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Changing midlife tropes: A transcendence into epiphany

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ABSTRACT: Midlife is often stereotyped as a time of turbulence, angst and chaos, marked by inappropriate behaviours, broken marriages, infidelity and destructive changes. However, this article aims to challenge these stereotypes and present a different perspective. It argues that midlife is not a crisis; instead, it is a transformative journey into epiphany. This transcendent midlife journey is possible through gaining self-awareness, garnering insights and resonating with accumulated inherent (and previously undiscovered) values and desires. This starkly counters dated and prescriptive narratives that, left unchecked, descend into negative midlife tropes. Navigating this necessary period in adult actualisation has the potential to be deeply transformative and equip the adult at midlife to live a more meaningful and aligned life. This article presents a detailed discussion and findings from the journeys of five research participants who transitioned from midlife crisis to epiphany. Each participant's life story is analysed, drawing on themes from existing literature on midlife crises and emphasising the variables of transcendence and evolution into epiphany. The article challenges conventional tropes and describes the unique epiphanies that resulted from these transcendent journeys, providing a rich and diverse perspective on midlife transitions.

KEYWORDS: adversity at midlife, midlife crisis, midlife misconceptions, midlife narratives, narrative therapy, new midlife generation, qualitative psychology, self-actualisation

Introduction – Defining a midlife crisis

O'Connor and Wolfe (1987) developed a model of midlife crises based on an analysis of interviews with people mainly in their forties. Central to this model were strong negative emotions and significant changes that shaped a midlife crisis. When the midlife crisis occurs, it presents as more than a period of internal crisis, but also a period characterised by profound internal and external transitions. These transitions can be evidenced by seemingly dramatic external changes such as divorce, change of career, or a desire to radically alter one's current life.

These shifts often lead to challenges related to identity and affect, which are difficult to avoid. Midlife or middle adulthood is defined as the period from 40 to 60 years old, yet the start and end boundaries are vague, allowing for a ten-year range on either side (Lachman et al., 1995; Staudinger & Bluck, 2001). Lachman (2004) advises against using chronological age to classify midlife because the age norms are less specific and strict during this period of life – social, family, career and other responsibilities may be different among individuals and contexts.

Kail and Cavanaugh (2004) note that society increasingly acknowledges middle age as a time when adults can re-evaluate their personal goals, develop different relationships with their children and start grandparenthood. In addition to intra-personal and interpersonal relationship changes, midlifers must also contend with changes in appearance, changes in their physical agility – bones and joints – as well as reproductive changes. Salkind (2005) identifies other physical changes such as a decline in eyesight and hearing, wrinkles and sagging skin.

Kail and Cavanaugh (2004), Lachman (2004) and Salkind (2005) counter popularly held beliefs that cognition declines in midlife. The reality is that adults in midlife may experience heightened cognitive functioning with regard to problem-solving and levels of expertise, as well as dialectical thinking and practical intelligence. In terms of the stability of personality traits, the general trend in middle adulthood is for individuals to be less neurotic and more open, agreeable and conscientious, according to Salkind (2005). However, an individual with high neurotic personality traits increases the likelihood of experiencing midlife as a crisis (Freund & Ritter, 2009).

Experiences such as divorce, death of a loved one, beginning or ending of a career and physical or mental illness may trigger stressors during midlife and change how individuals behave (Salkind, 2005). Midlife may also be shaped by the journey towards retirement, reconciling to having adult children and caring for aging parents (Salkind, 2005). It is the impact of these changes and the individual's ability to deal with them which determines whether normal changes manifest as a crisis (Lachman, 2004; Salkind, 2005). This lends itself to a dialectical counterpoint of a midlife crisis versus a transitionary conundrum in scholarly circles. Robinson and Wright (2013) reinforce this period's tumultuousness by defining crisis episodes as filled with stressful and challenging life events. These events are tethered to a retrospective recognition of that time as a crisis, as they may embody a symbolic turning point in life. Readjustment is

required after the event and may be reviewed as a central locus of change during the crisis (O'Connor & Wolfe, 1987; Robinson & Wright, 2013).

Robinson and Stell (2015) define crisis episodes in adulthood as a period in an adult's life that typically lasts a year or more. Significant transitions and stressors challenge and sometimes surpass their capacity to cope effectively during this time. This leads to an atypical level of emotional instability and negativity (Caplan, 1964; Erikson, 1980; Slaikeu, 1990). After such a crisis, the resultant instabilities and challenges lead to the individual questioning or reviewing their lifestyle, values, goals and sense of identity. This has the effect of soliciting action to understand the causes of the crisis and potential resolutions to it (Sheldon & King, 2001). According to the literature on the epidemiology of stressful life events, young adults are more prone to regard recent life events as stressful or traumatic, and they are more likely to have problems adjusting to stressful life events than persons in midlife or old age (Masuda & Holmes, 1978; Norris, 1992; Turner et al., 1994; Hatch & Dohrenwend, 2007). My findings have shown that research participants display a willingness and a strong impetus to change and adapt to stressful life events that occur at midlife.

Misconceptions about midlife

Midlife has become synonymous with a stereotype of striving to maintain youthfulness and sexual vigour, as well as dramatic crises with adverse outcomes. Traditionally, midlife has been seen as a period defined by stagnation, rebellion, the climacteric, an obsession with youth and generativity. My research chronicles crises generated from personal circumstances that are unrelated to generativity, the climacteric, or an obsession with youth.

