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T W O

*Judgments of One's Own Overall Contribution
to the Welfare of Others*

Life-Course Trajectories and Predictors

William Fleeson

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the general parameters of social responsibility in adulthood, taking advantage of MIDUS, a large and semi-representative sample of adult Americans, to provide answers to perennial and broad questions about social responsibility: First, what is the overall level of social responsibility among adult Americans? That is, to what extent do Americans see themselves as contributing to the well-being of others? Second, do men and women contribute different amounts to the well-being of others? Some theory suggests that women are disproportionately burdened with responsibilities for others or that women have greater interest in and greater ability to care for others (e.g., Antonucci and Akiyama 1997; Heimer 1996; MacDermid, Heilbrun, and DeHaan 1997); both of these notions would suggest that American women contribute more than American men. Third, how does social responsibility vary across the life span? Both theorists of midlife and theorists of social responsibility have separately argued that social responsibility peaks in the middle years of adulthood (Erikson 1963; Levinson 1978). Nonetheless, data testing this idea have been rare or have produced mixed findings (McAdams, de St. Aubin, and Logan 1993). The MIDUS survey offers two particular advantages on this point: it is a probability sample of all Americans (allowing generalizability and a near-definitive answer); and it is large, granting the power to test several possible age trajectories. The results will show that men and women have different age trajectories, with women showing the predicted midlife peak and men not, and a substantial portion of this chapter will be devoted to trying to explain this difference. Finally, the last question concerns whether there is reward to virtue: Specifically, what is the relationship of social responsibility to the well-being of the socially responsible actor?

This chapter acts somewhat as a table setting for the remaining, more analytic chapters in this volume. Whereas I treat social responsibility as a whole, other chapters focus on more specific aspects. Whereas I analyze the entire sample, other chapters analyze specific

subsamples. Whereas I focus on gross demographic associates of social responsibility, other chapters focus on specific predictors and consequences. In this way, I hope to provide a framework within which to locate the more precise and analytic findings from the following chapters.

THEORETICAL ISSUES IN CONCEPTUALIZING
AND MEASURING OVERALL
SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Existing theory and measurement of social responsibility is diverse, doing justice to its complex nature (Bradley 1997; Erikson 1963; McAdams and de St. Aubin 1992; Ryff and Heincke 1983). Here, I take one particular approach to conceptualizing social responsibility, and this is reflected in the measurement of social responsibility. Specifically, the conception of social responsibility used here is inclusive and subjective. In the following, I discuss the implications, advantages, and disadvantages of this conceptualization and measurement of social responsibility. Such issues are important qualifiers for interpretations of the answers to this chapter's central questions.

Inclusivity

My focus is on overall, or global, social responsibility, in an explicit attempt to be inclusive of all forms of contribution to others and of diverse theoretical conceptions of social responsibility. Consequently, respondents were instructed to take into account all that they do as a result of their concern for others and to consider all possible recipients of their contributions. In the section of the MIDUS survey concerning community involvement, each respondent answered the following question: "Using a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means 'the worst possible contribution to the welfare and well-being of other people' and 10 means 'the best possible contribution to the welfare and well-being of other people,' how would you rate your contribution to the welfare and well-being of other people these days? Take into account all that you do, in terms of time, money, or concern, on your job, and for your family, friends, and the community." Thus, the item is a summary statement of the respondent's overall contribution to others.

As is clear from the above question, the survey defines social responsibility in a way that includes all of what people do, think, and feel that they consider to be a contribution to others. The definition is not limited to volunteering, donating money, parenting, mentoring, or career-

related contributions, but includes them all. It is not limited to voluntary contributions, but rather includes both obligatory and chosen contribution. Excluded are other meanings of "responsibility": this conceptualization does not include "being responsible" in the sense of being dependable and conscientious, nor in the sense of controlling and making decisions, nor in the sense of originating or being in power.

The advantage of such a definition is that it provides the big picture: It allows answering questions about Americans' total, overall contribution to others' well-being. As a corollary advantage, the definition is evaluatively neutral and counts different forms of social responsibility equivalently. Different individuals can be socially responsible in different manners, and such a definition does not exclude those who do not fit into more narrow categories of social responsibility. For example, an individual who donates little time or money because his or her work is consuming and socially responsible (e.g., a consumer advocate) is not counted as socially irresponsible when using an inclusive definition. (See chapter 12 for more on how work can be a means to express social responsibility.) On the other hand, inclusivity here entails a lack of specificity. It is not clear from this measure exactly what socially responsible individuals are doing or feeling, and it is not clear which aspects of social responsibility account for the findings discussed below.

This definition of social responsibility overlaps with but is not identical to other conceptions of socially responsible behavior. One conception that has received considerable attention in the psychological literature recently is *generativity*. Generativity, as the name implies, focuses more on one particular type of social responsibility: caring for the next generation, including generating it, maintaining it, and benefiting it (Bradley 1997; Erikson 1963; Kotre 1984; McAdams and de St. Aubin 1992; Peterson and Stewart 1993). Although different writers have proposed different versions of generativity, all versions share an emphasis on caring for the next generation. Many such writers also agree that caring for the next generation often includes caring for the current generation, as a way of maintaining and improving social institutions for the benefit of the next generation. The current chapter, in contrast, does not specify which generation is the recipient of the contribution, and so includes caring for the current generation as much as caring for the next or even the previous generation (see Brody 1985 for a discussion of the considerable obligation caring for the previous generation can entail). Thus, the present conception is broader and more inclusive than generativity; on the flip side, this measure thereby loses some of generativity's unique features.

