

Personality type and the male experience of identity in midlife: implications for counselling and psychotherapy

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Introduction

Human psychological needs and requirements change in parallel with developmental changes over the lifespan. Counsellors and psychotherapists need to be aware of these changes if they are to provide appropriate and effective support to clients. An important transition occurs in midlife, a life stage characterised by enhanced psychological development and maturity as well as one of possible “crisis”. In particular for men, successful transition into midlife often requires examination and reflection in order to establish a new sense of meaning and purpose in life and an opportunity to develop aspects of self that have remained underdeveloped. As a result, there may be a change in how men perceive their self-identity. Existential concerns often come to the fore as men become increasingly aware of their own mortality and the realisation that time is finite.

Erikson (1950) introduced the notion of generativity and stagnation and the need to reconcile these opposite tensions in midlife in order for ongoing psychological development to occur. Levinson (1978), in his landmark study of forty US males aged 35 to 45 years, reported that men became less career focused in midlife as they looked to develop previously neglected qualities in their personality. Jung (1933), in his theory of personality type, suggested a range of ways in which human behaviour could be categorised, and postulated that midlife entails developing previously repressed aspects of the personality as part of an inner journey towards wholeness or individuation.

Re-evaluation in midlife will typically impact on a man’s relationships with significant others such as his spouse or partner, offspring, work colleagues and friends. There may also be a re-examination of self/masculine identity in midlife as men ponder on their role in society and contemplate a life which provides them with a greater sense of meaning and purpose (O’Connor, 1988). Within this broad arena, a range of inter-individual differences such as personality will impact on this experience. To date there has been a paucity of research examining the influence of personality type on midlife men.

A model of personality widely used, especially in the counselling and human resource management sphere, is the Jungian model which asserts that apparently random human behaviour actually follows clear and predictable patterns based on a number of core personality characteristics or preferences (Jung 1933). Carl Jung developed a theory of psychological types that was subsequently interpreted and further extended by Katherine Briggs and Isabel Myers to form the basis of the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory® (MBTI).

The MBTI is but one approach to understanding and describing personality. There are a range of other influential instruments that measure personality. One that is used extensively by psychologists is the Five Factor Model (often referred to as the “Big Five” model). This approach to personality focuses on five broad domains or dimensions of personality that include openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and emotional stability (or neuroticism). McCrae and Costa (1989), the formulators of the Big Five model, have identified correlations between the MBTI scales and the Big Five personality domains. Based on the results of a longitudinal study of ageing, McCrae and Costa (1989) have suggested that the four MBTI scales are subsumed within the Big Five personality traits. A major difference between the two instruments is that the MBTI lacks a measure for emotional stability contained in Big Five. Emotional stability is a core domain predictive of depression and anxiety disorders. For many practitioners, especially those in fields such as career development and human resources management, this may not be a major limitation. Unlike the Big 5, the MBTI can be accessed and utilised effectively (after going through an accreditation process) by counsellors, therapists and other practitioners who are not qualified psychologists.

Jungian/MBTI theory focuses on two processes, Perception and Judgement. Perception is the process of gathering information, either by way of the senses or through intuition. Sensing (S) refers to the perception of information that is observable by way of the five senses – those with an S preference tend to place an emphasis on concrete data, immediate experiences and practicality. Intuition (N) refers to perception of information as ideas and concepts – those with an N preference tend to focus on connections, possibilities, patterns and meaning (McGuinness 2004; Myers et al 1998). Judgement refers to how information is processed to come to conclusions and to make decisions about what has been perceived. The thinking (T) function uses logic and analysis and tends to be objective and impersonal in applying reason to a decision. In contrast, the Feeling (F) function focuses on values and relationships and is a more subjective decision making process (Myers et al, 1998). Those with a T preference tend to base decisions on objectivity or laws and principles related to objects and processes, while those with an F preference tend to make decisions by considering what is the most important for people (McGuinness 2004, Myers et al, 1998).

Jungian/MBTI theory incorporates another pair of opposites, Extraversion (E) and Introversion (I), which describes two different ways people focus their energy. Extraverts “are primarily oriented outwardly toward people and events in their external environment and introverts are those whose energies are directed inwardly toward thoughts and experiences in their inner environment” (Myers et al, 1998, p. 22). Myers and Briggs

added a fourth dichotomy to Jung's model (that was implicit but undeveloped in his theory), Judging (J) and Perceiving (P), which indicates whether a person's focus in the outer world is on decision making (J) or gathering information (P). While the preferences E-I and J-P (also known as "attitudes") are an important facet of MBTI theory, for the purpose of this study the focus will be on the four mental functions – Sensing (S), Intuition (N), Thinking (T) and Feeling (F).

