

College-Educated Women's Personality Development in Adulthood: Perceptions and Age Differences

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Adulthood encompasses a large time span and includes a series of psychosocial challenges (E. H. Erikson, 1950). Five aspects of personality (identity certainty, confident power, concern with aging, generativity, and personal distress) were assessed in a cross-sectional study of college-educated women who at the time of data collection were young adults (age: $M = 26$ years), middle-aged adults (age: $M = 46$ years), or older adults (age: $M = 66$ years). Respondents rated each personality domain for how true it was of them at the time, and they then rated the other 2 ages either retrospectively or prospectively. Results are discussed with attention to the ways in which women's adult development may have been shaped by experiences particular to both gender and birth cohort, and to how these women fit with E. H. Erikson's theory of adult development.

The developmental period of adulthood covers a large time span, from age 18 or 21 to death. A variety of strategies for dividing this long period into shorter age-based periods have been recommended. For example, Erikson's (1950) theory of psychosocial development includes distinctive stages defined by personality developmental tasks; for example, young adulthood (the 20s) is characterized as a time of concern with identity and intimacy issues, whereas middle age (the 40s) is characterized as a time of concern with generativity. Other theorists (e.g., Neugarten, 1968) have emphasized the notion of "executive personality" in middle age, or a confident sense of command. Older adulthood in Erikson's theory is characterized as a time of personality integration in which the key accomplishment is a sense of integrity. Recent theorists have noted that these issues (identity, intimacy, generativity, and integrity) preoccupy adults to varying degrees at all ages, although they may be particularly intense during specific periods and may take different forms at different adult ages (e.g., Kroger, 2000a, 2000b; Kroger & Haslett, 1991; McAdams, de St. Aubin, & Logan, 1993; Stewart & Vandewater, 1998). In addition, increased average life spans have challenged both aging adults and developmental theorists to articulate new age boundaries for these stages, and to explain when the process of integration resulting in integrity might be expected to occur and when it may be reflected in an early stage of more inchoate "concern about" aging.

Stewart, Ostrove, and Helson (2001) found that four aspects of personality originally theorized as central to young adulthood (identity certainty), middle age (generativity and confident power), and older age (concern with aging) were all perceived to be more salient for women in later middle age than in early middle age (the early 50s vs. the 30s and 40s), implying that there was growth on all of these dimensions during a 20-year period within middle age (30s to 50s). Other research (e.g., Jones & Meredith, 2000; Roberts, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2001; Roberts, Helson, & Klohnen, 2002) has demonstrated that aspects of personality develop over longer periods of adulthood. In our study we used cross-sectional data from college-educated women to consider the possibility that adult development may be better conceived as composed of elements that have different developmental trajectories, rather than as a series of relatively bounded stages.

There are many ways to study personality development, and each design has different advantages and disadvantages. Some researchers have gathered data from a well-defined sample over a long period of time (e.g., R. Helson's study of Mills graduates, A. Stewart's of Radcliffe graduates, and S. Tangri's of University of Michigan graduates, which are all described in Hulbert & Schuster, 1993). To ensure that findings are generalizable beyond a single sample, and to begin to disentangle age from cohort effects, it is especially valuable to use longitudinal data over the course of adulthood from multiple birth cohorts (see, e.g., Duncan & Agronick, 1995; Elder, 1974; Helson, Stewart, & Ostrove, 1995). In fact, though, only a small number of longitudinal studies that follow individuals over the course of adulthood exist, and these data sets take a long time to yield evidence for all ages. A second approach is to use cross-sectional data drawn from individuals who are in different life stages at a given time (e.g., McAdams et al., 1993). Although this method is much quicker, birth cohort is confounded with age, and it is impossible to examine within-

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person change. Finally, it is possible—as in this study—to use data from a single time point, with a combination of retrospective and prospective views of other life stages (e.g., Kroger & Haslett, 1991; Ryff & Heincke, 1983). Some of the literature on subjective personality change that involves retrospective and prospective evaluations of personality (e.g., Ryff, 1991; Ryff & Heincke, 1983; Ryff & Migdal, 1984) has demonstrated that personality is perceived to change in ways that are consistent with developmental personality theories such as Erikson's (1950; people expect to be most generative during midlife). Moreover, this literature also shows that other aspects of personality that are expected to be stable in adulthood (e.g., impulsivity) indeed are not perceived to change. We, in turn, combined in our study cross-sectional data from three cohorts of women (currently in their 20s, 40s, and 60s) with their retrospective and prospective views.

