Periods of life have underpinnings in the universals of biology and social life, but they are conceptualized differently in different cultures and historical periods (Menon, 2001; Shweder, 1998). Middle age is not recognized at all in some societies, but in ours estimates often stretch from age 35 or 40 to age 60 or 65—a span of 20 to 30 years. The question of whether or not personality should be expected to change or develop within this period has received little attention. This chapter begins with a brief and selective review of two background topics: (a) relations between age, roles, status, and personality, and (b) personality change in adulthood. Then after a brief consideration of middle age as a whole, the issue of making differentiations within this long expanse is discussed. Three phases of middle age are proposed, then longitudinal evidence supporting the conception along with divergent findings are presented. Finally, there are suggestions for further research.

**BRIEF REVIEW OF RESEARCH AREAS**

**Relations between Age, Roles, Status, and Personality**

Anthropologists and sociologists have linked age to roles and social status across a diverse range of societies (e.g., Linton, 1936; Riley, 1976). There are norms about what people of a certain age should be doing, and these norms may be internalized and help to guide or motivate behavior (Neugarten, 1977). In Western culture, the first half of adulthood has been described as a period of growth and expansion during which individuals seek to find and maximize their status in society, whereas security and threat-avoidance become more important in the second half (Kuhlen, 1968; Staudinger & Bluck, 2001). Middle age is described as a period of multiple roles and
complex relationships among roles (Antonucci, Akiyama, & Merline, 2001). It is a time of competition between demands of work and family (Havighurst, 1972).

A number of social scientists have argued that age has lost potency as a determinant of adult life patterns in Western society (e.g., Neugarten, 1979; Riley, Kahn, Foner, & Mack, 1994). Life styles and schedules have become more diverse (Bumpass & Aquilino, 1995), and people have become more tolerant of this diversity (Settersten, 1998). However, age remains a major factor in people's adult lives and personality. Lachman, Lewkowicz, Markus, and Peng (1994) found that middle-age people (average age = 48) described themselves and were described by younger and older adults as experiencing physical decline, having many responsibilities, and enjoying little leisure, but also as showing a peak of competence, productivity, and social responsibility. Earlier studies reported similar results, describing middle-aged individuals as showing both gains and losses (Heckhausen, Dixon, & Baltes, 1989), and as peaking in dominance, status, effective intelligence, and integrative skills (Cameron, 1970, 1973; Neugarten, 1968; Schaie, 1977-78).

Contemporary family roles begin and change at heterogeneous times, but some changes are predictable. In middle age, children leave home and parents die (Bumpass & Aquilino, 1995). Some longitudinal studies support Gutmann's (1987) view that gender roles are most stringent during the early period of childrearing, and men become more feminine and women more masculine in later adulthood (e.g., Harker & Solomon, 1996; Helson, Pals, & Solomon, 1997), but this is a complex issue and findings vary with measures and study design as well as with sample, cohort, and social climate (Diehl, Owen, & Youngblade, 2004; Parker & Aldwin, 1997).

Several stage theorists have based their stages in part on the relation between age and social roles, conceptualized in terms of developmental tasks (e.g., Erikson, 1950; Havighurst, 1972) or life structures that change with phases in career development (D. J. Levinson, Darrow, Klein, M. H. Levinson, & McKee 1978; Vaillant, 1977). Research on Eriksonian constructs suggests that sense of identity becomes stronger from young adulthood to middle age (Stewart, Ostrove, & Helson, 2001), and number and quality of social roles is related to identity development and well-being (Vandewater, Ostrove, & Stewart, 1997). Generativity tends to peak in middle age, but the conditions associated with its peaking are not altogether clear (McAdams, 2001a) and some have argued that it is the felt capacity for generativity, as opposed to desire for or actual generative actions, that peaks in middle adulthood (Stewart & Vandewater, 1998). Several studies (e.g., Ryff & Heincke, 1983; Zucker, Ostrove, & Stewart, 2002) show that young adults expect to increase in identity certainty and generativity during middle age in the ways hypothesized by theorists.