Literature review

Infurna et al. (2020) reinforce that development at midlife remains cumulative and is a lifelong process, yet very little is known about development in midlife. It is further noted that there are several misconceptions about what midlife is, scant knowledge of developmental milestones and difficulties faced by those in midlife. Midlife is a vital period encompassing gains and losses, and there is a link to earlier and later life periods. Infurna et al. (2020) also posit that the midlife period holds opportunities for reversibility and resilience through interventions. In this study, reversibility and resilience are equated with the variables of transcendence and epiphany.

Infurna et al. (2020) have identified midlife as the most significant portion of adulthood and the launch point for critical life transitions, yet we are only at the beginning of understanding this life phase and how it differs from other periods of adulthood (Lachman, 2004). It is proposed that the narrative surrounding midlife needs to move beyond misconceptions and stereotypes yoked to midlife crises and allow for the possibility of midlife as a vibrant period with untapped opportunities and the navigation and mastery of challenges in this life period. In this study, the narratives of research participants at midlife encompass the grittiness, challenges, crises, resilience, vibrancy and opportunities these research participants have dealt with. Furthermore, mastering their personal challenges has solicited transcendence into an epiphany.

Transcendence and epiphany in the context of midlife

Midlife is often countenanced as a stereotypical crisis, characterised by both internal and external vicissitudes. My findings have elicited the unique phenomena of transcendence and epiphany during this oft-maligned life stage. It has led me to approach my work with adults at midlife in a novel, curious and unique way, in turn differently shaping the future actualisation of adults in this verdant and fertile life stage. Viewing midlife as a period of transcendence and ultimately epiphanies deriving from the midlife experience counters the traditional negative stereotypes of midlife.

Transcendence

Taylor (2018) sees transcendence as experiences of such sudden, personal, profound, positive and permanent change that incontrovertibly alter the lives of those who experience them. Yet, qualitative research presents a conundrum regarding engaging with phenomena experienced as "more than words can say". Amos (2019) was driven to investigate this magical and miraculous experience further, and the potential contribution of the research study evolved to include the development of technical and experiential knowledge. Braud and Anderson (1998, p. 3) state that "many of the most significant and exciting life events and extraordinary experiences – moments of clarity, illumination and healing – have been systematically excluded from conventional research".

Epiphanies are defined as a "sudden discontinuous change" (Jarvis, 1997, p. 5). Epiphanic experiences are seen to transform the individual in an inherently positive and lasting manner. This is achieved through a reconfiguration of their most deeply held beliefs about themselves and the world. An epiphany is a profoundly emotional experience. It is not elicited by force, but is experienced as intensely positive and joyful (Chilton, 2015).

In their initial exploration of Finnish people's experiences of being moved, Hänninen and Koski-Jännes (2025) sought an overarching concept that would comprehensively account for their findings. According to their interpretation, the common denominator among the factors eliciting this emotion of being moved is a sense of meaningfulness. They propose that this feeling arises when a specific event is perceived as representing something larger or deeper, reflecting a sudden contact with the essential preconditions of human existence.

In everyday life, people typically concentrate on matters relevant to their ongoing projects. The phenomenon that triggers moving experiences seems to pierce a hole in this ordinary orientation. It flashes a glimpse behind the surface of everyday experience and sensitises the individual to the core issues of life. This resembles what Charles Taylor (1989, p. 419) describes as an epiphany, which he associates with aesthetic experiences in which a work of art "shows some greater spiritual reality or significance shining through it". This interpretation aligns with one participant's response that being moved involves standing on the verge of something valuable (Hänninen & Koski-Jännes, 2025).

Hänninen and Koski-Jännes's (2025) conceptualisation of the core of being moved centres on experiencing what is genuinely meaningful in life. This resonates with findings by Oliver and Raney (2011) and Cova et al. (2017), who distinguish between hedonistic (pleasurable) and eudaimonic (meaningful) experiences. They further suggest that meaningfulness is evoked through contact with conditions fundamental to human life,

such as community, achieving aims through effort, overcoming adversity, justice, understanding one's life course as a part of the succession of generations and the beauty encountered in human creation and nature (Hänninen & Koski-Jännes, 2025).

The impact of childhood adversity and parenting on midlife narratives

The elicitation of this narrative was not formulaic; other than that, I aimed to give form to the interviews by starting with a chronological history that began with childhood or adolescence. I did not then know that this line of questioning would form a fundamental tenet in the findings. The narrative stemming from this time elicited unresolved historical threads that were presented at midlife, and these historical threads were then reviewed in the context of a midlife crisis. Unresolved childhood or adolescent narratives found their way into the crisis at midlife. Part of the transcendence into epiphany was the research participants confronting these narratives and alchemising these into epiphanies in adulthood.

Jung noted that puberty is the life stage where the ability to navigate psychological problems begins (Hargrave, 2006). This time is akin to a psychic birth wherein adolescents can consciously distinguish the self from the parents. In this stage, the potential for unresolved identity crises from adolescence is sometimes revisited in midlife.

Moreover, it sometimes happens that when children reach adolescence, it is a trigger for the parent's own midlife crisis due to unresolved issues (Palk, 2015). Childhood adversity predicts adolescent suicidal ideation, but there are scant studies examining whether the risk of childhood adversity correlates to suicidal ideation in midlife (Stansfeld et al., 2017).

