



10-26-2015

Midcourse Corrections and Life Satisfaction in a Sample of Mid-Career Doctoral Students

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Recommended APA Citation

Hiltz-Hymes, C. E., Spicer, S., Hardy, E. A., Waddell, M., & Hatcher, S. L. (2015). Midcourse Corrections and Life Satisfaction in a Sample of Mid-Career Doctoral Students. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(10), 1709-1722. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol20/iss10/12>

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Abstract

The focus of this study was to examine motivations and reactions in context of a midlife decision to seek a doctoral degree. Participants were 116 non-traditional age, men and women graduate students and recent alumni from one of three geographically distributed and blended delivery model doctoral programs. Demographic information was collected, including career history and goals, age, gender, and ethnicity. The mean and median ages were between 41 and 50. The research questionnaire featured narrative questions regarding “midcourse corrections,” any experienced trauma, and life satisfactions. Autobiographical material was also analyzed thematically, providing further illustrative examples of the midlife experiences in the course of negotiating a doctoral education. Both the narrative responses and autobiographies were analyzed using content analysis (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Forty-four percent of the sample reported seeking the doctoral degree as part of a career change plan, while 56% sought to achieve an advanced degree in their current fields. Despite a high rate of reported regret, surprise, and even trauma, considerable life satisfaction (91%) was reported as the result of seeking doctoral education in midlife, by definition a “midcourse correction.”

Keywords

Midcourse Corrections, Life Satisfaction, Mid-Career Students, Life Review, Qualitative Research

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Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the Office of the Provost at Fielding Graduate University and awarded to Sherry Hatcher, Ph.D., Principal Investigator. The views expressed in this manuscript do not necessarily reflect those of the granting agencies.

Midcourse Corrections and Life Satisfaction in a Sample of Mid-Career Doctoral Students

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The focus of this study was to examine motivations and reactions in context of a midlife decision to seek a doctoral degree. Participants were 116 non-traditional age, men and women graduate students and recent alumni from one of three geographically distributed and blended delivery model doctoral programs. Demographic information was collected, including career history and goals, age, gender, and ethnicity. The mean and median ages were between 41 and 50. The research questionnaire featured narrative questions regarding “midcourse corrections,” any experienced trauma, and life satisfactions. Autobiographical material was also analyzed thematically, providing further illustrative examples of the midlife experiences in the course of negotiating a doctoral education. Both the narrative responses and autobiographies were analyzed using content analysis (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Forty-four percent of the sample reported seeking the doctoral degree as part of a career change plan, while 56% sought to achieve an advanced degree in their current fields. Despite a high rate of reported regret, surprise, and even trauma, considerable life satisfaction (91%) was reported as the result of seeking doctoral education in midlife, by definition a “midcourse correction.” Keywords: Midcourse Corrections, Life Satisfaction, Mid-Career Students, Life Review, Qualitative Research

Individuals tend to continually construct and reconstruct their lives in an effort to lend meaning to life-events in order to integrate new experiences and repair disappointments (Kenyon, Clark, & deVries, 2001; Schroots & Assink, 2005). With these narratives, or life stories, people consider their past and present as they anticipate their future. In other words, they create or recreate a more desired future (Beach, 2010; Josselson, 2007).

King and Hicks (2007) describe the role that experiences of regret can have in promoting life satisfaction and self-satisfaction. Through acknowledging regret in the process of life review, there is opportunity for considering “what you could do to make things turn out better in the future” (Beach, 2010, p. 34). A main focus of King and Hicks’s work is on the concept of “lost and found possible selves” (p. 625) and an individual’s capacity to confront unmet goals, where “possible selves” is defined as personalized representations of important life goals (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Ruvolo & Markus, 1992). King and Hicks’s work (2007) further describes how ruminating on lost possible selves is negatively related to happiness while, at the same time, explaining that such experiences may play important roles in an individual’s personality development. These researchers explored the manner in which having the ability to acknowledge what is regretted can ultimately result in happiness and even in increased ego strength during adulthood. According to Cross and Markus (1991), possible selves represent the imaginable futures we might think to occupy, both positive and negative, that can serve to motivate self-development throughout adulthood. As stated by Lachman and colleagues (2015), “What happens in midlife can have a long-term impact on the nature of aging” (p. 26).