Of the four combinations of paired mental functions (ST, SF, NT, NF), two contrasting pairs are NF and ST. People with NF preferences are typically highly reliant on gathering information conceptually and on subjective/empathetic decision making, compared with the ST preference for collecting detailed information and objective, logical decision making. (Myers et al, 1998). If personality is a factor in terms of experience, it is reasonable to predict there would be different experiences of midlife according to MBTI preferences. For example, for NF men a crisis may occur in relation to a strong desire to honour their true self rather than conforming to societal expectations regarding masculine behaviour. For STs a crisis may relate to the frustration of wanting to initiate change but, lacking a clear vision of other possibilities or options, remains reluctant to change.

The MBTI is based on the view that humans have an innate drive towards wholeness and a corresponding desire to develop various aspects of their personality – a process Jung called individuation. MBTI theory focuses on the development of personality throughout the lifespan and indicates that this can be achieved by further developing and integrating all four mental functions into the personality. During childhood the dominant (or first) function generally develops in a person's preferred world of extraversion or introversion (McGuinness 2004). In adolescence, the auxiliary (or second) function develops more fully in support of the dominant function in either the less preferred world of introversion or extraversion. At this stage of development there is relative neglect of the other two functions (Myers et al 1998; Myers and Kirby 1994). In early adulthood the third (tertiary) function develops and in midlife the fourth function develops in the less preferred world of introversion or extraversion. For example, in relation to this study, it is purported that midlife entails the NF developing the ST side of their personality and the ST developing their NF personality preferences. These developmental changes have been reported to occur in midlife but the extent to which they transpire is unknown.

In his book on midlife crisis, Australian Jungian psychologist Peter O'Connor (1988) postulated that midlife men experience a deep sense of loss in number of ways – loss of youth, loss of meaning, loss of (an imagined) sense of immortality and a loss of a previous (self/masculine) identity. Regarding relationships, authors such as Gerzon (1996) and Sheehy (1981) have suggested that midlife provides the opportunity for a deeper level of intimacy and connectedness, especially with spouses/partners. This idea is appealing but has yet to be validated.

Pedersen (1993) hypothesised that men with an NF preference may experience considerable social pressure when it comes to fully expressing their typological makeup:

NFs are truly a minority among men. This under representation makes them feel at odds with other men because there are so few of them and also because it is a difficult type for a man to be...NFs are the most unlike stereotypical males (p. 147).

Pedersen also made a persuasive case that the significant under-representation in the general population of males with the “feminine” NF personal qualities may contribute to them feeling marginalised and under pressure to conform. Based on Pederson’s notions it could be reasonably hypothesised that the experience of midlife for males with an NF preference may differ from that of men with an ST preference.

The aim of this study is to examine the influence of personality type on the male midlife experience by comparing men with NT preferences with those who have a preference for ST.

Methodology

Participants

A snowballing recruitment technique was utilised whereby potential participants were identified through professional networks. This ceased when a number (N) of ten was reached for each personality group. All of the participants were familiar with the MBTI and aware of their own personality preferences. The two groups were broadly similar in terms of age, partnership status and years in previous/current employment. By contrast, income was generally higher for STs while NFs had higher levels of education and were more likely to be self-employed. More detailed demographic information provided by participants is summarised in Appendix A.

Defining midlife is fraught with difficulty (for example, some believe it is delayed compared to forty or fifty years ago). When outlining what the questions were about, all participants were gauged by the interviewer to have met the criteria of being in the “midlife” stage of the life cycle. As part of the screening process key aspects of chronological and developmental criteria regarding midlife were explained. In response to the explanation, respondents also deemed themselves as suitable for participation in the pilot study.

The current occupations of the participants generally conformed with expectations for NF and ST preferences. Sixty per cent of the NF group versus none of the ST group identified their occupation as teaching, human resources or consulting. By contrast, 90% of the ST group and 30% of the NF group indicated their occupation/profession as business, management or sales.

The study was approved by the Human Ethics Committee of the University of South Australia.

Instruments

MBTI

The participants were recruited from a pool of people who had previously undergone a structured MBTI assessment with an accredited practitioner and had self-selected their best fit preferences.

SRRS

The Social Readjustment Rating Scale or SRRS (Holmes and Rahe, 1967) was administered to control for any potential group differences in life stressors that may confound any assessment of the effect of personality on midlife – especially given the small participant numbers. A further reason was to explore the nature of the stressors for each personality type.

Holmes and Rahe (1967) hypothesised that a wide range of stressors, both positive and negative, would involve significant change in a person's life. On the basis of data for more than 5,000 patients, they identified 43 life events that appeared to precede the onset of illness and allocated each item a score to reflect the possible degree of "necessary readjustment" required. The predictive validity of the SRRS is strong – high scores are reported to be highly predictive of poor health (Bishop, 1994).