It remains unknown whether the association between childhood adversity and suicidal ideation extends into midlife, although cross-sectional studies show that there are associations between retrospectively recalled childhood adversity and suicide in adulthood (Dube et al., 2001; Bifulco et al., 2002; Fanous et al., 2004; Corcoran et al., 2006; Enns et al., 2006; Fairweather et al., 2007; Heider & Skowronski, 2007; Afifi et al., 2008). These experiences are further compounded by sexual and/or physical abuse during childhood (Fanous et al., 2004; Ystgaard et al., 2004). It has been seen that the association of childhood adversity with adult suicidal ideation may be mediated through increased exposure to life events in adulthood (Fergusson et al., 2000).

Significant contributors to childhood adversity and midlife suicidal ideation have been defined by Kendler et al. (2002). Their developmental model for major depression in women (Kendler et al., 2002) and men (Kendler et al., 2006) describes three pathways: the development of internalising disorders, externalising disorders and adult interpersonal difficulties, also known as adult adversity. This developmental model was tested on twin samples and has been shown to be innovative. It has integrated a multifactorial aetiology of adult depression that considers genetic and environmental influences.

Kendler et al. (2006) extracted eighteen predictor variables spanning five tiers. During childhood there is risk in the form of genetic risk, a dysfunctional family environment, sexual abuse and parental loss. Early adolescence presents risks for neuroticism, self-esteem, anxiety and conduct disorder. Late adolescence places the adolescent at risk for educational disruption, trauma with potential longevity, variables in social support and substance abuse. Finally, adulthood presents the risks for divorce, major depression, or marital difficulties due to independent/dependent life events (Kendler et al., 2002).

Kendler et al. (2002) noted that neuroticism and early-onset anxiety disorders were the most dominant influences in the internalising pathway, with conduct disorder and substance abuse presenting as the most powerful in the externalising pathway. However, extrapolating the pathway to adult interpersonal difficulties proved more complex. Kendler et al. (2002) found that childhood adversity played a significant role in adult interpersonal difficulties. He found a correlation between lifetime trauma and several latent depressogenic consequences linked to earlier adversities. This presents as troubled adult interpersonal relationships (Kendler et al., 2002).

Methodology

The research participants' childhood adversities

Five research participants were interviewed and each presented a unique narrative, which represented the personality type of the research participant, as evidenced by their body language, the setting in which the interviews took place, how they told their story and the content of their narrative.

This study is small and qualitative, with an ethnographic orientation and was exploratory in nature. As Robson (2002, p. 59) notes, an exploratory design is appropriate for finding out "what is happening; to seek new insights; to ask questions and to assess phenomena in a new light". Conducted within an interpretivist paradigm, this study's exploratory nature aligns with Greener and Martelli's (2018) recommendation that qualitative methodology is well suited to such aims. A qualitative approach seeks to answer questions of "what", "how", or "why" as opposed to the "how many" or "how much" questions that characterise quantitative, positivist studies (Bricki & Green, 2018).

Several methods can be employed in a qualitative study. Based on the view that people are nuanced and cannot be understood in a straightforward manner (Madden, 2010), an ethnographic method was selected for data collection and analysis. Spencer et al. (1993, p. 304) define ethnography "in its broadest sense", as "the work of describing a culture", which includes learning from people as well as learning about them. A distinction can be made between traditional ethnography and focused ethnography. Traditional ethnography is found in large-scale, comprehensive studies typically conducted by sociologists and anthropologists (Spencer et al., 1993). Focused ethnography is in small-scale, concentrated studies addressing a specific problem area (Spencer et al., 1993).

Research participants were recruited via the snowballing technique. The researcher had a particular interest in midlife, as they too were experiencing midlife tribulations. The researcher embarked on a curious and deeply adventurous journey to better understand midlife and to reframe it for herself in previously unseen ways. Finding research participants who echoed a similar narrative was intriguing to me. Gergen (1985) proposed that social constructionism, a form of postmodernism, is relevant to the redefining of a lifespan psychology, particularly of women. The social constructionist perspective finds meaning in understanding how ideas and attitudes develop in the context of social and community. Social constructionism considers the development of cultural narratives formed by people, which influences their behaviour. It also considers normative views against which people measure themselves. Cultural constructions

are seen as the context that supports the development of certain problems (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996).

O'Connor and Wolfe (2007) have shown that a positive perspective on midlife is a transition phase with great possibilities for growth and development. However, growth and development can only occur when a paradigm shift occurs, as midlife is a time when the adaptive capacity of the old paradigm becomes strained (O'Connor & Wolfe, 2007). O'Connor and Wolfe (2007, p. 7) define paradigm as "the system of assumptions, perceptions, expectations, feelings, beliefs, and values organised to understand an extensive range of situations and events". Individuals need to face the challenges of midlife transition and work through them to achieve a paradigm shift. Factors such as ego development, inner directness and commitment to learning enable growth during midlife (O'Connor & Wolfe, 2007).

The participants in this study described their childhood experiences which resurfaced in midlife. All participants began their midlife narratives with a description of their early years. In these narratives, research participants who had experienced childhood adversity created a canvas that formed a catalyst for unresolved behaviours revisited during the midlife crisis.

Research participant's narratives

The research participants were provided with the pseudonyms Bella, Kate, Rita, George and Marc. Some participants, such as Kate and Bella, were more talkative and forthcoming than others. George was more guarded, and during interviews, I became finely tuned to each participant's particularities. For example, George presented as both defensive and highly sensitive. Marc was forthcoming, but at times tended to become stilted and require some coaxing. Rita was erudite, yet concise. Examples of these narratives and the participants' childhood adversities will be discussed below.