Other overlapping concepts include ethical behavior and virtuous behavior. Although social responsibility and these two concepts all overlap, none of them includes the entirety of any other. Socially responsible behavior is likely but not necessarily ethical or virtuous. For example, caring for one group of people may be at the expense of hurting another group or even oneself. Likewise, ethical or virtuous behavior does not always involve contributing to the well-being of others (though some Utilitarian theorists would argue that it does). This discussion is obviously too large for this chapter; the point here is that social responsibility is not synonymous with ethical or virtuous behavior.

In sum, this measure is inclusive of several conceptions of social responsibility (e.g., generativity); the downside is that it loses the richness of more specific conceptions. It is inclusive of many actions involved in social responsibility (i.e., "all that you do"); the downside is that this chapter provides no information on the different aspects of social responsibility. It is inclusive of concern as well as action; the downside is that we don't know whether an individual's response comes from action or from thought. (See chapter 3 for discussion of narrower definitions of social responsibility, such as found in Putnam 1995 and Seligman 1992.) This chapter's purpose is only to consider American individuals' overall level of social responsibility, and the measure's inclusiveness is primarily an advantage for that purpose.

Subjectivity

Committing to a truly comprehensive definition of social responsibility suggests using a subjective definition. That is, in order to include all forms of contribution to others, it may be best to allow the individual respondent to evaluate his or her actions as socially responsible or not. There are at least two reasons for this. First, humans can be very creative in the ways they contribute to the welfare of others (Colby and Damon 1992; chapter 9, this volume). Any definition based on a specific set of criteria or on a specific set of actions must be limited to those specific criteria and actions, thereby leaving out some of the more creative ways of being socially responsible. For example, defining social responsibility as the number of hours volunteered leaves out those individuals who are socially responsible through work or family. A subjective measure allows each individual to include his or her unique forms of social responsibility.

Second, social responsibility is itself a largely subjective concept. Evaluating whether an action is socially responsible (whether it contributes to the welfare of others) requires personal judgment. It re-

quires deciding at least whether the consequences of the action are beneficial for the others or not, and whether the motivation was to help others or not (though the extent to which motivation is relevant is arguable). For example, a career in the human services may be socially responsible, or it simply may be a convenient career choice. Objective measures of social responsibility necessarily smooth over such variations across individuals and leave the judgment up to the researchers. This is not to imply that the individual is the best judge of whether his or her actions are socially responsible, but to the extent that motivation is part of the judgment, the actor is at least a relatively informed judge.

On the other hand, such a definition has the normal problems with self-report (e.g., response bias, social desirability), which may be exacerbated in this case because of the measure's inclusiveness and obvious social desirability. That is, the evaluation and judgment concerns a much greater amount of behavior than a typical self-report item (it asks about all that respondents do for others vs., for example, asking how often they donate money to organizations). This wide latitude in judgment potentially opens the door to self-enhancing bias, such as selective recall, and to the use of different comparison standards by different individuals (Kobrynowicz and Biernat 1997). The main consequence for the present chapter, assuming that such biases are reasonably randomly distributed throughout the population, is an increase in error variance, making results harder to find (i.e., a reduction in power). It is also possible that these problems lead to biases in the results (e.g., men use different standards than women), but this is less likely.

The measure follows from this definition, asking each respondent to evaluate his or her own actions. The measure does refer to actual behavior ("take into account all that you do"), but both the definition and evaluation of what the respondent does is left up to the respondent. Such a measure is inappropriate for some purposes; the proposal here is that such a measure is useful for obtaining a comprehensive summary of each individual's total contribution to the well-being of others.

Using a Single Item

A third issue concerns the operational definition of social responsibility: I used a single item to measure social responsibility. Single-item measures suffer from reliability problems more than do multiple-item measures. That is, a larger percentage of the variance in this measure will be error variance than is typical for multiple-item scales. Of course, this is a quantitative and not a qualitative difference between single-

item and multiple-item scales: it means only that there is more error variance in this measure, not that there is only or mostly error variance in this measure. The primary consequence is that it works against finding results (it reduces the power of the analyses).

Again, however, this may be acceptable given the conceptual focus: investigating a global and subjective measure of total contribution to others. It would be difficult to construct additional items without becoming specific (sacrificing generality) or without becoming objective (sacrificing the advantages of a subjective measure). In any event, the potentially large component of error in this measure must be kept in mind when interpreting the results.¹

It should also be noted that most of the other chapters in this volume deal with more specific, more objective, and multiple-item measures of social responsibility. This chapter's inclusivity may provide a context within which to locate the other chapters, and a comprehensive conceptualization of social responsibility may be best for providing such a context.

ARE AMERICANS SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE?

The first question is a simple one: In general, how much do Americans contribute to the welfare of others? The answer includes not only what the average amount of contribution to others is, but also the diversity of levels of contributions across adult Americans. That is, the answer speaks also to the issue of whether social responsibility is evenly distributed among Americans or whether the burden is shouldered by only a few, while the rest avoid responsibility. This question is interesting in its own right, simply as one way of gauging the overall social responsibility of Americans in the 1990s. This question also has interest for developmental-theoretical reasons. By describing the extent to which Americans develop into socially responsible adults naturally, and assuming that social responsibility is a valued developmental aim, the answer to this question describes how far Americans get toward this goal. Finally, this question may also be useful in forming public policy. For example, the current state of social responsibility to others may be informative to efforts to increase or even to rely on social responsibility to solve our social problems (see Putnam 1995; chapters 1 and 3, this volume).