Five Domains of Women's Personality Development

In this article, we examine five domains of personality, and consider their potentially different developmental trajectories in adulthood. One domain (personal distress) is generally considered in the research literature to be equally important in adulthood at all ages, although its developmental course has not been examined often. Three domains (identity certainty, generativity, and confident power) were predicted to be tied to particular life stages, and thus have developmental trajectories that rise and fall with particular periods, defining relatively discrete stages. Finally, one domain (concern with aging) was expected to continue to gradually increase over the life course. We also review the theoretical background for each of these domains in terms of the developmental stages with which they have been most associated.

According to Erikson (1950), the main psychosocial task of adolescence is identity development. The job of the adolescent is to sort through previous identifications in childhood, including those adopted unthinkingly from authority figures, and integrate them into a coherent whole. This should result in a strong sense of self that includes commitment to a particular occupation, political ideology, and religious perspective, and lays the groundwork for establishing intimate relationships. Erikson suggested that identity certainty might come later for women than for men, in the context of their intimate relationships. Indeed, Kroger and Haslett (1991) found that women were likely to develop achieved identities in interpersonal domains more quickly than in vocational domains. Arnett (2000a) argued that the period of identity solidification has recently extended well into the 20s for both men and women, and Kroger (2000a, 2000b) suggested that there is a wide scope for identity development into middle and later adulthood. In a combined sample of men and women, Whitbourne, Zuschlag, Elliot, and Waterman (1992) found that identity scores increased throughout the 20s, declining only after age 31. Thus, it seems possible that although identity may first emerge in late adolescence, a sense of identity certainty might actually increase, especially for women, over the course of adulthood. Stewart et al. (2001) found, in fact, that identity certainty increased, or was perceived to increase, for women over the course of midlife. For that reason, we predicted, contrary to a more stage-based model, that identity certainty would be expected or recalled to increase from the 20s to the 40s to the 60s for all three cohorts in our study.

Though we expected identity certainty to develop in women beyond young adulthood, we did anticipate that young adulthood has some particular stage-related features. Although some longitudinal studies have shown that psychological distress declines during the college years (e.g., Roberts et al., 2001; Sher, Wood, & Gotham, 1996), young adulthood has nonetheless been characterized in the recent literature as a period of unusually high levels of personal distress for many individuals (e.g., Twenge, 2000). Jones and Meredith (2000) found that for two cohorts of men and women, psychological health increased across adulthood from age 30 to age 60.

A number of developmentalists have pointed to the increasing length of time between childhood and commitment to adult roles, as years of education, age at marriage, and age at childbirth continue to increase in developed nations (Arnett 2000a, 2000b; Ronka & Pulkkinen, 1995). Arnett has labeled the span between 18 and 25 as "emerging adulthood," a period that is differentiated from both adolescence and young adulthood. There is evidence that this period is characterized not only as one of identity development, but also of distress. This may, in part, be a cohort-related phenomenon, because the early 20s have become more and more a time of moratorium in recent decades (Arnett, 2000a). There is also greater financial strain on young people today. Ortnor (1998) and Eskilson and Wiley (1999) suggested that young adults are appropriately pessimistic about their financial futures because jobs offered to college graduates have been declining and they have little hope of matching their parents' financial status. Ronka and Pulkkinen (1995) suggested that the recent trend of the transition to adulthood becoming more extended, individualized, and discontinuous makes heavy demands on individuals' abilities to cope.

There is evidence, however, that older cohorts also suffered widespread distress as young adults. In one study that examined women who graduated from college in the late 1950s, Pals (1999) concluded that the 20s were a turbulent time in which women were attempting to organize their lives and establish themselves in adult roles. Furthermore, young adulthood was found to be the time of greatest emotional difficulty in a U.S. national sample studied more than 30 years ago (Veroff & Feld, 1970). Thus, we predicted that feelings of personal distress would be high for women currently in their 20s, and that these women would anticipate a decrease in these feelings over the life span as adult roles become more stable. It remains to be seen whether this contemporary cohort of young adults is significantly higher on personal distress than previous cohorts recalled having been at the same age.

