

Personality type and the male experience of career in midlife

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Rob Brandenburg is the recipient of an AACC Research Grant awarded at the AACC's April 2006 Conference. He has recently completed his doctoral thesis on the influence of personality type on the male experience of midlife within the Doctor of Counselling program at the University of South Australia. Dr Kurt Lushington is Rob's supervisor in his research. This article focuses on career issues faced by men at the midpoint of their lives and is an edited version of the literature review.

Lifespan developmental theory suggests that midlife is an important stage where men typically re-evaluate major areas of their life including career/work. Midlife can be looked at from several perspectives including Jung's theory of personality type which has since been interpreted and extended by Katherine Briggs and Isabel Myers to form the basis of the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory®. This literature review examines the influence of Jungian/Myers-Briggs personality type on the male midlife experience of career and work. It can be concluded that personality type does impact on the male midlife experience and thus has implications for career practitioners counselling men in midlife.

Jung, Myers and Briggs

Jung (1960) was one of the earlier social scientists to describe a midlife transition but despite his many ideas on adult development, he did not attract many disciples among other developmental theorists. Staude (1981), in his book *The Adult Development of C.G. Jung* contends that this was probably because Jung's basic world view and philosophical assumptions differed radically from those of mainstream psychology. An example of an alternative approach to the traditional developmental psychology view of lifespan development is evident in the Jungian use of metaphor and archetypal terms to describe the inner journey of self-discovery. One metaphor sometimes used is that of the "heroic journey" – the "calling" to adventure, an acceptance of the call, the struggle to overcome major ordeals and the successful

completion of the journey before finally returning “home” to a full and rewarding life. Vickers-Willis (2004), for example, uses the heroic journey metaphor in her account of men in search of their true self in midlife. The archetypal hero is seen by Pearson (1991) as being a selfless, proactive and courageous seeker of the authentic self. Thus midlife can be seen as a call to undertake an heroic inner journey in search of self-awareness and development of the psyche.

Jungian theory proposes that midlife is a crucial period of adult development and that after their forties adults begin to discover their inner selves and try to unify their former hopes and dreams with the actuality of their lives (Freiberg 1992). Jung described the period of life after the transition into midlife as a period of individuation that involves the search for wholeness and completion.

Jung (1933) introduced the concept of psychological types in response to his view that apparently random human behaviour actually follows clear and predictable patterns based on a number of core personality characteristics or preferences. Myers and Briggs subsequently interpreted and further extended Jung’s theory of psychological types into the Myers-Brigg Type Indicator[®] (MBTI) to assess and measure personality types. While postulating that midlife is a time to develop previously underdeveloped preferences, neither Jungian nor MBTI theorists have empirically addressed the influence of personality on the male experience of midlife.

The MBTI[®] attempts to describe individual’s personality in terms of four dichotomous indices: Extraversion (E) - Introversion (I); Sensing (S) - Intuition (N); Thinking (T) - Feeling (F); Judgement (J) - Perception (P). The four indices are combined to produce sixteen composite types (eg. ESTJ, INFP etc.). According to MBTI theory, two of the four dichotomous dimensions are considered to be important for mental functioning. These are Sensing (S) versus Intuition (N) and Thinking (T) versus Feeling (F). While the preferences E-I and J-P, known as “attitudes”, are an important facet of MBTI theory, for the purpose of this review, the focus will be on the four mental functions. -ST, NT, SF and NF.

As we have seen, Jungian/MBTI personality theory focuses on two aspects of information processing. Confusingly, Jung termed these “Perception” and “Judgement” (which are used quite differently by Myers-Briggs who have established it as a separate scale). Perception is the process of gathering information, either by way of the senses or through intuition. Sensing (S) refers to the perception of information that is observable by way of the five senses - those with an S preference tend to place an emphasis on concrete data, immediate experiences and practicality. Intuition (N) refers to perception of information as ideas and concepts - those with an N preference tend to focus on connections, possibilities, patterns and meaning (McGuinness 2004; Myers et al 1998). Judgement refers to how information is processed to come to conclusions and make decisions about what has been perceived. The thinking (T) function uses logic and analysis to make decisions and the Feeling (F) function weighs the relative values of the issues. Those with a T preference tend to base decisions on objectivity and laws/principles while those with an F preference tend to be more subjective and make decisions by considering what is the most important to people (McGuinness 2004, Myers et al 1998).

There is a stereotyped image of masculine identity in western culture that men are usually practical, logical and non-emotive (Connell 1995; Goldberg 1976; Levant and Sherman 1997; Moore and Gillette 1990; Townsend 1994; Zunker 1998). Indeed, a majority of males have a preference for ST and so conform to this paradigm (Myers et al 1994). Therefore it is no surprise that ST preferences align with traditional notions of masculinity. In contrast to STs, other types are less represented. This is particularly so for NF males who are generally less concerned with collecting factual data and making logical and objective decisions than STs. NF males are at variance from cultural norms and one would expect at variance from traditional notions of masculinity.

