are also irritated by their aging body. The most evident area in which women report loss and change in their midlife is their sexuality (Banister, 1999). They often find it difficult to accept the fact that they are aging (Saucier, 2004). The transitional phase from adulthood to midlife is affected by a lot of things like family characteristics, employment characteristics etc. most of the changes that occur during midlife are unconscious to the women experiencing them. Women do not attribute certain changes to particular age, according to them these changes were more affected by the quality of life and how satisfied they were with life. Some of the women even related age and well-being as positively correlated (Degges-White & Myers, 2006). Society also plays an active role on the experiences of women during this age. They dislike the feeling that life is winding down and are also concerned about how the society perceives them (McQuaide, 1998). Interaction between the women's perception about their bodies and other factors influence their transitional phase and even their thought pattern. Most of the women believe that realities are culturally constructed and they interpret the

changes based on these realities and they affect the health indirectly. Most of the women are not aware about the changes happening during the midlife which causes ambiguity and confusion in them around this phase (Banister, 1999).

It was seen that there was a shift in the personal paradigm of individuals either because of inner push or the external circumstances and demands due to change in familial life at middle age (O'Connor & Wolfe, 1991). Aging is perceived differently by all the individuals due to their subjective experiences and it was seen that short term aging perception is more different than the long term perception of aging.

In the present study first-hand accounts from the middle aged women were used to understand their experience of transiting from adulthood to early midlife. Different aspects of their life like sexual experiences, physical changes, family life etc. were focused upon while maintaining the subjectivity of their experiences. The specific objectives of the study are:

1. The influence of transition on their family life.
2. Change in their familial roles during transition phase from early adulthood to midlife.
3. The pattern of emotional experiences during the transition phase from early adulthood to midlife.
4. The quality of intimate relationship during the transition phase from early adulthood to midlife.

With this specific objectives in mind the present research focuses on studying the

experiences of women during their transition from adulthood to middle age and to what extent do they think that it had been positive or negative for them. Understanding this will help us know that how this transition phase can be made more positive for women and they do not undergo any kinds of stress.

Method

Participants

The sample for the research consisted of 13 married working women aged between 45-55 years whose partners are alive and have children. Sample was collected from the union territory of Chandigarh. participants were recruited using convenience sampling method. The length of the interview was around 45 minutes to 1 hours per individual. Women with government job were selected for the research in order to assure that they have similar kinds of exposure and experiences.

Procedure

Participants for the research were recruited from excise and taxation unit located in Chandigarh. The method of semi-structured interviewing was used for this study. The line of enquiry in the interview schedule was developed based on the research objectives. Sample questions of each line of enquiry are shown in table I. Informed consent was given prior to the interview and it was conducted in a separate cabin in their office. Hindi and Punjabi languages were used as a medium for conducting interview

Thematic Analysis

The interview collected from all the research participants were transcribed carefully and

Table I. Lines of inquiry and sample questions from interview schedule

Line of inquiry	Sample questions
Familial role	Does your relationship with the family members has undergone significant change? Does your role in the family changed?
Relationship with partner	Has the meaning of affection changed for you in the recent years in terms of your partner? Do you focus more on emotional experiences rather than on sexual experiences with your partner? Have you witnessed any conflicts surrounding your sexual life?
Initiation of midlife	According to your understanding when does an individual enters midlife?
Feelings at the age	How do you feel at this age?

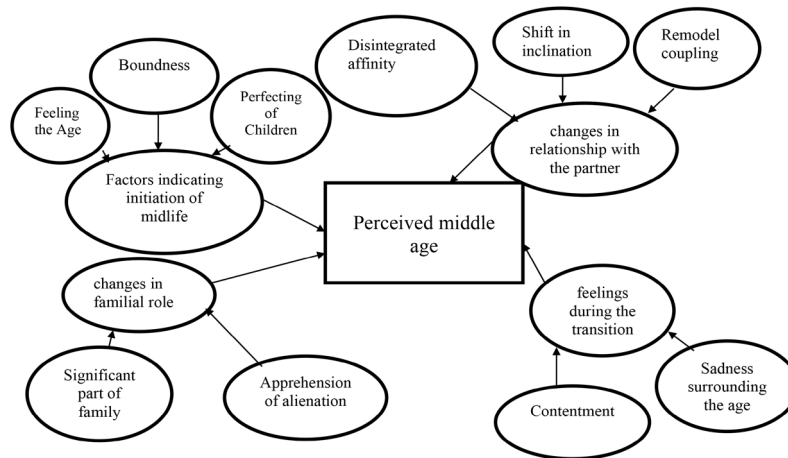


Fig: 1 showing Thematic Network

numbers were assigned to them to preserve confidentiality of the participants. The interviews conducted in Hindi and Punjabi were translated to English. Coding framework was prepared based on an extensive understanding of the participants responses. Similar codes were combined into a single theme. Themes were analysed and the ones that did not fit in the data were discarded. Themes were then organised into a hierarchical structure of basic, organising and global themes to understand the relationship between them. Relationship pattern between the themes were studied and a network was established. Excerpts from the transcriptions were selected to support and define the them.

