

Subjective Meanings and Identification With Middle Age

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Abstract

The “middle-age” life period has not been researched extensively and lacks a theoretical conceptualization. The present study explores subjective experiences of members of this age-group. This is a qualitative research, based on in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, which looks into the life stories of 25 Israeli residents aged 48–64 years. The results indicate that the definition of middle age is not clear-cut, and some participants regard their age negatively. Yet, participants report that this period is characterized by a relief of tasks, broader choice opportunity, a sense of liberation, peace of mind, experience, self-awareness, and self-acceptance. Description of middle age as a peak in life, with concerns about future old age, came up repeatedly. Middle-aged individuals’ difficulties to identify with their age-group and the social concept that dichotomizes age into young versus old are discussed. The article calls for further research of and engagement with middle age.

Keywords

middle age, life course transitions, age identification, qualitative research, Israel

The term “middle age” refers to the period in life that stands between “young” and “old” age, roughly defined as the age range of 40 or 45 to 65 years (Collins English dictionary, n.d.; Oxford English dictionary, n.d.). It has also been referred to as “midlife” (e.g., Lachman, 2004; Toothman & Barrett, 2011) and “middle adulthood” (e.g., Srivastava, John, Gosling, & Potter, 2003).

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The boundaries of the middle-age period are not clearly delineated; be it in popular discourse or in theoretical writings (Helson, Soto, & Cate, 2006; Lachman, 2004; Toothman & Barrett, 2011), these boundaries vary in accordance with official country-level markers (Ayalon, Doron, Bodner, & Inbar, 2014) and social and personal contexts (Abrams, Eilola, & Swift, 2009; Lachman, 2004; Toothman & Barrett, 2011). Some researchers divided this period to different parts, according to different age-groups (e.g., Gould, 1978; Levinson, 1978). Others suggested that psychologically and socially meaningful life events, such as children growing up, women's menopause, and retirement preparation, may mark the individual's fit to middle age (e.g., Lachman & James, 1997; Moen & Wetington, 1999). The absence of a theoretical consensus regarding the title of this life period or its boundaries is partially linked with the fact that this period has not been extensively researched (Ayalon et al., 2014, Lachman, 2015; Toothman & Barrett, 2011).

The present study aims to explore the subjective experiences of middle-aged individuals in Israel. The study draws on the principles of life-course perspective, which attempt to "locate individuals in age cohorts and thus in historical contexts, depicts their age-differentiated life patterns in relation to this context, and illuminates the continual interplay between the social course of lives and development" (Elder & Rockwell, 1979, p. 2). In this context, we assume that middle-aged individuals' experiences are shaped by the timing of events, social and cultural forces, and developmental tasks. Therefore, in the following sections, we will present (a) psychosocial aspects of contemporary middle age in Western countries, (b) the concepts of subjective age and age identification, and their expressions in middle age, (c) middle age and aging in Israel, (d) the present research question and its importance.

The Contemporary Middle-Age Phase in Western Countries

The rise in life expectancy and the improved quality of life in old age have brought about a demographic revolution that is expected to keep building up in the coming years (Harper, 2014). Given that middle age is defined subjectively and is constantly extending with the rise in life expectancy and the better health of older age-groups (Lachman, 2004), it constitutes a significant period in life.

A commonly mentioned developmental challenge of middle age is the assessment of one's life: accomplishments, capacities, and a reevaluation of life options (Lachman & James, 1997; Levinson, 1978; Neugarten, 1968). It is a phase where the life perspective is wider than ever and includes both the past and the future, along with the present focus. Although there may be a sense of "time is running out" or "it is now or never," many options are still open (Lachman & James, 1997).

A notoriously popular myth, manifested in a number of theories, is the “midlife crisis.” This crisis might entail mental distress, depression, and significant upheavals in life (Gould, 1978; Jung, 1933; Levinson, 1978). However, no research evidence for a specific middle-age-related crisis was found (Hoffman, Kaneshiro, & Compton, 2012; Reid & Willis, 1999; Wethington, Kessler, & Pixley, 2004).

Findings concerning overall well-being in middle age are contradictory. While some researchers suggested an age U-shape in well-being, with a dip around middle age (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2008; Frijtes & Beatton, 2012), others found enhanced well-being and life satisfaction during the middle age period (Helson & Soto, 2005; Lachman et al., 2008).

In Erikson’s classical life-span developmental theory (Erikson, 1963, 1968), the middle age is a part of the seventh life phase, “generativity versus stagnation.” In this phase, individuals face a choice between increasing generativity and care for others versus stagnation and self-focus. This is the phase in which the human functioning reaches its climax: Individuals are able to unite their life experience with their achievements.

More recent theories also stress middle age as a psychological high point in life. These theories emphasize that although middle age is characterized by numerous commitments, stressful events, and little leisure, members of this age-group have the ability to deal with it: Their productivity, social responsibility, sense of control, self-confidence, and assertiveness are at their peak (Helson et al., 2006; Lachman, 2004). Other psychological resources typical of the middle age-group are a solid identity (Lachman & Bertrand, 2001), ability to adjust to changes (Heckhausen, 2001), ability to regulate emotions (Magai & Halpern, 2001), better perspective taking (Labouvie-Vief, 2009; O’Brien, Konrath, Grünh, & Hagen, 2013), and a peak in self-esteem (Orth, Robins, & Widaman, 2012). Therefore, most of the middle-aged individuals are well equipped with psychological resources to manage multiple-demanding tasks (Helson et al., 2006).