This study provides a unique opportunity to answer this question. The size of the sample (over 3,500 respondents) allows for a relatively precise and accurate estimate of the level of social responsibility in the population of Americans as a whole. The sampling method (random-

digit dialing) provides a quality representation of all Americans (see the appendix for a full description of the sample and method for this study, as well as for a description of the representativeness of the sample).

The average response to the single item cited previously was $6.58 \pm .07$, and the standard deviation was 2.24, on the 0–10 rating scale. Given that a response of “0” means the “worst possible contribution” and a response of “10” means the “best possible contribution,” an average response of about six and a half is only somewhat encouraging. It is indeed closer to the best possible contribution (the midpoint of the scale is 5) than to the worst possible, but not by much. As noted, the sample size makes this a fairly accurate representation of the average American. As the standard error is only .037, the 95% confidence interval on the population mean ranges from 6.51 to 6.65; the social responsibility of the average American is just over 6.5.

The large standard deviation (2.24) also provides valuable information. Primarily it shows the considerable variation in the extent to which Americans take on social responsibility. As shown in figure 2.1,

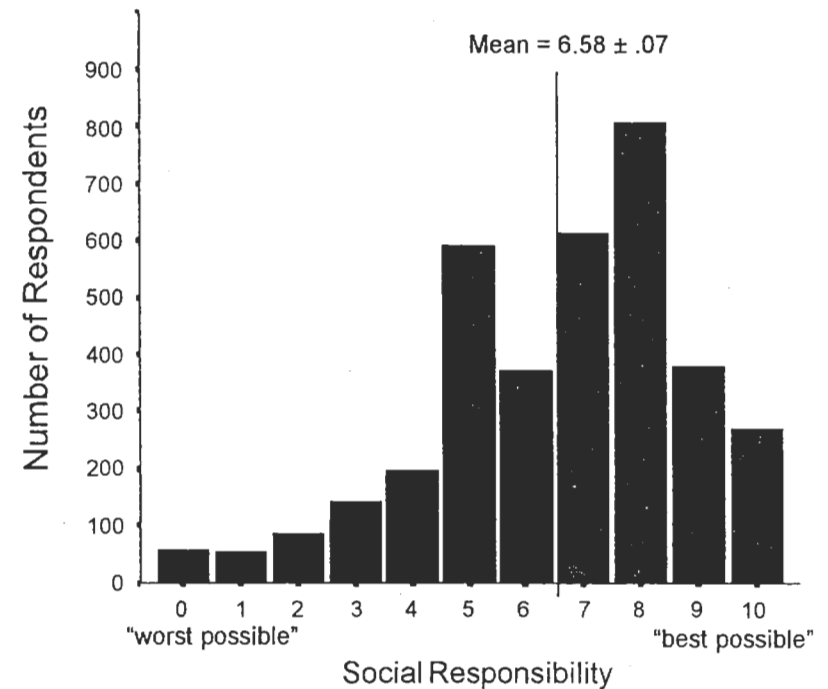


FIGURE 2.1. Distribution of responses to “How would you rate your contribution to the welfare and well-being of other people?”

many individuals reported the best possible or close to the best possible contribution to others (18% responded with a 9 or a 10), whereas many others consider themselves to be making close to the worst contribution to the well-being of others possible (10% responded with a 3 or lower, and over 30% responded below the midpoint of the scale).

A useful comparison standard is the respondents' responses to several similar questions in other parts of the survey. Using the same "worst possible" (0) to "best possible" (10) scale, respondents rated the quality of other domains in their life: work, marriage (or close relationship), relationship to children, finances, sexual life, health, and life as a whole. Thus, the quality of respondents' contributions to others can be compared with the quality of other aspects of their lives. The means for each of these eight life domains is shown in figure 2.2. The most striking result is that all but two of the domains were rated as higher quality than was contribution to the well-being of others. An ANOVA revealed that the means differ from each other, $F(7, 14539) = 521.57, p < .001$, and follow-up Scheffé tests revealed that each mean differed significantly from each other mean, all $F's > 15$. That is, Americans report that their health, work, relationship with children, marriage, and overall life are all better than their contributions to others. Only their financial situation and their sex life are seen as worse than their contribution to others. Whether the cause of this is priorities, effort, or

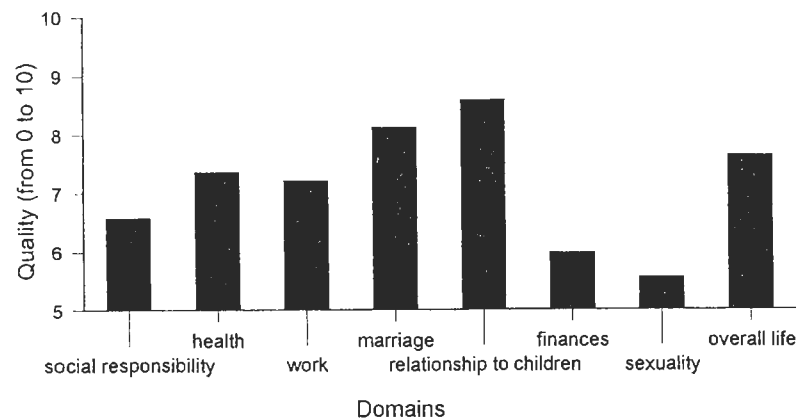


FIGURE 2.2. Quality of social responsibility in comparison to quality of other life domains. *N*s vary from 2,561 to 3,762, primarily reflecting variations in marital status, having children, and employment status.

something else, Americans are doing better at getting their own lives in order than they are at contributing to the well-being of others. By this standard, Americans' average level of social responsibility is low.

