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Life Satisfaction, Self-Esteem, and Subjective Age in Women Across the Life Span

Christine Borzumato-Gainey, Alison Kennedy, Beth McCabe, and Suzanne Degges-White

A study of 320 women, ages 21 to 69, explored the relations among relationship status, subjective age, self-esteem, and life satisfaction. Women in married or partnered relationships had higher levels of life satisfaction than did single women. Women in their 30s and 40s had significantly lower levels of life satisfaction than did other age groups.

Recent population estimates place the number of baby boomers between 40 and 60 years of age at approximately 78 million (American Association of Retired Persons, 2004). As the average age of the U.S. population increases, it is imperative for mental health professionals to be prepared to meet the needs of a maturing population. Although it may be expected that theory and understanding of adult development during these years are well formed, there is a noticeable gap in the existing literature related to the development of midlife women (Degges-White & Myers, 2006a). In part, this may be attributed to the fact that *midlife* is a relatively new phase of life that emerged as a result of increased longevity and the trend for a couple to spend a significant portion of their life together after their children have achieved independence (Quadagno, 2001, as cited in Degges-White & Myers, 2006a). Although strides have been made in increasing the understanding of midlife women's physiological development (Finkler, 2007), specifically regarding menopause, much less research has been concerned with nonbiological changes that occur in midlife women's attitudes and feelings.

The mass media have become a growing source of information about women's midlife transitions, especially the menopause transition (Carlson, Li, & Holm, 1997; Gannon & Stevens, 1998); however, the facts presented are often highly colored by editorial opinion. With few empirically supported theoretical para-

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digms of women's midlife development (Degges-White & Myers, 2006a), mental health professionals may feel unprepared to serve this population and women may be unsure about what is "normal." Unfortunately, the media and our society in general tend to hold and promote many negative stereotypes regarding aging, such as the widely broadcast belief that signs of aging are problems that require correction. These messages may negatively influence women's attitudes and feelings both about themselves and the aging process as well as their overall well-being (Chornesky, 1998; McQuaide, 1998). Mental health professionals need sound information about this population to help women navigate this phase of life and to help them offset these negative messages. It is important to expand the research and understanding of women at midlife in an effort to generate improved theories of midlife development.

LIFE SATISFACTION

Because women are often reminded by the media and culture that aging is a foe, maturing women may feel uncomfortable and ill at ease during their middle years. An individual's level of *life satisfaction*, the temporal measure of the amount of happiness people feel in their life at a specific moment, may be negatively influenced by these messages. In fact, Ryff (1989) concluded that the midlife years are times of changing roles and identity ambiguity and that these processes in themselves often affect women's life satisfaction. Some researchers have presented evidence suggesting that midlife women are maladjusted, have lower levels of well-being, and have a higher risk of suicide (Girard, 1993; Waskel & Phelps, 1995). Other research has found that midlife is not necessarily a negative time in women's lives. For example, Degges-White and Myers (2006b) found that women who have supportive people in their life may experience greater life satisfaction than do those who live a more solitary life. A friendship network or the presence of a confidant have both been noted for their importance to women's mental health (Baruch & Brooks-Gunn, 1984). Howell (2001) explored the experiences of midlife women and found that participants in her study emphasized the importance of relationships, as evidenced by the amount of time focus group participants devoted to this topic and the high percentage of participants who engaged in discussion of relationships. Howell concluded that the discussion in her focus group sessions supported Gilligan's (1982) argument that relationships are particularly important for women. On the basis of the existing literature, it appears that social support networks, and friendships in particular, are important to midlife women's well-being. However, the types of relationship and the extent to which they shape life satisfaction are still unknown, as are the role of other factors that may influence the overall well-being of women.