Life Review

Life review is an important developmental process that most often occurs in midlife (Levinson, 1986; Lewchanin & Zubrod, 2001; Stewart & Vanderwater, 1999). Although it can occur in earlier developmental stages as well, the life review associated with midlife tends to be accompanied by an accentuated sense of the time one has remaining and has the potential to trigger a substantial reevaluation of one's goals and pursuits. Stewart and Vandewater (1999) initiated the idea that midlife is a time that holds potential to identify regrets about the past, and which inspires midcourse corrections with the possibility of increased well-being. Similarly Lachman (2004) wrote: "When in the middle, it is natural to look back to see what has come before or to evaluate what has been accomplished and to look ahead to determine what comes next or remains to be done" (p. 310).

The time period for midlife has been identified in various studies as ranging from as early as age 30 and as late as 75, with a modal entry age of 40 and modal exit age of 60 (Lachman, 2004). As she stated, "The use of chronological age as a determinant of midlife may not be ideal because age norms are less stringent for midlife than for periods that occur earlier and later" (pp. 311-312). Life roles and timing of life experiences and events may be more accurate markers of midlife (Lachman, 2004; Lachman, Teshale, & Agrigoroaei, 2015). Still other researchers have suggested that a crucial developmental task in midlife involves reviewing one's past, coming to terms with regrets, and planning for the future (Coleman, 1974; Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986; Lewchanin & Zubrod, 2001; Stewart & Vandewater, 1999; Torges, Stewart, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2008; Wethington, Kessler, & Pixley, 2004).

Looking back on one's past in midlife involves a process of appraising experiences and achievements, while also considering one's future trajectory and wished-for accomplishments (Lachman, Teshale, & Grigoroaei, 2015). If an informal midlife review goes well, it should assist an individual in coming to terms with aging, including end of life issues, since having the potential to facilitate new challenges can be uniquely satisfying at any age (Levinson, 1986; Lewchanin & Zubrod, 2001). Alternatively, if midlife review goes poorly, it can result in regret, grief, and even despair.

Regret

In the course of a life review, individuals may recognize regrets and make attempts to cope accordingly (Torges, Stewart, & Miner-Rubino, 2005). Regret has been defined as, "unfulfilled or unattainable intentions or goals" (Lecci, Okun, & Karoly, 1994, p. 731), and it is often associated with dissatisfaction and self-blame for not having lived one's life differently. Given its importance, the current literature on life revision, midlife review, and midcourse corrections, also includes important research on "regret." Regret, disappointment, and even surprise (for example, achieving goals previously considered unattainable) may each constitute typical reactions in the midlife review process (Stewart & Vanderwater, 1999). As one example, reflecting on unfulfilled expectations can induce a sense of regret (Gilovich, Medvec, & Kahneman, 1998; Lecci, Okun, & Karoly, 1994) as one considers the role such perceived losses may have played in relation to missed opportunities (King & Hicks, 2007). Unresolved regret can carry substantial negative sequelae. Alternatively, the capacity to construct productive meaning from reflection on what "might have been" can facilitate a sense of psychological well-being (King & Hicks, 2007).

Sequelae of Regret in Midlife

The work of Torges, Stewart, and Miner-Rubino (2005) found that acknowledged regrets were associated with lower scores on well-being in a heterogeneous sample of men and

women in their sixties. As identified in a life review questionnaire, Lecci, Okun, and Karoly (1994) found an association between depression and feelings of disappointment from not having rectified regrets. These authors suggest that better psychologically adjusted individuals may be conscious of a valid reason for not having followed up on their experiences of regret. Such a conclusion is consistent with the work of Roesse and Summerville (2005) who found that regret was highest when individuals had an opportunity to achieve more education or other opportunities to improve their life circumstances--but did not act. Similarly, DeGenova (1992) administered a questionnaire to a random sample of 122 retired persons for the purpose of assessing life revision in the areas of friends, family, work, education, religion, leisure, and health. These results identified education as the one area with the greatest amount of desired change for people in late adulthood, with men and women indicating motivation to "spend more time pursuing their education...[and] intellect" (p. 135).

Midcourse Corrections

"Midcourse correction" refers to intended improvement in an individual's life path, which occurs during the middle years (ranging from age 30-75), most often after a period of midlife review, reflection, and evaluation of one's personal history (Stewart & Vandewater, 1999). Lachman and colleagues (2015) describe life review as a naturally occurring process during midlife. Further, when someone is "either early or late for an event or life transition, or is approaching a developmental deadline, this may have a major impact on one's self-concept and experiences during midlife" (Lachman, 2004, p. 312).