AGE- AND GENDER-RELATED DIFFERENCES IN SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

From the beginning, researchers have closely related social responsibility to adult-developmental theory and to adulthood. Some theorists have pinpointed it as an issue for the middle years of adulthood. Simply put, they argue that the confluence of maximal resources (the power to be socially responsible), maximal societal demand (the societal expectation that midlife adults will be the contributors), and maximal desire to help (the desire to contribute, aroused by developmental milestones) leads to a midlife peak in social responsibility (e.g., Erikson 1963). McAdams and de St. Aubin (1992), for example, hypothesized that there are two sources of generativity, and that these are strongest in adulthood. First, there is cultural demand, encoded in the work-related, lifestyle-related, and ideological opportunities and obligations that society puts on individuals. Second is inner desire. As adults age they often become more aware of their own mortality, which leads to twin desires to contribute to others: a need to feel needed by others, and a need to leave a lasting legacy (Kotre 1984). This inner desire may also be fueled by reminders of others' needs for receiving contributions (e.g., children prominently need contribution and care), and these reminders may become more insistent and salient in the middle adult years. These and similar ideas have sometimes led to an association of midlife with social responsibility.

Similarly, gender is often integral to theorizing about social responsibility. One main form of this theorizing concerns strong gender differences in the forms and amounts of socially responsible behavior. Some theorists have maintained that women are burdened with greater social responsibility than are men. Partly because men more often take the role of financial provider, women are theorized to more often take generative roles within the family and volunteering roles outside the family. Thus, such theories predict that women contribute more to the well-being of others than do men. Other theorists agree that there are gender-segregated types of social responsibility but argue that they balance out, so that men and women end up contributing equally to the well-being of others (Rossi and Rossi 1990). For example, men may be socially responsible at work (by mentoring, donating money, working

pro bono, or through the work itself). These theorists predict equal levels of social responsibility for men and women. The present chapter will test for gender differences in overall amount of social responsibility but, because of the generalized nature of the measure, will not test for gender differences in specific types of social responsibility (see chapter 3 for more detail on gender differences in the various domains and dimensions of responsibility).

In the following I test these theories about age- and gender-related differences in social responsibility. First, I test whether men and women, ignoring age, differ in average level of social responsibility. Second, I test for age differences or age trajectories in overall social responsibility, ignoring gender. The minimum age in the sample is twenty-five, disallowing comparison of adults to pre-adults (McAdams and de St. Aubin [1992] did find a difference), but adults of different ages can be compared on their contribution to the well-being of others. In particular, I test whether there exists a midlife peak. Finally, I will combine age and gender to test whether women and men have differing age trajectories.

As mentioned previously, the size and representativeness of the sample allows for fairly precise and accurate answers to these questions. The few previous tests of the midlife-peak hypothesis have received some mixed support (McAdams, de St. Aubin, and Logan 1993; Peterson and Stewart 1990; Ryff and Heincke 1983; Ryff and Migdal 1984). That is, there is currently sufficient evidence to keep looking, but not enough to answer the question. Thus, this chapter may provide one of the first definitive answers to these basic questions about social responsibility. One additional advantage of this sample is that it affords high statistical power: If a relationship between age and social responsibility exists, this sample will reveal it. Furthermore, this sample has the power to reveal exactly what the shape of that relationship is. That is, I have the opportunity to accurately test several shapes of the relationship between age and social responsibility: linear (e.g., a steady increase with age); quadratic (e.g., a peak in midlife); cubic (e.g., a peak in the late thirties and a nadir in the late sixties); and several other smooth curves. At the same time, this study is no more likely than any other to make a type I error: if no relationship between age and social responsibility exists, this study is no more likely than any other study to reveal one. In sum, the power of this sample allows finding the precise shape of the age and social responsibility relationship.

Of course, the disadvantages of the present sample are also appar-

ent, such as the slight positive sampling (e.g., only Americans possessing telephones were contacted) and the over-representation of white Americans. An additional limitation for the analyses in this chapter is the cross-sectional nature of the study. Comparisons across ages in levels of current social responsibility are comparisons across different individuals, preventing certainty about what happens as any given individual ages. Rather, different cohorts of the differently aged individuals may be responsible for the trajectories. (However, as will be seen shortly, each individual did supply ratings on past and future social responsibility, providing a version of within-person age trajectories.)

Gender-Related Differences in Social Responsibility

First investigating gender, a *t*-test revealed that women were more socially responsible than men, $t(3574) = 8.76, p < .001$ (for women, $M = 6.90$; for men, $M = 6.25$). This difference is about two-thirds of a point on the original scale (about one-third of a standard deviation). Thus, this sample provides support for the notion that women contributed more to the well-being of others than did men in America in the mid-1990s.

