CHAPTER TWENTY

Turning Points in Adulthood

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One important task of the MIDUS study was to chart the psychological landscape of adulthood, including the meaning that Americans in midlife typically assign to their everyday tasks and social roles. What can Americans expect to encounter as they enter and progress through midlife? How do middle-aged Americans knit the experiences of daily life into a coherent sense of meaning and purpose? How do middle-aged people differ from younger and older people in how they interpret their current and accumulated accomplishment in life as successes or failures?

The midlife crisis holds a remarkably dominant place in the experiences Americans expect to encounter as they age (Menon 2001). It predominates over the alternate perspective that positive development and experiences accumulate in midlife, typified by the hopeful phrase "life begins at 40" (e.g., Chiriboga 1997; Pitkin 1932). As Menon (2001) suggests, Americans dread aging and decline because of the consequent threat to their independence and control over life. The recent assertion that early adulthood is a more trying time for the average person, the so-called quarter life crisis (e.g., Robbins and Wilner 2001), has not (yet) had the same impact on the American imagination. The quarter life crisis, brought about by an overabundance of opportunities, decisions, and fateful choices, may not seem as threatening as the midlife crisis to most Americans, most particularly to the numerous and culturally dominant baby boomers.

Yet there is relatively little evidence to support the idea that most Americans experience a midlife crisis or, more generally, a universal course of life with expectable periods of crisis and stability. Brim's (1992) review of studies on midlife changes found that about 10 percent of adult males experience the period of emotional and personal turmoil called the midlife crisis, suggesting that serious emotional disturbance at midlife is not the modal experience for men (or women). Studies on self-perceived life turning points (e.g., Clausen 1995, 1998; Thurnher 1983) and general adaptation in adulthood (Vaillant 1977) also have not found

self-reported psychological change and turmoil to be more common in midlife than in other periods of adulthood. Analyzing the Institute for Human Development (IHD) studies in Berkeley and Oakland, California, Clausen (1995) found that the majority of self-perceived "most important" turning points in life were reported as occurring in early adulthood, some even in adolescence and childhood. Midlife turning points were rare. In another longitudinal study of life transitions and turning points, Thurnher (1983) reported a general decline in the number of turning points reported by successively older age groups, from youth to retirement age. Thus in at least two important longitudinal samples of Americans, participants were more likely to report that emotionally significant changes took place early in life, when the groundwork was being laid for the career and relationship trajectories of adult life. Big changes of life trajectories were relatively rare in midlife.

In a previous paper (Wethington 2000), data from the MIDUS survey and one of its follow-up studies, the Psychological Turning Points (PTP) study, showed that for many Americans the term *midlife crisis* names a widely held belief about experiences thought to be prevalent in midlife. The term connotes personal turmoil and sudden changes in personal goals and lifestyle, brought about by the realization of aging. Intensive studies of self-perceived personality change in adult life (e.g., Rosenberg, Rosenberg, and Farrell 1999) suggest that the term *midlife crisis* is used by many American men as a metaphor for changes in personality and attitudes they perceive that they have undergone in their forties.

Why then do Americans focus on midlife as a time of crisis? In common lore, midlife (age 40) is a time for taking stock (Brandes 1985). Taking stock is an evaluation of how well one has met goals set earlier in life, in other words, an assessment of whether life has been a success or a failure up to this point. More recently, McAdams and colleagues (1996, 2001), in a series of research studies of how people narrate their lives, have argued that people tell stories that are representative of the meaning they give to the trajectories of their lives, and these stories, or plots, are related to culturally held ideas about expectable changes in life (as well as to events that shaped the experience of a birth cohort). The narratives tend to focus on themes of aging and development and its relationship to cultural stories, or themes. These themes represent a culturally shared meaning of life—what makes it good, and what constitutes evidence of success or failure.

Social scientists, particularly sociologists, have studied the themes of the "plots" people use to describe the meaning of their lives. Three major themes emerged from this work on the contemporary American or "Western" character. The first of those themes is work, career, and measures of economic success (Bellah et al. 1985; Keegan 1994; Swidler 1986). The second theme is the role of love and other intense emotional bonds in the calculus of maturity and a life well lived (Bellah et al. 1985; Bourdieu 1977; Swidler 1986). The third theme, which crosscuts the themes of love and work, relates to the characteristics assigned to the successful "mature" adult personality, or "character."

The themes of character that typically emerge among Americans are a sense of control over the environment, confidence to undertake new actions, independence in judgment, and self-reliance (Baumeister 1986; Bellah et al. 1985; Giddens 1991). Aging and its threat to physical control symbolically, if not in fact, pose a threat at all levels—to work and career, the maintenance of love relationships, and self-reliance (see Menon 2001). To return to Brandes (1985), his work posits that attaining the age of 40 is to reach a midpoint or peak in the power to apply new resources toward a personal goal or the attainment of maturity, with subsequent life viewed as a shortened future.

In this chapter we describe research on psychological experiences in adulthood, specifically contrasting the clinical and popular image of the midlife crisis (Rosenberg, Rosenberg, and Farrell 1999) with the concept of the turning point, defined as a significant change in the trajectory of a person's life (Clausen 1995, 1998). The chapter presents data from two national studies, collected in response to questions about both the midlife crisis and self-perceived turning points.

We address three major themes. First, we report the types of life situations that Americans describe as significant changes in the trajectories of their lives, or turning points. Second, we examine how these experiences vary across gender, age, and the life course. Third, we analyze these themes and their variations for insights into the views that American hold of what constitutes success and failure and the expectations for judging optimal performance and attaining "the good life."

Previous Studies of Life Turning Points

Clausen's study of turning points (1995) constitutes an anchor by which one can compare the experiences of succeeding generations of Americans in reflecting on the important and significant events of their lives. Clausen (1990, 2) interviewed 244 men and women aged 50–62 in
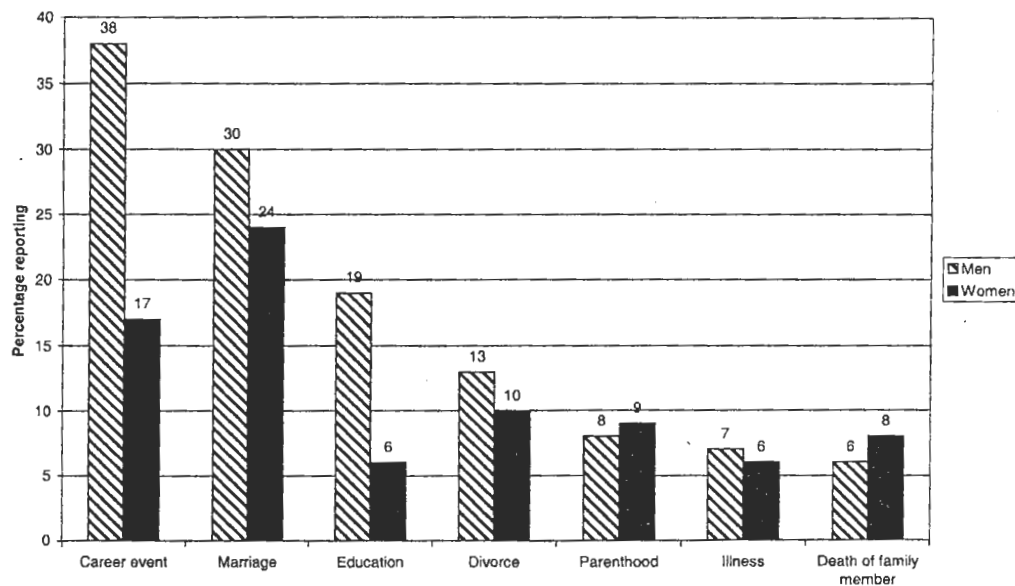
FIGURE 1. Types of life turning points ever experienced, by gender.
Source: Clausen 1990 (124 men and 144 women, aged 50–62 in 1982).