Contemporary middle age may be a high point in terms of social, economic, and occupational aspects. Facing multiple roles and complex relationships among it (Antonucci, Akiyama, & Medine, 2001), the number of significant social ties increases with age, reaches its peak around the age of 50, and then starts to decline (Glaeser, Laibson, & Sacerdote, 2002); the peak of empathic behavior and concern is also in middle age (Labouvie-Vief, 2009; O’Brien et al., 2013). Of the entire adulthood period, the sense of control over money is the highest in midlife (Lachman & Weaver, 1998). According to Census data, households maintained by householders aged 45 to 54 years had the highest income in the United States in 2013 (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2014). Middle age also marks the peak of one’s career (Helson et al., 2006). In this context, middle age enjoys a higher social status than young adulthood and old age (Garstka, Hummert, & Branscombe, 2005). Yet, age-related discrimination and

stereotypes also prevail with regard to middle age (Desmete & Gaillard, 2008; Iweins, Desmette, Yzerbyt, & Stinglhamber, 2013).

Some researches describe the familial aspect as another peak in middle-age years. This is because the burden of parenting decreases as the children leave home (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1997), and in this context, marital and life satisfaction increase (Dennerstein, Dudley, & Guthrie, 2002). Grandparenthood, another 'life course marker' of middle age, is positively associated with well-being and life satisfaction (Drew & Silverstein, 2004; Powdthavee, 2011). Yet, other researches question the grandparent role as associated with higher well-being, particularly if the role is more central than desired (Mehta, 2012; Muller & Litwin, 2011). The satisfaction with the children leaving home was also questioned, as the current "Y generation" stays at home longer than former generations (Almog & Almog, 2016) and still requires care and support (Kahn, Brittany, McGill, & Bianchi, 2011).

Another role that was added to the current middle age period is parental caregiving. Due to the longer life expectancy nowadays (Harper, 2014), this role has become more common than before and is associated with personal and familial stresses (De Jong Gierveld & Dykstra, 2006). The double caregiving roles to older and younger generations, the so-called "sandwich generation" (Zal, 1992), might be associated with high levels of stress and burnout, particularly among women (Grundy & Henretta, 2006; Wiemers & Bianchi, 2015). To conclude, findings concerning the familial aspects of middle-aged individuals and their implications to well-being and life satisfaction are diverse.

Hence, contemporary middle-age years include psychosocial diverse and sometimes contradictory characteristics; peaks and dips; changes in roles and ambiguity of norms; difficulties and capabilities; and unclear boundaries.

Subjective Age, Age Identification, and Social Status in the Context of Middle Age

Subjective age is the age an individual feels at (Diehl et al., 2014). It has been the focus of growing empirical interest due to its strong predictive value with regard to a variety of psychological and health outcomes. It has been found that feeling younger than one's chronological age in middle and later adulthood is associated with positive outcomes, and feeling older is associated with negative outcomes (Barrett & Montepare, 2015; Diehl et al., 2014).

Age identity emphasizes the individual's subjective sense of age based on his or her social experiences and the identification with a specific age-group. According to Diehl et al. (2014), age identification includes age norms and conceptions of the life course (Neugarten & Hagestad, 1976; Shanahan & Elder, 2002), age-grouped social roles, socioeconomic conditions (Barrett, 2003), and procedures of social categorization and identification (Tajfel, 1978).

Abrams et al. (2009) has stressed that age identification is the extent to which people positively identify with an age category. This is because according to the social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978), individuals are motivated to gain positive distinctiveness for their in-groups by comparing them favorably with out-groups. Therefore, individuals may be less motivated to identify with age-groups to which their culture assigns low social value (Abrams et al., 2009). For example, older adults' age-group dissociation was stronger when they were exposed to negative age stereotypes (Weiss & Lang, 2012).

In this context, the social status of middle age is controversial; although it enjoys higher social status in adulthood (Garstka et al., 2005), it also suffers age-related discrimination and stereotypes (Desmete & Gaillard, 2008; Iweins et al., 2013). Moreover, middle age was found as period in which age-related stereotypes were prevalent and were often self-imposed (Davis & Friedrich, 2010; Laditka, Fischer, Laditka, & Segal, 2004).

This ambivalence seems to impact the age identification of middle-aged individuals: According to Abrams et al. (2009), age-group identification was the strongest in the youngest and oldest age-groups and weakest among 50 to 64-year-olds. Referring to this phase as the most "ambiguous" age range, the researchers suggested that this lowest identification may reflect this group's potential uncertainty about how others may perceive and categorize their age.