Results

The qualitative study explores the experiences of middle age women as they transit from their adulthood to early midlife through first person accounts of changes, feelings and emotions they underwent during this phase. Majorly four themes were identified from the data: initiation of midlife, relationship with the partner, familial role and feelings during the transition. The thematic network is illustrated in figure 1.

Factors indicating Initiation of midlife

When the participants were inquired about their thoughts and beliefs about the initiation of midlife.

Boundness was considered to be an important event for most of them. Other factors include Feeling the age and Growing up of children. It was found that there was confusion surrounding the initiation of midlife among the participants and they did not have any clear idea about the concept. Participants who reported change in responsibilities as indicative of midlife reported "Once you get married your midlife starts even if it is in early 20s because of the kind of responsibilities you get and these increase too". Whereas other participant reported "that everything is based on the amount of responsibilities and the time when you get married".

Feeling the Age Other participants who thought that when an individual himself starts feeling the effects of his ageing body is the point when midlife starts. They usually associate these changes with their level of functioning. One of the participant reported that "I think the midlife of an individual starts after the age of 35 because This is the time when the individual himself starts feeling the effects of an increasing age". Another participant reported that "according to my understanding till 50 years the individual is fine after that only their functioning deteriorates which marks the beginning of middle age".

Perfecting of Children was also considered as an important factor indicating the start of midlife for these women. One of the participant reported that "An individual enters midlife after

the age of 40 when their children get settled and busy in their own work and we parents get their time”.

Overall it was found that there was a lot of confusion surrounded their belief of initiation of midlife and nobody had a concrete idea about the concept. The number and percentage of coding references are shown in table II.

Table II. Number and percentage of coding references in context of factors indicating initiation of midlife

Nodes	Number of coding references	Percentage of coding reference
Something puts years on someone	5	38.46
Boundness	6	46.15
Perfecting of Children	2	15.38

Changes in Relationship with the partner

From the present data it was found that the participants underwent a lot of changes in their relationship with their partners and most of them were in the negative direction. The significant changes included changes in affection and sexual life, equal distribution of power in a relationship and attachment issues. Most prominent factor was changes in their affection and sexual life.

Disintegrated affinity One of the participant reported that “my relations with my husband have worsened in this age as our bond has weakened because I have heard a lot of negative things about my husband which has broken my trust for him. In the recent years I do not have any affection towards my husband as he does not respects me so there is not even a meaning of our relationship. We live as two strangers being stuck in the same room. I do not have any sort of interaction with him. I do not have any sexual life with my husband since 3 years”.

Shift in inclination Whereas for another participant the meaning of affection was different to the general notion of affection. She reported that “For me affection is doing my duties and playing my role so I am still doing these things. According to my definition of affection there is no change in it towards my husband. The

pleasure has declined also I have never been so proactive in building sexual relationship with my partner. I am shy which also might cause decline in pleasure. I focus more on emotional experiences with my partner because I am not comfortable building sexual relationships with him. No particular reason but I don’t feel like only. I am happy without it”.

Remodel coupling Some of the participant were also concerned about the attachment issues which came up during this age and were not present earlier. Participant A reported that “yes with my husband there are negative changes in the relation as I get irritated with his habits of picking on me every time on small trivial issues and he even does not lives up to my expectations as I want him to and he even expects that I should do everything. I don’t have any physical or emotional attachment with him. From my side everything is finished”.

Another participant of the study said that “Both emotional and sexual experiences are on decline in this age. I don’t prioritise anything now. I think something is happening to my relationship with my partner, affection is still there but sometimes it’s not. I can’t clearly state what it is. I think it’s also on a transition phase which will become negative in long run”.

Lot of changes surrounded the marital relationship of these women and most of them try to compensate with these negative changes by sharing more emotional experiences with their partner and increase their attachment. The number and percentage of coding references are shown in table III.

Table III. Number and percentage of coding references in context of changes in relationship with the partner

Nodes	Number of coding references	Percentage of coding reference
Disintegrated affinity	3	23.07
Remodel coupling	5	38.46
Shift in inclination	9	69.23

Changes in familial role

As the participants transit from their adulthood to early midlife notable changes start

taking place in their role as a family member. Some of them start having An outsider feeling in the context of the family whereas others reported that they started involving themselves in decision making process and starting feeling themselves as a significant part of the family which was not present earlier. Although minimal interaction was reported within the family which was attributed to the changing times.