Marc

For Marc, his childhood was a recurring cycle of punishment, abuse and violence. It left an indelible print on him; he lives constantly with an underlying expectation of what he will be called out for next, or what he has done wrong. It also led him to experience criticism as deeply wounding and that he is not "good".

This was due to Marc being raised by his father, whom he describes as loving and, at other times, violent, unpredictable, volatile and a heavy drinker. Marc's childhood was one characterised by fear, violence, a lack of security and a series of different women in and out of his father's life that further contributed to the cruelty and punishment that Marc was subject to. These women were often much younger than Marc's father and resentful of caring for Marc. Marc says he did not want to ask his father why he left his mother. There was always an undercurrent of not wanting to anger his father as a child, and, in later years, this changed to great forgiveness on Marc's part and not wanting to bring up the past with his father.

Marc was sexually abused at boarding school at the age of 11. He kept this secret until adulthood, never disclosing what had happened to him to his father or anyone else. Marc also describes being sent away at such a young age as difficult. Marc has learned to deflect with positivity, and this is a residue of his childhood. He describes himself as having to overcome everything. Marc's sexuality was prematurely violated. Marc's adult life is characterised by a desire to conquer his sexuality, which seems to have been a rampant part of him that appeared to have its impetus during his childhood. A great deal of Marc's life was vested in trying to understand and control his sexuality. Marc had a very lonely, frightening and violent childhood, starkly ruptured by sexual abuse at a young age.

Kate

Kate presented with an immediacy that set the tone for me. She was forthright, with no preamble, and a narrative that was at times bracing, as can be seen in the example below where she recounts the family dynamics during her childhood:

> *Mum was married to a man and had two daughters by him. Apparently, he was diagnosed as a schizophrenic or a psychopath. Sorry, yeah, and then my dad, in the meantime, was married and had four sons, and then they got together, and they had me. So, I was the "laatlammetjie"* [late lamb] *in the family. The brothers were living with me, and my two sisters were living with us.*

When the participant was asked to clarify if she was the only child from her parent's relationship, her recollection of sexual abuse also came to the fore when she answered this type of questioning as follows:

> *Yes, yeah, but my dad got custody of the boys, right, because the boys were also kind of like abused in their teens and even when they were younger than teens. They were used as sexual toys in the family. Their mother was doing things to them and, yeah, and getting her friends over. One day, my dad came home. I don't know if this is the whole story, but it was the story that was told, so I don't know if this is true, but this is the story. He came home one day, and one of his boys was in the bath with another lady naked. You know, it was very inappropriate, and well, I'm just going also by word of mouth, but it could have been when my mom married my dad. The youngest brother was three, Nik, and then the oldest brother, I think, was fourteen, thirteen, or twelve. So, from three to about 14, they were very sexual. They were actually sexualised, and so that obviously makes sense as to why then it was completely normal for them to start having sexual relations with me and my sisters, although not my older sister.*

Kate further elaborated on how the traumas she experienced at home also influenced her school years. Her narrative shows how her childhood adversities compounded during her school years:

> *So, I failed standard four* [grade 6], *and when I think about it, that's when I was just a little baby. I failed because I was just out of it all the time. They saw my school reports…I must have just disconnected. Nobody noticed that I checked out except the teacher. Yeah, no, the teachers were also horrible, though. They hated me, but there was hatred because I was also rebellious. So, I used that energy for anger and rebellion. I even once spat on the teacher's shoes, you know, so I was hated by the teachers. That was my high school.*

Kate was explicit in her recollection of the adversities she faced during her childhood years. Her sexual abuse spiralled into feelings of neglect and abandonment, which would form part of her narrative during midlife.

George

George started the description of his early years by delving into his earliest memory without providing much context, as can be seen in the excerpt from his interview below. He is understated in his recall, and this challenged me to piece together his narrative.

> *My earliest memory is of being a roommate in an orphanage, and I was given a chair. I don't know what to do with the chair itself as I didn't speak the language, which was English at the time. In my memory, I was in a funny green room, which was that hospital green. There was this chair, and then a rush of people came in. That's as far back as I get. The other early memories I have are of sitting at fences, we did a lot of that. We had a lot of fences when I was younger and in Zimbabwe, because we had just finished the war, so there were fences put up everywhere to deter people. I remember the bombs and the gunfights, and I remember getting packed in cars.*

If his earliest memory was of being given a chair in the orphanage, followed by a rush of people, then I can but deduce that this was an early memory of visits by prospective adoptive parents. George continued and elaborated on the confusion he experienced in his early years as he did not speak English at the time:

> *All of the time, I was trying to understand exactly what was happening, because it's all being done in English, and the only people that spoke Italian were my parents at the time, so they did the translating. Then we moved to Johannesburg, and from Johannesburg, it was Durban, and I went straight into South African government schools. That's where the turning point started, I could see that I wasn't like everybody else. There were surfers and young guys jumping and skateboarding. In general, lots of outdoor activities. I was living a very unsheltered life.*

George endured a turbulent and traumatic childhood, and the vicissitudes thereof would underpin the crisis he experienced during midlife.

Rita

Rita recounted her childhood adversities and how they influenced her physical and mental health growing up as follows:

> T*hen, on top of it, I had to confront the relationship with my mom. My mom was always very domineering and very controlling. Her hearing was beginning to fail, and what I didn't realise is that she was experiencing the early stages of dementia. Which made her, at times, very aggressive, angry, and she would say terrible things to me...and I was in a deep depression, and I had lost a lot of weight. I think I weighed just under fifty kilos, and I mean, I'm like 1.76m. I remember one day she said to me, your leggings, your legs, your skin, your leggings shouldn't be bagging around your legs. You don't say that like that to someone who's clinically depressed, you know. I had a great therapist who was recommended to me through a friend, and I started going to him.*

During Rita's midlife period, she reflected on her childhood through adult eyes. She recognised that her mother had been cruel, domineering and narcissistic, all of which impacted Rita's midlife period.