1982, asking them to "pick out any point or points along your life course that you would call 'turning points'—where your life took a different direction." Figure 1 briefly summarizes Clausen's findings. Participants were encouraged to report all of the important turning points they had experienced across their lives.

Gender differences were evident in reports of significant life experiences. Men reported turning points about career most frequently (38 percent), followed by marriage (30 percent), and education (19 percent). Women most frequently reported marriage as a turning point (24 percent), followed by career (17 percent). Most notably, nearly everyone, when reviewing life experiences from the perspective of later middle age, could report a turning point of some kind over the course of their lives, but unexpectedly most of the turning points involved events and transitions in early stages of life, not in midlife. Clausen interpreted these findings as indicating that in retrospect, participants saw decisions in early adulthood as critical for setting the subsequent course of life, and also as more significant than transitions in midlife, which participants interpreted as mostly dependent on previous decisions they had made.

Another major study of turning points, using a question very like Clausen's, reported similar gender differences in reported important turning points. The study, led by Thurnher (1983), reported data on turning points from a longitudinal study of 180 adults who had been selected to represent four major transitions in adulthood. Those four

major transitions were the transition from high school to adulthood, recent marriage, departure of children from the household, and retirement. Each of the four groups contained between 43 and 48 people, with equal numbers of men and women. Eight years after first enrolling in the study, participants were asked about life situations that they now perceived as constituting important turning points. Participants had progressed through the major transitions defining adulthood and adult responsibilities, establishing a career, maintaining a stable marital relationship, having and raising children, or bringing career to a close.

Although the groups were small, the findings were suggestive. Work dominated as a source of turning points for men, in all four age–life transition groups (Thurnher 1983, table 1, p. 54). Overall, work was the most frequently nominated source of life turning points. The recently graduated group of women most frequently mentioned marriage as a life turning point, whereas the recently married group of women most frequently mentioned parenthood. For older women, work became the predominant source of life turning points. Unlike Clausen's (1990) study, Thurnher's found that parenthood was overall the second most nominated turning point (the finding was probably a result of the design of Thurnher's study, which was intended to capture the transition to parenthood). The third most nominated type of turning point involved the purchase of a home, an event not often mentioned in Clausen's study (1990) but which, on reflection, seems a major indicator of success in attaining the American dream of material comfort.

The MIDUS Studies

Following Clausen (1995, 1998), our study defines a turning point as a period or point in time in which a person has undergone a major transformation in views about the self, commitments to important relationships, or involvement in significant life roles (e.g., career, marriage, parenthood). A turning point involves a fundamental shift in the meaning, purpose, or direction of a person's life and must include a self-reflective awareness of, or insight into, the significance of the change. Major life events, life difficulties, normatively expected life transitions, and internal, subjective changes such as self-realizations or reinterpretations of past experiences may bring on a turning point. Such "triggers," as well as the turning points, may be either positive or negative in character, or both. According to Clausen's study (1998), many of the reported turning points were entirely psychological in nature, involving not so much objective change in life circumstances as a resolution or commitment to

make a change. Some of these situations were relatively minor but had gained significance over time.

To explore the meanings that Americans assign to different stages of life and age, we report from two studies conducted to explore self-reported psychological change about how beliefs and self-reports about psychological change are distributed by age and gender. In the first study, data on self-perceived turning points were collected in the MIDUS national telephone sample (weighted $n = 3032$). In the second, 724 respondents were randomly selected from the same national telephone sample and interviewed more intensively about turning points. (They were also asked a series of questions about the midlife crisis.) The primary methods employed are conceptual coding and analysis of brief narratives supplied by participants in the second study, and statistical comparison of those who volunteered these narratives versus those who did not. The major questions addressed are as follows:

1. How are self-perceived psychological changes, or turning points, distributed across the life span and by gender?

2. What types of events and situations are reported as important turning points?

3. How are self-reported turning points and midlife crises related to other life events and transitions?

4. How do turning points relate to the meanings Americans derive from their lives?

Turning Points and Beliefs about the Midlife Crisis

In the MIDUS survey, respondents were asked seven questions about the occurrence of turning points in the last twelve months. The seven questions, including follow-up probes, are reported in table 1. The first six questions, modified for telephone administration, were repeated in the PTP study (see table 1). The questions about turning points were developed in three successive pilot studies (Wethington, Cooper, and Holmes 1997). Following Clausen's recommendation (1990), the aim of these questions was to study turning points in the contexts of specific life roles rather than as a general evaluation of life. (Clausen [1995] also noted that recalling turning points over the entire life course was a very difficult task for many of his respondents.) Because the course of life is influenced by the expectations of work and family roles, focusing on role-related turning points would enable us to detect shifts in the way success and failure are gauged across the life course, as was done in the Thurnher (1983) study of turning points.

TABLE 1 Turning Point Questions Used in the MIDUS and PTP Studies

Questions Used in Both Studies	Questions Used in MIDUS Only	Questions Used in PTP Only
	Introduction	
The following questions are about what we call psychological turning points. Psychological turning points are major changes in the ways people feel about an important part of their lives, such as work, family, and beliefs about themselves and the world. Turning points involve people changing their feelings about how important or meaningful some aspect of life is or how much commitment they give it.		
	Work Turning Point	
With this definition in mind, in the past 12 months (MIDUS)/last 5 years (PTP), did you have a psychological turning point that involved your job or career?	This could be an experience like increasing the amount of effort you put into your job or career, cutting back on your job to spend more time with your family, deciding to change careers, now or in the future, or leaving your job to do something different. Probe: Briefly, what happened? What impact has this had on you?	Probe: In what year did that happen? In what month? Briefly, what happened? What impact did this have on you?
	Learning Upsetting Thing about Other	
Another kind of psychological turning point involves learning something new and very important about a person close to you.	This would be things like someone close to you making a major change for the better, finding out that he or she is doing	Probes: In what year did that happen? In what month? Briefly, what happened? What impact did this have on you?

592

TABLE 1 *continued*

Questions Used in Both Studies	Questions Used in MIDUS Only	Questions Used in PTP Only
What these turning points have in common is the realization that this person is not the person you thought they were, either for the better or for the worse. First, in the past 12 months (MIDUS)/last 5 years (PTP), have you had a psychological turning point like this where you learned something very upsetting about a close friend or relative?	something you disapprove of strongly, or learning that he or she is a stronger person than you thought. Probes: Briefly, what happened? What impact has this had on you?	

Learning Good Thing about Other		
What about the opposite situation: in the past 12 months (MIDUS)/last 5 years (PTP), did you discover that a close friend or relative was a much better person than you thought they were?	Probes: Briefly, what happened? What impact has this had on you?	Probes: In what year did that happen? In what month? Briefly, what happened? What impact did this have on you?

Learning Upsetting Thing about Oneself		
Sometimes things happen that force people to learn upsetting things about themselves. This can lead to a big change in your feelings about who you are, what you stand for, and what your life is all about. Did you have a major psychological turning point like this in the past 12 months (MIDUS)/last 5 years (PTP)?	Probes: Briefly, what did you learn? What impact has learning this had on you?	Probes: In what year did that happen? In what month? Briefly, what happened? What impact did this have on you?