Middle age has been characterized as dominated by both generativity (Erikson, 1950) and confident power (Neugarten, 1968). Generativity is the ability to care for and contribute to the next generation and to the larger world outside of oneself. This can be accomplished by caring for one's own or other children, but also by producing important and lasting work, caring for the environment, and so forth (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1998; McAdams et al., 1993; Peterson & Klohn, 1995; Peterson & Stewart, 1996; Stewart & Ostrove, 1998). Stewart et al. (2001) found that generativity was higher for women in their 50s than they recalled it being in their 30s and 40s. In contrast, some studies have shown that generativity peaks in middle age (e.g., McAdams et al., 1993; Ochse & Plug, 1986; Ryff & Heincke, 1983). Stewart and Vandewater (1998) argued that the confusing picture presented by cross-sectional studies might result from measures that do not differen-

tiate among three components of generativity: desire, felt capacity, and accomplishment. They suggested that Erikson (1950) pointed to felt capacity as characteristic of middle adulthood, whereas desire might emerge earlier and accomplishment might peak later and, in fact, contribute to subsequent adult integrity. Stewart and Vandewater also suggested that the appearance of a midlife "peak" is the result of measures that combine items assessing desire, capacity, and accomplishment. The measure we used in this study included elements of desire and felt capacity, but few of accomplishment. Therefore, we expected that generativity would be higher for women in their 40s than for those in their 20s, but would level off or even decline for women in their 60s.

Confident power grows out of Neugarten's (1968) work on the executive personality, which she and her colleagues suggested was a hallmark of midlife personality and characterized by feelings of mastery and competence (see, e.g., Howard & Bray, 1988; Jones & Meredith, 1996; Lachman, Lewkowicz, Marcus, & Peng, 1994; Roberts et al., 2002, for confirmations in the research literature). Women in the three cohorts studied by Stewart et al. (2001) described themselves as higher on confident power in their 50s than in their 40s and in their 40s rather than in their 30s. We expected women in their 60s—who are still mostly involved with major work, community, and family roles—would score higher on confident power than women in their 40s, who, in turn, would score higher than women in their 20s.

Stewart et al. (2001) found the exact same pattern for changes in women's concern with aging, probably the most common conception of what people become preoccupied with during middle age and beyond (see, e.g., Becker, 1973; Clausen, 1986; Jacques, 1965; McAdams, 1985). Some researchers have suggested that the transition to midlife and increased preoccupation with becoming old will be particularly salient for women because of the premium placed on women's youthfulness in U.S. culture (e.g., Gergen, 1990; Mathews, 1979; Unger & Crawford, 1996). We, therefore, expected to find that women in their 60s would score higher on concern with aging than women in their 40s, who, in turn, would score higher than women in their 20s.

Stewart et al.'s (2001) research, although an important foundation for our work, has several limitations. First, it was limited to personality change within the course of midlife (30s to 50s), and second, it relied in part on retrospective ratings. In this research, we improved on their design by studying women in three different stages of adulthood: young adulthood (20s), middle age (40s), and older age (60s). Thus, we had direct data from women while they were in each of these distinct life stages and were able to ask questions about the periods that preceded and followed middle age. In addition to having women rate their feelings in the present, we also asked them to rate the other two ages prospectively or retrospectively. Thus, our data allowed us to perform cross-sectional analyses between cohorts and to examine recalled or anticipated change within cohort.

We tested two hypotheses and predicted the following outcomes.

Hypothesis 1: Across cohorts, these five indicators of personality would show three different developmental patterns: (a) Women in their 20s would score lower than women in their 40s, who would score lower than women in their 60s, on current ratings of identity certainty, confident power, and concern with aging; (b) generativity would be higher in the 40s than in the 20s, but level off by the 60s; and (c)

personal distress would be higher in the 20s than in the 40s or 60s. These different patterns would, of course, result in distinctive clustering of preoccupations within each period, but would not, in our view, resemble bounded stages, with steep rises and declines in a single period.

Hypothesis 2: Within each cohort, there would be similar patterns, with women expecting or recalling increases in the domains of identity certainty, confident power, and concern with aging from their 20s to their 40s to their 60s, and generativity increasing from the 20s to the 40s, but not to the 60s. Women would also expect or recall a decrease in feelings of personal distress from the 20s to the 40s.

Method

Participants

Participants were 333 female graduates of the University of Michigan, 99 (30%) from the class of '51 or '52, 144 (43%) from the class of '72, and 90 (27%) from the class of '92. A random sample of women from each graduating class was contacted and mailed a questionnaire; participants were sent follow-up reminders and encouraged to participate for up to 1 year following the initial mailing; final response rate was 30%. This response rate is comparable to other studies in which university alumni were contacted for the first time long after they had graduated (e.g., Abramowitz & Nassi, 1981; Cole, Zucker, & Ostrove, 1998; see Zucker, 1998, 2002, for more detailed information about data collection).