Apprehension of alienation Participant in the study reported that “Relationships with my in laws and my husband have deteriorated to a greater extent, for them I do not exist anymore and they are also not willing to keep any relations with me. I don’t know any particular reason for the same because I don’t feel that I have done such a wrong deed but I can’t change their perceptions of me so I just ignore. Apart from them rest all relations are intact”.

Significant part of family Whereas another participant who started taking part in the process of decision making in the family reported that “now I also take part in the decision making process in the family. The relations have changed in a positive way among the family members”.

For some participants with the transition positive changes happened in their family life and they started feeling as a significant member of their family. One Participant reported that “There is More understanding with time with my family members I am living up to their expectations and their expectations have increased from me as I am very independent women and they are very dependent kind of people who wholly solely depend on me for every petty thing. but I don’t depend on others. At times I also expect from them but I don’t ask for it if they extend it I would take it but I don’t think it’sgoing to happen ever”.

Most of the participants had adjusted with their changing roles without any discomfort and this change is attributed to the external factors rather something internal. The number and percentage of coding references are shown in table IV after the references.

Feelings during the transition

With the transition from adulthood to early midlife women start to have a variety of feelings which surround their experiences of this age. A mixture of feelings were observed across

Table IV. Number and percentage of coding references in context of changes in familial role

Nodes	Number of coding references	Percentage of coding reference
Significant part of family	4	30.77
Apprehension of alienation	4	30.77

participants.

Sadness surrounding this ageSome of the participants reported being sad and lonely during this age as “I feel depressive at this age as my husband does not behaves properly with me, there is minimal interaction without any particular cause. This made me really sad and I also feel aloof sometimes as I feel that there is nobody to talk to me. I also suspect that I have depression but I don’t know to what extent is it true. whatever happens in my life I feel it to be negative only, be it with me, my family or anything in general”.

Contentment Whereas other participants reported being satisfied in this age like “I have very healthy relations with my family, I have a sustained job as well. There is so much to cherish about. I am still growing and I engage in all such activities which will help me in my personal growth. I am an independent women and I always love working on me and making myself better”. Another participant reported that “I don’t see it to be something different.I even have not witnessed any problems in the family life too so overall it is a positive change for me.I live every moment of my life and enjoy it.”

It was seen that most of the participants showed feelings of satisfaction related to different areas at this age. They were happy in their new phase of life and didn’t perceived it as

Table V. Number and percentage of coding references in context of feelings during the transition

Nodes	Number of coding references	Percentage of coding reference
Contentment	10	76.9
Sadness surrounding the age	4	30.76

much different from other phases. The number and percentage of coding references are shown in table V after the references.

Discussion

The present study explored the experiences of middle age working women in Chandigarh during the phase of transition from adulthood to early midlife using principles of qualitative method. Four major themes pertaining to their experiences were identified and explained from the first-hand accounts of the women of this age. The major themes are Factors indicating initiation of midlife, changes in relationship with the partner, changes in familial role and feelings during the transition.

The initial theme that emerged from the narratives of participants was the belief among the women related to the initiation of midlife. Most prominent belief related to the initiation of midlife as reported by the participants was the significant change in amount of responsibilities. In the context of patriarchal society we often find that women are burdened with a lot of responsibilities. The most important life event that brought change in responsibilities of these women is marriage. In most of the cases it was arranged marriage where no importance was given to the choices of women and they had to oblige by their parents. Participants did not associate any age group with the initiation of midlife rather they saw marriage as the threshold of entering midlife despite of any particular age.

Whereas other factors like feeling the age were considered as initiating factors of midlife when individuals themselves started feeling that they are getting old and changes are happening in their bodies. Most of these changes were related to the physical aspects of their bodies like decrease in the level of functioning. It was found that around 20% of women in the age group of 40-55 reported limitations in physical functioning (Sowers, Pope, Welch, Sternfeld & Albrecht, 2001). Even growing up of children marked beginning of midlife because for some it indicated increase in responsibilities while for others it was the time when they were able to spend more time with their partners.

Along the heterogeneity of sample different beliefs about middle age were reported which indicate the confusion surrounding this phase of an individual's life.

Banister (1999) in his study reported that during midlife the most important area in which loss or change is experienced by women is their sexuality. This has been evident in the present research as it was observed that there was either a decline in sexual activity or there was no sexual activity between the partners since the beginning of middle age. They try to be satisfied in their marriage by giving importance to other aspects like emotional closeness etc. (Lodge & Umberson, 2012). These women tried to give more importance to having more emotional experiences with their partner as they felt that this could lead to more attachment with them rather than having sexual intimacy. It was seen that in this age emotional experiences are prioritised over sexual experiences with the partner. No significant distress was seen among this women due to decline in sexual activity as they had accepted it as a part of their ageing process. Even confusion was seen around how women perceived the meaning of sexuality as there were variety of responses and most of them relate it to sexual intercourse.