(continued)

TABLE 1 *continued*

Questions Used in Both Studies	Questions Used in MIDUS Only	Questions Used in PTP Only
Learning Good Thing about Oneself		
What about the opposite situation, discovering important good things about yourself that changed your view of who you are, what you stand for, or how you should lead your life? Did you have a major psychological turning point like this in the past 12 months (MIDUS)/last 5 years (PTP)?	Probes: Briefly, what did you learn? What impact has learning this had on you?	Probes: In what year did that happen? In what month? Briefly, what happened? What impact did this have on you?
Fulfilling a Dream		
Most people have dreams for their future. Sometimes they're realistic, sometimes not, but often they are important. During the past 12 months (MIDUS)/last 5 years (PTP), were you able to fulfill a special dream?	Probe: Briefly, what was that about?	Probes: In what year did that happen? In what month? Briefly, what was this about? What impact has this had on you?
Giving Up a Dream		
	During the past 12 months, did you give up for good on fulfilling one of your dreams? Probe: Briefly, what was that about?	

Note: Questions in the MIDUS survey asked about the past twelve months; questions in the PTP survey asked about the past five years.

The concept of *turning point* was defined in the first question. In the MIDUS survey, if a respondent checked "yes" to having one of the turning points in the past twelve months, he or she then was asked to describe what had happened and what impact it had had on him or her. Questions about turning points were asked of everyone in the sample. There were some major disadvantages to the strategy used in the MIDUS

study. First, the questions were located in the self-administered portion of the study and required respondents to write descriptions of the turning point; many of the respondents' descriptions were fairly cryptic, or missing altogether. (There were particular problems with the seventh question in the series, "giving up a dream.") Second, the recall period of twelve months (rather than a lifetime) led to respondents reporting what Clausen referred to as "little" turning points, memorable events to be sure, but not likely to lead to big changes in the direction of one's life. Third, the twelve-month recall period might have been too short to allow for adequate time to have elapsed for a person to know whether an event was a turning point or not. Fourth, the questions themselves were in some cases too leading. The question about work turning points (see table 1) included examples of what were meant by turning points, and some of these examples (e.g., "leaving your job to do something different") are not necessarily major or life changing. The examples were useful for helping define what a turning point might be, but they may have in fact affected responses.

In the follow-up PTP study, we used a very different assessment strategy. To address concerns that the twelve-month recall period had been inappropriate, respondents were asked to report turning points "over the last five years." The follow-up survey was by telephone, and responses could be consistently probed by interviewers. This resulted in more detailed responses. The examples were dropped from the work turning point and other turning points questions to reduce their influence on people's responses. Finally, because of its relatively infrequent endorsement and missing data in the MIDUS study, the turning point question about "giving up a dream" (Levinson et al. 1978) was not repeated in the PTP survey. The decision was made reluctantly, but there was considerable evidence that the question did not fulfill its purpose.[1]

In the PTP survey, detailed information was coded regarding the content of self-reported turning points. (The MIDUS responses, embedded in a self-administered survey, did not yield the same quality of data as the personal interviews in the PTP survey, and thus they were not coded in the same manner.) The codes are based on a classification scheme proposed by Clausen (1995). First, this information includes the self-reported "trigger" of the experience. A trigger can be an objective event, an anticipated event, or various types of self-reflection. Up to two causes were coded as triggers. The specific coding system for triggers is based on that developed by Wethington, Brown, and Kessler for the Structured Life Event Interview (1995).

TABLE 2 Question Texts for Midlife Crisis Questions (PTP only)

1. People often use the term *midlife crisis* to describe important experiences during their middle years. What does that term mean to you?
2. At what age do you believe someone might have a midlife crisis?
3. Have you ever experienced something you would consider a midlife crisis?
4. How old were you when this happened?
5. Briefly, what was that about?

Second, the codes include perceived impacts or consequences of the experience. These are events that came about as a result of the triggering events, objective changes in roles or behavior that the respondent undertook as a consequence of the triggering events, or psychological changes.

All entries were double-coded. Discrepancies were resolved by the first author. The coding scheme required several iterations before coders could distinguish triggers and impacts reliably. After the final iteration, coders agreed on average 85 percent of the time in their coding of the experiences.

In the PTP survey, respondents were asked five questions about the midlife crisis. The questions were placed after the turning point questions and before a series of questions about life events. The five questions about the midlife crisis, including probes for positive responses, are reported in table 2.

The midlife crisis questions were coded for content. First, we coded them for beliefs about what constitutes a midlife crisis. Second, for people who reported they had had midlife crises, we coded what these crises were about. All entries were coded independently by two trained coders, and discrepancies were resolved by the first author. Interrater agreement between the coders was .81.

PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPERIENCES IN ADULTHOOD
Definitions of the Midlife Crisis

Despite findings in the research literature that the midlife crisis is not particularly common (Chiriboga 1997; McCrae and Costa 1990), the idea remains very popular. The term *crisis* itself implies that midlife is a time of stress and difficulties brought about by aging, and by turning age 40 in particular. Using the PTP study, Wethington (2000) examined the disjunction between popular and researcher views of midlife and its "crisis."

The PTP study confirms that the term is very recognizable to the majority of Americans. Over 90 percent of the PTP participants provided a definition of the midlife crisis, and these definitions coincided very well

with the definitions used in psychological and psychoanalytic theories of the midlife crisis. Consistent with the popular portrayal, the midlife crisis was described by most people in negative terms. Twenty-six percent of the PTP participants over age 40 reported that they had had a midlife crisis sometime in the past. This is higher than the proportion reported from other studies (e.g., McCrae and Costa 1990) in which an investigator definition was applied rather than relying on self-report. Subsequent qualitative analyses of the data applying various types of investigator definitions showed that the PTP participants used a much wider definition of what constitutes a midlife crisis than that used by researchers estimating the prevalence of the crisis.

Multiple points of discrepancy involved who typically has these crises, when they occur, and what causes them. Perhaps the most notable discrepancy was that despite the identification of the term *midlife crisis* with male personality development, women were as likely as men to report having had one. Another source of discrepancy was the range of ages reported for midlife crises. More than half of the reported crises occurred before age 40 and after age 50. The average age reported for a midlife crisis shifted up with the age of respondents who believed they had had one, with respondents over age 60 reporting midlife crises in their fifties and even in their sixties. Although the reports of "off-time" midlife crises were in most cases serious events or crises, from a theoretical standpoint they did not meet one typical criterion of what constitutes a midlife crisis (e.g., Chiriboga 1997), which is a crisis at or around ages 40–50.

Another discrepancy was the reported cause of midlife crises. Most participants did not attribute their self-reported midlife crises to aging itself but rather to major life events that posed a severe threat and challenge during a very broadly defined period of midlife. These were major negative life events that caused a searching reassessment of life. A number were linked to episodes of serious depression (Wethington 2000). Moreover, those who believed they had not experienced a midlife crisis defined the midlife crisis as a time of reassessment, brought about by serious events in one's life.

To summarize the major findings, we found that women were as likely as men to report a midlife crisis. Most self-reported midlife crises occurred before age 40 or after age 50; relatively few people report having a midlife crisis in their forties. Finally, Americans tended to report serious crises that occur in a very broad period of "midlife" as midlife crises, rather than as crises brought on solely by turning 40 (or any other age).

Midlife Crises, Turning Points, and Life Events

The preceding findings suggest, consistent with previous research, that the experience of the midlife crisis is not a universal factor of adult life, for either men or women. Why do so many Americans believe that they have experienced a midlife crisis? And are these crises "real"?