At the time of data collection in 1996, the women from the class of '51 or '52 had an average age of 66 (range: 65–70), women from the class of '72 had an average age of 46 (range: 44–50), and women from the class of '92 had an average age of 26 (range: 23–30). The majority of the participants were White (the youngest group had the most racial diversity, with 13% people of color). Thirty-eight percent of the oldest cohort was in the paid labor force at least part time, whereas 85% of the middle cohort and 89% of the youngest cohort were employed. The sample was highly educated: 48% of the oldest cohort, 74% of the middle cohort, and 60% of the youngest cohort obtained graduate degrees. The sample was also financially privileged, although level of income differed significantly among the three groups. Median annual household income was \$60,001–\$80,000 for the oldest cohort, \$100,001–\$120,000 for the middle cohort, and \$20,001–\$40,000 for the youngest cohort. The majority of the sample was heterosexual (the youngest cohort had the greatest diversity, with 13% identifying as lesbian or bisexual). Rates of marriage were high for the two older groups: 98% of the oldest cohort and 90% of the middle cohort had been married at some time, whereas only 28% of the youngest cohort had been married by the time of data collection. Rates of motherhood were also high in the two older groups: 94% for the oldest cohort and 82% for the middle cohort. Twelve percent of the youngest cohort were mothers at the time of data collection.

Measures

Adult personality was assessed by using an expanded version of the Feelings About Life Scale originally developed by Helson and her colleagues (Helson & Moane, 1987; Helson & Wink, 1992). The original measure included a number of statements that were rated on a 3-point Likert-type scale as to how descriptive they were of a participant's life; responses ranged from 1 (*not at all descriptive*) to 3 (*very descriptive*). In an effort to increase the available pool of items for the constructs of interest to this project, additional items were added to the questionnaire, yielding a total of 41 items, which are described later.

All participants rated each item for three time points: "in my 20s," "in my 40s," and "in my 60s." Thus, all women rated the feelings for their current age and rated the other two ages either retrospectively or prospectively. For example, women from the class of '72 reflected back to their

Table 1
Cross-Sectional Analysis of Five Personality Themes

Theme	20s		40s		60s		<i>F</i> (2, 332)
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Identity certainty	2.09 _a	0.44	2.45 _b	0.44	2.61 _c	0.39	37.55**
Confident power	2.01 _a	0.36	2.41 _b	0.37	2.54 _c	0.32	57.90**
Concern with aging ^a	1.56 _a	0.32	1.79 _b	0.32	1.97 _c	0.41	35.50**
Generativity ^b	2.23 _a	0.33	2.43 _b	0.30	2.45 _b	0.36	14.10**
Personal distress	1.71 _a	0.39	1.49 _b	0.36	1.39 _b	0.37	18.20**

Note. Means with different subscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$ by the Scheffé test.

^a Because of positive skew, log transformation was used to correct for nonhomogeneity of variance. The means and standard deviations were transformed back into their original units. ^b Because of negative skew, square-root transformation was used to correct for nonhomogeneity of variance. The means and standard deviations were transformed back into their original units.

** $p < .001$.

20s, rated their 40s at the time of the study, and rated anticipation for their 60s.

Five subscales that assess identity certainty, confident power, concern with aging, generativity, and personal distress were derived from the Feelings About Life Scale (see Stewart et al., 2001, for description, theoretical rationale, and construct validity for all subscales except Personal Distress). Items in each of the scales are listed in the Appendix. The first three subscales were predicted to rise across the three ages assessed. The Identity Certainty subscale was developed to assess Erikson's (1950) concept of identity as a secure sense of self and place in the social world. Stewart et al. reported significant correlations of this scale with identity achievement assessed by *q*-sort in two samples. Reliability estimates are provided based on each cohort's rating of the items in the subscale for participants' current age. The scale included eight items (seven of which were the same as the items in Stewart et al.) and had an alpha reliability ranging from .79–.81. Items on the Confident Power subscale assessed a sense of competence, confidence, mastery, and power, which was based on Neugarten's (1968) idea of the midlife executive personality (eight items, six of which were the same as in Stewart et al., 2001; $\alpha = .64$ –.76). Stewart et al. reported significant correlations of this scale with California Psychological Inventory dominance and self-acceptance in two samples. There were eight items on the Concern With Aging subscale that were identical to Stewart et al. (2001), including ones that reflected a concern with the approach of death and loss of physical attractiveness ($\alpha = .55$ –.71). Results of a factor analysis of these apparently disparate items indicated that they nevertheless form a strong factor. Stewart et al. reported a significant correlation of this scale with negative feelings about getting older. The Generativity subscale items were predicted to rise from the 20s to the 40s and then level off and were intended to operationalize Erikson's notion that the psychosocial task of middle age is about the capacity to care for and contribute to the next generation and a concern with the world beyond the self (eight items, six of which are the same as in Stewart et al., 2001; $\alpha = .56$ –.68). Stewart et al. reported significant correlations of this scale with Loyola generativity in one study and generativity *q*-sort scores in two. Finally, the Personal Distress subscale items were intended to operationalize some of the more difficult aspects of emerging adulthood, such as isolation, constraint, and negative affect; distress was predicted to decline steadily after early adulthood. This scale was developed for this study and included nine items assessing difficult times ($\alpha = .71$ –.77). The validity of this measure was indicated by its high negative correlation ($-.57$) with the Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985).