Middle Age and Aging in Israel

The European Social Survey conducted in 2008 to 2009 included questions concerning the timing of the end of youth and of the start of old age. In the description of the estimated average age by each of the 28th countries that participated in the survey, Israel was found as a country in which the perception of the end of youth was higher than the average (about 43; the average was 40) and the perception of the start of old age was also higher than the average (about 66; the average was about 62; Abrams, Vauclair, & Swift, 2011). Referring to the range between the end of youth and the beginning of old age as middle age (Ayalon et al., 2014), we may suggest that the perceived middle age in Israel starts late and ends late in comparison to European countries.

Upon its establishment in 1948, Israel was a young society (for instance, it had only 4% of adults aged 65 and older; Central Bureau of Statistics, 2016). In these years, the vast majority of Israelis were young immigrants from various countries; many of whom were holocaust survivors who immigrated to Israel during the 1940s and the 1950s (Carmel, 2010). During these years, the ethos of youth was rooted as a substantial part of the Israeli culture, as the ideals of "fresh, young, and healthy" symbolized the new Jewish body and the new society that was established (Spector-Mersel, 2008).

Over the years, the Israeli population has aged rapidly (Carmel, 2010); for instance, in 2014, 10.8% of Israelis were 65 years and older, and this rate is

expected to continue increase (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2016). Yet, the Israeli population is younger than most Western countries, particularly due to its higher birth rate (Central bureau of Statistics, 2016). These changes are associated with changes in perceptions of age and aging in Israel, from a culture which perceived itself as being respectful toward its older population to one that is challenged with ageist perceptions, empirical findings of elder abuse, and rising political awareness of the older population (Doron, 2008; Lowenstein, Eisikovits, Band-Winterstein, & Enosh, 2009; Shiovitz-Ezra, Ayalon, Brodsky, & Doron, 2016).

The Research Question

In light of the diverse literature concerning social aspects and well-being of contemporary middle age in Western countries, the lower identification of middle-aged individuals with their age-group (Abrams et al., 2009), and the changing perceptions of aging in Israeli culture (Shiovitz-Ezra, Ayalon, Brodsky, & Doron, 2016), the present study aims to examine the subjective experiences of middle aged individuals in Israel. In particular, it focuses on beliefs and perceptions concerning middle age.

Given that middle age is constantly extending with the rise in life expectancy and the better health of older age-groups (Lachman, 2004), it constitutes a significant period in life that has been understudied (Ayalon et al., 2014, Lachman, 2015; Toothman & Barrett, 2011) ,and its subjective meanings were rarely been examined (Lachman, 2004). Nevertheless, the perceptions of age contain important implications to individuals' well-being (Ward, 2010, 2013) and future aging experiences (Vaillant & Mukamal, 2001). Therefore, the current study aims to take part in a research effort to fill some of the gaps on this subject.

Research Method

The present study relies on a qualitative research design to investigate middle-aged individuals' beliefs and perceptions concerning middle age. The study implements qualitative research to gain the deep meaning of experiences. The strength of qualitative research lies in permitting to delve deeply into the topic of the study, while exploring ideas that have not been researched before and offering participants the opportunity to be heard (Cresswell, 2003).

The researchers took several measures to establish the rigor of the present research: Triangulation (validation of qualitative findings; Cresswell, 2003), by interviewing 25 individuals, analyzing each interview separately and comparing the findings with those of other-related studies. Additional triangulation techniques included analyzing the findings by the first author and cross checking it with the second author. In writing this article, the findings were presented using a "thick description," including quotes from the interviews, which make the

process that yielded the findings transparent (Polkinghorne, 2005), and enable the readers to judge the proposed interpretations (Cresswell, 2003).

Participants

The participants in the study were 25 men and women who reside in Israel. We chose to interview individuals who meet the age range of the middle-age phase (45–65 years old) as described in literature (e.g., Helson et al., 2006; Lachman, 2004) and the age range that was perceived as the years in between “the end of youth” and “the beginning of old age” as was found in Israel (43–66 years; Abrams et al., 2011). Participants were 16 women and 9 men aged 48 to 64 years. These participants were diverse in various aspects: employment, education, family status, religiosity, geographic location, ethnicity, and immigration background.

Sampling and Recruitment of Participants

The study draws on a purposeful sampling, utilizing the strategy of maximum variation sampling. According to this strategy, common patterns that emerge from great variations are of particular interest in capturing the core experiences and central aspects of the subject (Patton, 1990). This sampling method was achieved in three steps: First, the authors were assisted by undergraduate social work students who undertook an academic course on adult development and aging. Each student was asked to locate an individual between the ages of 45 and 65 years, with maximum sampling variations in the mentioned criteria. Each student interviewed his or her participant. The students-interviewers were experienced in qualitative interviews and acquired experienced with interviews with patients during their practical training. They were further trained for the present interview by the first author. Second, 22 interviews were selected to the current study based on the quality of the interviews and the participants’ diversity in terms of background characteristics. Third, in order to get further diversity in the sample in terms of immigration background, the first author conducted three additional interviews with middle aged individuals who immigrated to Israel. These participants volunteered to participate in the study through ads in online bulletin boards and in institutions that assist immigrants.