Other factors that have been identified as potentially enhancing to midlife women's well-being or life satisfaction include a broad range of variables, such

as income, relationship status, and education (Diener, Suh, & Oishi, 1997; McQuaide, 1998). McQuaide found that in addition to having a confidant or group of friends, an annual income above \$30,000 and positive feelings about one's appearance were predictive of midlife women's well-being. Diener et al. (1997) noted that the variables of income, education, and well-being typically have a direct correlation with life satisfaction. In a more recent study that focused specifically on midlife women, Degges-White and Myers (2006b) found mixed results related to these factors. They found that although overall well-being and income were positively related to life satisfaction, menopausal status was not related to life satisfaction, nor was level of education. However, similar to the findings reported by McQuaide on the role of positive feelings about oneself, Degges-White and Myers (2006b) found that women who had positive self-perceptions also had higher levels of life satisfaction. These findings suggest that self-esteem directly influences life satisfaction.

SELF-ESTEEM

Researchers have found that *self-esteem*, defined as how individuals feel about themselves, is an important indicator of quality of life and has been linked to physical and psychological functioning (i.e., Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1995; Kuppens, Realo, & Diener, 2008; Sarwer, Thompson, Mitchell, & Rubin, 2008). However, few empirical studies have focused on the role of self-esteem for midlife women. Researchers have disagreed about how self-esteem develops across the life span, but Robins and Trzesniewski (2005) presented a model of self-esteem development based on a comprehensive review of the existing literature. It was noted that high levels of self-esteem in childhood give way to noticeably lower levels during the teen years, especially for young women. Self-esteem levels then increase in adulthood, but fall again in late adulthood. Robins and Trzesniewski also found that although fluctuations occur throughout the life span, individuals tend to have relatively stable levels of self-esteem across time. According to this model, midlife women should not experience great fluctuations in their self-esteem in relation to their age and should, overall, experience relatively high levels of self-esteem. However, it may be possible that the factors that influence self-esteem for midlife women are different from those of women at different stages of life based on the nature of the life experiences and transitions being faced at this time.

Several researchers have observed that transitions in midlife are related to loss of familiar roles (e.g., that of mother to children in the home) and the sense of purpose that accompanied these identities and to physical decline, which provides a challenging counterpoint in a society that values youthful beauty as the feminine ideal. For example, Mackin (1995) concluded that as women age, they realize they are being betrayed by their body in a culture dedicated to youth. Saucier (2004) noted that maturing and aging in a youth-worshipping culture may

lead to compromised self-esteem and increased depression and anxiety. Negative stereotypes about women at midlife abound (Howell, 2001), which may negatively influence women's self-esteem. Some of these negative stereotypes are that midlife women are obsolete, needy, and moody and are in a state of decline. These stereotypes are reflected in the advertisement of antiaging products, nonsurgical antiaging procedures such as Botox injections, and cosmetic surgery.

Sales figures for antiaging products and procedures are increasing by double-digit percentages each year, with an estimated sales figure of over \$7 billion in 2010 (M2PressWIRE, 2007). Bayer (2005) noted that "midlifers" receive mixed messages from society and the media. On one hand, individuals at midlife are presented with positive representations of old age through an increasing number of independent, active, and happy older individuals. On the other hand, midlifers are bombarded with the message that signs of aging are unacceptable and should be prevented and corrected. As women age, it may be difficult to maintain positive perceptions of their appearance when being confronted with these conflicting societal messages. Women who maintain positive perceptions of their appearance may experience greater self-esteem just as McQuaide's (1998) findings indicated that positive perception of appearance was directly related to overall well-being.