Personality Change in Adulthood

Personality trait psychologists have traditionally emphasized continuity in adult personality, conceiving traits as largely genetic and unchanging (e.g., McCrae et al., 2000). Recently, a new consensus regarding adult personality change has developed, more in line with cognitive approaches and a perspective of adaptation to changing biological resources in a changing environment throughout the life span (Baltes, 1997; Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995). A meta-analysis showed that personality continues to increase in rank-order consistency until late middle age (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000). Several
large cross-sample or cross-national studies have shown relations between age and personality in both men and women over the adult years (see review in Helson, Kwan, John, & Jones, 2002). Most studies show increase with age in conscientiousness and agreeableness, and decrease with age in the social vitality aspect of extraversion. Although many studies have looked only for linear relations between personality and age, recent work provides much evidence of quadratic relationships (e.g., Cramer, 2003; Helson, Jones, & Kwan, 2002; Srivastava, John, Gosling, & Potter, 2003).

Researchers have also conceptualized and demonstrated relations of emotionality and coping styles with age (e.g., Carstensen, Pasupathi, Mayr, & Nesselroade, 2000; Diehl, Coyle, & Labouvie-Vief, 1996; Gross et al., 1997; Mroczek & Kolarz, 1998). People are said to increasingly avoid negative emotions and maintain positive states through improved emotional control, shifts in coping techniques, or lesser emotional reactivity. Older married couples are more skilled in affective relationships with each other than are those in early middle age (Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1994). As people age, they choose their social contacts less on the basis of the information these contacts provide and more for their emotional value (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999). Labouvie-Vief and Medler (2002) suggested that affect regulation involves two independent coping strategies: Affect optimization is the tendency to constrain affect to positive values, and affect complexity is the amplification of affect in the search for differentiation and objectivity. Based on this and earlier work (e.g., Labouvie-Vief, DeVoe, & Bulka, 1989), Labouvie-Vief and Márquez (2004) proposed that the former increases throughout adulthood, whereas the latter peaks in middle age and then declines.

Cognitive researchers say that perceptual speed begins to decline in the mid-20s, but that some higher order abilities, such as inductive reasoning, continue to increase in middle age and then decline very gradually with many individual differences (Willis & Schaie, 1999). Studies of wisdom as “expertise in the pragmatics of everyday life” do not show increase into the later years, but they also do not show the decline that might be expected from cognitive losses (Baltes, Staudinger, Maercker, & Smith, 1995; Pasupathi, Staudinger, & Baltes, 2001).

In other areas of research, motivation and values have been found to shift from tenacious goal pursuit (changing one’s situation to meet one’s goals) to flexible goal adjustment (changing one’s goals to meet one’s situation) over middle age (Brandststaedter & Renner, 1990). Search for personal growth lessens after midlife (Ryff, 1991), but spirituality increases (Wink & Dillon, 2002).

It must be emphasized that most research on personality in relation to age has used cross-sectional designs. Because cultural and cohort effects make a difference (e.g., Roberts & Helson, 1997; Twenge, 2001), more longitudinal work is needed to demonstrate that the same individuals change or stay the same in the ways we have discussed. Nevertheless, there are many lines of evidence that personality changes within and across middle age.

MIDDLE AGE AND ITS PHASES

Middle Age

Research on personality and age in adulthood often contrasts young and old, omitting middle age altogether (Lachman & Bertrand, 2001). This may be done as a matter of
convenience, with middle-aged individuals being busier and less likely to participate, but the latent implication is that midlife is merely an intermediary zone between young adulthood and old age. However, middle age is a unique period of life. In terms of roles, the distinctive content of middle age includes the middle stages of parenting, changing relations to one’s own parents, transitions in employment in coordination with changing family responsibilities, and in later middle age the anticipation of relinquishing the employment role or the experience of actually retiring (Moen & Wethington, 1999). As Bumpass and Aquilino (1995) said, “The negotiation of ... changing roles and statuses constitutes, to a significant extent, the nature of midlife experience.” (p. 52). Thus, middle age should be regarded not only as a period when certain conditions prevail, but also as a period during which certain changes take place. Although there may be variation across cultures and socioeconomic groups, here are the characteristics of midlife personality and experience that are most salient in the literature:

1. The individual has become a responsible member of society; there is pressure toward the coordination of multiple roles.
2. Most people attain their maximum status and widest responsibilities in the labor force and/or the community and family.
3. There is increasing physical decline, along with awareness of this decline and of the finiteness of opportunities, and of life itself.
4. Affect optimization increases and peak cognitive and affect complexity and integrative skills are in evidence.
5. Experience, power, and increased skills are used in personality development (e.g., achieving identity certainty; becoming an individual; becoming less egocentric and more generative, spiritual, and wise).

