

# Adulthood Comes of Age

Middle age is "in" as a research subject...  
much to the relief of countless rats

BY JOEL GREENBERG

"The middle aged male," says psychologist Douglas Bray, "seems to have replaced the white rat and the college student" as the psychological research world's foremost subject. Had Bray, who works for American Telephone and Telegraph Co., included females in his statement, it may not have been far from the truth. An explosion of books, research papers and even entire conferences dealing with what happens between young adulthood and the Social Security years is reverberating through the behavioral and social sciences.

Neglected for years — as perhaps too normal or merely psychologically uninteresting — the middle aged adult is finally getting a share of the limelight ... and more. This year alone has seen numerous meetings — including a major session at the American Association for the Advancement of Science meeting — devoted to the midlife phenomenon.

As with most relatively new areas of exploration, initial bursts of information can trigger somewhat premature stereotypes — in this case, the "midlife crisis." Researchers are finding that middle age does appear to have its own set of stresses that can lead to emotional difficulties peculiar to those years. But it is far from established that every person, or even the majority, experience gut-wrenching conflicts, identity crises or other forms of devastation. "Adulthood cannot be understood in terms of currently prevalent ... psychology," contends Yale University's Seymour Sarason.

Much of the current research is aimed at identifying any common threads that might apply to various groups of middle aged persons, and at how to diminish or prevent the "unhealthy" effects of midlife stress. This was the theme of the fourth annual Vermont Conference on the Primary Prevention of Psychopathology — a meeting that in previous years dealt almost exclusively with problems of childhood and adolescence.

The work of Bray and colleague Ann Howard constitutes one of the few long-term studies of the evolution of the middle years. A 20-year follow up of more than 200 employes who began working for the Bell System in the 1950s, the study examines what factors contribute to or detract from occupational and overall life satisfaction, and how the two areas affect each other. The first reported results, on 80 subjects, were presented at the Vermont conference.

Assessments consisting of wide-ranging interviews, observations and psychological measurements were made when each person first joined the company, again at eight years and finally at 20 years. Bray and Howard are also conducting two sub-studies dealing with current new employes and specifically with the executive group rising above middle management levels.

---

***"A person's total satisfaction and happiness with life appears to be almost totally unrelated to whether he or she is successful in work ..."***

---

Perhaps the most significant general conclusion of the study thus far is that a person's total satisfaction and happiness with life appears to be almost totally *unrelated* to whether he or she is successful in work. "Career success is not a predictor of life satisfaction," says Howard. "But there is not necessarily a negative correlation, so you might just as well be successful because there's no assurance you're going to be happy another way," she adds.

However, the researchers did find a negative correlation — and a rather stunning one: Those who scored *highest* in heterosexuality and mental ability turned out to be *less* happy and well adjusted than most of the other Bell employes studied. Bray is quick to put that result in perspective. The great majority of people in the study — including the well-adjusted and happy — have IQs above average, "well above 100. We're not talking about dumbbells," he says. The psychologist suggests that extreme intelligence, however, may work against a person's happiness in many cases. "The people who were better adjusted may not be quite as introspective. They don't worry about what life is all about, they are less questioning," says Bray.

Similarly, he says, the results do not imply that heterosexuality is bad for your mental health. The relative unhappiness and poor adjustment was found among those who scored well above the norm on "interest and concern for the opposite sex." This indicates a possible "overdependence" on the opposite sex, Bray says. When this happens, a person's preoccupation with the relationship may prevent him or her from pursuing other sources of satisfaction and happiness in life.

In terms of career alone, the "successful" subjects (upper level management)

showed increases over the years — and middle and lower managers showed decreases — in:

- Importance of work.
- Identification with the professed values of the Bell System.
- Occupational involvement.
- Forcefulness and dominance.

The successful managers did show increased involvement with their marriages and families, but at a lower rate than the "unsuccessful." Upper managers remained fairly constant in community involvement but participated in fewer recreational activities over the years. In contrast, the lower level managers increased their recreation and decreased community involvement.

A significant number of those classified as "unsuccessful" in work scored high in life satisfaction. These persons, though slightly less intelligent and knowledgeable, were nevertheless self-confident, optimistic, unselfish and relatively less cynical than the others in the study. But the "satisfied" group also included some who were successful in their occupation — a finding which confused Bray and Howard until further analysis yielded a "common ground."

