

Follow that dream

A study of men in midlife



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The male experience of midlife is influenced by personality type

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While completing a Doctor of Counselling program, I investigated the influence of personality type on the male experience of midlife. My study examined the impact of midlife on career, and on relationships with self and others.

I recruited two contrasting groups of men, with ST and NF preferences, identifying participants through professional networks until I had 10 for each group. All of the participants were familiar with the MBTI and aware of their own type preferences.

The two groups were broadly similar in age (40 to 55), partnership status and years in employment, but there were differences in income and education. STs generally had higher incomes, while NFs had higher levels of education and were more likely to be self-employed.

Their occupations generally conformed to expectations. 90% of the STs described their occupations as business, management or sales, compared to just 30% of the NFs. By contrast, 60% of the NFs, but none of the STs, identified their occupations as teaching, human resources or consulting.

I observed the following differences in the personality types:

- More NFs than STs reported that their young adult career dream eventuated. However, only a minority of the NFs reported that achieving their career dream was a positive experience.
- NF men emphasised the importance of self-determination and autonomy in their careers, and a strong desire to work in environments aligned with their personal values. ST career dreams were more pragmatic and concerned identifying work opportunities that were more people-focused.
- While many STs desired a change from business and sales to human services, the NFs expressed no similar wish to change from the human services field in which they predominantly worked.
- NFs personalised job loss, reporting a strong sense of disillusionment and anger at what they perceived as personal rejection. STs were more objective and accommodating of job loss.
- NFs ranked coaching and mentoring others and experiencing new challenges as higher priorities than did STs. And what constitutes a new challenge was perceived differently by the two groups. The NF need related to the tendency to get bored easily and their subsequent desire to change jobs, whereas the STs indicated that new challenges could be readily achieved in their current roles.
- Midlife crises affected only a minority of men, and there were notable differences between the two groups in the nature of the crises. ST men typically reported existential concerns and lack of meaning in their lives, whereas relationship issues were more likely to underlie NF reports of crisis.
- ST men emphasised a more traditional view of masculinity, with the majority stressing their roles as family breadwinners. By contrast, NF men reported self-development and increased self-awareness as integral to their self- and masculine identity.
- NF men reported increased intimacy or connectedness with their partner by learning to reframe the relationship to one of friendship. For STs, the capacities of listening and empathy were instrumental in improving intimacy.

Regardless of type, a majority of the men reported a greater sense of **life mastery** in midlife, and felt empowered by the variety of lifestyle options they now had. Many also identified **career mastery** as a key factor, but the two groups reported career mastery in different ways:

For STs, career mastery was externally focused, dependent on attaining a certain role within their organisation. Consistent with their type profile, ST men were averse to change and risks, and preferred to seek career mastery in their current work settings.

For NFs, career mastery referred to finding an ideal career congruent with their inner selves. This quest for the ideal career could be seen to underpin the proactive manner in which they had pursued their career dreams and aspirations.

Both groups indicated that **generativity** was important in their career mastery, expressing a desire to pass on their acquired knowledge and wisdom to others in the workplace. For NF men this manifested as a wish to coach or mentor others in the workplace; for ST men it was expressed as the desire to use their current knowledge for the benefit of other employees and the organisation.

Contrary to expectations, midlife was not characterised by **midlife crisis**: only six men (30%) reported experiencing a crisis in their transition between the ages of 35 and 45. Moreover, the experience was different for the two groups. The ST midlife crisis was existential, focused on the need to find a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. By contrast, the midlife crisis for NFs was more to do with relationship difficulties and the need to change their vision of their ideal relationship.

Both types learned and grew from their crises. For ST men, this involved overcoming their lack of an internal reference point by developing an effective relationship with their inner self. For NF men, it required learning to be less idealistic and develop a more realistic view of relationship, as demonstrated by the creation of a new sense of friendship with their partner.

Regardless of the difficulty, those who had experienced midlife crisis reported that in hindsight the experience had been positive.

The angst, depression and soul-searching that typically accompanied their crises helped ST men honour and express their feelings more and find greater meaning in their lives. And for NF men, it provided an opportunity to refocus their priorities, including maintaining a healthy relationship with their inner self and significant others.

There is extensive literature highlighting the importance men attach to attaining their **career dreams** or aspirations. In my study this was highlighted in the reporting of career mastery and life mastery. The two groups differed in the nature of their career dreams as young men, and in their proactivity in trying to implement them. A larger number of NFs reported that their young adult career dreams had eventuated; however, only a small proportion reported that to be a positive experience. Paradoxically, STs, who had a smaller proportion of career dreams eventuate, indicated a higher level of satisfaction and career mastery.

In midlife, men assess and re-evaluate their career dreams. In my study, the midlife dreams for both groups entailed a desire to work in the human services field: a change in the nature of career dreams for ST men, but less so for NF men.

The two groups differed, however, in the *nature* of their midlife career dream. For NFs it involved remaining in the human services field, but in a capacity providing greater opportunity for self-determination and autonomy. For STs, it meant a shift from business and sales-related work into roles with more of a human service focus. This ST desire for a shift in occupation reflects their midlife desire for regeneration and wanting to make a difference.

The career direction of midlife men has a profound influence on their **self/masculine identity** (Lee and Owens 2002; Colling 1992). This is highlighted not when they are in work, but when they experience job loss or unemployment.