Age-Related Differences in Social Responsibility

Age-related curves were investigated with regression analyses predicting social responsibility from age. In a regression on the whole sample, no linear relationship between age and social responsibility was evident, $b = .005, p = .10$.² However, a quadratic relationship was revealed, $b_{\text{age}} = .094, b_{\text{age-squared}} = -.0009, p < .001$, and no higher power relationship was significant. As shown in figure 2.3, this curve is precisely the shape and location predicted by the midlife-peak hypothesis: social responsibility is lowest, $M = 6.12$, at age 25, climbs to a peak of 6.75 at age 51, and steadily declines again to almost 6.12 at age 75, for a total change of about one-half scale point in each direction. This effect is small, accounting for only half a percent of variance in social responsibility, but it is real, and the hypothesis is supported.

The interpretation of this curve, however, is qualified by an interaction with gender. As described earlier, I performed regressions to test for different age trajectories for men and women. A significant interaction between the quadratic age term and gender, $b_{\text{interaction}} = -.0014, p = .001$, allowed investigating age trajectories separately for men and for women. The most striking finding is that only women show the quadratic relationship (and no higher power relationship). For men,

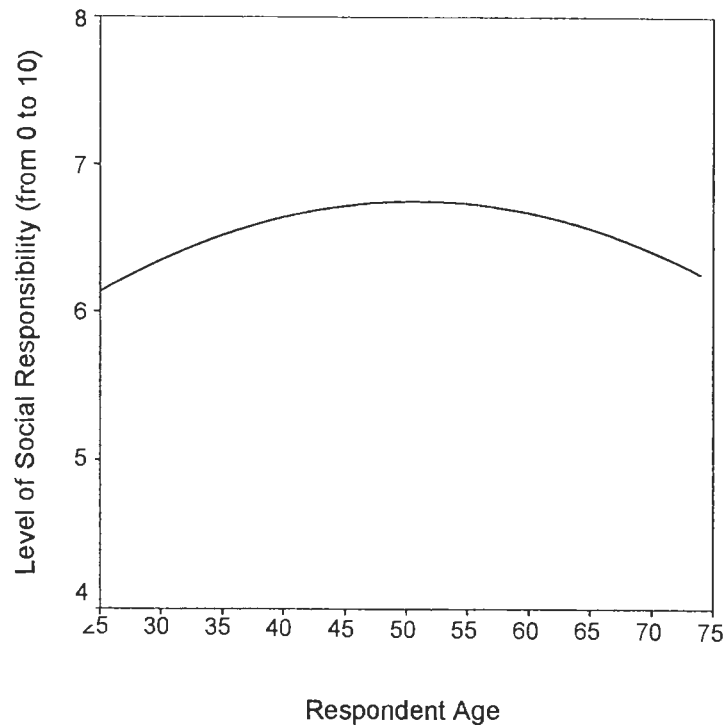


FIGURE 2.3. Social responsibility across ages. Shown are respondents' own estimates of their level of contribution to the well-being of others. All respondents are included in this significant curvilinear relationship.

age was linearly related to social responsibility (no higher power of age added a significant amount of variance to the prediction of men's social responsibility). The linear trend was positive and slight, $b_{\text{age}} = .011$, $p < .01$, such that every decade was associated with a tenth of a point increase in social responsibility—over fifty years of adulthood, this accumulates to a half-point increase.

For women, the midlife peak was evident and stronger than for the sample as a whole, $b_{\text{age}} = .16$, $b_{\text{age-squared}} = -.0016$, $p < .001$. Figure 2.4 shows the two age gradients. Women go from a low of 6 at age 25 to a peak of 7.2 at age 47.5, and back down to approximately 6.4 at age 75. Thus the effect for women is over 1 point (about one-half standard deviation) and accounts for almost 2% of the variance. Still a small effect, but now of worthwhile magnitude.

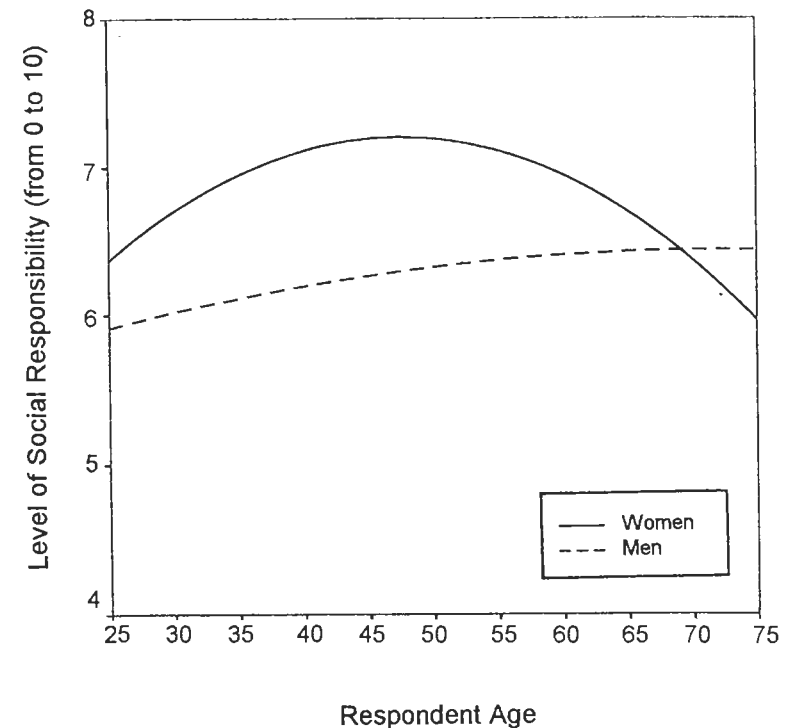


FIGURE 2.4. Social responsibility across ages, separately by gender. Shown are respondents' own estimates of their level of contribution to the well-being of others. The interactions between age and gender and between age-squared and gender were both significant. The curvilinear age-related trend was significant for women only.