Results

Plan of Analyses

We first used a series of analyses of variance (ANOVAs) to conduct a cross-cohort comparison of women in their 20s, 40s, and 60s on their current self-ratings in the domains of identity certainty, confident power, concern with aging, generativity, and personal distress. For example, we compared 26-year-old women's ratings of their identity certainty in their 20s to 46-year-old women's ratings of their identity certainty in their 40s to 66-year-old women's rating of their identity certainty in their 60s. Next, we presented within-cohort repeated-measure ANOVAs that assessed perceived or expected change over time (20s, 40s, and 60s) for each of the five domains.

Cross-Cohort Analysis of Personality Development Indicators

The results for the cross-cohort analysis are presented in Table 1. Three scales (Identity Certainty, Confident Power, and Concern About Aging) were predicted to show increases at each age. In fact, women in their 20s rated themselves significantly lower on identity certainty, confident power, and concern about aging than women in their 40s, who in turn rated themselves significantly lower than women in their 60s.¹

Generativity was expected to show the same kind of pattern for women in their 20s and 40s but was expected to remain at about the same level among women in their 60s. This pattern was confirmed. Women in their 20s rated themselves significantly lower than women in their 40s and 60s on current levels of generativity; however, there was no difference between women in their 40s and women in their 60s.

Finally, personal distress was expected to be highest among women in their 20s and to decline among women in their 40s and

¹ It seemed possible that the Concern With Aging subscale might reflect both concerns associated with the end of life and those more focused on issues of physical aging and appearance. Analyses of separate items on this scale showed, however, that both types of items showed the same pattern of change over time.

60s. In fact, women in their 20s did rate themselves significantly higher than both women in their 40s and women in their 60s on current levels of personal distress; however, there was no difference between women in their 40s and women in their 60s.

Within-Cohort Analysis of Personality Development Indicators

Within-cohort analyses examined whether these same patterns characterized the three cohorts' expectations and retrospective recall of their feelings.

As shown in Table 2, the youngest cohort anticipated that identity certainty, confident power, and concern with aging would all increase significantly from the 20s to the 40s to the 60s. Generativity was expected to increase significantly from the 20s to the 40s, but there was no anticipated difference between the 40s and the 60s. In contrast, personal distress was expected to decrease from the 20s to the 40s to the 60s.

The middle cohort (Table 3) perceived an increase from the 20s to the 40s on identity certainty, confident power, and concern about aging, as well as an increase from the 40s to the 60s. Generativity was perceived to have increased significantly from the 20s to the 40s, but there was no expected difference from the 40s to the 60s. Personal distress was not recalled to have been significantly higher in the 20s than it was rated in the 40s but was expected to decline significantly in the 60s.

In the oldest cohort (Table 4), identity certainty, confident power, and concern about aging were all perceived to have increased significantly from the 20s to the 40s to the 60s. Generativity was perceived to have increased significantly from the 20s to the 40s, but there was no difference between the 40s and the 60s. Personal distress was perceived to have increased from the 20s to the 40s, but was rated as significantly lower in the 60s.

Discussion

Using cross-sectional data from three cohorts of college-educated women, we have shown, both across and within cohorts, that identity certainty, confident power, and concern with aging were all higher in the 40s than in the 20s, and higher in the 60s than in the 40s. Across and within cohorts, generativity was higher in the 40s than in the 20s but leveled off by the 60s. Across cohorts, personal distress was higher for women in their 20s than women in the other two age groups. Personal distress was perceived to

decrease from the 20s to the 40s for the youngest cohort only and among all cohorts from the 40s to the 60s.