Almost certainly some of these reports came about because the boundary of what constitutes midlife has now stretched to include the years leading up to retirement (Moen and Wethington 1999). Another reason respondents reported midlife crises that occurred outside the 40–50 age range is that self-perceived psychological changes are prevalent across the life course, as Clausen (1995) and Thurnher (1983) demonstrated. Although researchers make fine distinctions between different types of psychological experiences, those who are less familiar with the theories justifying the concepts are more inclusive about "what counts." A midlife crisis is a crisis in "midlife," a period with ever-widening boundaries. Another possibility is that crises occurring in early adulthood and in old age pose greater emotional and practical difficulties than crises in midlife (cf. Clausen 1993; Erikson 1963). The earlier crises threaten the subsequent course of life ("forks in the road"), whereas the later crises threaten the most precious of resources for maintaining control over life, physical health.

Another possible explanation for why the midlife crisis persists as the major descriptor for adulthood is that there is no other widely available alternate term applied to expected, normal development in this period of life. Coupled with the observation that most Americans view aging in negative terms (e.g., Menon 2001), the term *midlife crisis* becomes a way to make meaning of negative events that occur during a period that is also expected to be a time when people are at the peak of their achievements. Thus a belief that the midlife crisis is common and expected provides a kind of comfort to those who experience the types of very serious events described by the PTP respondents who believed they had had midlife crises.

Some might note another explanation for why most reports of having a midlife crisis did not fit the traditional definition of the term. Our questions were not directed specifically at the age 40 transition itself. (If we had asked separate questions about crises associated with turning 30, 40, 50, and 60, we might have had different findings.) Another possibility is that many people, particularly men, may deny having had a crisis around age 40 (Rosenberg, Rosenberg, and Farrell 1999). The state of

crisis in the prime of life implies that one may be mentally ill or unable to cope effectively with normal challenges.

The PTP data, although very rich, do not provide all of the measures necessary to come to a firm conclusion about why Americans did not frequently report crises around the age of 40. But they do provide one way (albeit imperfect) to examine how self-perceived psychological changes of other types are distributed across the life course, and whether their distribution implies that midlife is a period of particular crisis in ways that the midlife crisis questions did not capture. Four of the turning point questions refer explicitly to psychological changes believed to "peak" in midlife, from the midlife crisis perspective: experiencing turning points in job or career, learning upsetting things about oneself, learning good things about oneself, and fulfilling dreams (Gould 1978; Levinson et al. 1978; Vaillant 1977). Data are available from both the MIDUS and PTP surveys to examine the distribution of such turning points by age and to explore their meaning.

The Distribution of Turning Points across the Life Course

MIDUS survey data on the gender and age distribution of turning points are reported in figure 2. These data document self-reported turning points over the last year before the interview. People could report up to seven types of turning points, although doing so was rare (52 percent
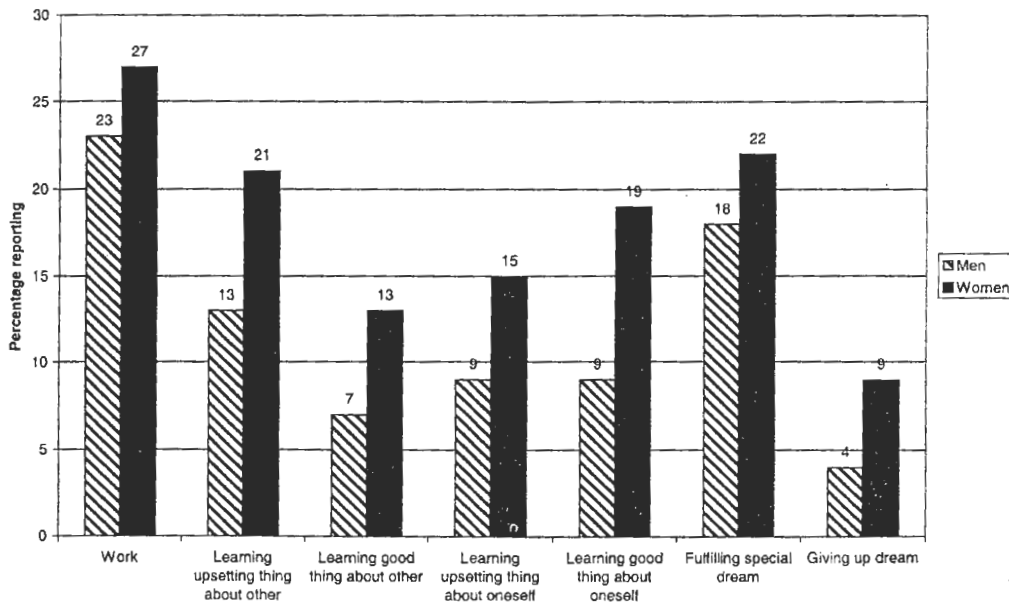

FIGURE 2. Turning points in the past twelve months, by type and gender. *Source:* MIDUS ($n = 3032$).
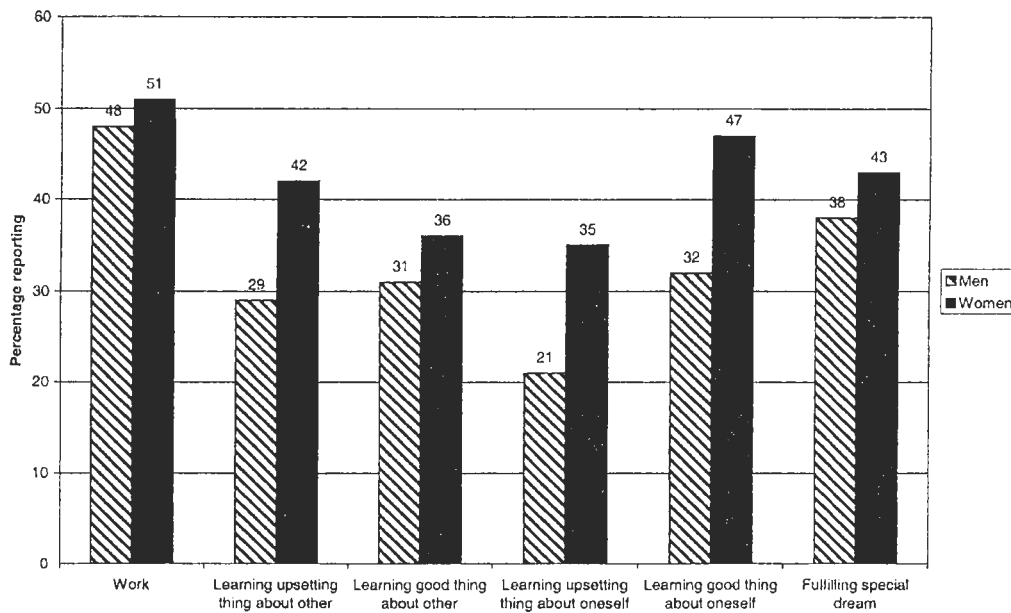
FIGURE 3. Turning points in the past five years, by type and gender. *Source:* PTP ($n = 724$).

report no turning point, and the mean number of turning points is 1.08 (SD $= 1.46$)). Overall, women report significantly more turning points than men.

Work turning points are the most frequently endorsed, which is consistent with Clausen's (1990) data reported in figure 1 (23 percent of men and 27 percent of women report them). The second most frequently endorsed in the MIDUS survey is fulfilling a dream, by 18 percent of men and 22 percent of women. (The third most endorsed was learning something upsetting about someone else.) The least endorsed is giving up a dream; only 4 percent of men and 9 percent of women report this.