Research Procedure

The interviews were held in locations chosen by the participants, most often in their homes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The language spoken in the interviews was Hebrew (accept for the three interviews conducted with recent immigrants, in which the languages were either English or Russian). The interviews began with a broad question addressing the purpose

of the study (to learn about subjective experiences of middle-aged individuals concerning this life phase) and asked participants to tell their stories. Participants were encouraged to relate whatever they perceived as significant. Next, the interviewers queried about specific points raised by the participants. An interview guide, which prompted the informants to discuss issues associated with the topic, covered the following areas: the participants' current health status, work, relationships, and life difficulties. The interview was concluded by gathering demographic information (see Appendix). Each interview lasted between 2 and 3 hours.

Ethics

The study was approved according to the ethical procedures employed by the department of social work. All participants signed an informed consent after receiving detailed explanations about the study. Identifying details were blurred.

Analysis of the Findings

The interviews were thematically analyzed by the authors. Coding was carried out in stages. A preliminary coding frame was drawn up from an explorative stage, in which the first author closely read the transcribed interviews, looking for codes. Next, each transcript was coded thematically, multiple comparisons were done, links between categories were tested, and the themes were joined to create broader thematic structures (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The findings were coded openly, so that the categories emerged from the content of the interviews (Cresswell, 2003). The categories were initially descriptive, but became interpretative as the analysis progressed, and eventually turned into core categories that delineated the narrative line (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

For example, the category "what do I have to do with middle age?" was developed as a cluster of three code groups: (a) The codes "being middle aged means being old?," "I don't feel old?," "memories of relatives at this age as old?," and "health problems or declines mean I am old" were clustered under the group title "*perceptions of middle age as an old age*"; (b) the codes "I don't feel middle aged?," "I don't look middle aged?," "I don't behave middle aged?," and "afraid or ignore my age" were clustered under the group title "*detach myself from my age*"; (c) the codes "when is middle age?" "am I in middle age?" and "on which stage of middle age am I?" were clustered under the group title "*queries concerning the concept of middle age?*" Finally, these three code groups were clustered under the core category titled "what do I have to do with middle age?"

While coding and categorization were underway, comparisons were repeatedly made between individual participants to define thematic categories that would be more comprehensively relevant (Miles et al., 2014). During the process

of categorization, the researchers moved back and forth between the interview transcriptions, the themes, and the categories. This process spanned the entire research process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The second author participated in the final coding stage, in which the categories were determined. The analyses were audited through detailed documentation.

Findings

The present study addresses the way middle age is perceived by middle-aged individuals in Israel. Although the term “middle age” was unfamiliar to many respondents and was occasionally interpreted negatively, the current period in the participants’ life was often described as positive, in terms of a relief, peace of mind, experience, and self-acceptance; some participants have described it as a personal peak in life. However, participants were ambivalent regarding identifying with middle age, both because they have perceived it as low prestige age and because of concerns regarding declines in the years to come.

Four main categories were identified: (a) “I don’t feel old at all”: what do I have to do with middle age? (b) “It is my time now”: Time for relief and liberation; (c) “A better sense of perspective”: Peace of mind, self-acceptance, and experience; (d) “This is the best time of my life”: The peak and what lurks behind it. In this section, we will use quotes from the interviews to demonstrate the perceptions of the participants about middle age.

“I Don’t Feel Old at All”: What Do I Have to Do With Middle Age?

In the beginning of the interviews, the interviewers explained that the topic of the study was middle age and asked the participants to tell their stories. Consequently, the stories usually began with a statement concerning age. Many participants were curious to learn why a research was being conducted on middle age, and what was interesting about that period. The participants debated as to whether they were going through middle age and at which of its stages they were. Some participants asked for an explanation: “What is middle age?” In response, the interviewers were instructed to describe the age ranges commonly referred to as middle age in the literature (45–65 years).

One reaction that kept reappearing was the participants’ astonishment about being middle aged and still feeling young. Several participants compared themselves to middle aged people they had known, whom they recalled as old. For instance, two participants said:

I had great difficulty accepting that the digit 5 now marks my age, because I used to think that being a fifty year-old woman was extremely heavy and serious, but I crossed it, I survived, and I haven’t even changed that much (a 54-year-old woman, Code Number 9).

I have reached the age of my grandmother as I remember her . . . I would see her not as a woman but as an old woman, and I don't feel old at all. Many of my friends, who are 30 or older, tell me 'wow, you really don't look or behave like a 51-year old', so I can take this as a compliment (a 51-year-old woman, Code Number 21).

Compared with these women, other participants have reported difficulties accepting their chronological age. This finding was particularly prominent at the beginning of the interview, where eight participants regarded this period in life negatively, as a fate they had to face, but were driven to detach themselves from. A 59-year-old woman participant explained:

I kind of ignore my age. And when I'm being asked for my age, it's not easy for me to say it. Because, there are kinds of stamps being put on people. I mean, if I say that I'm close to sixty, people say 'wow, sixty'. It's true that nowadays sixty is not old anymore, but it isn't young either. It's like I'm done, I have finished the young person's phase (Code Number 4).