Also attachment issues were also seen surrounding the marital relationship during this age as women reported decrease in attachment with their partner and lack of belongingness which marked negative changes in their relationship. Early cross-sectional surveys of marital satisfaction suggested that marital satisfaction declines steadily during the first 10 years of marriage (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Dentler & Pineo, 1960; Pineo, 1961, 1969). From these findings we can infer that the marital satisfaction tends to decline further with more time passing as seen in the results of the present study. With increasing years of marital relationship the power distribution between the couple tends to be equalised in terms of taking decisions and other related aspects. Male dominance is perceived as a myth whereas balance is actually maintained in the informal distribution of power between the both. (Rogers, 1975).

The third important theme that emerged from the data was changes in the familial role of women during the stage of transition. Carstensen, Pasupathi, Mayr & Nesselrode (2000) in their study found that middle aged people tend to experience more positive emotions as compared to the negative ones

as noted by the difference in the frequency of occurrence of both the type of emotions. These results are in congruence with the results of the present study where it was found that most of the women felt satisfied in their new phase of life. The sense of satisfaction was seen in different aspects like family life, job, qualities of partner etc. Some of the women even related age and well-being as positively correlated (Degges-White & Myers, 2006) because it was seen that most of the women reported increase in the subjective well-being in this phase of their life. They start feeling good as the participants reported that they have so many good things to cherish about in their life which brings about consistency in their lifestyle.

Evidence was also found for the negative emotions like sadness and tension as experienced by some of the women which was due to their negative life experiences like unfulfilled responsibilities, negative changes in intimate relationships etc. although these emotions were reported less frequently as compared to the positive ones. The results of the present study indicates that the feelings of women during the transitional phase are affected by their life experiences. Culture does not seem to play an active role in affecting the feelings of these women. Bromberger, Harlow, Avis, Kravitz & Cordal (2004) In their study found that there is a strong association between psychosocial factors and depressive symptoms among women in their middle age irrespective of their ethnicity. These results highlight the importance of certain psychosocial factors that can predispose an individual towards the development of depressive symptoms.

The fourth important theme that emerged from the present research is changes in familial role of women. When women begin their midlife they experience a change in their role of a family member. Some women start feeling themselves as a significant member of the family while taking active part in the decision making process whereas for some women they start feeling left out of the family and start having an outsider feeling. Even the changing times and advancements also contributed to minimal interactions between the family members therefore increasing the distance between them. Bhatnagar & Rajadhyaksha, (2001). In their

study found that during midlife there is a change in familial roles of working women as they start identifying more with their parental role and start taking active part in their children's lives like taking decisions etc. This makes them feel as a significant part of the family.

Chesley (2005).in his research stated that with changing times and introduction of technology there has been changes in the levels of family satisfaction. The present research findings also suggest that the interaction between the family members has decreased as it was reported that people are overinvolved in their lives. These changes in the family pattern didn't cause any distress to the participants as they had accepted this as a part of their life. Empirical research in this area found that negative life events or changes have less impact on the lives of women during this age when compared with the positive life events or changes.

Throughout the research findings it was seen that women had very well adjusted in their new phase of life although negative changes were reported but they had adjusted with these changes appropriately. They tried to even compensate these with some positive things. Overall no distress was found among the participants. Although confusion was seen around some of the concepts related to their age as they didn't have clear understanding about it

Limitations

The present study analysed the narratives of women who are in their early midlife and explores different experiences they undergo during their transition from adulthood to midlife. The narratives highlighted certain changes that take place in their life like change in relationship with the partner, change in familial role, beliefs about initiation of midlife and feelings of these women in this age. It was inferred that women were well adjusted in their new phase of life without experiencing significant distress.

The present study included women aged between 45- 52 years of age from the union territory of Chandigarh. The findings from the research help us understand how women experience different changes in their new phase of life and how they adapt with their changed

circumstances and try to compensate for it. The findings from this research cannot be generalized to whole of the India as there might be regional differences. As the sample was exclusively from government sector while those in private sector might have different experiences which needs to be explored. The education level of all the participants was not matched and the kind of marriage of the sample was also not explored.

Future Implications

The future research can include more information about their adult life in order to understand the findings in a better manner. Also the sample was limited to only one union territory of India which can be further increased to different states to understand the underlying cultural influences on one's life. Future research can explore the possible factors which bring in some of the changes in the women's lives. A psychoeducation module can be prepared based on the findings of the study. Quantitative study can also be conducted to understand the life satisfaction scores of women during this age.

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