SUBJECTIVE AGE

Subjective age refers to the age that individuals feel themselves to be and is based on self-perceived evaluation of activities, behaviors, interests, and appearance. Researchers have found that individuals in middle and late adulthood tend to have a subjective age identity that is several years younger than their chronological age and that these discrepancies grow larger as chronological age increases, particularly for women (Degges-White & Myers, 2006b; Kastenbaum, Derbin, Sabatini, & Arrt, 1972; Montepare & Lachman, 1989). However, women who report younger subjective ages that are extremely divergent from their chronological ages have been found to be less satisfied with their life than are those with smaller chronological-subjective age discrepancies (Breytspraak, 1984; Montepare & Lachman, 1989). Many researchers have used unidimensional measures of subjective age, measuring the age at which individuals perceive themselves to feel, look, act, and desire to be. Kaliterna, Larsen, and Brkljadic (2002) found that measures of *cognitive subjective age* (i.e., how individuals feel, look, and act) and *comparative age* (i.e., how old individuals perceived themselves to be in comparison to their peers) were negatively correlated with *desired age* (i.e., the age an individual desires to be). They noted that their research corresponded with findings from other researchers, several of whom had concluded that the desire to be younger than one actually is suggests a negative attitude toward aging, whereas feeling younger than one actually is reflects denial of aging and tends to be related to a positive self-perception (Barak, 1987; Staats, 1996). These conflicting perspectives are explored in the current study.

Although researchers who study midlife women have begun to make strides toward formulating a more complete picture of women's development, research is still needed to further identify and clarify the factors that shape midlife women's experiences. A major shortcoming in the existing literature on midlife women is the lack of generalization from the findings. Because much of the research on this specific age group has relied on samples of middle class, well-educated Caucasian women, there is a strong need for more demographically diverse samples. The purpose of the current study was to use a culturally diverse sample to explore factors related to women's life satisfaction, self-esteem, and perceptions of appearance.

The following hypotheses were tested: (1a) Women in married/partnered relationships would have higher mean levels of life satisfaction than would single, separated/divorced, and widowed women; (1b) women in married/partnered relationships would have higher mean levels of self-esteem than would single, separated/divorced, and widowed women; (2) there is a significant relation between subjective age, life satisfaction, and self-esteem; (3) life satisfaction would be higher for each successive chronological age cohort; and (4) self-esteem would be stable across the chronological age cohorts.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 320 women, ages 21 to 69 years, who were recruited through various means including face-to-face recruitment, electronic mailing list announcements, and snowball sampling. The mean age for respondents was 42.84 years ($SD = 11.74$). The majority of the respondents were European American (68.4%), 18.0% were African American, 7.1% were Hispanic, 1.5% were Native American/American Indian, 1.5% were Asian or Pacific Islander, and 2.0% indicated multiracial or other as their race. The remaining 1.5% did not provide a response regarding ethnicity. Approximately 30% of the participants reported annual household incomes of less than \$50,000. Most of the participants, 64.7%, were married or partnered; 25.6% were single; 8.1% were divorced; and 1.6% were widowed. A broad range of education levels were reported, with 36.2% of participants having less than a bachelor's degree, 39.6% holding bachelor's degrees, and 24.1% reporting education beyond the level of a bachelor's degree. (Total percentage does not equal 100 because of rounding.)

Instruments

Participants completed a demographic questionnaire and three paper-and-pencil assessment instruments: the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES; Rosenberg, 1989), the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), and the Subjective Age Questionnaire (SAQ; Barak, 1987).

The SWLS (Diener et al., 1985) was designed to measure respondents' overall or global satisfaction with their life. The SWLS comprises five items (e.g., "In most ways my life is close to my ideal"), which are rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. Answers to the five items are averaged, yielding a single measure of global life satisfaction. The internal consistency of the five-item instrument has been supported by multiple studies in which both alpha and test–retest coefficients consistently exceeded .80 (Pavot & Diener, 1993). The Cronbach's alpha was .87 for the current sample.

The SES (Rosenberg, 1989) was designed to provide a measure of an individual's overall feeling of self-worth. The SES comprises 10 statements (e.g., "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself") that are rated on a 4-point scale: *strongly agree*, *agree*, *disagree*, and *strongly disagree*. Five of the statements are negative statements and are reverse-scored. The sum of the scores provides a single global measure of self-esteem, with higher values indicating higher levels of self-esteem. The assessment has been used with adolescents and adults and has been shown to have high reliability and validity (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991). The Cronbach's alpha was .92 for the current sample.