Another participant, a 58-year-old man, explained his refusal to celebrate his recent birthday:

I turned 58 in September. Everyone [in my family] wished to celebrate my birthday, but I said no . . . I don't want to be my age, I don't accept my age, I don't approve of a birthday party . . . Do you think I'm happy to be 58? I'm not! . . . They will have to accept the fact that I can't behave as you would expect a man in his 60s to behave . . . so no birthday for me (Code Number 25).

In fact, birthdays seemed to be a sensitive subject to other participants as well, especially birthdays marking the end of a decade or the beginning of a new one. Noteworthy, those participants who regarded middle age negatively expressed these attitudes in relation to their numerical and not to the characteristics of the current period in their lives.

In describing their lives at present, all the participants chose to compare—with no prompting—their health, appearance, behavior, personality, and lifestyle at that time with that of an earlier age. Most comparisons were related to changes in the body (health, capabilities, and appearance). Some comparisons went into detail, while others were matter-of-fact. For example:

When you're young, you don't think about diseases or about the end [of life], when you're aging you start thinking as an older person, life moves faster (a 51-year-old woman, Code Number 21).

I feel young. Physically, I do almost everything I used to do when I was young. Obviously things are harder now . . . when I went on a journey with my son, going

up the mountains was harder [than before], and my son waited for me. But I will not prevent myself from doing things I used to do just because I'm older now (a 50-year-old man, Code Number 5).

These persistent comparisons between the present and the past may indicate a process of creating a distinction between the current period and prior periods in life to establish a personal construction of middle age.

“It Is My Time Now”: Time for Relief and Liberation

Many of the stories about middle age began with the realization that the children had grown up and would soon leave the nest—or have already left. The women reported ambivalent feelings: Missing the children and being concerned about them together with a sense of relief and liberation from previous duties. However, most of these women said that they had gradually begun dedicating the free time they had regained when the children grew up to other purposes. Some extended their work hours or launched new careers; others invested more time in new hobbies or recreational activities. A 53-year-old woman participant explained:

For so many years you have been occupied with children, doing their laundry, feeding them, worrying that everything will be clean and tidy when they come home, and suddenly they leave and these chores and energy are interrupted . . . unexpectedly you have lots of free time, and the children occupy you more mentally than physically. You think about them, what they do, how do they get along . . . that might be sad, people might feel emptiness, but it is also natural and positive, because when children leave home it means that everything is fine, normal, and it also allows you time for yourself, to start over a career, to invest more hours at work, to study (Code Number 7).

An expression that kept reappearing in this context was “it is now my time,” expressing the idea that while in earlier years the tasks involved in caring for the children and the home consumed a significant part of the woman’s lives, now the woman was free to decide how to spend her time. A 54-year-old woman participant said:

[When you are younger] you often find yourself doing whatever you are doing because you understand [that this is necessary], but in your mind you wish you could have done something else, without being obligated. So suddenly there is this relief . . . even during the two years my daughter was in the army, we went to the theater, I didn’t have to cook . . . we took walks, every Saturday we would go to a café. Suddenly this burden was lifted (Code Number 1).

The quotations above may point on a secondary socialization to middle age, where people learn how to become middle aged and to enjoy its advantages.

Noteworthy, some participants, and particularly those who were grandparents, claimed that they were not relieved in middle age. A 54-year-old woman said:

I have two married daughters and one son, they all have left home. But my tension and worries have not dropped subsequently, on the contrary . . . our relationships are very open, they tell me a lot, almost everything they go through, and it somehow causes me an emotional overload. I talk with each of my daughters at least twice a day, and being informed of every small pain or wound my grandchildren go through . . . I see my grandchildren at least twice a week . . . I often worry when grandchildren are ill, when one of my children is looking for a job, difficulties they go through, financial worries (Ccode Number 9).

However, this participant, as other grandparents' who participated in the study, stressed her *choice* to be a deeply involved parent and grandparent, in contrast to typical parenthood to younger children, which included more obligations.

Most of the participants (18 of the 25) had at least one living parent. Some of the parents were independent, some needed assistance, and some were living in old-people's homes or nursing homes. Participants whose parents needed an intensive assistance reported of a significant physical load as well as an emotional overload. When the parents needed intensive assistance, such as in times of sickness, hospitalization, or transitioning to a different living arrangement, the participants usually said they have dedicated significant part of their time to their parents, and their sense of relief was naturally reduced. However, these were usually temporary circumstances. Half of these participants (nine participants) stressed that they have helped their parents of their own free choice and not out of formal obligation. The point of having the choice of whether or not to provide help and the ability to decide regarding the extent of this help was yet another manifestation of freedom. A 61-year-old man participant (Code Number 22) said:

When we were children, our mother gave us everything she had and being able to help her now makes us feel good. But yes, it is difficult, we are no longer young, we also have all kinds of health problems . . . I am fortunate to be able to pay them (my parents) back.

This sense of liberation of formal obligations is associated with a sense of freedom, reported by most of the participants: liberation from the need to adjust

and meet the expectations of the people around. This idea was mentioned in diverse contexts during the interviews, for example:

You are allowed to do whatever you feel like doing . . . you are even allowed to say 'no' (a 59-year-old woman, Code Number 4).