Pedersen (1993), in his influential book on masculine personality (MBTI) types, postulates that men with NF preferences may experience considerable social pressure when it comes to fully expressing their typological makeup. NFs are truly a minority among men. This under representation makes them feel at odds with other men

because there are so few of them and also because it is a difficult type for a man to be - NFs are the most unlike stereotypical males (p 147). Pedersen argues that the significant under-representation in the general population of males with the “feminine” NF personal qualities may contribute to them feeling marginalised and under pressure to conform. Pederson’s notion is largely based on anecdotal information and these assumptions need to be tested.

Based on Pederson’s assumptions we could predict that the experience of career in midlife for males with an NF preference will differ from that of men with an ST preference. For example, ST males who were in business and technically focused jobs in early adulthood may express a strong desire in midlife to undergo a major career change as they embrace their previously repressed NF preferences and contemplate working in fields more concerned with helping others - something they possibly previously deemed as inappropriate because of community/peer expectations. According to Myers et al 1994, NFs are more likely to work in relationship-focused roles and STs in more task-based work roles. Likewise, NF males who were previously in more people and helping focused roles may express a strong desire in midlife to pursue a career that aligns more with their now developing ST functions and may become more task or business focused. For ST males, it may be that midlife manifests a strong desire to move from more practical jobs that require logical thinking into roles that are more people and ideas focused, thereby reflecting a desire to honour their developing NF functions.

Pedersen (1993), while not specifically addressing midlife, has proposed a connection between MBTI preferences and the lived experiences of males. Pedersen makes a persuasive case that the significant under-representation in the general population of males with the “feminine” personal qualities of intuitive - feeling (NF) may contribute to them feeling marginalised and under pressure to conform. If personality was to play a role in the male experience in midlife, then comparing ST and NF groups of males should highlight it. Based on Pederson’s notions it could be reasonably hypothesised that the experience of midlife for males with a preference for NF may differ from that of men with the highly contrasting preference for sensing - thinking

(ST).

The Male Experience of Career/Work in Midlife

Three major career development theorists, Super, Havighurst and Levinson, have postulated that the experiences adults have in the world of work have a major influence on psychological development in midlife.

Super (1971) proposes a three stage model of adult career development that consists of an “establishment” phase (age 25 to 44), a “maintenance” phase (age 45 to 60) and a final phase (beyond 60 years) of career decline that is characterised by a slowing of work activities and eventual retirement. Super postulates that at about the age of 45 there is a motivational shift regarding work and the single-minded push for achievement and personal advancement that characterises early adulthood is replaced by a desire to consolidate earlier advances. In contrast to the earlier establishment phase of career, self-concept is no longer shaped by surpassing previous feats. According to Super, there is a sense of complacency for some and for others, their self-concept is one of failure. Eventually all workers move into a “decline” phase of the lifecycle where work activities slow down before having to adjust to retirement. Havighurst (1964) proposes three stages of adult career development that are based on integrating Erikson’s theory of lifespan psychological development with Super’s three stages of establishment, maintenance and decline. The first phase (25 to 39 years) focuses on Super’s notion of career establishment and Erikson’s concept of identity crisis that involves an inward struggle regarding self-definition. The second phase (age 40 to 69) is characterised by a shift in motivation from personal ambitions to a desire to benefit society as whole and includes developmental tasks such as becoming more socially aware and more altruistic and mentoring younger workers. The mentor role in particular provides an opportunity to resolve Erikson’s generativity versus stagnation conflict. The final phase (age 70 and over) focuses on the search for meaning now the career life cycle has been completed and the person comes to term with their own mortality.

Levinson (1978), as previously discussed, devised a theory of lifespan development

that subdivides adulthood into nine stages or eras. His broad theory also relates to career development. Levinson contends that periods of career stability are inevitably followed by periods of transition during which previous life goals and activities are questioned and gradually modified. Focusing specifically on male midlife transition (age 40 to 45 years), Levinson postulates that the focus shifts from self-advancement to expressing qualities in their personality that were previously neglected. As with Erikson's model, successful development entails assisting younger workers and gaining a more balanced perspective of one's career.

The theories of Super, Havighurst and Levinson are similar in two important ways (Peterson 2004). First, each postulates an initial phase of adjusting to the chosen career and then single-mindedly following it. Secondly, all three major theories agree in postulating that the vocational life cycle is apt to change radically around the age of 45 when a mid-career stock-take occurs that may cause psychological upheaval. During this transitional phase, self-analysis and self-doubt are a precursor to a redirection of work-related priorities and efforts.