Phases of Middle Age

Ideas about what age range middle age encompasses vary considerably (Staudinger & Bluck, 2001). When a middle-aged sample is included in a study of age and personality, the average age of this subgroup may be 40 years, but it may also be 45 or 50 years. Differing results are hard to interpret, especially because very little research documents systematic change within middle age. In their conceptualization of male adulthood, D. J. Levinson et al. (1978) portrayed ages 35–40 as a period of peak achievement effort, and ages 40–45 as the midlife transition, a time of considerable tension and crisis for many men. There then follows a generally more stable period (with several parts) from ages 45–60, and after that the late adulthood transition from age 60 to age 65. Levinson’s depiction of men’s development, however, has been criticized as too universalistic and elitist (because the men interviewed were 10 workers, 10 executives, 10 biologists, and 10 novelists). Particular controversy has surrounded the midlife transition, with many researchers (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1980; Thurnher, 1983; Wethington, 2000) failing to find evidence for a “midlife crisis.”

Staudinger and Bluck (2001) suggested that distinguishing early and late middle age would reflect the very different preoccupations of the 40-year-old and the 60-year-old. They said that over the life course a person’s goals direct resources into carrying out three kinds of functions: growth functions (e.g., growing, achieving, helping children develop), maintenance functions (e.g., balancing a career and fam-
ily), and the management of loss (e.g., adjusting to chronic illness). Early in life most resources go into growth functions, maintenance functions in midlife peak, and late in life most resources go into the management of loss. Staudinger and Bluck suggested that this shift in allocation of resources could be used to differentiate early and late middle age. These authors may have suggested only two phases because they were working with the age range from 40 to 60 as the extent of middle age. Following the example of Lachman and James (1997), McAdams (2001b), Mroczek (2004), and others, middle age here is considered to begin in the mid-30s and extend to age 65, and in this longer period (if not in the shorter) early, middle, and late phases of middle age can be identified.

The idea of phases seems particularly compelling if it is true that important factors show peaks or troughs or change quality during middle age. The conceptualization offered here focuses on these changes: an increase in social commitments and status from young adulthood to early middle age followed by decrease in commitments and striving for status by late middle age; progressive increase in affect optimization along with increase followed by decrease in affect complexity; awareness of time constraints and aging, which differs in quality at different points in middle age. The following sketches of three phases of middle age suggest how these factors relate to the self and to different syndromes of middle age that have been identified by researchers.

The Ascendant Phase. At this time, the individual is motivated (in part by internalized social norms) to find a route of upward mobility for self and family. Commitments to multiple roles and adherence to social schedules and expectations require discipline and personal sacrifices, but they also increase integration of personality, confidence, and assertiveness. The pinch between individual needs and the increased level of conformity, along with the excitement of status potential and awareness of the finiteness of time, lead to a focus on self and identity and an increase in complex coping. Although the individual now shows more successful affect optimization than the young adult, the ascendant phase is characterized by less positive and more negative emotionality than are subsequent phases of middle age. This phase shows predominance of the growth function described by Staudinger and Bluck (2001). It shows features of Levinson and colleagues' (1978) period of Becoming One's Own Man, assigned to the late 30s, and the Midlife Transition, assigned to the period from age 40 to age 45. The concept of the ascendant phase is also enriched by the demonstration of Labouvie-Vief, Chiido, Goguen, Diehl, and Orwoll (1995) that the self-concept is particularly rich and dynamic near age 40, and by Jung's (1969) conception of age 40 as a turning point after which the dominance of the ego lessens, hitherto less conscious parts of the personality become more accessible, and the person in time becomes more of an individual.