The perceived change was prospective for women currently in their 20s, whereas for women in their 60s it was retrospective. Women in their 40s looked back to their 20s and forward to their 60s. These findings suggest that similar patterns are obtained by using either prospective or retrospective data, lending support to the notion that self-reports, retrospective reports, and future anticipations can be consistent (as Ryff, 1991, showed). Despite the strength of the findings across these differences, it is not clear that all retrospective or prospective reports show the same robustness. For example, Woodruff and Birren (1972) found that retrospective reports in 1969 of personal and social adjustment of a small sample of men and women who were college students in 1944 overestimated past unhappiness (or reports at the time underestimated it). It is impossible to know whether the particular historical circumstances (the difference between reporting in 1944 vs. 1996 or retrospecting about 1944 in 1969 vs. retrospecting about the 1950s in the 1990s) may have played a role, or whether methodological differences may have. (Woodruff & Birren, 1972, asked respondents to "answer the [test] as they thought they had answered it in 1944" [p. 252]; we simply asked respondents to rate items' descriptiveness "in their 20s.") Certainly the utility of retrospective and prospective accounts for assessing personality change over time is uncontested, while even more investigation of their reliability is warranted. Our cross-sectional/within-cohort design leaves us reasonably confident in both our method and in our findings, and we now turn to a more extensive discussion of those and their implications.

Across and within cohorts, identity certainty was reported and anticipated or recalled to increase from the 20s to the 40s and from the 40s to the 60s for all three cohorts of women. These data extend Stewart et al.'s (2001) finding that identity certainty is perceived to increase over the period of middle age. Although Erikson (1950) postulated that identity should be achieved in late adolescence, or perhaps in early adulthood, it appears that identity continues to grow and strengthen well into older adulthood (see Kroger, 2000a, 2000b; Kroger & Haslett, 1991). If this is the case, it may be particularly so for women because gender socialization into a certain identity is more atypical for women's earlier development than for men's. Whitbourne et al. (1992), however, using a different measure of identity achievement among men and women, found increases in scores of identity through the 20s, but

Table 2
Within-Cohort Analysis of Five Personality Themes, Class of '92

Theme	20s		40s		60s		<i>F</i> (2, 84)
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Identity certainty	2.07 _a	0.44	2.51 _b	0.29	2.64 _c	0.25	74.98**
Confident power	1.98 _a	0.34	2.53 _b	0.26	2.60 _c	0.27	143.36**
Concern with aging	1.56 _a	0.32	1.79 _b	0.34	2.12 _c	0.41	82.23**
Generativity	2.23 _a	0.33	2.59 _b	0.26	2.54 _b	0.28	81.61**
Personal distress	1.73 _a	0.38	1.46 _b	0.29	1.41 _c	0.27	40.87**

Note. Means with different subscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$ by the Scheffé test.
** $p < .001$.

Table 3
Within-Cohort Analysis of Five Personality Themes, Class of '72

Theme	20s		40s		60s		<i>F</i> (2, 134)
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Identity certainty	2.08 _a	0.48	2.43 _b	0.43	2.62 _c	0.29	88.31**
Confident power	1.77 _a	0.44	2.39 _b	0.37	2.52 _c	0.31	150.17**
Concern with aging	1.24 _a	0.23	1.80 _b	0.32	2.10 _c	0.40	228.17**
Generativity	1.95 _a	0.38	2.43 _b	0.30	2.42 _b	0.33	105.85**
Personal distress	1.56 _a	0.38	1.51 _a	0.36	1.32 _b	0.25	43.19**

Note. Means with different subscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$ by the Scheffé test.
 ** $p < .001$.

a decline after age 31. It is possible that methodological differences between the studies contributed to the different findings. Whitbourne et al. used a measure of successful resolution of each Eriksonian age-related crisis. It seems plausible that one could resolve the identity crisis by age 31 (as was seen in their study), but still have room to develop an ever-more confident sense of identity throughout later adulthood (as in our study). Our data, as well as Stewart et al.'s (2001), and consistent with Kroger's (2000a, 2000b) work, demonstrate that at least some groups of women become increasingly secure in their identities over the course of adulthood.

The finding that young adulthood is a period of some difficulty may be one reason identity continues to develop and become more secure later in the life course. Stewart et al. (2001) called for a more detailed exploration of young adulthood; their data and others (e.g., Arnett, 2000a, 2000b; Pals, 1999; Ronka & Pulkkinen, 1995) suggested that this can be a period of psychological hardship, characterized by financial and emotional difficulties, and the strain of sorting out adult roles and relationships. They suggested that researchers need to know more about the developmental period of young adulthood itself—a time when there is increasing expectation to have a secure identity and a confident stance, but when there is little basis for either.