Figure 3 summarizes reports on turning points, as described in the PTP survey, over a five-year retrospective period. Recall that in the PTP survey, both the method of collecting data and the recall period were different from those of the MIDUS survey. As a consequence of both of these changes, endorsement rates are higher. (The endorsement rate for the last twelve months is very similar to that of the MIDUS survey, however. Endorsement rates "fall off," with most turning points reported as taking place in the two years before the interview.) Only 16 percent do not report a turning point over the five-year recall period, and the mean number of turning points reported (out of six) is 2.23 (SD $= 1.66$). The high rate of reporting turning points is consistent with Thurnher's (1983) study.
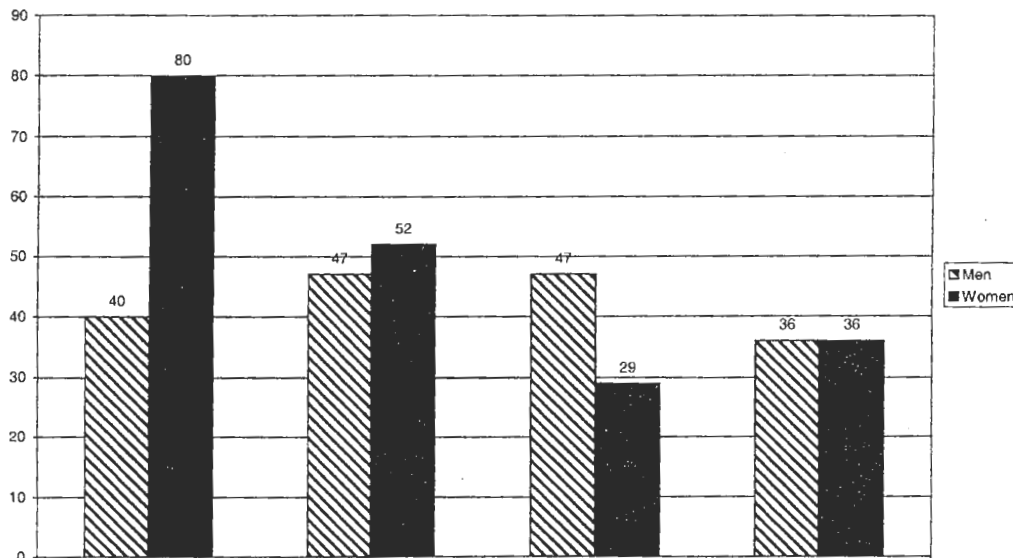
FIGURE 4. Percentage reporting work turning points in the past five years, by age and gender. *Source:* PTP.

Both men and women are most likely to report a turning point involving work (48 percent and 51 percent, respectively). For men, the second most common turning point reported is fulfilling a dream, and the third most common is learning something good about oneself. For women, the second most common is learning something good about oneself, and the third is fulfilling a dream.

We now examine how the content of frequently reported turning points differs by age, gender, and life circumstances.

Turning Points at Work

Figure 4 examines the age distribution of work turning points by gender. The age distribution varies by gender, although the difference is not statistically significant. Men's reports of work turning points peak in early and later midlife, and decline at retirement. Women's reports peak in early adulthood and decline until retirement age, where there is a small increase in reports. The age trends by gender may reflect the different average course of women's lives in contrast to men's. In early adulthood, many women must adjust their work lives to accommodate marriage and the demands of childrearing, even if they remain committed to careers (Wethington 2002). The middle of most men's lives remains dominated by work and career responsibilities. Although the peak of work turning points comes at midlife for men, there is little evidence from detailed qualitative analyses that these events are connected to classic midlife crises
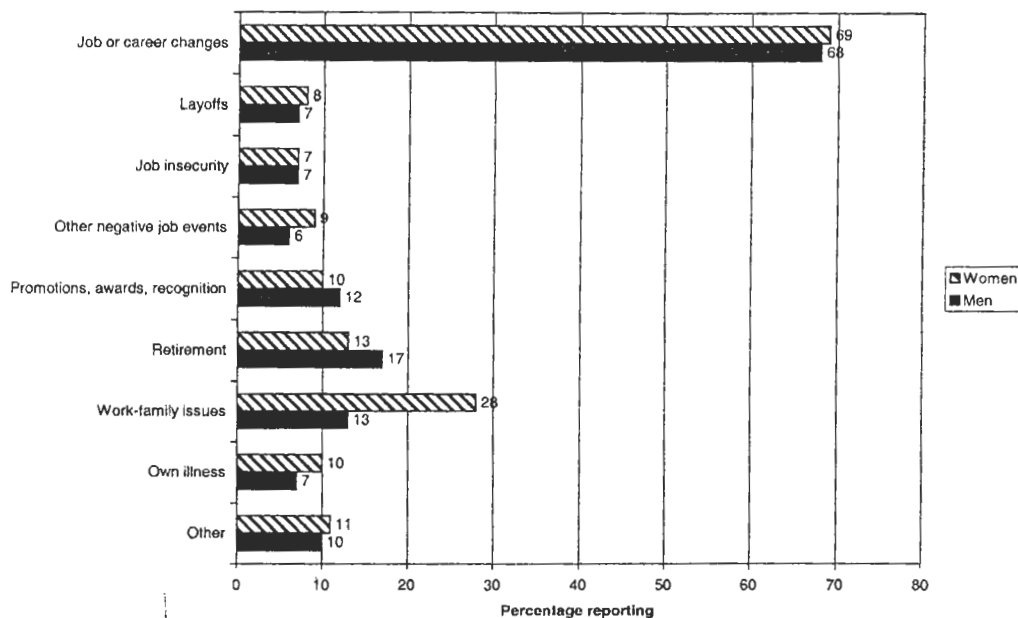
FIGURE 5. Reported causes of turning points at work, by gender. *Source:* PTP.

(Wethington 2000). For the same respondents in the PTP study, reports of turning points at work are distinct from reports of midlife crises.

Wethington (2002) analyzed the causes to which people attribute turning points involving work or career. Findings from these analyses, using the PTP data, are summarized in figure 5. The predominant cause reported was a job or career change. Overall, 68 percent of men and 69 percent of women reported that their turning point at work was triggered by the process or the fact of a job or career change. A small proportion (7 percent) named job insecurity as a trigger for a work or career turning point. Five to 7 percent attributed their work turning points to actual layoffs.

Those who reported work or career turning points attributed them to positive as well as negative events and situations. For example, retirements were reported sometimes as positive events leading to turning points, and sometimes as negative events leading to turning points. Many of the job and career changes reported were also reported as positive events, because they were voluntary or self-directed to improve a career (Wethington 2002).

What meaning do people attach to work turning points? McAdams, Josselon, and Lieblich (2001) reported that the narratives Americans produce to explain changes in their lives emphasize psychological growth in response to stress and adversity. Because work is a major source of

meaning and purpose in life, it is likely that many of those who reported work turning points spontaneously reported personal growth as an outcome of the experience.

In the PTP study, consistent with McAdams's research, most men (61 percent) and women (62 percent) reported that the work or career turning point had a positive impact on them. This was the case even when the event or situation that triggered the turning point had been a negative event. The positive impacts reported include successful mastery or resolution of the situation that caused the turning point, such as a career change that turned out well, or an impending layoff that was resolved by starting a successful business of one's own. Intrinsic rewards (e.g., a sense of growth and confidence) outnumber extrinsic rewards (a higher salary) among the positive impacts reported.

For example, the most frequently reported positive impact (11 percent) of participants was a positive shift of energy away from career to personal life. These are instances not only of scaling back at work to spend more time with family (Becker and Moen 1999) but also of scaling back to pursue volunteering, community action, and other, more rewarding interests such as hobbies. Many participants reported gaining more self-confidence, enjoying new challenges and achievements, and finding relief from stress. The most frequently mentioned negative impacts of work turning points reflect a lack of perceived mastery over work and life in general. Whether or not a turning point is perceived as having a positive or negative impact is also related to whether the job or career change was brought about by personal choice (deciding to pursue a new career) or external events (a layoff).