The Executive Phase. During this phase, the individual reaches maximum status and responsibility in a socially complex environment. Affective controls and cognitive skills and breadth continue to increase and to become increasingly integrated. However, the individual works under time constraints to meet the demands of the day and lacks leisure. In terms of Staudinger and Bluck (2001), maintenance functions are emphasized. The person in this phase has many features of Neugarten's executive personality (1968), such as increased mastery and competence, and re-
sembles the middle-aged person as compared to young adults and older adults (e.g., Lachman et al., 1994, described in an earlier section).

The Acceptant Phase. This phase finds the individual relaxing the effort to achieve future goals and higher status, being content with the present or beginning to lessen commitment to the public sphere and increase attention to private pursuits. Awareness of aging and of limited time ahead increases, but daily demands on time are reduced as the number of major roles drops. The individual becomes less affectively complex but sometimes more spiritual. This phase has features of Levinson et al.’s (1978) transitional period between age 60 and age 65, which he regarded as a major turning point of the life cycle, when the task is to “conclude the efforts of middle adulthood and to prepare oneself for the era to come” (p. 62). The understanding of it is informed by work on the shift in adaptational styles over middle age treated by Baltes (1997), Brandststäedter and Renner (1990), Heckhausen and Schulz (1995), and others. Also relevant are Neugarten’s (1968) idea of middle age as showing a shift in time frame from time since birth to time left to live, Karp’s (1988) work on the interpersonal context of the increased awareness of aging throughout the 50s, and descriptions of preretirement consciousness (Ekerdt & DeViney, 1993; Super, 1990), during which ties to the work world loosen and more energy is invested in private undertakings.

Phases and Individual Differences in Change. The phases of middle age described here are not conceived as universal in nature. There are certain to be individual differences in when, how, and why people progress through them. Nevertheless, previous findings in the literature and the work described later suggest that these phases capture important commonalities among people in modern cultures.

PHASES OF MIDDLE AGE IN THE MILLS LONGITUDINAL STUDY

Helson and Soto (2005) formulated hypotheses about how personality changes from young adulthood through middle age, and tested these hypotheses using data from the Mills Longitudinal Study. This study built on much previous work on personality change by the Mills study researchers, although the organizing constructs and the period covered were unique to this article. The Mills sample consists of a representative two thirds of the 1958 and 1960 graduating classes at a women’s college in northern California (Helson, 1967). Follow-ups have been conducted at ages 27, 43, 52, and 61. At each of these ages, the women provided information about life events, social roles, status, and health, as well as inventory data including the California Psychological Inventory (CPI; Gough & Bradley, 1996) and the Adjective Checklist (ACL; Gough & Heilbrun, 1983). In addition to its standard scales, the CPI was used to score scales developed by Joffe and Naditch (1977) to assess Haan’s (1977) constructs of coping and defending: Intellectuality and Tolerance of Ambiguity were used to measure affect complexity. To measure affect optimization, Positive and Negative Emotionality were scored (Gough, Bradley, & Bedeian, 1996; Helson & Klohnen, 1998), assessing Tellegen’s (1985) constructs, from the ACL. At the age 43, 52, and 61 follow-ups, the women also rated a set of “Feelings About Life” items taken from theories of adult de-
velopment. This chapter discusses how changes found in the Mills sample relate to the conceptualization of three phases in middle age.

During the transition from young adulthood (age 27) to the ascendant phase of early middle age (age 43), the Mills women typically came to occupy a peak number of social roles, as spouse, parent, and worker. Their status level in work increased, and they were anxious to reach their full potential and take advantage of opportunities (high ratings of the Feelings About Life items “Anxiety that I won’t live up to opportunities” and “Excitement, turmoil, confusion about my impulses and potential”). They gained in purposiveness and confidence (higher CPI Dominance, lower CPI Femininity/Masculinity; see Fig. 17.1). They scheduled their lives in the interests of achievement (higher CPI Achievement via Conformance, lower CPI Flexibility). They increased in affect optimization (higher Positive Emotionality and lower Negative Emotionality; see Fig. 17.2), and also became more affectively complex, as assessed by the Joffe and Naditch (1977) scales (higher Intellectuality and Tolerance of Ambiguity; see Fig. 17.3).