Additional support for this finding comes from two related items in the survey. Respondents indicated also how good they expected their contribution to be ten years in the future, and how good they remembered it to have been ten years in the past. These two items were otherwise identical to ratings of current social responsibility. Analyses were repeated for these items. Panel A of figure 2.5 shows the results for women. All three questions showed quadratic relations to age (and no higher power relationships), and they all converged on the same conclusion: social responsibility among women is highest in the late forties, with smooth increases to that peak and smooth decreases from that peak. What is remarkable about this convergence is that the answers are from different women. That is, the women who remembered their

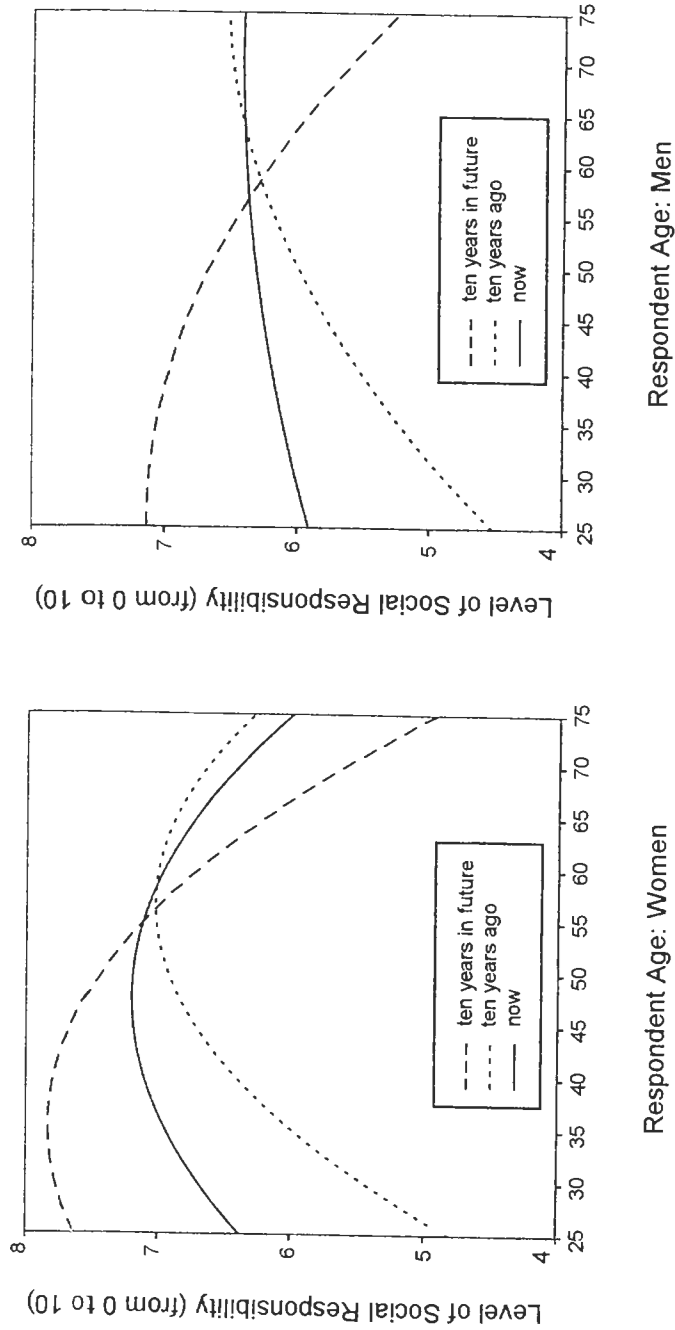


FIGURE 2.5. Social responsibility across respondents' ages. Shown are respondents' own estimates of their level of contribution to the well-being of others now, ten years in the past, and ten years in the future. Curvilinear age-related trends were significant for all but the men responding about their current contributions.

level of social responsibility as being the highest ten years previous were the sixty-year-old respondents; the women who most anticipated being more socially responsible in ten years were the forty-year-old women; and the women who reported the highest level of current social responsibility were the fifty-year-old women.

The results for men are less consistent, as shown in panel B of figure 2.5. The older the male respondents, the more they reported current social responsibility, the more they remembered having been highly socially responsible in the past, but the less they expected to be socially responsible in the future. That is, the younger men anticipated grand contributions to the well-being of others, and the older men remembered grand contributions to the well-being of others; the line for present contributions shows that neither holds true.³

In summary, there is strong support for the midlife-peak hypothesis of social responsibility, but only for women. In contrast, men show a nearly flat line across age, with a steady but slow increase that first gets them to the level of women at about age seventy. When it comes to women, those theorists of social responsibility who emphasized a midlife peak appear to be correct: American women in their late forties are contributing more to the well-being of others than are women of any other age, and than are men of any age at all. These findings may also clarify the previously mixed picture. Many previous studies have either included both men and women or defined midlife in a way that excludes the late forties. Only studies that focus on women in their late forties or early fifties would provide clear evidence for the midlife peak. The following section describes some attempts to explain this peak for women.⁴

Why the Midlife Peak for Women?