Changes in the Self: Lessons Learned from Events

Another type of turning point that could be related to popular ideas about midlife change and turmoil is self-perceived changes in oneself, or character. Wethington (2000) found that learning something upsetting about oneself was significantly correlated with reporting a midlife crisis, although only for men.

It was the women, however, who reported significantly more turning points involving changes in how they viewed themselves over the past twelve months (MIDUS survey) and in the last five years (PTP survey) (see figs. 6 and 7). Women were significantly more likely to report discovering something upsetting about themselves, as well as more likely to report discovering something good about themselves. Among the men and women who specifically reported learning something upsetting about
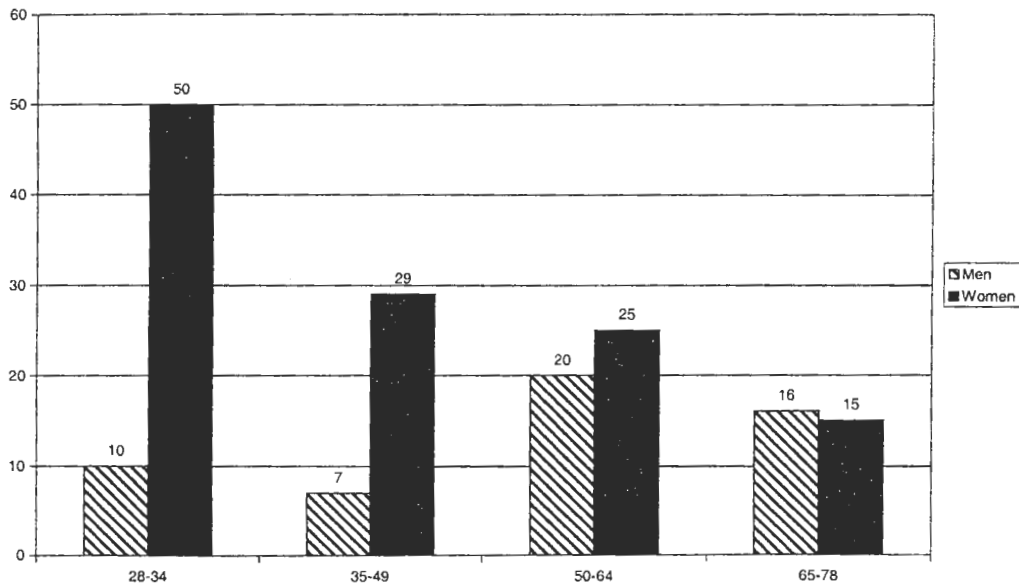
FIGURE 6. Percentage reporting learning something upsetting about themselves in the past five years, by age and gender. *Source:* PTP.
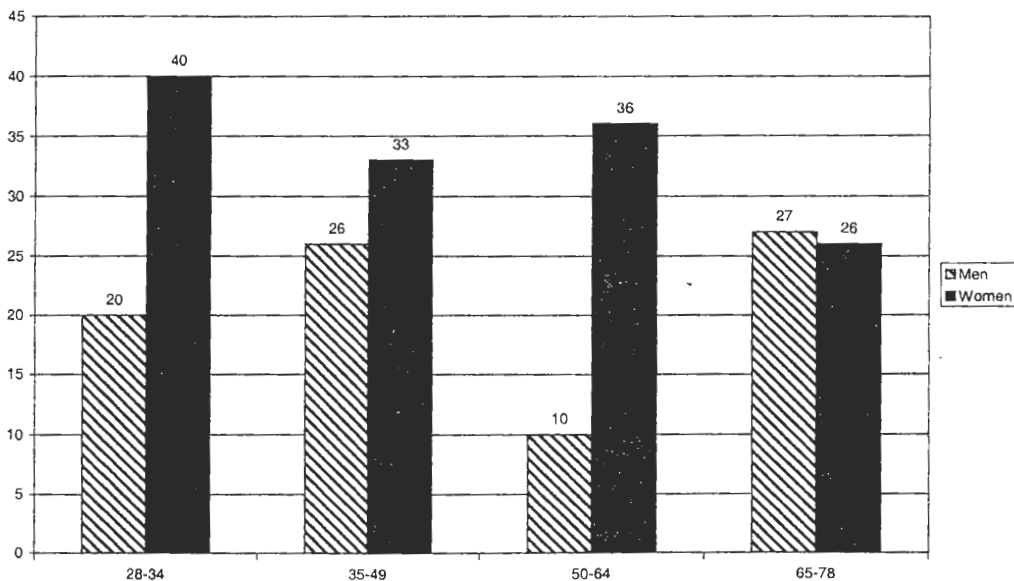

FIGURE 7. Percentage reporting learning something good about themselves in the past five years, by age and gender. *Source:* PTP.

themselves in the PTP survey, 49 percent also reported learning something good about themselves.

Younger women were most likely to report learning something upsetting about themselves, whereas young men were relatively less likely than older men to do so. The proportion of men and women who reported
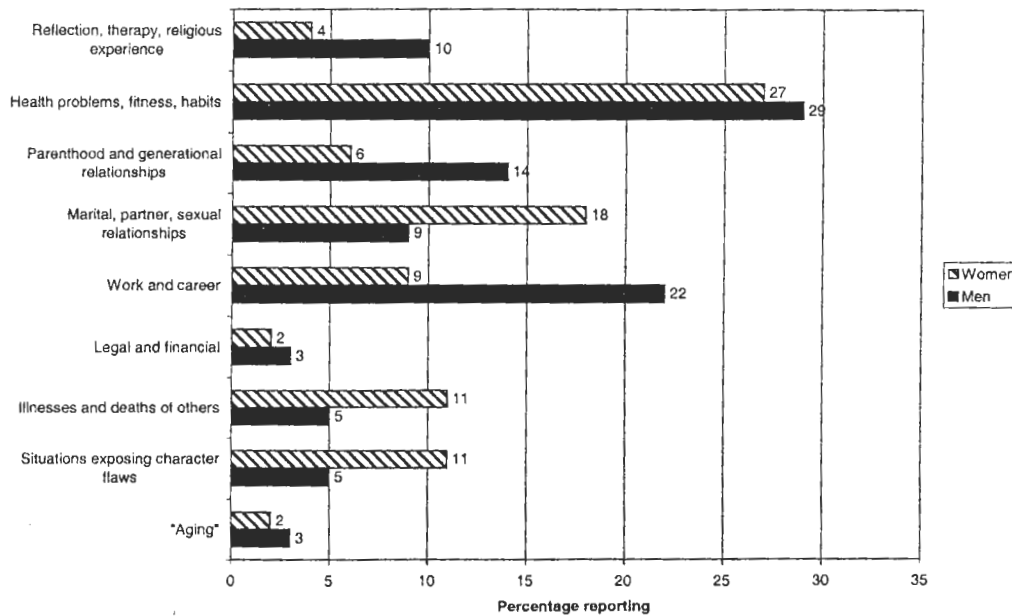
FIGURE 8. Self-reported causes of learning something upsetting oneself. *Source:* PTP.

learning something upsetting about themselves was nearly equal in the oldest age group (fig. 6). Younger women were also the most likely to learn something good about themselves, although the age trend was not significant.

Wethington (2003) examined the PTP survey responses more closely to characterize the reasons people give for learning something upsetting or good about themselves. These analyses give some insight into the age and gender distributions of this type of turning point. The causes are summarized in figures 8 and 9.