Bella

I probed Bella about the childhood memories that stood out the most to her and what her experience was like growing up. She responded by saying:

> *Okay, so let me perhaps start with my mother. She had me when she was 16, and my biological father and grandparents raised me for the first ten years of my life. My mother wasn't very present. She was off working, understandably, as one is, when she left school to support me. My grandparents were my mother and father, for all purposes. They had actually lost a child called Bella at age one. So, when my mother had me, they named me Bella after their daughter – the daughter that they lost. They were the nurturing factor, and I lived with them for the first ten years, and I think, if I hadn't had that, possibly, I would have had less resilience to handle what came thereafter. My mother got remarried...when I was 10, and I moved in with her and my stepfather. They subsequently had a daughter. My mother's child is nine years younger than me. My stepfather, as soon as she was in the marriage, was very emotionally and physically abusive. Between 10 and 18, when I left home, I was subjected to emotional abuse in the sense that he didn't want me to be there. So, I would have to be in my bedroom when he came home. I was never allowed to watch TV.*
>
> *To this day, I battle watching TV. I was, um, I had to have my school shoes outside my room, and they had to be polished so that he, my stepfather, could see his face in them, and if they weren't, he would walk into my room and hit me over the head with a shoe. So, I had that to manage. And I'll come back to how I've dealt with that, with my mother, my grandparents were there once. I recall he hit me with a belt, and I had welts on my back, and my grandparents came to the rescue and said, "you know, we're taking her away from you".*

Bella's childhood was characterised by the rupture of being removed from her grandparent's warm and nurturing care into the volatility and abuse from her stepfather in her biological mother's home. She also experienced neglect and abandonment by her mother. These experiences surfaced at midlife for Bella and served as a catalyst for change.

The effects of childhood adversities on the participants

The researchers found childhood stressors as identified by Kendler et al. (2002) in all the participants' narratives. These stressors are defined as:

- Maternal or paternal absence, for example, when a child is not living with their natural mother or father, whether through death, divorce, separation, illegitimacy, or being in institutional care; and
- Physical abuse by a parent – punched, kicked, hit, or beaten with an object, or requiring medical treatment. Physical abuse and sexual abuse were ascertained by Kendler et al. (2002) from retrospective reports at 45 years (Rosenman & Rodgers, 2004). These types of adversity are challenging to assess prospectively, because children experience shame and adult coercion and most do not report abuse at the time.

Exposure to adversity in early childhood predicts adulthood adversity, either through trajectories of social disadvantage (Graham & Power, 2004), or through a series of adverse environments (Kendler & Eaves, 1986). This correlates with our findings with Marc, George, Kate and Bella, since a series of adverse environments characterised their adulthood.

The combination of childhood adversity and abuse has been linked to adverse coping methods for stressors in adulthood. These lead to disengagement, defined as problem avoidance, social withdrawal and self-criticism (Leitenberg et al., 2004). This behaviour, inherent in childhood adversity, may result from stress sensitisation and could stunt the emotional processing of adverse events in adulthood. Difficulties in coping with adult adversities have the potential to accrete in terms of perceived burden and severe interpersonal difficulties that place the adult at risk of perpetuating and increasing suicidal ideation (Heikkinen et al., 1993). Marc, Kate and George all struggled to navigate adult life due to their childhood adversities.

Adversity in childhood, presenting as parental divorce and sexual abuse, has the effect of predicting an increased risk of affective disorders such as suicidal ideation and is completed in adolescence and early adulthood (Fergusson et al., 2000; Agerbo et al., 2002). Most of the participants were exposed to emotional abuse in addition to physical and sexual abuse during their childhood. Marc, George and Bella all experienced traumatic physical abuse by a parent. Kate was subject to sexual abuse by her stepbrothers and further sexual abuse at school. George was exposed to physical and emotional abuse, and Rita was exposed to emotional abuse from a narcissistic mother. Exposure to these types of childhood adversity has been shown to interact with genetic factors, resulting in altered hormonal responses to subsequent stressful life events. This has the potential for long-term consequences in the life trajectory (Bradley et al., 2008; McGowan et al., 2009; Hornung & Heim, 2014).

That childhood adversity in the form of sexual (Fergusson et al., 2000; Fanous et al., 2004; Ystgaard et al., 2004; Afifi et al., 2008) and/or physical abuse (Ystgaard et al., 2004; Enns et al., 2006; Bruwer et al., 2014; Harford et al., 2014) has been correlated with suicidal ideation, both in the form of attempts and completed suicide (Séguin et al., 2007). This combination of life events in childhood (Fergusson et al., 2000) and adulthood, which includes divorce in adulthood (Dennis et al., 2007), is further linked to an increased risk of suicidal ideation. This was evidenced by Marc's attempts to commit suicide in adulthood, as well as Kate's and Bella's attempts at suicide in adolescence.