Since, if proactively addressed, a sense of regret may inspire midcourse correction, it can ultimately foster increased well-being (Stewart & Vandewater, 1999). Subsequently, a productive midlife review can lead an individual to make significant changes in his or her life course in order to accommodate desirable "new challenges" (Lewchanin & Zubrod, 2001), even while acknowledging past regrets (Stewart & Vandewater, 1999). As noted by Frazier, Newman, and Jaccard (2007), "...adaptation that leads to optimal developmental outcomes, such as a strong sense of well-being, is a product of the combined influences of having developmental goals and using appropriate developmental processes to successfully achieve them" (p. 678). Recognizing past decisions and how those may have contributed to one's midlife circumstances can motivate reflection on unfulfilled goals and serve to inspire self-actualization (Stewart & Vandewater, 1999).

Related to this finding, Wethington, Kessler and Pixley (2004) examined life turning points that cluster in midlife around changes in career paths. Turning points are substantial changes in life trajectory, including changes promoted by regret and midcourse correction, and most frequently involve work or career (Lachman, 2004). Indeed, possible selves, or personalized images of goal pursuit, may help facilitate midlife revisions with an ultimate goal of increased life satisfaction (Frazier, Newman, & Jaccard, 2007; Markus & Nurius, 1986).

The classic 1999 article by Stewart and Vandewater explored midlife review and regret in connection with early adult life choices as a source of motivation for changes in later life stages in a sample of women. One essential contribution of their work is the finding that using regret to prompt a midcourse correction in one's life can result in greater well-being. They found this to be true for women, in particular, though it may also be applicable for midlife males. As King and Hicks (2007) wrote, "The happy and complex person acknowledges fully a past characterized by loss but is also deeply engaged in the present" (p. 630).

Researchers' Interest in Study

The researchers who contributed to this study are interested in ways midlife review plays a role in motivating individuals to consider “possible selves” in seeking midcareer doctoral education. Together we represent both career changers and not-career changers, and each of us can relate to this topic both personally and professionally. We found participants' accounts of how pursuing a doctoral education has been transformational and inspirational, especially as we assisted with the study during our own doctorate program under the guidance of Dr. Sherry Hatcher, the principal investigator for this research project. In group discussions of the data, among us, we experienced aspects of this research process in ways reminiscent of women's consciousness raising groups from the 1960s. Those of us who gained our doctorates in midlife have lived, first-hand, some of the experiences reported in the narratives offered by many of our study participants, both in terms of making “midcourse corrections” and, ultimately gaining enhanced life satisfaction.

The Current Study

The present study builds upon Stewart and Vandewater's (1999) research by including men as well as women in a contemporary sample of 116 doctoral students and recent alumni from three geographically distributed, blended delivery model university doctoral programs that include online and face to face seminar and coursework formats. A representative questionnaire item from our study is: “If I had to do it over again...” comes directly from the research of Stewart and her colleagues. The focus of our study was to examine midcourse corrections, regrets, self perceptions, and satisfaction in midlife in an effort to contribute to an emerging literature (King & Hicks, 2007; Lachman, 2004; Lachman, 2015; Lewchanin, 2001; Stewart & Vandewater, 1999; Torges et al., 2008; Wethington et al., 2004) that has focused on life review and midcourse corrections, particularly for those who make choices to advance their education at non-traditional ages. By virtue of seeking the doctorate at a non-traditional life stage, both those career change and not-career change groups within our sample have likely negotiated some form of “midlife review and midcourse corrections” (Stewart & Ostrove, 1998; Stewart & Vandewater, 1999). The mean and median ages for our sample were between 41 and 50.

Given our personal interest in the topic, our research questions were:

- 1) In what ways do midcourse corrections moderate life regret and life satisfaction in a sample of mid-career doctoral students and recent alumni?
- 2) Given that all our participants made a midcourse correction, in the form of working toward a doctoral degree in midlife, how satisfied are they with their graduate education and with life in general?
- 3) What reasons do participants most frequently provide for a high levels of satisfaction with midlife when that is the case?
- 4) Even though most participants have described various degrees of loss and trauma, what reasons do they give for any reported satisfaction in midlife?

By virtue of seeking the doctorate at a non-traditional life stage, we believe that both career change and not-career change groups within our sample have, by definition, negotiated some form of midlife review and midlife midcourse corrections (Stewart & Ostrove, 1998; Stewart & Vandewater, 1999; Hiltz, Spicer, Hardy, Waddell, & Hatcher, 2009). In this context, we also hypothesized that career change participants would, in some ways, have undergone

more profound “midlife review” and “midcourse correction(s)” than the not-career change participants.