There is empirical evidence to support the view that a shift in career direction and vocational self-concept normally occurs in midlife. Murphy and Burck (1976), after studying the results of seven separate studies on career attitudes of men aged between 35 and 45 years, contend that there is a drop in self-esteem around the age of 40 that is accompanied by intense self-doubt and questioning of values, priorities and occupational and personal identities. Murphy and Burck report that many of the men seemed to long for a career change but feared the risks involved. However, by the age of 45 or 50, all the men seemed to have emerged from their uncertainty with a new set of values, a diminished personal investment in their job and restored self-esteem. It has been hypothesised that job satisfaction increases over the career lifespan (Peterson 2004). To test this notion, O'Brien and Dowling (1981) interviewed 1,383 Australian workers by door-knocking every 200th household in metropolitan Adelaide. The ages of the interviewees ranged from 15 to over 60, and all major occupational areas were represented in proportions matching the whole Australian working population. O'Brien and Dowling found that the oldest workers had the

greatest job satisfaction and suggested this could be due to a process of becoming more “mellow” with age. Jepsen and Choudhuri (2001), having identified the career patterns of 170 rural high school graduates over 25 years, conclude that there is a link between lower levels of career/job satisfaction in midlife and occupational stability (in terms of the number of times a person changes occupations). These findings support adherents of lifespan developmental theories who generally advocate the importance of “the continual adaptive process of matching choices and jobs” (Jepsen & Sheu 2003, p 177).

O’Connor (1995) contends that there is considerable social pressure on men to fulfil the role of breadwinner and that in midlife they may seriously begin to question earlier career choices. This is especially true for males for whom paid work plays a significant part in their self- identity (Colling 1992). O’Connor (1995) found that men in midlife may begin to experience fantasies or dreams about working in completely different fields such as farming, writing and helping or even “dropping out” all together. From a counselling perspective, such fantasies should not be dismissed but acknowledged as an attempt to build new dreams and goals to replace those developed many years before.

The MBTI theorises that an individual’s function pairing (ST, SF, NF and NT) is predictive of job selection (Hammer 1993; Myers et al 1998). Pairings that are diametrically opposed are NF and ST. It could be hypothesised that if personality preferences were an influence on the male experience of work/career in midlife it would be found in comparing these pairings. Myers et al (1998) report US data (N=3,009) that supports the notion that the function pairs have the most impact on job selection. For example, work deemed as more socially acceptable for males are ST type roles which are usually more task and detail orientated. “STs are usually found in environments where they can focus on pragmatic ways to use details, such as in business.” (Myers et al 1998, 293). NF jobs are usually more concerned with the big picture and are often focused on helping others. NF work is generally more relationship based whereas ST work is usually more task based.

Myers et al (1998) postulate that more career satisfaction will occur when there is congruence between an individual's personality type and the task demands of the occupation or work environment. A mismatch between type and occupation has important implications for careers counsellors and HR practitioners. Myers and McCaulley (1985) contend the client usually reports feeling tired and inadequate. According to [Myers-Briggs] type theory, the mismatch occurs because it is more tiring to use less-preferred processes. A mismatch also causes discouragement, because despite the greater expenditure of effort, the work product is less likely to show the quality of products that would be developed if the preferred process were utilised. Tasks that call on preferred and developed processes require less effort for better performance, and give more satisfaction. (p 78)

Hammer (1996), in his synopsis of more than a dozen studies across a range of occupations on Myers-Briggs type preferences and career satisfaction, contends that a lack of congruence between individual type and the task demands (or values) of the organisation has implications regarding employee retention. Those types who are less frequent or underrepresented in an occupation tend to be less satisfied or have higher intention to leave the occupation than do those types who are more frequent or whose fit with the occupation is judged to be better. (pp 40-41)

Career practitioners are generally of the view that work values are important in making career decisions and that highly prioritised values are chosen when they are available (Brown 1996). Hammer (1996) summarised five studies relating personality type to values or beliefs and concluded that values generally align with type preferences in ways that are to be expected - for example, S types often desire security and stability while N types often desire creativity. Garden (1997) examined the career paths of 341 computer software professionals and found that, despite different type preferences, all valued money, recognition and autonomy, suggesting that similarities within the profession, not type preferences, accounted for the difference. However, when Garden examined four possible career paths (managerial, technical, challenging project, own company), she identified statistically significant type differences – for example, the managerial path was chosen most often by ESTJ,

ENFJ, ISTJ and the technical path was chosen most often by INTJ. Myers et al, based on career related data collected in the National Sample (N=3,009) conclude that, as expected according to MBTI theory, values are influenced by differences in T-F preferences, with Feeling types “identifying more values of importance to them than Thinking types” (p 324).