A consequence of childhood adversity demarcated as an indicator of adult externalising behaviours by Kendler et al. (2002) is problem drinking. Kendler et al. (2002) describes this as the adult feeling they should cut down, or other people annoying them by criticising their drinking. It is further described as feeling bad or guilty about their drinking. Stansfeld et al. (2017) reinforce that exposure to childhood adversity is related to increased exposure to traumatic midlife events. Their study showed that self-reported alcohol dependence, as an example of externalising behaviour, partially mediates the effects of sexual and physical abuse (Dube et al., 2001). Marc and Bella both described negative interactions with alcohol in their adulthood. In addition, Marc, Kate and George all had an alcoholic father that contributed to their childhood adversities. All three were subject to verbal, emotional and physical abuse. Marc abused alcohol in adulthood, as did Bella. George admitted to abusing as many drugs as possible. The experience of adversity, in turn, impacts feelings of self-worth, mastery and the ability or potential to develop positive and trusting relationships, as per Marc, Kate, Bella and George.

These feelings of poor self-worth, lack of self-mastery and the inability to develop positive or trusting relationships may further influence coping abilities and the ability to ask for help in a crisis (Gunnell et al., 2004). Mastery has been linked to lower levels of suicidal ideation (Fairweather et al., 2007). Self-mastery has been a factor in transcendence for Marc, George, Bella and Rita.

Results

Midlife as a period of transcendence and, ultimately, epiphany

The autobiographies of Gandhi (1949) and Frankl (1959) illustrate real-life narratives of sudden transformational periods with positive and lasting effects. It has been shown that positive transformational experiences present post-trauma in the guise of adversarial or post-traumatic growth (Linley & Joseph, 2004). This post-traumatic growth (PTG) has been the subject of substantial attention in recent decades. PTG is a central tenet of positive psychology (Joseph, 2014). Similar terms have been posited to encompass the breadth of profound and enduring positive change. These are transformative change experiences (White, 2007), unencumbered moments (Murray, 2006), turning points (Berglund, 2014), transformational growth (Ivtzan et al., 2015) and pivotal experiences (Bhattacharya et al., 2018).

Individuals have also described experiencing profound and epic change (Miller & C'de Baca, 2001) where they were aware something extraordinary was happening to them and could recall details of their experience vividly. The experience was exhilarating, liberating and characterised by an innate sense of self-love, security, safety and acceptance. The resultant change was described as permanent: "They knew instantly they had passed through a one-way door through which there was no return" (Miller, 2004, p. 456).

According to Amos (2019), Prendergast (2009) eruditely describes this experience in the context of an empirical evidence-driven research world as a radical ability to draw on openness, intuition and an emphasis on the "itself-ness" of things. Amos (2019) determines that what we understand is intricately woven into how we learn, and how we learn is recursively threaded into what we come to understand.

Factors influencing transcendence

It is worthwhile noting Jung's (1971) views on factors influencing transcendence at midlife, a transition in the forties or even the fifties. The transitionary process can be delayed if the parents remain alive, but, more pertinently, for men, the death of a father has a much more significant impact, one which Jung (1933, p. 107) described as a "catastrophic ripening". George experienced an impactful ripening when his father died, which could be described as a catastrophic ripening. He was liberated from his cruel, violent and alcoholic father. Yet, George experienced dramatic changes to his health; he had a stroke while dealing with the aftermath of managing his father's financial legacy and the bifurcation of dealing with both his family and the financial fallout.

Self-doubt and internal disharmony tend to surface with progression into midlife (Jung, 1933). Navigating the midlife

process is smooth if the individual is adequately self-aware. However, difficulties present when individuals hold onto misconceptions steeped in childhood that remain incongruous with the real world (Jung, 1933). Kate, George, Rita and Marc were unaware that their childhood adversities were unresolved and, consequently, their midlife trajectories were adversely affected.

Jung (1971) maintains that it was necessary to spend time on oneself in the second half of life, that this period is when the self becomes illuminated. Midlife presents the opportunity for a transition period because it has the potential to bring gradual changes to individuals' pursuits and affect changes in their characters (Jung, 1933).

As per the researcher's findings (Niehaus, 2024), individuals in midlife are forced to confront many aspects of their lives, to face the realisation that some endeavours or efforts have not been worthwhile and the disappointment that some aspirations were not attained. People can create a new set of aspirations, take different paths and search for new interests. Jung (1971) maintained that this change hinges on accepting that life does not always turn out the way we want. This holds true for Rita, who still harbours dreams of reuniting with her ex-husband. She never wanted to be divorced.

Death and the fear of death at midlife were not determined as significant at midlife for Jung (1933). He did not deem it a meaningful dilemma during middle age like other theorists such as Dickstein (1972) and Jaques (1965) have. Jung (1933) posited that midlife difficulties occuring in response to significant psychological changes are far more transformational than physical changes. This has held true for all research participants – the sum of their psychological changes took precedence over any physical changes.

The midlife journey to transcendence

Research participants' midlife crises are about confronting unresolved aspects of themselves, whether conscious or unconscious. Jaques (1965; cited in Jackson, 2020) noted that for those who did not work effectively through the psychological anguish that accompanies midlife, the impulsive strategies intended to stave off the tragedy of death were futile. Jaques (1965) determined defensive fantasies are just as persecutory as the chaotic and hopeless internal situation that they are intended to mitigate. These aspects remain unresolved until a crisis forces the midlifer to confront them.