Qualitative Methodology

This study is grounded in qualitative analysis, and coding categories emerged from the qualitative responses and narrative autobiographical data based on thematic material (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). The researchers have a strong appreciation for the ways a qualitative approach gleans meaningful information which is highly illustrative of the participants’ experiences. The qualitative data provided further in-depth understanding of transformation in the process of midlife review and midlife course corrections.

The qualitative responses were coded by the research team, with two coders for each question. Coding pairs initially reviewed the qualitative data and identified themes separately, and then conferenced with their coding partner to discuss themes and develop coding categories specific to these themes. The qualitative responses were then coded based on the thematic coding categories, and inter-rater reliability calculated for each separate question. Any disagreements in coding within coding pairs were resolved by consensus.

The narrative autobiographical data were initially coded by three members of the research team. Each coder initially reviewed 10 of the autobiographies separately for critical themes. They then wrote summaries that captured defining moments and identified categories common across the autobiographies illustrating the themes that emerged. The coders conferenced in person to review their summaries, and in that process, were reminded of women’s exploration or consciousness raising groups from the early 1970s. An additional researcher joined the autobiographical coding team, and the 116 autobiographies were divided among the four trained coders who summarized and highlighted key quotes, reflecting issues and themes. Specific themes were assigned to each of the four researchers for summary and choice of illustrative quotes, which were deidentified. Interrater reliability was achieved and maintained at 94%. Any disagreements about autobiography codings were resolved by consensus.

Method

Participants

A sample of 116 midlife female (73%) and male (27%) doctoral degree students, and recent alumni, participated in this study. Seventy-seven percent of participants self-identified as Caucasian, 10% as African American, 5% as Hispanic, 2% as Asian or Pacific Islander, 1% as Native American, and the remaining 5% checked “Other” or were “missing.” Ninety-seven percent of participants were age 31 or older, with a mean age in the early forties. Participants were pursuing or had recently received a doctorate degree in Clinical Psychology (PSY; 26%), Educational Leadership and Change (ELC; 24%), or Human and Organizational Development (HOD; 50%) at an accredited university. Recent alumni comprised 31% of the sample. Of the 116 participants, 44% reported pursuing their doctoral degree with a goal of changing careers (CC), while 56% sought to achieve an advanced degree in fields related to their present careers and were thus identified as “not career changers” (NCC).

Procedure

All students and alumni (n=558) who entered one of the three accredited doctoral programs at the university between the years of 1999 and 2002 were invited to participate in

this study. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was gained and, following written consent from participants, a questionnaire was mailed to them. One hundred and forty-nine individuals responded to the initial invitation to participate, and 116 returned their completed questionnaires. The overall response rate to our questionnaire was about 21%.

Each questionnaire included a request for demographic information, career history and goals, and whether or not the participant sought a career change (CC) by pursuing his or her doctoral studies. The questionnaires also included narrative response items relating to midlife, midcourse corrections (Stewart & Ostrove, 1998; Stewart & Vandewater, 1999), missed opportunities, regret, surprise, and life satisfaction. Yielding rich narrative data, deidentified autobiographies from admissions materials were also studied with written permission from each participant. Prior to receipt by the research team, these autobiographical materials were assigned a code number corresponding to their questionnaire data to preserve participants' anonymity. To further protect the confidentiality of the material, the researchers were required by the primary investigator¹ to sign confidentiality agreements.

Questionnaire and Narrative Data Analysis. Participants completed a questionnaire that asked about midlife midcourse corrections, regret, and surprise about life course as well as with regard to life satisfaction. In addition, missed opportunities were assessed by asking participants, "As an adult, were there any attractive opportunities for career or other long range activities which you did not pursue? If these were not pursued, why not?"

Possible reactions of regret and surprise about a participant's life course were assessed by asking them, "Are there ways in which your life has been different from what you thought it would be when you graduated from high school and/or college?" When participants answered, "Yes," to this question, they were then asked to explain how their lives had been different than expected.

Midcourse corrections were assessed using four questions derived from Stewart and Vandewater's (1999) research, including the following items:

- 1) If you had to do it over again, would you choose the same lifestyle pattern with respect to your home life versus career decisions? Why or why not?
- 2) What would you have changed, if anything?
- 3) Do you have any regrets about your career choices and/or the balance of your career and personal life?
- 4) In reflecting on the course of your life, are there things you would have wanted to do differently? If yes, please say what and why (p. 272).