Respondents attributed changes in the way they viewed themselves to a variety of situations. The majority who reported these turning points attributed them to objective changes in the environment, either major negative events or long-lasting difficulties. Less then one in ten reported that they found out something upsetting about themselves through reflection, therapy, or religious contemplation. What these triggering situations had in common were the challenge they posed or the way they revealed one's character or personality.

Health problems were the most commonly reported cause of learning something upsetting about oneself (fig. 8). (Health problems accounted for the increase in reports of learning something upsetting among older men.) Work was the second most commonly reported cause of learning something upsetting about oneself. Work was also the most commonly
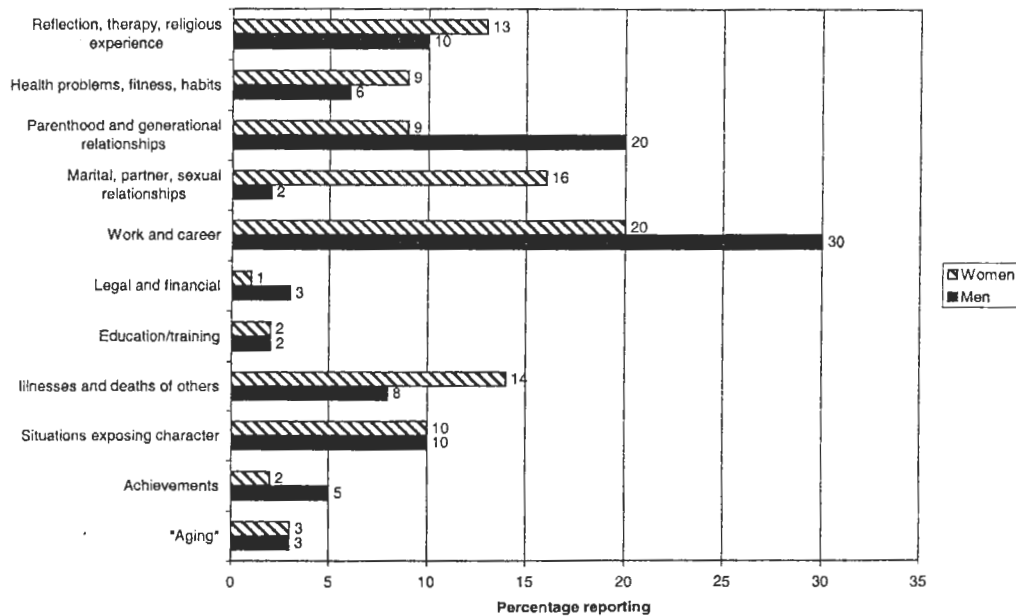
FIGURE 9. Self-reported causes of learning something good about oneself. *Source:* PTP.

self-reported cause of learning something good about oneself (fig. 9), followed by parenthood.

At first glance, health problems might seem to be an incorrect answer to the question about learning something upsetting about oneself, because health does not obviously pertain to character. Did people misunderstand this question? An examination of the PTP responses shows, however, that people understood the question. Health problems led to revelations about the need to change health-related behavior. They also led to the realization that the cause of the health problem may have been in previous behavior. Many of the respondents who reported health problems described blaming themselves for their health problems and the steps they were taking to increase their expected span of life.

As expected from past research on Americans' definitions of success, many respondents attributed learning something upsetting about themselves to problems and failures at work and in their families. No respondents attributed learning something upsetting to educational or other personal achievements, although some reported that achievements led them to learn good things about themselves.

Reports of learning something upsetting about oneself were often related to learning something good about oneself. In the PTP study, 45 percent who reported learning something upsetting about themselves

also reported that the same situation led them to learn something good about themselves. In other words, a substantial number of people used the question about finding out something good about themselves to elaborate or balance their description of the upsetting thing they had learned about themselves. Most people whose responses followed this pattern were describing their adjustment to stressful events and difficulties.

Those participants who reported learning only something good about themselves were more likely to attribute its cause to a positive event. The situations reported frequently involved positive events and transitions that symbolize maturity. These included getting married, finishing school, having a child, adopting a child, and starting a new business. Other respondents reported learning something good about themselves from experiencing approbation and affirmation from important others, at work, from their families, or from social groups. Another type of situation reported was success in challenging situations, such as managing the care of a disabled child or accomplishing difficult tasks at work. Other respondents reported learning good things about themselves from mastering new tasks and difficult hobbies.

Wethington (2003) also examined what sorts of personality and situational factors (from the MIDUS survey) predicted the reporting of turning points of this type in the PTP survey. A consistent finding was that reporting stressful difficulties or recent life events in important life roles related significantly to reporting learning both upsetting and good things about oneself. This finding holds when we control for demographic factors (age in years, female gender, and completion of college) and respondent personality. Conventional theory and research on life events and psychological distress successfully explain why negative events would be correlated to the reporting of learning upsetting things about oneself. It is not so obvious, however, why negative events and difficulties are related to reporting good things about oneself. Analyses of the qualitative data in PTP revealed that respondents reported not only negative impacts on views of themselves but also positive impacts.

As noted earlier, many of those who described negative impacts on self-views also went on to describe how the same challenging situations had had positive impacts on self-views. In the PTP responses, these reported changes are best described as lessons learned rather than positive reappraisals of the situations that caused the turning points (e.g., Aldwin, Sutton, and Lachman 1996). The majority of narratives about positive impact were extended reports of coping with the situation that caused the turning point, or plans for avoiding such problems in the future.
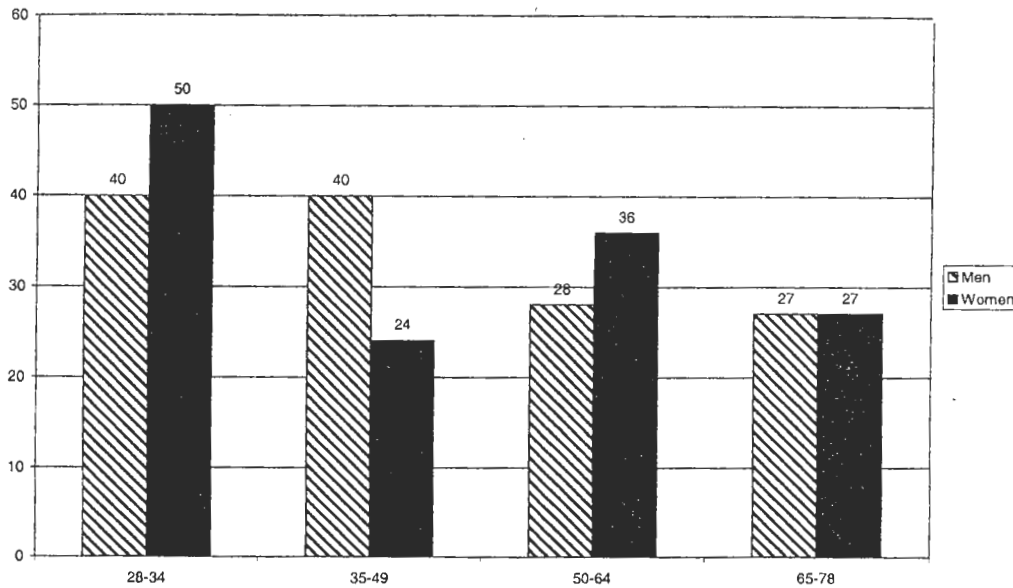
FIGURE 10. Percentage reporting fulfilling a special dream in the past five years, by age and gender. *Source:* PTP.