In the executive phase of middle age (age 52), the Mills women occupied fewer social roles than they did during the ascendant phase, because in most cases their children had left home. This did not mean that their children were no longer sources of concern (Huyck, 1989), but it did give the women more time on a day-to-day basis, which they tended to devote to their careers. Not coincidentally, they attained their highest ratings on status level in work at this age. They remained purposive and confident (high Dominance) and adjusted to their confining schedules (high Achievement via Conformance, low Flexibility), and they dropped further in emotional vulnerability (lower Femininity/Masculinity). They again increased in affect optimization (higher Positive Emotionality and lower Negative Emotionality) and attained a peak level of affect complexity (Intellectuality and Tolerance of Ambiguity). They began to experience the passing of time less in relation to the achievement of their potential and more in terms of their place in the life course (lower ratings of the items “Anxiety that I won’t live up to opportunities” and “Excitement, turmoil, confusion about my impulses and potential,” and higher ratings of the item “Looking old”).

![FIG. 17.1](image)

Change in social competence, confidence, and norm adherence. Data are from Helson and Soto (2005, p. 199). Copyright 2005 by the American Psychological Association.
In the acceptant phase of middle age (age 61), the Mills women began to relax their level of purposiveness and tension. About one half either had retired or were reducing their work hours or were preparing for retirement. Achievement strivings and the stringent organization of life decreased (lower Dominance and Achievement via Conformance, higher Flexibility). The women increased in affect optimization (higher Positive Emotionality, lower Negative Emotionality) while declining in affect complexity (lower Intellectuality and Tolerance of Ambiguity). Their consciousness of time shifted to a greater awareness of aging and death (higher ratings of the Feelings About life item “Thinking a lot about death”). In short, they prepared themselves for release from formal social roles and for old age.

The generality of these patterns of change was tested across subgroups within the Mills sample defined by level or change on various social role (e.g., parent or not,
work status) and biosocial (e.g., general health) factors. Several examples were
found of associations between these social and biosocial factors and personality
change from one specific assessment time to the next (e.g., women whose children
had not left home by age 52 did not gain as much in Intellectuality from age 43 to age
52 as other women did). There were, however, very few significant associations (no
more than would be expected by chance) between the individual difference factors
and overall change on each personality variable across young adulthood and the
three phases of middle age.

ADDITIONAL EVIDENCE FOR AND AGAINST
THE GENERALITY OF THE PHASES

The Mills study has followed the graduates of a particular women's college through a
particular period of history. Is there any evidence for the generality of the pattern of
change over middle age that was found in the Mills study, beyond its general consis-
tency with the literature?

Supportive Longitudinal Findings From an Older Cohort

Cramer (2003) described personality change in 155 men and women of the combined
Berkeley and Oakland samples studied at the Institute of Human Development (IHD)
at average ages in the mid-30s, mid-40s, and late 50s. These men and women constitute
a more representative sample than the Mills women in terms of social background, and
having been born in the early or late 1920s, they had a different cohort experience. The
women, for example, had less education, more children, and many fewer years in the la-
bor force than did the Mills women (Helson, Jones, & Kwan, 2002).

Cramer (2003) used observer Q-sort data scored on the Big Five dimensions and a
multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) design. From their mid-30s to late
50s, both men and women increased on Agreeableness and decreased on
Neuroticism (a pattern resembling the changes in Mills women on affect optimiza-
tion), and both groups increased on Openness from their mid-30s to mid-40s and
then decreased by their late 50s (a pattern resembling change in the Mills sample on
affect complexity). The women increased and then decreased on Extraversion and
Conscientiousness, as the Mills women did on Dominance and Achievement via
Conformance. On both of these scales, the men increased as the women had done
from their mid-30s to mid-40s, but they did not change significantly from their
mid-40s to late 50s, possibly because they did not consider themselves close to retire-
ment. Although one would like to have information about roles and status, these
findings are, nonetheless, strong evidence of similarity in personality change across
gender, sample, and cohort.