I sit in university courses as an auditor . . . I don't need the degree . . . suddenly you don't have to (a 58-year-old woman, Code Number 14).

All those things I used to fear of, what my children and the kibbutz members would think about me, today I work hard on myself and do what I want to do. This is my time (a 51-year-old woman, Code Number 21).

Similar statements kept reappearing in other interviews, mostly by women but also by men. Of the 16 women interviewed, 7 also mentioned they no longer had to make an effort to adjust their appearance to the expectations of those around them:

Being beautiful is no longer a big deal, you don't have to (a 58-year-old woman, Code Number 14).

To summarize, the participants reported a sense of relief because either they had less formal chores and social expectations to deal with or they felt they were now more able to control their time and choices.

“A Better Sense of Perspective”: Peace of Mind, Self-Acceptance, and Experience

As a rule, the participants associated the sense of liberation with having a peace of mind, a stress-reduced surrounding. Most of them noted that in recent years, they have experienced an inner calmness, did not get upset as often, were less irritated by situations that had once annoyed them, and had a more balanced and relaxed perspective. A 53-year-old woman participant (Code Number 18) attempted to explain this state of mind:

There is a kind of maturity at the point where we are now . . . especially a sense of . . . gratification, of relaxation and peace, of acceptance, of accepting yourself and others, life is much more relaxed. Things no longer annoy me as they used to, everything gets its right proportions, as if your past experiences make you see things in a more balanced way.

In a similar manner, a 64-year-old man participant (Code Number 15) said that when he was a young father, he used to get angry with his children and

spank them, but things mellowed down over the years:

When we were young, the pressures were enormous I now regret [my behavior], and think that if I had known then what I know now, I would have treated them differently I am so sorry for having behaved like this (long silence). I recall a number of very difficult situations . . . and today I see my children getting equally furious I wish they would be wiser to achieve at 30 what I achieved at 60.

A metaphor that kept coming up in this context in a number of interviews was “calm water” or “calm seas”. Several women chose to describe earlier periods in their lives as “stormy water”, whereas now, as one of them said, “I am through with all the sea storms and I am now in peace” (a 53-year-old woman, Code Number 11).

A total of 15 participants (out of 25) explained that they have gained a deeper knowledge of themselves of their abilities and limitations. This self-awareness generates sensations of self-acceptance, sometimes after many years of “searching for the right path” (a 53-year-old woman, Code Number 19). A 62-year-old man participant (Code Number 2), whose story depicted him as a devoted family man and a successful businessman, said:

Today I feel strong enough to face things that I had difficulty facing as a young man. As a young man [when facing difficulties] I used to drink, I drank a lot . . . the chief escape from problems, I drank a lot.

Another example of self-acceptance was seven women’s declarations of accepting their looks and bodies as it is, for example:

I feel less embarrassed with my body, I don’t hide it as I once used to (a 51-year-old woman, Code Number 21).

However, the other nine women participant seemed to be ambivalent at this point; they have said that their appearance was very important to them and found it difficult to accept the signs of aging. They had reflections about cosmetic possibilities and plastic surgeries, yet in the same time reflected they would like to accept their current looks. A 53-year-old woman participant (Code Number 18) shared her inner conflict:

My appearance changed, I don’t look like I used to, it, it annoys me that it annoys me (laughing), that I can’t accept it. It really bothers me, that I am not willing to accept that I don’t look like I used to, that I’m constantly not pleased with my appearance.

This self-aware, striving to self-acceptance and experienced perspective reported by the participants, allowed them to advise younger people, as their children, relatives, or others. The former participant (Code Number 18) explained why her younger colleagues at work turn to her advice on personal matters:

When they (colleagues) have an argument with their spouses, they share it with me, and I somehow calm them down, put them in perspective, and show them the other side I've been there, I know, I have the experience. I am more clear-headed and much more mature.

To summarize, the participants were aware of their life experience in middle age, which was associated with a calmer and more relaxed perspective than before. Most of them also reflected about self-awareness and self-acceptance or about striving to achieve self-acceptance.

“This Is the Best Time of My Life”: The Peak and What Lurks Behind It

Four participants began their story with statements about middle age as a peak in life: “I am now going through the most beautiful time of my life.” However, most of the stories began tentatively with some suspicion about the topic of the research. As the interviews advanced, a change was noticed: The repeated comparisons of the present with younger age-groups became increasingly positive. It became apparent that in the end of the interviews, the term “middle age” was used more frequently and with more positive connotations. Thus, for example, a 53-year-old woman participant (Code Number 7) said:

[At my present age] all my capabilities swing into action and reach a very high level. Beforehand, at earlier times, I was not sure, I didn't know what was suitable for me and what wasn't, what I should do, what I should study, but now all capabilities reach their peak and I think this is wonderful.

Moreover, it appeared that the initially negative connotations of the term “middle age,” which came up directly in eight interviews, gradually turned positive. The idea of a “peak” expressed in the last quotation repeated in 14 interviews, in a way that sometimes surprised the participants themselves. For example, a 61-year-old man (Code Number 22), who reported in detail his health problems in the past few years, said:

I don't see anything I would like to change in my life [at the moment]. I could do without my health problems, but they too have a good side, they made me slow

down my pace and understand that one should seize the moment. Thank God, I think that I have much to enjoy at the moment.