Dreams Fulfilled

Figure 10 reports the age and gender distribution of persons who reported fulfilling dreams. Fulfilling dreams peaks for women in early adulthood (as did work turning points and learning something upsetting or good about themselves). For men, fulfilled dreams peak in early to middle adulthood, that is, about the time the midlife crisis is believed (at least popularly) to occur.

The most common dream fulfilled involves personal finances or property acquisition (see fig. 11). Reminiscent of Thurnher's findings (1983), buying a new home, extensively remodeling an older home, or acquiring a second home was perceived as a significant transition in life. Others nominated the achievement of financial freedom or security, or the acquisition of boats and cars as significant milestones. Surely this is a reflection of the American dream; material possessions symbolize how well we have managed all of our other responsibilities and provided for others. (As one participant said, "look at what I had left over to give myself.") They also may reflect the increasing prosperity of the years over which the PTP study asked respondents to reflect, from 1993 to 1998.

For men, work was the second most common type of dream fulfilled. For women, parenthood and accomplishments outside of work and education were the second most common types of dream fulfilled, reflective of a continuing division by gender in American society as a whole.
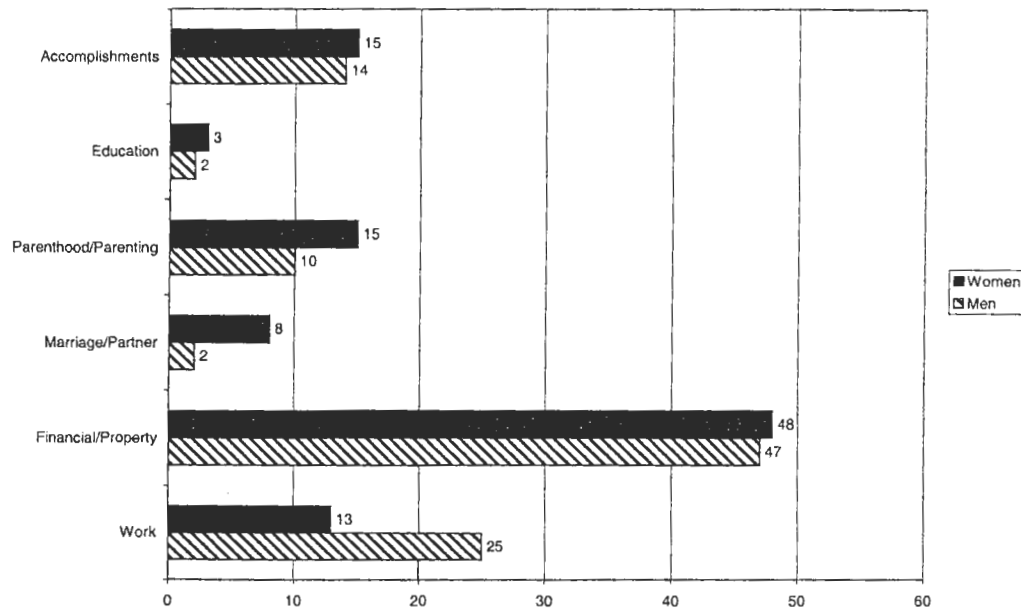
FIGURE 11. Types of dreams fulfilled in the past five years, by gender. *Source:* PTP.

DISCUSSION

This study of turning points has found support for some of its guiding ideas. First, not surprisingly, events and situations symbolizing appropriate enactment of adult social roles are associated with self-perceived psychological change in adulthood. The more detailed analyses demonstrate that reports of the four types of turning points we examined are associated with characteristics of marriage, work, parenting, and family relationships. People frequently report that major changes or disturbances in these important social roles are triggers of turning points that have a negative impact on them, at least initially. Moreover, successes and recognition in these roles are frequently nominated as causes of turning points that turned out well.

Specifically, this study examined self-reports of personal growth and change that related to work and career, and reported by respondents as "turning points at work." Research and theory in adult development and the life course suggest that work turning points would be associated with characteristics of work life that define success, such as promotions. Work turning points are related to adapting to negative work events, particularly situations that were resolved successfully. Turning points at work are also related to achieving success at work. Analyses of the intensive data suggest that promotions and getting better jobs are perceived as contributing to perceived positive growth and change for many who experience them.

It is important that many of the improvements in career are described as self-directed. In fact, perceptions of experiencing growth and change are more frequently mentioned as impacts than are increased extrinsic rewards from a better job, such as more pay.

The study also found that challenge and stress at work produce adaptation and change that is in retrospect construed positively (Vaillant 1977). Reports of turning points were strongly related to involuntary job loss (and other situations indicating job insecurity). However, it is notable that not all of the reported long-term impacts of work turning points involving job loss are negative. The qualitative data suggest that people believe they derive positive feelings of growth and change from stressful situations that they were able to resolve well (Pearlin and Schooler 1978; Thoits 1994).

Third, the data show that turning points involving perceived changes in oneself, both positive and negative, are associated by Americans with stressors and challenges. Chronic stressors in marriage, at work, and in parenting are consistently related to reporting a turning point involving one's character. The qualitative data confirm this interpretation.

The analyses of the qualitative data on turning points involving learning something good or upsetting about oneself raise several additional important points. When people reported the negative psychological impacts of learning upsetting things about themselves, they described depression, devaluation of previous beliefs or views, or devaluation of the self. When they described positive impacts of learning upsetting things about themselves, they reported how they coped with the consequences of the events or the difficulties that caused the turning point. People report experiencing positive psychological growth because they believe they coped well (see also Schaefer and Moos 1992). They attribute success to taking action and solving the problem, to taking steps to avoid similar problems in the future, to minimizing the impact of chronic stress on other aspects of their lives, to acquiring new knowledge and self-knowledge, and to renewing their faith and hope in the future.

Another important finding is that self-reported turning points are more prevalent in early adulthood than in midlife. Clausen (1993) found no evidence of prevalent midlife crises in his in-depth studies of life history. Both the MIDUS and the PTP studies confirm Clausen's general finding. In general, turning points were most likely to be reported in young adulthood, with some important exceptions. Except for one instance—learning an upsetting thing about oneself—reporting a

610

turning point was not significantly correlated with reporting a midlife crisis (Wethington 2000), and then only for men.

What we have called turning points often occur earlier in the life span than what was defined as the age of midlife crisis. In fact, we found considerable evidence that the "age 30 transition" described by Levinson et al. (1978) or the decade of life before age 30 is more psychologically disruptive to more people than is the age 40 transition. This is consistent with previous research (Clausen 1995, 1998) on psychological turning points: people in the Clausen study nominated early adulthood (and even adolescence) as the time period of "most important" turning points. It is also consistent with Levinson's writings about the age 30 transition (see Levinson et al. 1978), an aspect of his work that has been less integrated into popular beliefs about adulthood.

Nevertheless, the term *midlife crisis* remains a powerful metaphor in the stories told about adulthood. Its ubiquity in descriptions of middle-aged men and women in contemporary literary novels (e.g., Oates 2001) speaks to its standing as a phenomenon of popular culture and its power as a belief. We suggest that the notion's persistence is indicative of its symbolism to Americans of the hidden potential of their aging to threaten control over their lives, rather than its presence in everyday life. In everyday life, the decade of the forties is likely to be experienced as a time when material and emotional dreams are fulfilled.

NOTE

1. About 20 percent of the MIDUS survey respondents skipped the question, and another 3 percent answered the question incorrectly. This may have been the result of an inadvertently confusing questionnaire page, which implied that the question could be skipped. In telephone pilots for the PTP study, moreover, respondents often protested the question angrily, saying that people should "never give up dreams."

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