Life satisfaction was assessed by asking participants, "Overall are you satisfied with how your life has turned out so far?" Participants were asked to respond to this question based on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from "Very Satisfied" to "Very Dissatisfied." Based on a participant's response to this item, s/he was asked to note three ways in which s/he was either satisfied and/or dissatisfied with life.

Coding categories were based on thematic material that emerged from the qualitative response and narrative data (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). As Reissman (1993) wrote in discussing this approach to qualitative research: "Perhaps the research issue is defining critical moments and the awakening of [personal] and [professional] identity" and "to identify similarities across the moments into an aggregate, a summation" (p. 13). Two raters coded each of the narrative responses, resulting in high inter-rater reliability percentages, consistently in the 90% range. Any disagreements were resolved by consensus. Qualitative and quantitative measures were

¹ A research grant from the Office of the Provost at Fielding Graduate University supported Dr. S. Hatcher's initial research project

compared across and within sample groups and for the subgroups of both Career Change (CC) and Not-Career Change (NCC) perspectives.

Results

Missed Opportunities

Participants' responses were first coded based on "Yes" or "No" to the questionnaire item, "As an adult, were there any attractive opportunities for career or other long range activities which you did not pursue?" Sixty-one percent of the sample indicated there were attractive opportunities for career or other long range activities which they did not pursue. Participants who indicated a missed opportunity were then asked to describe the reason the opportunity was not pursued. The following categories emerged from coding the narrative responses to this question: too much time required, fear or lack of confidence, too expensive or not enough money, family obligations, or poor fit.

For respondents who identified "missed opportunities," family obligations and poor fit were the most common reasons given. For example, one participant wrote, "Yes, [a] job [was] offered which required uprooting family and my husband who has some serious health issues." Another respondent said, "I used to be an IT Manager—I had many opportunities, but found it boring." CC and NCC participant responses to this question were similar.

Regret and Surprise with Ways Life has been Different than Expected

The coding categories for regret that emerged from the questionnaire data in response to the question, "Are there ways in which your life has been different from what you thought it would be when you graduated from high school and/or college," included: "No Regret," "Mixed," and "Regret." Related to this, each participant's response was also coded based on any ways in which s/he noted that life had been different than expected. The categories that emerged from this coding included: "No Surprise," "Surprise about Career or Financial Situation," "Surprise about Relationships and/ or Family Life," "Surprise about Personal Accomplishments and/or Resiliency," and "Surprise about Timing of Success and/or Course of Life Events."

In our sample of participants, 41% reported some degree of regret, whereas 43% indicated no regret about the way their lives might have been different than expected. Expressions of and reasons for regret were roughly equal for CC and NCC participants.

Some participants indicated surprise rather than regret about the way their lives had taken unexpected turns. Surprise often had to do with personal accomplishments, career and financial situations (for example, in having more or less money than expected). A key finding is that many participants expressed surprise in their ability to be more resilient than expected, particularly in connection with the decision to seek a doctoral degree at a nontraditional age. For instance, as one alumni-participant wrote, "I never expected to acquire a Ph.D. and am still amazed that I did."

Of the participants who described surprise with the way their lives had been different than expected, 68% reported surprise with their careers or financial situation. For example, one participant wrote, "Yes!!! I barely made it out of high school. *No one* expected me to go to college let alone get a doctorate. I hated school—who could have imagined I would love teaching?" Results were again similar for CC and NCC participants in response to this question.

Regret categories also emerged from the autobiographical material and referenced situations in which participants expressed or implied remorse, sorrow, or ill feelings. The

categories of regret included: “Choosing the Wrong Field of Work,” “Failed Marriage,” “Life Decisions,” and “Not Getting Started Earlier.” For example, one participant wrote:

The gradual awakening I have been undergoing in the past several years has enabled me to choose the kind of work I love to do instead of the kind I thought I had to do...I knew since I was a [young child] I wanted to be a teacher...The easy explanation for [the] postponement was that a corporate career had better financial rewards than a teaching career.

Another participant wrote, “[My] high school counselor told me not to attempt college – he said I wouldn’t make it. I looked for a minimum paying job.”

Midcourse Corrections

Although in some sense, all participants in this sample can be seen as having made a midcourse correction in pursuing doctoral studies at midlife, a little over one third directly labeled this as a midcourse correction in response to the four questionnaire items adapted from Stewart and Vandewater’s (1999) research. However, a few respondents expressed regret more indirectly, such as,

I have always maximized the resources at hand. Had there been stronger family and cultural inputs/supports, I might have arrived at my present career goal sooner. But then maybe I’d have missed out on [attending this doctoral program]. All’s well that ends well.