Women showed a midlife peak in social responsibility, as expected. This expectation was based on the presumed confluence of cultural demands and individual development (e.g., McAdams and de St. Aubin 1992). That is, midlife is a unique time when (1) younger individuals may not yet have acquired the resources to be socially responsible and older adults may witness the waning of resources; and (2) immediate contextual factors such as responsibility at work or parenting may similarly reach maximum demand in midlife and then decline thereafter. The purpose of most of the remainder of this chapter is to address the age-trajectory of social responsibility for women. It is beyond the chapter's scope to fully explain the midlife peak; nonetheless, a brief explo-

ration of some of the more obvious explanations for why women in midlife are more socially responsible than women in young or older adulthood is possible.

Candidate explanations hinge upon features of women's midlife that (1) are not present in young or older adulthood; and (2) increase social responsibility. Similarly, they may also involve features of young or older adult women's lives that are (1) not present in midlife; and (2) decrease social responsibility. (Note that such features may be different for younger and older women.) It is also possible that a feature has greater influence on social responsibility in one period of life (more positive in midlife or more negative at other ages). For example, having children may be more strongly associated with increased social responsibility in midlife than in older adulthood. I will explore four such features: two cultural demands (career and parenthood), and two developmentally influenced resources (health and income) (Peterson and Klohnen 1995).

Cultural Demands: Career and Parenthood

Career is certainly an open venue for social responsibility. On the one hand, it is possible that more women work in midlife than at other ages, and that this is responsible for the peak. On the other hand, it is possible that only in midlife does career increase social responsibility. That is, younger adults may not have the power or responsibilities to make social contributions through work, and older adults may scale back their work-related activities. Such possibilities suggest that the midlife peak exists for employed women but not for non-employed women. Conversely, quite the opposite is also possible. Women and men who work may be consumed with work responsibilities, leaving only non-employed women to demonstrate social responsibility. This possibility predicts that the midlife peak in social responsibility may be evident only among non-employed women.

Three identical regression analyses, one for full-time employed women, one for part-time employed women, and one for non-employed women, showed the same quadratic curve for each group of women, with a peak in midlife. Thus, women working full-time experience the midlife peak the same as women who do not work or women who work part-time. Employment status does not explain the midlife peak.

However, not all full-time employment produces power and responsibility, and perhaps only women in responsibility-enhancing ca-

reers experience this peak. It is beyond this chapter to test such an idea fully, but a rough test is possible. As described previously, respondents indicated the overall quality of their work situation (as shown in figure 2.2). I repeated regressions holding this measure of work quality constant to see whether it accounts for the peak. That is, if the peak is due to women in midlife holding the highest quality careers, then holding quality of work constant should remove the age effect. The results for this regression were very similar to those presented earlier: controlling for quality of work did not affect the curvilinear relationship between age and social responsibility in women. I performed a second analysis to test for interaction effects. That is, it may be possible that only women in high-quality work situations show the midlife peak. A regression with an age-by-work-quality interaction term added no significant variance, suggesting that the midlife peak occurs equally among women in all qualities of work situation. Note that the statistical power afforded by this study makes type II errors unlikely: if this interaction were present, this analysis would have detected it.

In sum, career does not seem to account for this peak. Given that men do not show a midlife peak in social responsibility, it may not be too surprising that employment is not the explanation for this finding. However, not being employed (or being under-employed) is also not the explanation, as working and non-working women both showed the midlife peak. Of course it may require studies designed specifically to explore the reasons for the midlife peak to obtain a more definitive answer.

A second possibility is childbearing. Having children certainly increases demands to contribute to the well-being of others (i.e., the children) (Snarey et al. 1987). In addition, children may arouse a desire to care for others that is translated into a general increase in social responsibility. This increase in social responsibility may begin with the birth of the child in the twenties and rise steadily throughout childhood (until the late forties); after the children leave the home, these demands may slowly trail off. Such a theory would suggest that the midlife peak would exist for women with children but not for women without children. However, regressions showed the same quadratic curve for both groups of women, with a peak in midlife. Thus, women without children experience the same midlife peak as do women with children.

Although it is beyond this chapter to test fully, it is possible that the quality of relationship to the children accounts for the midlife peak. However, neither regressions holding quality of relationship to chil-

dren constant, nor regressions with age-quality interaction terms showed any change in the quadratic relationships: the midlife peak occurs equally among women with all qualities of relationship to their children.

Neither work nor parenting seems to account for the midlife peak, at least according to the results of these admittedly limited tests. One final possibility is that the relationships above did not change because the peak is a result of work for some women but a result of parenthood for other women (MacDermid, Heilbrun, and DeHaan 1997; Peterson and Stewart 1996). I performed one last test. Due to the large sample size, there were 34 women in the sample who did not work and who did not have children. I completed regressions for these 34 women, and found the same quadratic midlife peak of social responsibility, $b_{age} = .48$, $b_{age-squared} = -.005$, $p < .05$, although these results should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size.