Cohort and Sample Differences and Their Implications

When role histories vary, one often finds differences in personality change. Women
in recent cohorts often put out strenuous career effort in young adulthood and then
have children after they have made a place for themselves in the labor force, creat-
ing a period of very high stress in their late 30s or 40s. This stress is a serious social
concern of the present time. Perhaps it is one reason that middle-aged women in the cross-sectional study of Mroczek and Kolarz (1998) scored lower on positive affect than did younger and older women, whereas the Mills women, most of whom began their families in their mid-20s, increased linearly in positive affect from young adulthood through middle age (Helson & Klohnen, 1998; Helson & Soto, 2005).

Another sample whose affect optimization did not increase from young adulthood to middle age were the male managers and foremen at AT&T studied by Howard and Bray (1988) over a 20-year period, which included institutional setbacks, extensive social change, and lowered expectations for advancement. From youth to middle age these men became “less affable with upsurges of autonomy desires accompanied by increased feelings of hostility and decreased needs for friendships or for understanding others” (Howard & Bray, 1988, p. 150). Unfortunately, there was no further follow-up of this sample.

Other studies suggest that features of life history may only temporarily accelerate or retard the development of a characteristic. Studying the Oakland and Berkeley IHD samples, Jones and Meredith (1996) found that Self-confidence increased from age 30 to age 40 in the Berkeley participants, born in the late 1920s, whereas in the Oakland participants, born in the early 1920s, it decreased somewhat from age 30 to age 40, then increased to the same level as the Berkeley sample between age 40 and age 50. The authors attributed this difference to the delayed parenting and career patterns of the Oakland sample. Most of the Oakland men served in World War II and most of the women had a more extended period of childrearing, along with less and later participation in the labor force, than did the Berkeley women.

Though these are distinctive changes related to role sequences and cohort experience, the generality of personality change should not be underestimated. It was reported earlier that, in the Mills study, whether or not a woman had children and the level of status she had obtained (among several other factors) showed very little relation to her change over middle age. The IHD women had patterns of roles and status very different from those of the Mills women, yet their personality change seems to have been similar. Miner-Rubino, Winter, and Stewart (2004) obtained retrospective questionnaire data from a sample of men and women in their 60s, both college educated and noncollege educated. Noncollege men reported the strongest concerns about aging, but there were no differences among the groups in their sense of having increased since their 20s in clarity of identity, sense of confident power, and generativity.

Why is personality change not more closely related to roles and status, to social class and ethnicity? A social variable may be related to some aspects of middle age but not to others. For example, upper-middle and working-class men were reported to have different ideas about how soon middle age began and whether it was a period of productivity or decline (Neugarten & Datan, 1974), but there are broad expectations that middle-aged people across class lines (except at the extremes of the social class continuum) should have married and started a family, and that men at least should have made some progress in an occupation (Krueger, Heckhausen, & Hundertmark, 1995).

It is important to recognize that distinct role behaviors can be functionally equivalent. People with little opportunity to gain status in work may seek it in family or community roles or relationships. Thus, an immigrant cab driver seeks status by
helping his children to go to college. Those who are not parents themselves have younger relatives and coworkers by whom they are perceived and with whom they interact in ways that change their self-concept over middle age (Karp, 1988; Lachman et al., 1994; Zucker et al., 2002). This certainly does not mean that differences in gender, social class, and lifestyle are not important, but may help to explain why there is significant uniformity across these factors in development over middle age.

**DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

There is now much evidence from many sources for normative personality change across adulthood. In some respects, change is unidirectional, but in others there are peaks or troughs during middle age. These peaks and troughs are the most direct evidence that middle age has qualitative characteristics that distinguish it from young adulthood and old age, and they also suggest the usefulness of making differentiations within middle age.

The term "phases" of middle age is used to call attention not only to systematic changes including the increase and decline in effortfulness related to multiple roles, responsibilities, and ambitions; shift in the pattern of coping styles; and shifts in time perspective between the mid-30s and mid-60s, but also to the patterning of these various characteristics in individuals at particular ages. Several portraits of middle-aged people that are prominent in the literature have contradictory features, but the recognition of phases resolves this tension by locating these differing portraits in distinct periods of middle age. Thus, it is the individual in the ascendant phase who is most likely to show turmoil and achievement-related identity conflicts and the individual in the executive phase who is most likely to show superior affect complexity and integrative skills. It is the individual in the acceptant phase who is making the transition from social centrality to a more private life.