The SAQ (Barak, 1987) was designed to assess individuals' subjective, or self-perceived, age in relation to four age-related concepts: feel-age, activity-age, interests-age, and look-age. The SAQ consists of four statements (e.g., "I *feel* like someone who is in their _____") for which respondents choose one of eight age-decade responses (e.g., "teens," "20s," "80s"). Subjective age is determined by averaging the responses to the four questions to generate a single continuous measure. Barak and Stern (1986) reported an internal consistency of .87 for the SAQ. The Cronbach's alpha for the current study was .92.

Data Analyses

Data were analyzed using SPSS 12.0, and an alpha of .05 was set for determining statistical significance. Descriptive statistics were calculated for all demographic variables and for scales of the instruments. Analyses of variance (ANOVAs) and Pearson product–moment correlation coefficients were used to examine the research questions.

RESULTS

In Table 1, the means and standard deviations for scores on the SWLS and SES are presented. For purposes of analysis, participants were categorized by chronological age, relationship status, income level, and subjective age compared with chronological age. Relationship categories included single, no relationship; single, casual relationship; single, committed relationship; married/partnered; separated/divorced; and widowed. Chronological age cohorts were 21–29 years, 30–39 years, 40–49 years, 50–59 years, and 60–69 years. The discrepancy between the mean chronological age (CA) and the mean subjective age (SA) became increasingly larger for each age

TABLE 1
Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES) Means and Standard Deviations by Chronological Age, Relationship Status, Income, and Subjective Age

Measure	n	SWLS		SES	
		M	SD	M	SD
Total	320	25.2	6.8	19.1	6.3
Age group					
20s	54	25.3	6.6	16.4	4.8
30s	77	24.2	6.5	18.6	5.7
40s	84	24.4	7.2	19.4	6.9
50s	85	25.9	7.1	20.7	6.5
60s	20	29.8	3.3	20.5	6.4
Relationship status					
Single, no relationship	25	20.6	7.5	17.6	5.3
Single, casual	12	19.5	6.4	18.0	6.0
Single, committed	45	23.9	7.2	17.6	6.6
Married/partnered	207	26.5	6.2	19.6	6.1
Divorced/separated	26	23.9	6.7	19.8	7.4
Widowed	5	26.8	8.8	20.8	10.9
Income ^a					
< \$10,000	6	21.7	8.8	12.5	1.6
\$10,000–\$29,999	31	22.8	6.9	17.7	5.5
\$30,000–\$49,999	56	23.0	7.1	19.6	6.6
\$50,000–\$74,999	74	25.3	7.0	19.3	6.4
\$75,000–\$99,999	84	36.8	5.7	18.6	5.5
≥ \$100,000	67	26.4	6.9	20.5	7.0
Subjective age < chronological age	306	25.4	6.7	19.2	6.3
Subjective age = chronological age	1	30.0		40.0	
Subjective age > chronological age	13	19.4	8.3	16.1	4.0

^aTwo participants did not report their income.

group. For women in their 20s, mean CA = 25.0, mean SA = 21.0; for women in their 30s, mean CA = 35.0, mean SA = 27.3; for women in their 40s, mean CA = 44.7, mean SA = 32.5; for women in their 50s, mean CA = 54.6, mean SA = 40.5; and for women in their 60s, mean CA = 62.6, mean SA = 49.1.

Relationship Status, Life Satisfaction, and Self-Esteem

A two-way ANOVA was conducted to test the hypothesis that women in married/partnered relationships would have higher mean levels of life satisfaction than would single, separated/divorced, and widowed women. Relationship status was significantly related to life satisfaction ($F = 6.49, df = 5, p < .001$). The partial eta squared calculation as a measure of effect size was 0.09, indicating that 9% of the variance in life satisfaction scores was due to relationship status. Women who were married/partnered had a mean level of life satisfaction of 26.5, which was found, via post hoc analysis, to be significantly higher than the level for women who were single in any relationship circumstance. Surprisingly, there was not a significant difference in life satisfaction between women who were married/partnered, separated/divorced, or widowed. Thus, the hypothesis was partially supported.