Development of Resources: Health and Income

I also explored the resource side—development in resources to provide for others may explain why younger and older women show lower levels of social responsibility. First, health may be a limiting factor in being socially responsible. In particular, older women may find that poorer health interferes with their available time and energy. However, controlling for health quality (the self-report item depicted in figure 2.2) did not eliminate the midlife peak. That is, older women are not less socially responsible because of worsened health. Health status also did not interact with age-squared in predicting social responsibility. That is, even those with the best possible health also decline in social responsibility in later adulthood; thus, that decline can not be attributed to poor health. Interestingly, health quality did interact with the age term in the full quadratic equation, meaning that the age of the peak in social responsibility varied significantly with health status. Specifically, good health pushes the peak back such that the better one's health, the later in life one can maintain high levels of social responsibility.

A second resource is total household income. Income may provide a means to be socially responsible and may do so most strongly in midlife. Younger women may not yet have acquired sufficient income to give to others, and older adult women may find household income again becoming restricted. Controlling for income did not eliminate the midlife peak in social responsibility. However, household income

did in fact interact with age squared in predicting social responsibility. Specifically, those with higher levels of income did not decline in social responsibility with age, but rather showed a steady linear increase across the life span. Those with middle or lower levels of household income showed the midlife peak. Thus, income provides a partial explanation. Part of the decline in social responsibility in later adulthood is associated with a decline in the resource of income. However, these results leave open some questions and raise others. These results do not explain the lowered levels of social responsibility in young adulthood (even the wealthiest were low in social responsibility in young adulthood); they do not explain why the midlife peak exists for those with middle to low income; nor do the results explain why social responsibility increases steadily with age among those with higher income levels.

This question—why does social responsibility peak for women in midlife—will have to remain unanswered in this chapter. Additional possible explanations include having different standards of social responsibility at different ages; achieving peak social status (women may experience a general social status peak in midlife); reaching peak emotional expressivity (there is some evidence that emotional expressivity leads to social responsibility, see Rossi and Rossi 1990 for evidence of this relationship); acquiring a broader understanding of political activity (Stewart and Gold-Steinberg 1990); or belonging to a particular cohort (perhaps women born in the early 1940s were socialized more to be socially responsible than were women born before or after that period, although this would not explain the peaks for the other two questions as shown in figure 2.5). It is well beyond the scope of this chapter to investigate all of these possibilities; the central purpose of this chapter is to answer the long-standing questions about levels of social responsibility cited at its start. This study clearly shows the hypothesized midlife peak in social responsibility, but only among women. It remains for future research to investigate the many possible explanations for this peak.

RELATIONSHIP OF WELL-BEING TO SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

A final goal of this chapter is to investigate the relationship between overall social responsibility and well-being. There are at least two reasons to expect a positive association between social responsibility and well-being. On the one hand, it is likely that having a good life leads to trying to improve others' lives. It is more difficult to give when one has

very little, whereas those who have much should be able to part with it more easily. In addition, having more than others may lead to a sympathetic interest in sharing some of that wealth. In the complementary direction, giving may increase well-being. A sense of satisfaction with oneself and happiness upon receiving gratitude may result in increased well-being (Fisher 1995; MacDermid, Heilbrun, and DeHaan 1997; de St. Aubin and McAdams 1995). Given that both causal directions are likely, the association between social responsibility and well-being ought to be rather strong. That is, since the association is the sum of both causal directions, the two added together should be of considerable magnitude.

Although results may differ with more affective measures of well-being, I tested this possibility with a cognitive definition of well-being: the item asking respondents to indicate the overall quality of their lives from 0 (worst possible) to 10 (best possible). The result of a regression predicting life quality from level of social responsibility was significant, $b = .17$, $R^2 = .05$, $p < .001$. This relationship did not depend on gender, age, or on the gender-by-age interaction. Thus, there was a positive relationship between social responsibility and quality of life.

The magnitude of this relationship was nonetheless much smaller than expected (although consistent with other research, e.g., Fleeson and Baltes 1998). Both suggestions received support, but at a weaker level than anticipated. Thus, if "having" increases giving at all, it is only to a slight degree; if giving increases well-being at all, it is also only to a slight degree.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this chapter was to explore the overall level of contributions to others among adult Americans of a wide age range, using an inclusive and subjective definition of social responsibility. I was able to show that Americans are only moderately socially responsible, and levels of social responsibility vary widely. I found that a small part of this variance is associated with well-being, suggesting that having a good life is only a small part of the explanation for differential levels of contributing. Second, women were more likely than men to contribute to the well-being of others. The central finding of this chapter, however, refers to the age trajectories. The large size and near-representativeness of this sample allowed for a clear affirmation of Erikson's original thesis that social responsibility peaks in midlife. However, this peak is not large, occurs only among women, and does not reach its zenith

until the late forties or early fifties. It was beyond this chapter's scope to fully explore possible explanations for this peak, but I did find that part of the decline in older women's social responsibility is associated with lowered income. The full explanation will have to wait for future research.

NOTES

1. Alice Rossi, in chapter 3 of this volume, shows that this measure correlates moderately and positively with all more precise indicators of social responsibility included in this survey (with the exception of number of hours worked), suggesting some convergent validity as well as comprehensiveness to this measure.
2. All presented betas are unstandardized.
3. There were slight quadratic trends for men for both the retrospective and anticipative items, both p 's $< .02$. Thus, the quadratic trends for all three items are depicted, although figure 2.4 shows clearly the predominance of the linear trend.
4. Alice Rossi, in chapter 3 of this volume, reports a slight midlife peak in generativity for men and a stronger midlife peak for women. The generativity scale was limited to six items; those showing the midlife peak for men concerned teaching others, giving advice, and passing on skills; these items may represent a specific work-related form of generativity.

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