However, while acknowledging the advantages of middle age, participants were also ambivalent in describing it. Their ambivalence was reflected as they discussed their concerns of declines that might come after the peak. Some have expressed concerns that these advantages were temporary and that one could only go down from this high point. Thus, a 53-year-old woman participant (Code Number 20) explained:

[This] is a very pleasant age, and I wish it could stay this way. The best time ever . . . Today I have everything! But this soon will end When I was 50 I realized that life is very short. It was after my father passed. Before that, I didn't think about the issue of death, that life ends in a certain point When my father passed at 77, I was stunned, simply shocked I realized that I have maybe another twenty, perhaps twenty something years left, it's very sad for me. Because life is so beautiful. I want to squeeze it (life), to enjoy it, try to appreciate the small details So it is such a combination [of happiness and sadness].

Reflections about old age, illness, and death were not frequently brought up during the interviews but were implied occasionally when the participants referred to their parents' old age. In fact, 13 participants said frankly that they evaded these thoughts, which could indicate their concerns of these subjects. Nine others participants spoke about old age, illness, and death directly, with considerable anxiety. For example, a 60-year-old woman participant (Code Number 16) who cared for her mother for years said:

I accompanied my mother everywhere. There were good days and there were very difficult days And she was depressed. I would always 'milk' her with questions, so she would talk and not get deep into her melancholy I've always said I don't want to be like her. I've been very, very afraid I'm still afraid. No, I'm terrified! . . . For many years I've been so busy taking care of my parents, that I never allowed myself to be ill I still don't allow myself, no. I'm very scared. Maybe because it reminds me of my mom.

Some other participants talked specifically about their fears of death and said that they have bothering thoughts about it. These participants were part of those who described their current life phase as a peak. Thus, it appears that these participants have perceived middle age not only with ambivalence but as a period with intense contrasts.

An expression that was often mentioned in this context was that at their age, the participants should "seize the moment," before it was over. This feeling was linked with the recurring narrative about the peace and calmness of middle age,

discussed earlier. However, those peaceful narratives now depicted a temporary situation that might partly stem from the need to try and make the best out of life before it would be too late.

To summarize, during the interviews, the connotation of the term “middle age” gradually turned positive, and it was largely described as a peak in life. However, participants associated middle age with concerns about old age, illness, and death. Middle age appeared to be perceived as a peak that beyond it lurks a substantial decline.

Discussion

The present article discusses the subjective experience of middle aged individuals in Israel. The findings of the research indicate that the concept of “middle age” is not sufficiently clear and in some cases awakens negative associations in members of this age-group. Nevertheless, middle aged individuals report that this period has many advantages over previous periods in their life course: a heightened sense of freedom, control, and improved peace of mind; self-awareness; and self-acceptance. These advantages are accompanied by concerns about the next period in life—old age, which casts a shadow on the perception of middle age as a positive period.

A theme that stood out was the participants’ revelation that they belonged to this age-group. These findings illustrate that the middle age category is ambiguous (Abrams et al., 2009) and has no clear boundaries and norms. It has not been researched thoroughly (Ayalon et al., 2014; Lachman, 2004), even though it lasts for several decades. Age identification includes norms, conceptions, and roles that relate to age (Diehl et al., 2014); based on social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978), age identification should also include procedures of social categorization and positive identification with age categories (Abrams et al., 2009; Diehl et al., 2014). The literature shows that middle age is a period in which age-related stereotypes are prevalent and often self-imposed (Davis & Friedrich, 2010; Laditka et al., 2004). Moreover, age-group identification is weaker in middle age compared with any other age-group (Abrams et al., 2009).

What makes it difficult for people to identify with middle age? The literature suggests several explanations. Past research has found that as individuals grow older, they feel and wish to be younger and are likely to pursue a younger age identity (Barak, 2009; Hubley & Russell, 2009; Westerhof & Barrett, 2005). Lachman (2004) demonstrated that in various studies, one third to one half of the older adults who were investigated considered themselves to be middle aged. In the current context, middle-aged individuals may identify with younger age-groups than their chronological one.

Currently, the social prestige of middle age is controversial; although middle age enjoys the highest status of the adulthood period (Garstka et al., 2005), age-related discrimination and stereotypes prevail with regard to middle age

(Desmete & Gaillard, 2008; Iweins et al., 2013). Several studies have claimed that the current job market and the consumer market glorify youth, regarding it as a value that maximizes one's chances to succeed in life (Blatterer, 2010; Desmete & Gaillard, 2008; Iweins et al., 2013). A youthful style has therefore been in great demand by all age-groups (Blatterer, 2010).