As pointed out previously, every individual goes through middle age differently. The process of change is affected by more factors and patterns of factors than there is space here to describe. Nevertheless, the phases have sufficient generality to make them useful heuristic tools. The goal of future research is not to show that patterns of change through middle age are always the same, but to identify factors related to different ways of experiencing the phases and to the consequences of these differences in experience, and to look for differences in the phases themselves that have characterized particular cultures or may be developing in our own changing society.

**What Should Be Studied?**

One important topic is the causal network among factors that seem related to change to and through middle age. Do the social clock tasks expected of young adults (finding an occupation, finding a partner) lay a foundation for the confidence and dominance of middle age? How do different sequences of roles and role combinations affect the phases of middle age, within and across cohorts? Does having young children and a career in a person's early 40s increase stress for a few years without long-term effects, or does the expectation and experience of this pattern change that individual's adaptation more profoundly?
The late phase of middle age is an intriguing topic. As in Levinson and colleagues (1978), it is conceived of here as a transitional period, some of its features associated with the multiple changes that characterize the early 60s. For example, the increase in Flexibility shown by the Mills women from age 52 to age 61 may be temporary, because other studies show a general pattern of decrease with age into the 70s (e.g., Helson, Jones, & Kwan, 2002). The Mills women in their early 60s may have been experiencing a "honeymoon" period during which many enjoyed greater leisure or looked forward to a new lifestyle while still in good health. On the other hand, now that older people are healthier and expected to travel and do new things, perhaps flexibility will decline later in life and more slowly.

How should the decline in affect complexity combined with higher affect optimization be regarded? Is it the longer term trend labeled as "graceful degradation" (Labouvie-Vief & Márquez, 2004)? Is a lower level of complexity necessarily a loss? Think of the distinctive late-life style of creative older artists, characterized by less emphasis on centering (Arnheim, 1986) or more oceanic content when compared to younger artists (Maduro, 1974), or the Jungian idea that the last of the four personality functions can be integrated into consciousness only by a lowering of the level of consciousness as a whole (Von Franz, 1993).

How Should Middle Age Be Studied?

It seems obvious that a variety of approaches is necessary for studying middle age. Large cross-sectional studies give an invaluable breadth of coverage, but they find personality differences among age groups, not changes in personality with age. They have two serious weaknesses: They cannot separate age effects from cohort and sampling effects, and they usually do not obtain enough information about individuals to explain the differences (or lack of difference) that they report. Thus, longitudinal studies are essential. Sometimes cross-sectional samples are studied at repeated intervals, thus obtaining longitudinal data. However, they usually examine change over short periods of time, and they may not have sufficient data to explain what they find, or even to evaluate attrition biases. These problems are particularly serious in studies of middle age, where contextual factors are thought to be maximally influential (Mroczek, 2004).

Longitudinal studies of particular birth cohorts show how a sample of individuals change over a particular time period. They usually have enough information to provide some causal texture, but they are imprisoned within their particular historical and sample context. Sometimes longitudinal researchers compare or combine data across studies and show whether relationships hold across them, or whether they differ in hypothesized ways (e.g., Charles, Reynolds, & Gatz, 2001; Helson, Jones, & Kwan, 2002; Helson, Stewart, & Ostrove, 1995; Jones & Meredith, 1996). Although this approach is important and should be encouraged, it tends to be limited in that measures devised for one study may be less appropriate or not available in another. This necessarily narrows the focus and hypotheses. For this reason, it is important that longitudinal studies be encouraged to tell their unique stories, without having to take on the burden of establishing generality in every investigation. Between the extremes of cross-sample studies and uniqueness, however, intermediary
strategies are useful, such as taking hypotheses from the literature and applying them to a particular body of longitudinal data.

Phases are important in providing a sense of the life narrative, a sense that one part of life leads to the next. Much of what people work and strive for is won or lost in middle age. If middle age is considered a patternless period of 30 years, just because no one pattern is universal, psychologists take meaning away from the life story.

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