Job Loss/Unemployment

Winefield et al (2002) postulate that job loss/unemployment in middle or later life is far more damaging than in early adulthood because of the much greater impact it has on lifestyle, finances, and health. Similarly, earlier research by Warr (1987) in England concludes that unemployed middle-aged men experience the greatest stress as a result of job loss and proposes that the degree of stress will vary according to the extent purposeful activities are undertaken. Winefield (1995) indicates further possible factors may influence psychological reactions to job loss and unemployment such as financial security, marital status and family responsibilities and further proposes that personality factors such as high initial self-esteem (or low neuroticism) and extroversion may have a moderating influence on the level of psychological distress associated with job loss.

Hill (1977) views the psychological effects of job loss/unemployment as conceptually and experientially similar to the bereavement/grief process. Thus, according to Hill, one would expect to find such initial reactions as denial, anger, grief and depression and gradual shift towards some sense of acceptance and recovery from loss. A similar theme is pursued in a landmark book on life and career transitions by Bridges (1980) and is an approach commonly used by career counsellors/consultancies in the outplacement industry. For example, outplacement specialists Morin & Cabrera (1991) describe a range of anticipated psychological responses including anger, hurt, shame, fear, grief, sadness and depression.

A recent US study by Brewington et al (2004) of 30 unemployed people who had recently experienced involuntary job loss supports the notion that grief can be expected in these circumstances and may be influenced by a range of factors.

Brewington compared the responses for the Grief Experience Inventory, which included nine subscales measuring such items as despair, anger, hostility, guilt, social isolation and loss of control, with those provided by a similar group of bereaved individuals and found, in general, that the type of grief in both groups was similar in magnitude. Brewington et al concluded from their data analysis that counsellors (and Outplacement/HR practitioners) should be especially alert for signs of grief among workers who have been unemployed the longest, who have dependents, and did not receive adequate notice that the job was ending... It is essential for career counsellors to identify clients who are grieving and to be prepared to work with a range of grief responses (p 81).

The lifespan developmental model is one way of viewing the possible impact of job loss/unemployment. The developmental approach recognises that job loss/unemployment affects people of all ages and that responses will vary at different stages of the life cycle (Feather 1990). Warr (1987), for example, compares the impact of unemployment on middle aged men and teens and contends that the negative psychological impact of unemployment is especially evident in midlife males if they have families to support. Estes & Wilensky (1978) postulate that male job loss in midlife usually results in a dramatic reduction in income, especially for those on high salaries, because financial demands are likely to be greater in midlife with families to support and mortgages to repay. Feather (1990) is of the view that midlife men may also lose their valued role as provider for the family and, as a result, their unemployment generates further ambiguity and uncertainty about the future.

As stated previously, Levinson (1978) postulates that the psychological impact of job loss may be compounded for midlife men because they are typically at that stage of the life cycle that is often accompanied by questioning of past career achievements, the formation of new career dreams and aspirations for the second half of life. Also, Erikson's theory of lifespan development views midlife as a time to resolve the conflict between generativity and stagnation/self-absorption which is manifested at the career level as well as at the family level. The implication in terms of Erikson's model is that job loss/unemployment may result in self-absorption (and hence

stagnation) due to financial imperatives at the expense of ongoing psychological development that comes from generativity (Feather 1997).

What is not clear is how different personality types navigate job loss/unemployment. MBTI theory regarding NF and STs would postulate that, due to their F preference, NFs may display greater emotionality due to their tendency to personalise such events as job loss compared with the more objective and logical STs (Myers et al 1998).

Summary

Midlife is a time of reflection and change for men. It is often in the areas of career/work and marital relationships that change is most profoundly experienced. For example, career priorities may change for midlife men as they seek greater work/life balance. According to Jung, midlife is a stage of the life cycle where the innate human desire for wholeness or individuation is apparent.

What remains unclear is the extent to which personality type may moderate the midlife experience of career/work in men. It would be of value to identify personality types, for example by using MBTI preferences, and examine the area of career/work. This has implications for career counsellors and human resources practitioners.” In this context, research that involved interviewing midlife men and comparing their experiences according to personality type would be valuable. It would be expected that there would be differences. Specifically, it would be anticipated that certain personality types (eg NF and ST) would have considerably different experiences. The outcome of such an inquiry would allow career practitioners to provide appropriate support and suitable interventions.

It is anticipated that the provision of client personality testing will provide career practitioners with enhanced knowledge and awareness of individual personality preferences and motivators when counselling midlife clients. Furthermore, individual personality profiling will help employers ensure their organisation provides meaningful and relevant career development plans and support for midlife employees.

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