A two-way ANOVA was also conducted to test the second part of the first hypothesis, that women in married/partnered relationships would have higher mean levels of self-esteem than would single, separated/divorced, and widowed women. There was no significant relation between relationship status and self-esteem ($F = 1.23, df = 5, p = .293$). Thus, this part of the hypothesis was not supported.

Subjective Age, Life Satisfaction, and Self-Esteem

A Pearson product–moment correlation calculated to test the hypothesis that subjective age would be related to life satisfaction and self-esteem revealed a significant positive relationship between these variables. The greater the disparity between chronological age and subjective age, specifically the younger one felt oneself to be as compared with one’s chronological age, the higher one’s level of life satisfaction ($r = .15; p < .01$) and self-esteem ($r = .20; p < .01$). Follow-up ANOVAs were conducted. Subjective age in relation to chronological age was significantly related to life satisfaction ($F = 5.31, df = 2, p < .01$); however, caution is advised in interpreting this finding because of unequal sample sizes, which increases the probability of a Type I error (Scheffé, 1959). The partial eta squared calculation as a measure of effect size was .03, indicating that 3% of the variance in life satisfaction scores was due to the chronological–subjective age relationship. The relationship between subjective age and chronological age was also significantly related to self-esteem ($F = 7.14, df = 2, p < .01$), with a partial eta squared calculation showing an effect size of .04, indicating that 4% of the variance in self-esteem scores was due to this variable.

Life Satisfaction and Chronological Age Cohort

The third hypothesis stated that life satisfaction would be higher for each successive chronological age cohort. An ANOVA was calculated to compare the mean level of life satisfaction for each cohort. Although it was determined that life satisfaction differed significantly among the age cohorts ($F = 3.20, df = 4, p < .05$), women in their 30s and 40s had the lowest mean levels of life satisfaction.

Self-Esteem and Chronological Age Cohort

The final hypothesis stated that self-esteem would be stable across the life span and that no significant differences would be found among the chronological age cohorts. However, results of an ANOVA indicated that there was a significant difference in mean levels of self-esteem between chronological age cohorts ($F = 4.51, df = 4, p < .01$). Women in their 20s had significantly lower levels of self-esteem than did all other age groups, and women in their 30s had significantly lower levels than did those in their 50s.

Post Hoc Analyses

On the basis of findings related to subjective age, life satisfaction, and self-esteem, attention was directed to women’s self-perceptions of their appearance

and its relation to the latter two variables. An item from the demographic questionnaire (rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale), “I look good for my age,” was used as the measure of appearance self-perception. A Pearson product–moment correlation indicated that women’s beliefs about looking good for their age were significantly related to life satisfaction ($r = .12; p < .05$), but, surprisingly, not to self-esteem.

Because of the diversity of the participants’ education, income, and cultural identity, further analyses were conducted to determine if these demographic variables were related to life satisfaction or self-esteem. Somewhat surprisingly, life satisfaction and self-esteem differed significantly only in relation to the demographic variable of income.

DISCUSSION

A study of 320 women, ages 21 to 69 years, was conducted to explore the relationships among relationship status, subjective age, life satisfaction, and self-esteem. Three of the four study hypotheses were fully or partially supported. Women in married/partnered relationships reported higher levels of life satisfaction but no greater levels of self-esteem. The discrepancy between chronological and subjective age was related to both life satisfaction and self-esteem. Life satisfaction and self-esteem were both found to be related to chronological age.