Across the entire sample, 69% of the participants reported things s/he would have wanted to do differently. The most reported midcourse corrections or “do-overs” involved issues of timing life ventures, career choice, educational achievement, financial issues, and/or relationship issues.

Autobiographies. The autobiographies were considered introspective reports of the participants’ lives that provided a glimpse into retrospective factors leading to personal and professional developmental change. Participants’ autobiographies were rich with examples of midcourse corrections in various areas of their lives, including career development, relationships, geographic location, time commitment, refocusing, spirituality, and self-care. For instance, one participant wrote,

One benefit of hitting midlife has been the sense that the many and diverse threads of life are finally coming together in a vibrant tapestry...This notion of usefulness is more important to me now than when I was younger...I’ve spent the majority of my career (and arguably my life) helping others communicate their messages. My sense is that in this second half of my life I may well have something of my own to communicate.

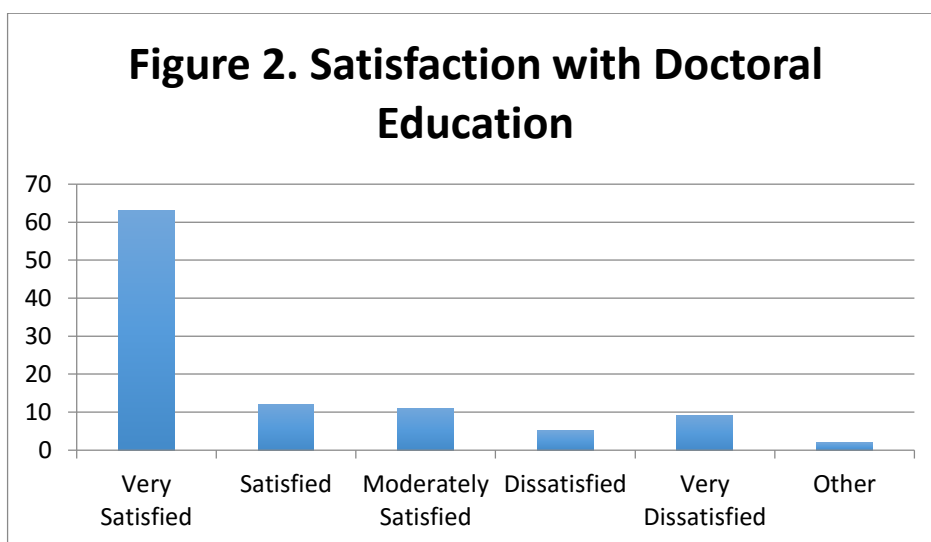
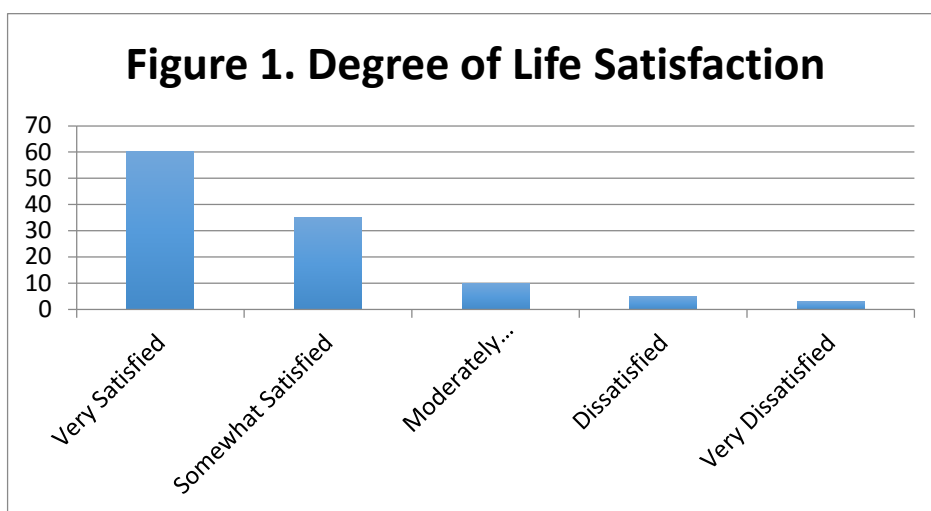
Or, as another participant wrote,

I have pursued material possessions and status in the first half of my adult life and accomplished nothing that is really worth anything...Finally I have confirmed that my greatest passion and sense of meaning resides in the study and practice of psychology.