For Jaques (1965), midlife presents the ultimate paradox – that of entering the prime of life, a stage ripe for fulfilment, yet paradoxically, both prime and fulfilment are dated, and death awaits. He proposed that those who reach midlife without successfully navigating life and establishing themselves in relationships and careers were ill-equipped to meet the stressors of middle age. This portends what have become clichéd features of a midlife crisis. By the late 1960s, Jaques's work had become known for attempting to understand and resolve the "search for meaning" that characterises a midlife identity crisis. For example, the impact of a midlife crisis on relationships, specifically marriage, became an impetus to confront personal, familial and social determinants and their consequences as divorce levels increased (Jackson, 2020).

Levinson (1978) determined that once a life path is acknowledged, new perspectives and needs surface, and these need to be addressed and changes made. These changes lead to transcendence and, in turn, elicit epiphanies. The epiphany or epiphanies remain entirely dependent on the midlifer's decision to transcend.

Transcendence into epiphany

All research participants experienced a transcendence into epiphany due to confronting and navigating their respective midlife crises. As per O'Connor and Wolfe (2007), who determined that a positive perspective on midlife is a transition phase with great possibilities for growth and development, transcendence can be elicited through a paradigm shift. That growth and development can only occur when such a paradigm shift occurs, because midlife is a time when the adaptive capacity of the old paradigm becomes strained (O'Connor & Wolfe, 2007).

This finding held true with all the research participants – growth and development were impossible unless they chose to adapt or change. O'Connor and Wolfe (2007) defined a paradigm as a set of assumptions, perceptions, expectations, emotions, belief systems and intrinsic values that are uniquely organised to navigate a broad range of situations and events. Individuals need to confront the challenges inherent in a midlife transition and work through them to achieve a paradigm shift. Variables such as ego development, a capacity for inner directness and a commitment to learning facilitate growth during midlife (O'Connor & Wolfe, 2007). This ego development, the capacity for inner directness and the potential for learning at midlife were visible during all participants' crises at midlife.

Unique thematic narratives at midlife

The earlier theories of midlife, as posited by Erikson, do not fit this study, as none of the participants were overly concerned with generativity versus stagnation and self-absorption. They were more concerned with navigating and traversing their crises. The epiphanies that emerged for research participants in this period of transcendence correlate with what Taylor (2018) wrote of experiences of such sudden, personal, profound, positive and permanent change that fundamentally alter the lives of those who experience them.

Research participants were able to resource unique and diverse coping mechanisms. They could reclaim parts of their lives, whether to heal, recover their identities, gain a better sense of self, gain self-awareness and discover epiphanies such as liberation, sexual liberation, spirituality, religion, or self-respect. These epiphanies serve as positive, magical, rooted and definitive vanguards for the future of the middle-aged adult as they traverse their way through life.

Resolution of crises

Without fail, each research participant actively sought to find potential resolutions to their respective crises. Robinson and Stell (2015) define features of later-life crises as different to crises that occur earlier in adulthood, yet there are also some similarities. These similarities include stressful or difficult endings, new beginnings, periods of self-questioning or self-doubt, instability of life structure and emotional upheaval. These events occur in crises in early adulthood, as well as in midlife (Levinson, 1986; O'Connor & Wolfe, 2007).

However, there were some notable differences. Crisis events presented earlier in adulthood were defined by the challenges that arose from becoming entrenched in adult roles. These roles were characterised by feeling overwhelmed, or eliciting feelings of entrapment (Robinson & Wright, 2013). In contrast, later-life crisis is differentiated by the challenges and emotional difficulties of separating from these roles and may include feelings of marginalisation and isolation. Kate occupied an

outsider status as she no longer fit her marriage as she became sexually liberated, nor did she align with the ideologies of her church. Bella and Rita self-isolated in bounded ways to protect themselves during their midlife crises.

Transcendent changes and their resultant epiphanies

Many theorists have suggested that crises can portend positive adult development (Forer, 1949; Sheehy, 1977; Levinson, 1978; Denne & Thomson, 1991; Sheldon & King, 2001). These crisis episodes can provoke change, especially when people conduct their lives in problematic or unhealthy ways. A crisis can also act as motivation to overcome the inertia that seeps into adult life due to commitments or responsibilities (Kegan & Lahey, 2009). This motivation for change was seen in all the research participants in the following ways:

Marc found change in a healthy, fulfilling relationship through periods of intense and cataclysmic change. He underwent a number of incarnations that led to these changes, spanning a spectrum of being rebellious, acting out sexually and seeking out dangerous and thrilling activities. He sought out danger and acted out impulsively. He then embraced a fundamental religious doctrine and immersed himself in solitude and piety. Following the extremism of this religious phase, he found peace and liberation in a more spiritual and less punitive doctrine, allowing him to finally express himself and find relief from his torturous upbringing and the resultant flawed narrative that shaped his adulthood.

Kate found liberation from shame by distancing herself from her church, its dogma and the judgement she felt from the religious order. The distance enabled her to critically evaluate those who had judged and shamed her. She found her voice in the respite from a punitive and judgemental doctrine that gave her mixed messages about herself and the world. She also released herself from her toxic marriage. This separation combined with the freedom of severing ties with a domineering and judgemental church environment allowed her to pursue the sexual and spiritual liberation that she had been denied since adolescence.

George finally gained the courage to shut out poisonous relationships and seek comfort and nurture within his own nuclear family. He freed himself from his sense of responsibility towards his alcoholic father and his longstanding filial duty towards his mother. He found great joy and comfort in the love and safety of his immediate family. He also renounced the dogma of the religious overtones that had shaped his life. He finally embraced his own irreverence, quirkiness and unique self-expression.