Given the strong connections among self-esteem, life satisfaction, and women’s relationships in the findings of this study, it is important to consider these results within a relational framework. These findings echo the early work of Gilligan (1982) related to women and community. Gilligan’s study indicated that women in married/partnered relationships tended to have higher levels of life satisfaction than did divorced women and single women, particularly women in casual relationships. This corresponds to a study by Gallo and Matthews (2003) that addressed the factors related to healthy functioning of adult women. They found that middle-aged women who were in satisfying relationships had lower levels of biological, lifestyle, and psychosocial risk factors, thus resulting in a health advantage not as readily found in women who were in a less satisfying relationship or no relationship. Furthermore, the fact that women in casual relationships reported lower levels of life satisfaction than did women who were not currently involved in a romantic relationship may highlight the need to be in an unambiguous relationship situation. Women may be happier in their life when they know where they stand in relation with others.

The essential elements of a good relationship may be found in greater abundance in midlife women’s friendships. The apparent crucial role of midlife women’s friendships in the health and well-being of women raises concerns about the erosion of the community, the demands of multiple roles (e.g., wife, caretaker, and wage earner), and the expectation of long hours at the workplace in a shrinking economy. The findings of this study indicate that there may

need to be an increased emphasis on the building of friendships. This is an area worthy of future research.

The dip in life satisfaction among women in their 30s and 40s is disconcerting. It may be due to a variety of factors, such as these ages being periods of potential adjustment wherein women are beginning to fear physical changes (e.g., wrinkles) and the accompanying loss in social status or periods that represent an accumulation of failed expectations and low self-concept (Mackin, 1995; Saucier, 2004). Indeed several researchers regarded high levels of depression in aging women as an effect of growing up in a toxic, beauty-focused environment. These researchers have stated that it is understandable that women seek a culturally valued, youthful appearance despite its unattainability because of the psychological, social, and practical rewards associated with ideal beauty (Engeln-Maddox & Miller, 2008; Saucier, 2004). Saucier noted several worthwhile clinical suggestions for working with aging women as they struggle with poor body image and self-concept, including consciousness raising, values clarification, and support groups for women dealing with the same issues. The current study's findings support these interventions, but with an important addition—placing a strong emphasis on helping women build high-quality friendships.

Often women are trying to cope with a number of roles and responsibilities. Many women hold full-time jobs while rearing children who are still at home and taking care of aging parents. These multiple roles may give rise to feelings of being overwhelmed at home and at work (Mackin, 1995). With numerous caretaking responsibilities at home, it may be difficult for women to find time and energy to enhance the friendships that provide an increased sense of life satisfaction. The shift in life satisfaction that begins an upward trend in the 50s may be partly due to a newly gained sense of self that is independent of the views of others (Pearlman, 1993). This is also the period in which children typically leave home, women return to work, and/or women begin to reevaluate their life (Degges-White & Myers, 2006a).

As noted in the literature, there are conflicting views on the roles of subjective age and self-perceptions. In this study, the findings provide further evidence of a skewed self-perception of age and its link to higher self-esteem. Feeling younger than one's age was positively related to overall life satisfaction and self-esteem. Self-esteem is known to be low in adolescence and to increase as individuals reach older adulthood (Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005). In this study, as we hypothesized, the level of self-esteem rose gradually across the age cohorts as is expected during adulthood. In their comprehensive study of self-esteem across the life span, Robins and Trzesniewski considered a variety of theories to speculate on the increase in self-esteem: the changes in life roles, the increase in power and status at work, personality changes that include a more internal focus of strength and support, as well as higher levels of psychological maturity and adjustment. Further explorations of the factors that positively influence self-esteem are needed.

Limitations

A number of limitations may affect the internal and external validity of the findings in the current study. Reliance on self-report measures is a limitation of particular concern because of the influences of social desirability, response biases, and lack of collaboration with other sources. Furthermore, limitations arise from the overall sample size and specific group sizes used in the study analysis. Although every effort was made to recruit a demographically representative sample, the current sample was well educated, overall, and reported fairly high household incomes. Results are limited in their generalizability beyond the study population because of this demographic balance of the sample.