Our narrative findings particularly suggest the possibility that experiences of regret may serve as a motivator for midcourse corrections, including career changes.

Life Satisfaction

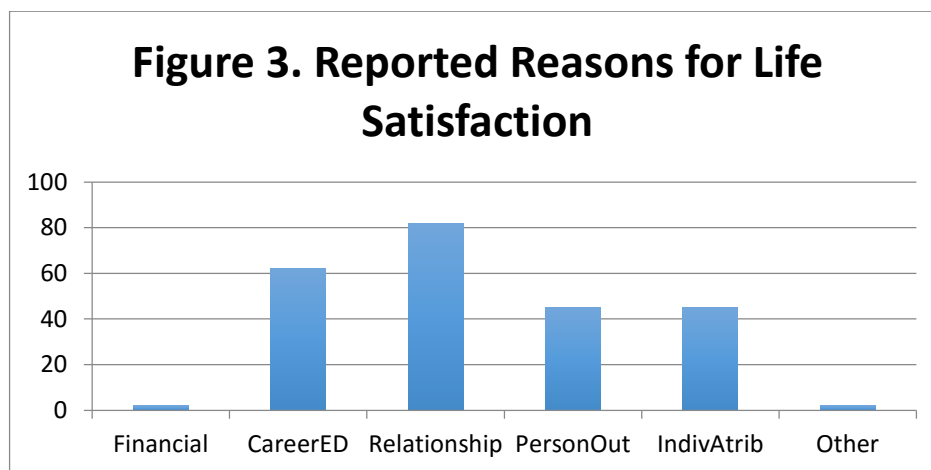
Despite a considerable degree of trauma that many participants had experienced by midlife (including loss or death of a loved one, abuse and/or neglect, divorce, and childhood abandonment), most were quite resilient and expressed a sense of positive life satisfaction (see Figure 1), as well as satisfaction with their decision to complete a doctoral program (see Figure 2). Here, as well, there were no statistically significant differences between CC and NCC participants.



Across the whole sample, 91% of the participants reported feeling either “Very Satisfied” or “Satisfied” in response to the questionnaire item, “Overall, are you satisfied with how your life turned out so far?” Seventy-nine percent expressed a sense of satisfaction with their decision to attend the doctoral program. As one participant wrote, “I consider it a highlight of my personal life.” Or, as another participant wrote, “[It was the] best decision I could have made.”

Of the participants who reported satisfaction with their lives, the most common reasons given were with regard to career and/or educational decisions and relationships (see Figure 3). Personal outcome, lifestyle, and life course were also commonly cited. As one participant wrote:

I am free to do what I want to do. And soaring to new heights every week. I'm nurturing my children and being an effective role model for living one's dreams. I'm acquiring skills/knowledge that will serve my communities (family, church, city) well.



The most common types of satisfaction reported for CC participants were career and relationships (82%); followed by educational decisions (49%), individual attributes (49%), and personal outcome or life course (45%). NCC participants most commonly indicated relationships (89%), and career and educational decisions (75%) as reasons for their overall satisfaction with life.

Only nine percent of participants reported feeling less than satisfied with their lives, 70% of whom still reported they were at least “Moderately Satisfied.” Two of the 10 participants who reported feeling less than satisfied indicated this was at least partially due to “timing issues.” As one person indicated, “I like what I am doing. I wish I had started earlier.” Another respondent indicated dissatisfaction because, “I wish I would have made a change sooner.” Both of these respondents mentioned “relationships” as positive aspects of their lives. For instance, one wrote, “I have a great family [that is]...very supportive.” The other participant indicated personal and financial concerns, as well as conflict over career and educational decisions. Still another participant, who indicated only moderate satisfaction with career but high satisfaction with family, explained the negative issue as follows: “I never felt I was smart enough to compete, and society told me that, as a [minority] woman, I wasn't good enough in my developmental years.”

Discussion

We examined motivations and reactions in connection with a midlife decision to seek a doctoral degree. Such a major commitment of time and resources requires strong and persistent motivation. For some people in our sample, attaining the doctoral degree appears to be a further step along an already established career path. For others in our sample, it may represent a substantive, perhaps even unsettling, change. As such, midcourse corrections may be more or less upending, even when reached after a reflective process of “midlife review” that

has transitioned the individual toward a potentially positive future life goal and away from experiences that may have been regrettable or disappointing (Babineau & Packard, 2006; Markus & Nurius, 1986). Such dramatic midcourse corrections can involve taking on new roles and, perhaps, fulfilling a vision of a “possible self” that has been nurtured for many years, in some cases since early childhood.