Rita gained independence and freedom from the narcissistic dynamics in her relationships with her mother and ex-husband. She started to make decisions based on her own well-being rather than deferring to the desires of others. She disengaged from reacting to the narcissistic pulls and found the confidence to make significant new life choices. She changed countries, pursued a new career and reinvented herself in a form of her own making.

Bella realised that she needed to practise self-care and establish boundaries. She gained considerable wisdom during her voyage of self-discovery. Her manifold adventures had taught her resilience and revealed her capacity for adaptability and adventure. She found her way back to herself and recognised the importance of making decisions based on her own needs and maintaining healthy boundaries.

Research participants' epiphanies

In this study, each participant's peaks or areas of transcendence were visible in the following ways.

Marc

Self-awareness, liberation of self and from others, spiritual awakening, happiness and self-awareness, insights into self and others, resilience, positivity and discovery of authentic self.

Kate

Spiritual/sexual epiphany, taking control, extrication from marriage, new love, sexual and religious liberation.

George

Self-actualisation, survival, coping mechanisms, music as a means of self-expression, adaptation, self-awareness, self-preservation, healthy relationship, epiphanies, religion, emancipation, transcendence through creative outlets, transcendence through healthy relationships, self-expression, self-worth, positivity, fulfilment.

Rita

Rita gained strength, reconnection, forgiveness, had supportive friendships, experienced healing, insights, self-awareness, recovery and developed spiritual beliefs, resilience and self-mastery.

Bella

Illustrious career, survival, resilience, resourcefulness, intuition, persistence, second marriage, fundamental change, family life, new career, second career success, happiness, self-awareness, spiritual emergence, transcendence, truth, spiritual epiphanies, spiritual growth through illness and adversity, insights, self-care, boundaries, positivity, intrinsic change, self-actualisation.

Conclusion

New midlife generation

These research participants did not fit previously held narratives of midlife. Infurna et al. (2020) have determined that some of what we know about midlife is based on misconceptions, and some narratives have been debunked by empirical research.

The most cited theories about midlife are those of Carl Jung and Erik Erikson (Lachman & James, 1997). Jung's theory on midlife was poetically known as the afternoon of life and delineated as a distinct period separate from early and later adulthood. Erikson's (1993) stage theory of development pertains to the psychosocial conflict in midlife and is concerned with generativity versus stagnation and self-absorption. Erikson theorised that middle-aged adults are predominantly invested in time and effort to nurture and promote the younger generation and create legacies that will extend beyond their lifetime. This generativity is found in parenthood and grandparenthood, work, professional activities, volunteering, and participation in religious/political organisation (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). Erikson (1993) posits that if a person does not attain generativity, they will be mired in stagnation, impotent in their inability to leave a legacy, with a potential for self-preoccupation and a predilection to focus more on the self than others. Lachman (2001) states that there might be differences in the strength of generative feelings among adults.

Midlife has traditionally been defined as a negative period of adulthood, stereotyped by a negative crisis, and research has been scarce on this period post-crisis. Research participants in

this study all experienced a profoundly negative crisis during their middle years, which was coloured by unresolved childhood adversity. This childhood adversity was woven into the fabric of research participants' lives, who inadvertently continued living with outmoded coping mechanisms that were learned behaviours from childhood.

They were unconsciously entering a period of mature adulthood where their outmoded responses to the adult world were out of alignment with the experiential sum of their contemporaneous midlife lives. Research participants were forced through a period of crisis to work through varying degrees of shame, loss and betrayal and physical, emotional and sexual abuse that characterised their formative years and were again triggered by their midlife crisis. However, they were forced through a period of crisis to confront these challenges and opted to transcend this crisis by drawing on resources that were unique to each individual.

Amos (2019) notes that to date, qualitative literature relevant to sudden and profound transformation has mostly been preoccupied with elucidating the antecedent and facilitative variables associated with this type of change (Hayes et al., 2007; McDonald, 2008). It has now been determined that stressful and traumatic events may serve as a trigger to facilitate both personal growth and positive change (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006).

Jung (1933) proposed that the ultimate purpose of the individual is to develop consciousness – that by the end of their life, the goal is for the unconscious to become fully conscious. This process is known as individuation. It is characterised by resolving and attaining cognisance of any and all underlying, repressed, traumatic and difficult memories. Jung determined this process to enhance and generate personal growth. This personal growth is not accessible to all, and not everyone is able to attain individuation (Jung, 1933). Jung's observations were that society typically attributed little value to the exploration or individuation of the inner self. Only external accomplishments are vaunted, hence the importance of studying the internal explorations of midlife narratives.

Robinson and Stell (2015) describe Erikson's stage model of ego development with its particular dialectic as the dominant concern in what has been described as old age: integrity versus despair. Integrity presents as a personal acceptance of the past, present and perceived future of one's own life (Erikson et al., 1986). Our research participants eventually reconciled their past, present and perceived future. However, it was only through confronting the sum of their experiences that they were precipitated and ignited by a crisis that led them to transcendence, culminating in epiphany. Ultimately, accepting the past entails not dwelling excessively on regrets, painful memories or secrets, and resolving conflicts with family or friends (Torges et al., 2008). Accepting the present means finding satisfaction with how life is versus how it could be, and thus not mentally struggling against the inevitability of one's current life circumstances (Viney & Tych, 1985).

All research participants wanted to confront and resolve past conflicts. Confronting these past conflicts came about insidiously through unresolved childhood trauma, which was intrinsically and often unconsciously threaded into the fabric of their adult lives and then unexpectedly triggered by a midlife crisis.

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