The most happy persons overall were not necessarily the successful or the unsuccessful, but those who were "satisfied" with their careers, regardless of their status on the management ladder. "This appears to bridge the gap" between career and life satisfaction, says Howard. Finally, the Bell study reveals that only 22 percent of the subjects were undergoing a "midlife crisis," suggesting that the term may be overused when applied to Americans, Bray suggests. "Everybody is not having a midlife crisis," he says. Other research presented at the conference seems to corroborate that impression.

---

***"This is a large lie, a myth that a shattered and depressed woman lives inside the shell of an empty nest... It's a distorted view of womanhood."***

---

In a study of 160 middle aged women, Lillian Rubin of the Institute for Scientific Analysis attempts to debunk what she calls "the myth ... of the empty nest syndrome." "This is a large lie, a myth that a shattered and depressed woman lives inside the shell of an empty nest" after her children leave home, Rubin says. "It's a distorted view of womanhood."

In her research, Rubin looked at women (average age 46) whose children had either left the "nest" or were in the process. More than half the women were "homemakers," while others had returned to school or work. All had given up jobs for at least 10 years following the birth of a child.

---

***"In fact, just about all of them [the mothers] responded to the departure of the children with a decided sense of relief."***

---

"Except for one," Rubin reports, "none of these women suffers from the classical symptoms of empty nest syndrome. In fact, just about all of them responded to the departure of the children with a decided sense of relief... although a few were ambivalent when the time of departure came close." The problems of experiencing the child's departure "are short term and limited," Rubin says. "They usually do not approach depression."

The effect of the women's movement may be a factor in helping mothers to better cope with loss, she suggests. "The revolution in the rising expectations in midlife women" has enabled many mothers to view the empty nest as "an opportunity for freedom and to 'claim' themselves," Rubin says. "For most midlife women, becoming a mother means they aborted their own hopes and dreams" to devote their lives to bringing up their children. "It should come as no surprise that the end of the mothering function should come with relief," says Rubin. She did find that conflict, including a sense of failure, with the youngster can make the departure more traumatic by leaving the parent with a feeling of an unresolved problem. But she also found that going back to work

for financial reasons." In addition, she notes, working class families generally stay closer to each other, geographically, and provide considerable support.

But even in difficult mother-child separations, "women cope and do not overly suffer," Rubin says. "There is still a sense of a need for freedom, even if they are scared." Ironically, perhaps, she found that some husbands were more likely than their wives to get depressed when the children left. "Often, the father never had a lot of time for the kids in previous years; he didn't share as much as the mother in their development, and suddenly, they're gone...."

The importance of employment for women is also reflected in a Brandeis University study of 142 white, married, middle class Boston-area mothers who have at least one child in preschool. Researchers Rosalind Barnett and Grace Baruch compared mothers employed part and full time (35 percent of the sample) with those who did not work outside the home.

---

***"Money isn't the only thing in the world, but it's way ahead of whatever's second."***

---

They report no significant difference between the two groups in role satisfaction, self-esteem or confidence — more than 85 percent of all women said they were moderately or very satisfied. However, they found that the "at-home" women were considerably more dependent for their own satisfaction and esteem on how they perceived their husbands felt about the women's roles. More than half the unemployed women expressed such dependence, compared with 30 percent of the working mothers. (The prestige of the husband's occupation, however, was not

according to the Brandeis team. "Our data suggest that well-being may be *enhanced* by commitment to work and satisfaction with a job," Barnett says. "Involvement in multiple roles need not result in a debilitating state. In fact, it may be a good preventive factor for later years when the woman may be alone [following a divorce or death of the husband]," she adds.

The attitudes of both women and men were analyzed in a study of predictors of life satisfaction conducted by John C. Flanagan of the American Institutes for Research. In one of the most comprehensive studies of its kind to date, Flanagan surveyed 2,800 people from around the United States on various "quality of life" aspects, and on how their attitudes and expectations measured up to their actual life satisfaction levels.

After sifting through mountains of data on 30-, 50- and 70-year-old men and women, Flanagan has drawn some conclusions which he says, if somewhat expected, are well-substantiated by the size and representativeness of his sample. The two major factors in life satisfaction appear to be money and health care, he reports. "People are coping pretty well, but there certainly is a significant-sized minority who just don't have the finances and resources to get the food, shelter and health care they need," he says. "Money isn't the only thing in the world, but it's way ahead of whatever's second."

Beyond that, the best predictors of overall quality of life, according to the study, are work, active recreation, learning, expressing yourself creatively, having close friends, understanding yourself, socializing and (except for the 70-year-olds) close relationship with a spouse. The importance of active recreation — even among the 50- and 70-year-olds — was the "biggest surprise among the predictors," Flanagan says. "It seems plausible on reflection that an activity that lacks deep commitment and satisfactions may still be a very important contributor to one's own feeling of well being," he says.