Despite the high rate of regret, surprise, and even disclosure of multiple losses and trauma, a very high degree of life satisfaction (91%) and satisfaction with graduate education (79%) was reported in this sample for both women and men, apparently due, in large part, to seeking advanced education and as a manifestation of resiliency that allowed for actualizing a healthy midcourse correction. As one participant wrote, “I am doing the kind of work that requires growth and development, at a level I never envisioned.” Another participant stated,

Life brings many opportunities to choose from and disappointments or losses we have to deal with...I just take each moment as it comes and try to find things to appreciate and learn in each experience [and] trust(ing) the process.

Pursuit of graduate studies at an atypical age likely involves actualizing a desired possible self. King and Hicks (2007) assert that one’s ability to construct a new future (or possible self) may represent the degree to which an individual has fully recognized regrets or disappointments and mourned related losses. As the findings of this study and previous midcourse corrections studies (e.g., Lewchanin & Zubrod, 2011; Stewart & Vandewater, 1999) suggest, an individual who considers “possible selves” may thereby be able to move forward in attaining what s/he desires for the future, in turn, contributing to an increased sense of confidence and life satisfaction. By engaging in the midcourse correction of graduate studies at a nontraditional life stage, the majority of participants in this sample report improved life satisfaction, even in the face of new challenges involved with changing life course and, thus, proactively addressing past regrets and/or lost possible selves.

Our research team was most impressed with the resiliency of participants in this study, and we posit that this personality trait is likely essential for those who choose to pursue advanced education at a nontraditional age. When actualization is possible, such a non-traditional pursuit appears to contribute to life satisfaction and facilitate resolution of midlife regret. As demonstrated in the words of this sample of 116 nontraditional graduate students, their life satisfaction increased considerably upon achieving or even anticipating the doctoral degree. This seemed to offer the opportunity to reintegrate previously lost possible selves and to further the progression toward self-actualization. For some, this process even involved feeling surprised by their abilities to surpass previously held beliefs about life course limitations and obtaining life goals believed to be unattainable.

Limitations

While our findings were quite consistent within our group of participants for CC and NCC, as well as for men and women, we note that the overall response rate to our questionnaire was only about 21%. The true response rate may have been somewhat higher, given outdated addresses whereby prospective participants were essentially unreachable. Clearly there may also have been a self-selection factor operative in terms of those who responded to our questionnaire. The unequal number of males and females in our sample, while typical of university populations in these fields, was nonetheless comprised of many more women than men. We also note that all respondents were from a single university which, while geographically distributed and catering to mid-career students in particular, may not be

representative of other educational institutions that welcome midlife doctoral students or those comprised of traditional age students.

Future Research

Future research might benefit from an even larger group of participants and also by incorporating a control group, (i.e., universities that cater primarily to students of traditional graduate school ages). Thus, by further examining the nuances of midcourse corrections, additional understandings may be gained about how regret and unrealized possible selves may shape a life course for nontraditional as well as traditional aged students. Finally, autobiographical material from other than admissions materials might better avoid the possibility of response bias. These limitations aside, our findings were quite consistent within our sample group and sufficiently intriguing to invite future research along these lines.

While the participants in our study generally reported experiencing considerable turmoil in midlife, our findings bear the very good news of overall outcome satisfaction, both in relation to graduate school and life as a whole. These findings could be helpful for current and future non-traditional doctoral students in considering their midlife review and understanding the potential value of a midcourse correction including advanced education. From our findings, we expect that if such midcourse corrections are disregarded, it can result in substantial regret, lost opportunities, and even decreased well-being and life satisfaction. We note there may also be usefulness in our results for facilitating retention and recruitment in graduate programs that are willing to serve the non-traditional student. Further research in this area could involve better understandings of ways to help individuals, even at earlier stages of adulthood, to identify and pursue their ideal education and career goals.

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Acknowledgement

This research was funded by the Office of the Provost at Fielding Graduate University and awarded to Sherry Hatcher, Ph.D., Principal Investigator. The views expressed in this manuscript do not necessarily reflect those of the granting agencies.

Article Citation

Hiltz-Hymes, C. E., Spicer, S., Hardy, E. A., Waddell, M., & Hatcher, S. L. (2015). Midcourse corrections and life satisfaction in a sample of mid-career doctoral students. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(10), 1709-1722. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol20/iss10/11>