We directly assessed personal distress (a domain not included in Stewart et al.'s, 2001, study) to attempt to capture some of these difficulties. Two of our findings lend support to the hypothesis that young adulthood is a particularly difficult time. First, women currently in their 20s rated themselves higher on personal distress than they anticipated being in their 40s and 60s. Second, in the cross-sectional analysis, women in their 20s scored significantly

higher than women in their 40s and 60s on current levels of personal distress. These findings were not confirmed for the women currently in their 40s and 60s, however, suggesting that the experience of young adulthood, at least for women, may be shaped by cohort. These older cohorts did not recall a decrease in personal distress from the 20s to the 40s. In fact, women in the oldest cohort actually recalled an increase, perhaps because their 40s coincided with the second wave of the women's movement. The resulting social changes in women's work and family opportunities (e.g., Klein, 1984) may have led to periods of revision and, perhaps, to distress about previously accepted roles (Stewart & Healy, 1989). Certainly there were considerable societal changes, a controversial war, and other historical events that could have affected the distress levels of this cohort at that time in their lives. All three cohorts did recall or expect a decrease in distress from the 40s to the 60s. Taken together, these findings suggest that young adulthood may be a particularly difficult time for recent cohorts of women (Arnett, 2000a, 2000b; Twenge, 2000), whereas middle age may actually have been more difficult for some past cohorts than others. These findings of cohort differences in reports and expectations about distress are particularly striking, given the pattern of cross-cohort consistency in the projection, report, and recall of all four of the other domains of feelings.

Of interest, both across and within cohorts, generativity was higher in the 40s than in the 20s but was level from the 40s to the 60s for all groups. The finding that generativity was higher in middle age than in young adulthood supports Erikson's (1950) theory that generativity is primarily a task of midlife. In contrast, generativity did not decline in older age, as Erikson would have predicted. It may be, as Keyes and Ryff (1998) argued, that the

Table 4
Within-Cohort Analysis of Five Personality Themes, Class of '52

Theme	20s		40s		60s		<i>F</i> (2, 96)
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Identity certainty	2.21 _a	0.45	2.30 _b	0.48	2.61 _c	0.40	36.02**
Confident power	1.78 _a	0.47	2.16 _b	0.41	2.54 _c	0.32	112.35**
Concern with aging	1.24 _a	0.23	1.45 _b	0.29	1.97 _c	0.41	120.06**
Generativity	1.96 _a	0.42	2.44 _b	0.36	2.45 _b	0.36	89.41**
Personal distress	1.45 _a	0.39	1.52 _b	0.44	1.39 _c	0.37	7.35*

Note. Means with different subscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$ by the Scheffé test.
 * $p < .01$. ** $p < .001$.

ability to draw on material resources and educational advantages strengthens and maintains an individual's capacity to guide and direct the younger generation; our sample is certainly privileged in those regards. In another sample that is much more diverse in terms of social class, however, Miner-Rubino, Winter, and Stewart (2002) found the same exact pattern of perceived increase in generativity from the 20s to the 40s and a leveling off, but no decline, from the 40s to the 60s. Thus, this finding suggests that other social groups besides the educationally privileged are able to maintain a high level of generativity into their later years. Because the current measure of generativity focused on generative capacity, our findings are, in any case, in line with Stewart and Vandewater's (1998) theorizing that felt capacity for generativity, in particular, peaks in middle adulthood. It would be helpful to examine older adults to see if there is a period in which generative capacity decreases, possibly replaced by a greater emphasis on generative accomplishment (Stewart & Vandewater, 1998) or on integrity (Erikson, 1950).

Confident power was the other personality domain expected to be especially salient in midlife. However, it showed the same pattern as identity certainty of being higher in the 60s than in the 40s and in the 40s than in the 20s across cohorts, and of anticipated or recalled increase from the 20s to the 40s and from the 40s to the 60s within cohort. Unlike generativity, then, confident power does not appear to level off, at least by age 66. As with identity certainty, it seems possible that this may be a particularly gendered phenomenon. Women may find that their sense of confidence and power continues to reflect increasing security in their roles and relationships across adulthood (Stewart & Ostrove, 1998).