---

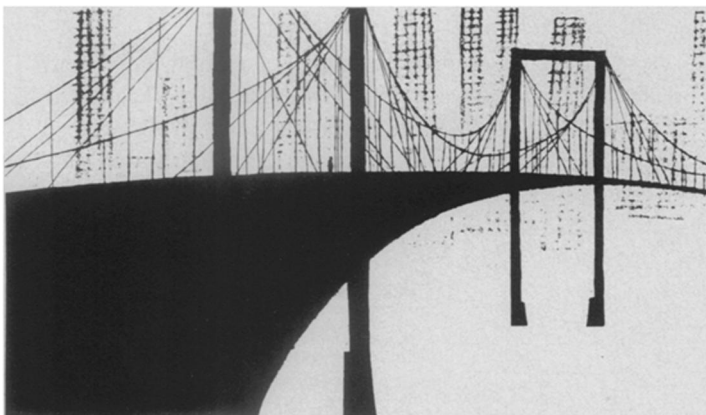
***"Whether a patient is depressed, schizophrenic or neurotic, he or she is at risk for a feeling of loss of the importance of the sense of self at 44-60 years of age."***

---

The poorest predictors of quality of life at ages 50 and 70 include: having and raising children; participation in local and national government; helping and encouraging others; relationships with relatives.

While most past and current middle aged research deals with relatively healthy, non-institutional populations, a study of midlife psychiatric patients was published in the June AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PSYCHIATRY. The team of researchers, from Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Cornell Medical Center and elsewhere, compared 193 psychiatric outpatients to

*Continued on p. 79*



can help alleviate some of that pain by giving the woman a "sense of self that lives apart from the children."

The study results show that working class women "sometimes find the transition easier because they have more options" than middle and upper class mothers, Rubin says. "They are willing to take lesser jobs, and probably worked at some point [previously in the marriage]

found to be connected to the wife's esteem and satisfaction.)

Baruch and Barnett also report that the nonworking mothers seem more concerned with choosing a role model that meets the approval of their own mothers.

Their results tend to refute a number of previous studies, which indicated that multiple roles might be emotionally detrimental to women bringing up children,

# Genus Attempt



ght) and friend work on trajectory analysis.

fuel tanks with gasoline. We moved the ship outside the garage and set her up on the sidewalk.

Condit crawled in, screwed the nose cone back tight, started up the compressor motor, and threw the switch that activated the sparkplugs.

I never saw so much fire in my life. Big blooms of red flame boiled out around the spacecraft, and big clouds of black smoke rolled up into the sky. Traffic couldn't get by because of the fire. Pretty soon we had quite a few spectators.

Condit had just wanted to take her up maybe a quarter of a mile or so, let her hang there in the air until he got the feel of her, then lower down to load up with more gasoline for the real trip.

He gave the rocket pipes more and more gas, and finally threw the throttle wide open. He made a lot more fire and smoke than before, but the ship wouldn't lift. He kept on trying until he ran out of gas.

The test firing showed us we couldn't get a ship into space without helping it along with a booster rocket, and we estimated that would cost another \$10,000 at least. So we gave it up. Our wives were against the whole deal, anyway.

Condit came back in a few weeks, loaded the rocket on a truck, and hauled it off to Florida.

I never saw him again, but I expect he did real well for himself somewhere. He was a mathematical genius.

# BOOKS

BOOKS is an editorial service for readers' information. To order any book listed or any U.S. book in print please remit retail price, plus 25% handling charge for each book to **Book Order Service**, Science News, 1719 N Street, N.W., Washington, D. C. 20036. All books sent postpaid. Domestic orders only.

**BEYOND THE MOON** — Paolo Maffei, translated by D. J. K. O'Connell — MIT Pr, 1978, 377 p., illus., \$12.50. This book is the story of a voyage in space that starts from the moon and continues as far as the greatest distances that can be reached by exploration or thought. It presents our present knowledge of the universe in a readable style for the intelligent layman. A translation of the sixth edition (1977) of *Al Di La 'Della Luna* published in Italy.

**COAL RESOURCES, CHARACTERISTICS AND OWNERSHIP IN THE U.S.A.** — Robert Noyes, Ed. — Noyes, 1978, 346 p., illus., \$45. Coal currently occupies less than 18 percent of the nation's energy market. Based on federally funded studies, this book presents an accurate picture of U.S. coal reserves, the nature and composition of the coal and of the land and minerals ownership.