Another explanation stems from the association done by participants between middle age and old age (e.g., in response to their positioning in the *middle age*-group, most of the study's participants stressed that they did not feel *old*). This association may indicate a dichotomous perception of age (young vs. old) that leaves no room for middle age. Nikander (2009) has claimed that chronological age is most often used to categorize individuals as young versus old, and Hagestad and Uhlenberg (2005) have suggested that the present social structure supports an institutionalized segregation between young and old age-groups in most aspects of culture and society. Hence, participants' responses indicate that the place of middle age on the continuum is less clear-cut.

Zygmunt Bauman (1992) maintained that in an environment of "or" definitions, the option of assigning an object or an event to more than one category leads to ambivalence that may threaten social order and generate confusion and fear. Bauman (1995) mentions two types of fear: resentment toward the perceived difference of something unfamiliar (Heterophobia) and fear from and anger toward whatever or whoever defies the existing category structure (Proteophobia). In the current context, it appears that in a social order that categorizes age dichotomously, an individual who is neither young nor old would feel embarrassment and fear. This theory may explain the popular myth about a "midlife crisis" (Gould, 1978; Levinson, 1978), which expects a person standing between the two categories to experience a crisis. Moreover, according to Bauman (1992), individuals who stand between categories are themselves embarrassed and concerned. It would therefore appear that identifying with one of these categories could ease these sensations. In light of the negative stereotypes and discrimination branded with old age (e.g., Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2005; Nelson, 2005), middle aged people's choice to identify with the young and disconnect from old age is understood.

And yet, the research participants gradually opened up and began talking about the current period in their lives in positive terms. Ward (2010) suggested that persons who subjectively are more successful in fulfilling developmental challenges, especially for personal growth, feel younger but their ideal age (i.e., a comparison of oneself now with a younger age) is older. Possibly, the current study's participants' reflections on their life story, as a part of the interview process, made them more aware and mindful to their successes and personal growth and made them look at their age in a different perspective.

The positive aspects of middle age that the participants have described are well known in the literature, yet seemed new to the participants in this study. Relief at being released from the family duties involved in caring for young

children was mainly expressed by women and is known to be characteristic of middle aged women (Helson & Soto, 2005). The reduced need to abide by accepted norms and adjust oneself to the surroundings has been mentioned in key theories (Jung, 1933; Levinson, 1978; Neugarten, 1968) and in various studies (e.g., Harker & Solomon, 1996; Helson & McCabe, 1993; Tiggemann & McCourt, 2013). The self-perceptions of experience and peace of mind have also been discussed in various studies (Labouvie-Vief, 2009; O'Brien et al., 2013) and theories (Eriksen, 1968; Neugarten, 1968).

The research findings also suggest that the participants, while illustrating the advantages of middle age, were still ambivalent about this period. According to Barrett and Montepare (2015), implicit conceptions of the life course are presumed to take on a curvilinear shape with anticipated gains in early development and a decline with advancing age (see also Heckhausen, Dixon, & Baltes, 1989; Ryff, 1991). Thus, in the current study, the perception of middle age as a peak included the implicit conception of inevitable decline in old age, which seemed to be a substantial source of anxiety to the participants and casted a shadow on the positive aspects of the current phase.

The current study has several limitations. The interviews were conducted, transcribed, and analyzed in Hebrew (three of them were translated to Hebrew). The presented quotations were therefore translated from Hebrew to English as accurately as possible, yet cultural meanings and common-sense might be lost in translation. Second, the prior familiarity of most of the interviewers with their interviewees might have biased the interviews, although it could also be an advantage with the interviewees' openness and cooperation. Third, the relatively small sample and sampling method question the generalizability of the study's findings.

Yet, the study may contribute to the research effort aims to fill some of the gaps in this subject of middle age generally and its subjective meanings in particular. Furthermore, past research has shown that perceptions of age may implicate individuals' well-being (Ward, 2010, 2013) and future aging experiences (Vaillant & Mukamal, 2001). Hence, the present research calls for further investigation of middle age and its subjective meaning.

Appendix: The Questions Asked in the Interview

1. A broad question: "I am studying middle aged people. I would like to hear your story."
2. "Opening windows": Expanding on points that came up in the story (e.g., "Please say more?" "What do you mean by this?" "Can you explain further?").

3. Additional questions (if the participants did not include these points in their story):
 - Tell me about your health at the present
 - Tell me about your work at the present
 - Describe your current relations with the people close to you
 - Describe the difficulties you are experiencing at the present.
4. Verification of demographic information: age, profession, family status, religiosity, immigration background.

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Liat Ayalon, PhD, is the chair of the Psychosocial Aspects of Aging research lab and a professor in the Louis and Gabi Weisfeld School of Social Work at Bar Ilan University, Israel. Her research concerns ageism, discrimination based on age, formal and informal care of older adults and the integration of mental health treatment in primary care. She is currently the chair of an EU funded COST Action on ageism (IS1402). She is the principal investigator of an Israel Science Foundation grant on social networks in the continuing care retirement community. She is also the PI on a grant from the Israel National Institute for Health Policy Research on the treatment of sexual concerns among older adults, a grant from the National Insurance Institute of Israel on elder care in the North of Israel, and another grant from NIII on the evaluation of training programs for paraprofessional workers. She is a co-PI on an NIII grant to assess barriers facing paraprofessional workers with older adults.