Concern with aging followed the expected pattern of being higher in the 60s than in the 40s and in the 40s than in the 20s across cohorts, and was also recalled or anticipated to increase from the 20s to the 40s and from the 40s to the 60s for all three age groups. It seems logical that a concern with aging would become more salient for older groups of women. It is interesting, however, that this domain, although perceived to be highest in the 60s, was still lower than all other measured aspects of personality, except for personal distress, even at that age. Thus, contrary to some popular and psychological perceptions of aging, a concern with issues about growing older does not dominate personality at this time. In fact, positive factors, such as increased certainty about one's identity, high levels of generativity, and a sense of confident power, characterize the 60s for these women (see also Stewart & Ostrove, 1998). Furthermore, feelings of personal distress diminish by this age, suggesting that rather than marking the beginning of a period of decline, the 60s may be a time of considerable psychological well-being.

An interesting methodological note is that the patterns of perceived change varied by personality domain. Some positive aspects of personality were perceived to increase over time (confident power and generativity, though it then leveled off), as were some painful aspects (concern with aging). Other painful aspects (personal distress) were perceived to decrease. These differences suggest that there is not some stereotype or response set that is driving the participants' responses to these questions.

It is important and provocative that the perceived levels of all these dimensions are so consistent, both across cohorts and for groups of women from different cohorts over time (see also Helson & Moane, 1987; Helson & Wink, 1992; Stewart et al., 2001, for

related findings). We might have expected that the social change movements of the 1960s would have had profound effects on these women that would affect their personalities (e.g., Agronick & Duncan, 1998; Duncan & Agronick, 1995), but would differ by cohort (Stewart & Healy, 1989; Zucker, 1998). Although these movements may be associated with the higher recalled distress in their 40s for one cohort, generally these domains are perceived to or actually do change over time for women of different generations, suggesting that there is something about growing older, regardless of historical cohort, that relates to many changes in personality. With respect to development, then, our notion that different patterns characterize different personality components over the course of adulthood was supported by the data, as was our view that it is not particularly useful to view personality development in adulthood in terms of relatively bounded stages. At the same time, the configuration of the components does provide a distinctive shape to each period we investigated. It will be important to see whether this picture of adulthood as a time of continued growth and personality strength can be replicated in other samples, representing different demographic groups.

There are a number of limitations to the current research that can be addressed in future investigations. Our sample was limited to college-educated women, the majority of whom were White and middle class. Future research on a sample that is more diverse in terms of social class and ethnicity, and that includes men, will afford the opportunity to broaden researchers' knowledge base. It would also be instructive to explore whether specific types of life events, relationships, and skills relate to successful personality development during adulthood. Despite the limitations of this study, we believe we have offered not only evidence for the ways that personality domains are both particularly salient in certain developmental stages, and continue to develop and grow over the life course, but also a useful methodological strategy for assessing such salience and growth. Both of these help contribute to the knowledge base about women's lives over the long period of adulthood.

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Appendix

Themes and Items on Feelings About Life Scales

Theme	Item
Identity certainty	A sense of being my own person
	Excitement, turmoil, confusion about my impulses and potential (reversed)
	Coming near the end of one road and not yet finding another (reversed)
	Feeling my life is moving well
	Searching for a sense of who I am (reversed)
	Anxiety that I won't live up to opportunities (reversed)
	Feeling I will never get myself together (reversed)
	Feeling secure and committed
Confident power	Feeling powerful
	Feeling more confident
	Feeling I have the authority to do what I want
	Not holding back when I have something to offer
	Having an accurate view of my powers and limitations
	Feeling I understand how the world and other people work
	Feeling established
Concern with aging	Feeling respected
	Looking old
	Feeling the limits of what I will be able to accomplish
	Thinking a lot about death
	Feeling passé
	Knowing there are things I'll never do
	Feeling men aren't interested in me
Generativity	Feeling the importance of time's passing
	Feeling less attractive than I used to be
	Feeling needed by people
	Effort to ensure that younger people get their chance to develop
	Having a wider perspective
	Influence in my community or area of interest
	A new level of productivity or effectiveness
Personal distress	Wanting to make changes in society
	Interest in things beyond my family
	Having something to teach young people
	Depression and resentment or disillusionment
	Rebellion against constriction
	Feeling very much alone
	Doing things for others and then feeling exploited
Fears of competition with other women	
Wishing I had a wider scope to my life	
Feeling angry at men and masculinity	
Feeling angry at women and femininity	
Feeling weak, incompetent, or not as strong as other people	

Note. From "Middle Aging in Women: Patterns of Personality Change From the 30s to the 50s," by A. J. Stewart, J. M. Ostrove, and R. Helson, 2001, *Journal of Adult Development*, 8, p. 28. Copyright 2001 by Kluwer Academic Publishers. Adapted with permission.

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