In my study, all of the midlife men who had experienced job loss reported that they had become aware of the importance of work to their self/masculine identity and psychological wellbeing. Nevertheless, the two groups differed in their responses to the



Contrary to expectations, midlife crises were not a characteristic of midlife

impact of job loss on their self/masculine identity. For NF men, career was so much of their self-identification that they over-identified with their work. Losing a job did not have the same effect on ST men, as they did not take it personally.

The two groups' responses to careers and relationship with self/others in midlife can inform the practice of counsellors and HR professionals. NF men need assistance to establish career goals specific enough to allow an informed choice among alternatives, and to then collect information and facts that objectively inform them about the day-to-day tasks required in that role (Hammer 1993).

In contrast to the NFs' need for help with a career 'reality check', STs benefit from assistance in brainstorming and exploring entirely new career options and setting long-term career goals. ST men also need help in looking beyond the 'logical' to identify roles consistent with their inner core values (Hammer 1993). Myers and McCaulley (1985) and Hammer (1996) report that congruence between personality type and work demands results in greater career satisfaction and employee retention.

Despite these differences, there were similarities between the two groups.

First, consistent with Jung's view (1960) of midlife as a time of re-evaluation, STs and NFs both reported greater work-life balance as a major priority.

Second, Jung's notion of individuation and growth in midlife was also evident—both types reported a greater sense of life and career mastery and personal wisdom.

Third, demonstrating Erikson's notion of midlife generativity (1950), both the NF and ST groups expressed an interest in helping and supporting others, both in the workplace and in the broader community.

Fourth, transition into midlife was a relatively smooth process for both types, not the time of crisis often depicted in midlife literature (eg Jacques 1965; Levinson 1978).

Fifth, as proposed by Levinson (1978), there was evidence of the participants seeking to develop a more meaningful Dream, especially in terms of career.

The findings of this study are consistent with Levinson and the Jungian / MBTI notion that midlife is a time of psychological change for men, particularly in regard to career and work.

There is no support for the view that men are less career-motivated in midlife. This study supports Levinson's belief that men see their career in a broader context in midlife as they look to attain greater balance in their lives. It is also consistent with the Jungian concept that men look to individuate in midlife and make more conscious choices, especially in regard to attaining greater work-life balance.

Broadly, both groups made comments consistent with Erikson's notion of the desire for generativity in midlife. This meta-need was evident in both groups, although the actual path was expressed differently for the two personality types.

Of note is that transition into midlife is not typically experienced as a crisis (as postulated by Jacques and Levinson and so often depicted in the mass media); and for those who experience crisis, structural issues such as divorce and job loss are often the instigators.

These findings suggest that people who are counselling or working with midlife ST men should be aware of their relative discomfort with change. In identifying more fulfilling career opportunities, for example, it may be beneficial to help STs identify jobs within their current or similar organisation. By contrast, NFs would be more receptive to investigating a move to another organisation, as well as the possibility of self-employment.

For ST men experiencing midlife crisis, it would be beneficial to focus on existential-related issues in order to help them find a greater sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. By contrast, NF men would profit from exploring the degree of intimacy or connectedness experienced in their personal relationships, including a specific emphasis on the nature of the relationship with their spouse or partner.

In midlife, men review and re-evaluate their relationships, and greater emotional warmth and tenderness may be evident (Vickers-

These findings confirm that midlife is a time of psychological change

Willis 2004). In my study, most of the men reported increased intimacy with their partners in midlife.

In midlife men also look for a deeper connection with their children and friends. A majority in both groups reported increased intimacy with their children, and half of the men in each group reported greater intimacy with friends. While type differences were evident in marital relationships, no differences were identified between STs and NFs in their midlife relationships with children and friends.

An understanding of type differences is of benefit in counselling midlife couples, as it provides further insight into relationship dynamics, areas of misunderstanding, and the partners' communication and intimacy needs.

This study also highlights how counsellors and HR practitioners can use personality assessment with midlife clients in terms of work and career. With the exit from the labour market of increasing numbers of 'baby boomers', proactive career development strategies that allow for type differences will be important in retaining and developing midlife employees.

An understanding of the impact of type on midlife will also be of benefit in coaching and mentoring, and in providing appropriate employee assistance program. This study also highlights the importance of issues and concerns related to generativity and individuation for midlife men, regardless of their personality types.

My study had some limitations. Firstly, the number of participants was small, but nonetheless broadly representative of the community in terms of income, education, occupations and family types.

Secondly, the boundaries of 'midlife' are not well defined, and various age ranges have been proposed. This study identified no clear age effect in the quality and nature of the responses.

A third limitation is that only two MBTI subgroups, NFs and STs, were compared. In future it may be instructive to examine other function-pairs, whole types, and the sequence of the four functions.

Lastly, the identified type differences may be partly attributable to differences in the gathering and processing of information. (For example, one ST possibly interpreted a question about spouse intimacy literally, as about sexual activity.) Further probing may have indicated more commonalities between the types than the study indicated.

My study is the first to explore the influence of type on the male experience of midlife using Myers-Briggs typology. Many of the assumptions about type in the literature are anecdotal. This qualitative study confirms what has been previously reported but not systematically analysed. Although it may need to be replicated in larger numbers and with different type groups, it demonstrates the utility of exploring type as a factor in men's midlife experience.

This study confirms that there are many common features in the male experience of midlife—but there are distinct differences in how men walk that path, which can be partly explained by personality type. ❖

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There are distinct type differences in how men walk the midlife path