**THE CREATIVE ENGINEER: The Art of Inventing** — Winston E. Kock — Plenum Pub, 1978, 385 p., illus., \$25. Examines the ways in which a number of important new technologies came into being from 1909 to 1949 and reviews the characteristic traits of the inventors who created these technologies. Ways are suggested that could, according to the author, enable young and old alike to become more creative.

**DIABETES WITHOUT FEAR** — Joseph I. Goodman with W. Watts Biggers — Arbor Hse, 1978, 198 p., \$8.95. The various fears and anxieties which preoccupy the diabetic and the diabetic's family are discussed by a diabetes specialist. All sides of the problems are presented from a scientific standpoint with practical advice and "how-to" information in order to help the patient lead a normal life.

**ENERGY USE IN THE UNITED STATES BY STATE AND REGION: A Statistical Compendium of 1972 Consumption, Prices and Expenditures** — Irving Hoch — Resources for the Future (Johns Hopkins), 1978, 737 p., paper, \$15.

**547 EASY WAYS TO SAVE ENERGY IN YOUR HOME** — Roger Albright — Garden Way Pub, 1978, 124 p., drawings by Penny Lee, paper, \$4.95. A smattering of old-fashioned common sense, practical energy-saving ideas written in simple, down-to-earth, easy-to-follow language.

**GETTING WELL AGAIN: A Step-by-Step, Self-Help Guide to Overcoming Cancer for Patients and their Families** — O. Carl Simon-ton et al — J P Tarcher (St. Martin), 1978, 268 p., \$8.95. A radiation oncologist and a psychotherapist describe how an individual's reaction to stress and other emotional factors may have contributed to the onset and progress of cancer, and give detailed instructions to help patients recognize and deal with these elements in their lives.

**HUNTED MAMMALS OF THE SEA** — Robert M. McClung — Morrow, 1978, 191 p., drawing by William Downey, \$7.95. Tells in simple language the history, characteristics, habitats and behavior of eight sea-mammal groups, and outlines steps that must be taken if these endangered species are to survive.

**THE SEA AGAINST HUNGER** — C. P. Idyll — TY Crowell, rev. ed., 1978, 222p., illus., paper, \$6.95. Looks at mankind's chance of avoiding widespread hunger by increasing the use of food from the sea.

## ... Middle age

136 nonpatients on a number of emotional measures. They found consistently that nonpatients experienced a considerably higher "sense of self" and acceptance of their adult roles than did patients.

"Whether a patient is depressed, schizophrenic or neurotic, he or she is at risk for a feeling of loss of the importance of the sense of self at 44-60 years of age," the researchers report. "This loss is consistent with difficulty in surmounting the difficulties of the midlife transition, which occurs at about age 40. ... Patients who do not master the challenges of this period may experience an increasing sense of failure and loss of self-esteem in later years."

Somewhat consistent with Rubin's results was the finding that nonpatients underwent a general decrease in concern about their children over the years and were able to successfully "loosen the ties" with them following separation. Among the patients, however, "the ability ... to allow their children to separate was impaired," say the researchers. Nonpatients after age 50 also showed an increased concern for the welfare of their parents. This responsiveness was not seen among the patients.

The data on the process of middle age are still rather haphazard and preliminary, most scientists concede. While cause and effect relationships do appear to exist, it is still not certain that the research will spawn a picture of well-defined and structured midlife development "stages" — along the lines of the strict developmental models of children.

But a picture is emerging, and behavioral scientists believe whatever insights they can develop might help a significant number of persons better cope with the transition from child to geriatric. □

## MURPHY'S LAWS!

Incomparable "scientific" wit. Colorfully lithographed on 8" x 10" heavy Parchtext for framing. A great business or personal gift! Only \$3 (4/\$10). Four Corners Press, Dept. SAK, Hanover, Mass. 02339

## EINSTEIN PRINT

A charming sepia-toned reproduction of this 1933 photo. Einstein riding his bicycle! Fine for framing at 16½" x 22". Send \$6.95. **The Scientist's Gallery**, Box 306, Louisville, Co. 80027.



## AUTHORS WANTED BY NEW YORK PUBLISHER

Leading book publisher seeks manuscripts of all types: fiction, non-fiction, poetry, scholarly and juvenile works, etc. New authors welcomed. For complete information, send for free booklet T-8. Vantage Press, 516 W. 34 St., New York 10001