Implications

These findings have implications for counseling professionals in a variety of settings and furnish valuable data that can help shape more appropriate mental health care and service programming for women throughout the life span, but especially in midlife.

Counselors can benefit from developing an awareness of the interaction of individual, biological, and sociological forces that combine to influence women's life satisfaction and self-esteem. It is important that counselors working with adult women assist them in recognizing the degree of universality in midlife struggles, which may allow these women to feel better about themselves as individuals. Counselors should encourage women to value themselves based on their own unique identity and to resist societal pressures to remain youthful in appearance and to be hyperproductive to their own detriment. A variety of activities can be used to emphasize a woman's development of the ability to create her own goals; to self-evaluate objectively and independently (including self, goal attainment, life values); and to analyze the messages being received about marriage, parenting, and unrealistic cultural expectations. Counselors can assist women in viewing midlife and aging as a time of possibility and positive change. They can assist women in advancing media literacy, in strengthening the ability to tune out cultural messages that only devalue the aging process, and in creating and shaping their identity without the influence of self-deprecating thoughts. Women should also be encouraged to form deeper, more meaningful connections with other women. Finally, counselors can advocate for women by helping to create additional support services where possible and by writing to the media about the images of midlife women they present.

Counselors who are working with younger female clients in the school setting may integrate some of the following suggestions into their interactions. School counselors may want to eliminate the presence in their office of fashion magazines that glorify physical beauty and unnatural thinness. If magazines are needed for collages and other types of interventions, counselors should make careful selections of the genre available. School counselors may choose to promote journalism within the school that honors female achievements, such

as a “by women for women” publication. They may also choose to develop an event that spotlights female guest speakers who are accomplished in their field. Guests would be encouraged to articulate their values and goals in a forum discussion for the students. This and other career-related events should provide female students with exposure to women who have achieved success through nontraditional career choices.

Both school and community counselors may work to desensitize young clients to negative images of aging women. This should be coupled with discussions regarding clients’ fears of growing older. Helping professionals may want to find ways to intermingle age groups within settings such as church or community functions. It can be helpful for service providers to provide clients with stories of women who are happy at all points in middle adulthood and older adulthood. Other suggested topics for counselors to incorporate in their work with adult women include the recognition that feelings about one’s subjective age is a more powerful indicator of overall life satisfaction and self-esteem than is the actual chronological age marker. This emphasis will support a woman’s efforts to measure her worth using an internal locus of control, rather than depending on the skewed measures of beauty and worth promoted in popular media.

Counselor educators may also want to address the process of the rise and fall of self-esteem and life satisfaction in their human development courses. Helping counselors-in-training better understand the trends in these characteristics over time will add to their level of empathy for and insight into their adult women clients.

The findings of this study also suggest important areas for further research. It may be very beneficial to more deeply explore the role of nonromantic relationships in women’s lives. Over the past several decades, the marriage rate has been declining, and divorce rates, while having peaked in the 90s, are still higher than those recorded in the latter half of the 20th century (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992). Therefore, it may be helpful to find out more about the role that friendships play in the life of adult women. Understanding and educating women on the positive benefits of platonic friendships would perhaps contribute to the overall life satisfaction of women who are not involved in permanent romantic relationships.

CONCLUSION

This study provided empirical evidence that linked relationship status and life satisfaction and presented support for the influence of attitude toward aging and subjective age on well-being. Also important for counselors is the finding that self-esteem was related to subjective age, indicating that the current youth- and appearance-focused culture in the United States may be influencing women’s levels of self-esteem, particularly in the early to early-middle adulthood periods. Future studies could explore the relationship between lifestyle and demographic

variables in addition to income that might affect wellness and life satisfaction for women and focus more specifically on women’s friendships and their role in healthy functioning. This study is notable in that it provides an updated exploration of contemporary women’s experiences with self-appraisal related to age and overall life satisfaction.

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