Protocol

After collecting the MBTI, SRRS and demographic information the participants underwent a 30 to 45 minute interview. For the interviews, based on the review of the literature and identification of key areas, five questions were developed regarding midlife. First, to test the midlife experience, participants were asked about losses or gains in midlife. Second, participants were asked if their transition into midlife had been one of crisis or not. Third, participants were asked what changes they had experienced in terms of self-identity, including masculine identity. Fourth, they were asked what impact midlife had had on levels of intimacy and connectedness with their (a) wife/partner (b) children (c) friends/others. Finally, to explore stressors, the SRRS was administered and participants were asked to comment on the life events they considered to be a major source of stress.

Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was undertaken to obtain insight into how participants perceived their experience of midlife. IPA is an approach to qualitative psychological research which aims to provide insights into how a person makes sense of a given phenomenon such as a major life event or the development of an important relationship. It has its theoretical origins in phenomenological psychology which figured prominently in the history of humanistic psychology (Smith, 2007). IPA is distinct from other approaches to phenomenological psychology because it contains psychological, interpretative and ideographic (or individual case) elements. IPA studies typically involve the close examination of the experiences of one participant or a small group of people, and the meaning they attach to those experiences (Reid, Flowers and Larkin, 2005). Instead of using randomised sampling techniques, IPA is based on purposive sampling

whereby participants are invited to take part in a study because they can offer the researcher meaningful insight. The benefit of this type of study, and its homogenous sampling, is that it illustrates how something is understood from a shared perspective.

The audio-taped interview sessions were transcribed and IPA was applied to the responses. This involved reading the first transcript a number of times, commenting in the right-hand margin regarding aspects of responses that were perceived as interesting or significant, as well as writing summarising statements and notes regarding connections or associations, emphasis and any apparent contradiction in the responses. On completion of this process, a further right-hand margin was used to identify themes which related to both the comments and the participant's dialogue. This resulted in a list of themes, patterns and common categories (Lindlof and Taylor, 2010) relating to the first interview, with quotes and direct references to the text where themes were apparent. Themes were then examined for connections and clustered into groups with similar or related meaning to form tentative categories before reworking them and creating new categories in order to identify deeper meanings or "meta-codes" (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The process was then repeated for the remaining interview transcripts, with the preliminary list of themes informing the analysis of the remaining transcripts. The list of themes was modified to incorporate the other responses and earlier transcripts were reviewed in light of any new meta-codes, or super-ordinate themes, that had emerged. Overall, the identified themes were consistent between both parties. Finally, the major themes were compared and contrasted within and between the NF and ST groups.

RESULTS

Overview

The majority of both personality types reported several gains including increased life mastery, wisdom/self-awareness and enhanced personal relationships (especially with their spouse/partner). In addition, the majority reported a smooth transition into midlife. However, men in the ST group were more likely than those in the NF group to have experienced an existential crisis, to view their self-identity primarily in terms of career/work and were less likely to have experienced greater intimacy with their spouse/partner. These areas are elaborated in the sections below.

(1) Psychological gains/losses in midlife

Major gain/loss themes and typical quotations for the two groups of men and the numbers that reported each theme, are summarised in [Table 1](#). Of note is that 18/20 of participants reported both gains and losses.

Gains

More gains were identified than losses. Nineteen participants (10 NF, 9 ST) reported experiencing a sense of gain since entering midlife with major themes of life mastery, wisdom/self-awareness and enhanced personal relationships.

(1) Life mastery: A majority (14/19) of participants (6NF, 8 ST) reported greater life-mastery with typical comments referring to their enjoyment/happiness due to a more balanced lifestyle and a broader sense of freedom regarding lifestyle choices.

(2) Enhanced wisdom/self-awareness: Almost one third (6/19) of participants (4 NF, 2 ST) reported enhanced wisdom/self-awareness as a major gain in midlife with comments typically referring to their greater self-confidence.

(3) Enhanced personal relationships: The third theme evident for 4/18 of the participants (2 NF, 2 ST) was that of enhanced personal relationships with all reporting greater intimacy and connectedness with their partner/spouse/children. One NF also described how his journey of personal discovery had recently helped him discover the joy of “connecting” with others, especially men, through community and personal growth groups.

Losses

Three areas of loss were identified in analysis of the data: physical strength, death or physical separation and meaning/identity (from job loss). Eighteen participants reported a sense of loss since entering midlife.

(1) Physical strength: Loss of physical strength, fitness and agility was reported by 7/18 of participants and was distributed almost equally between the two groups (4 NF, 3 ST).

(2) Death/physical separation: Feelings of loss due to death or physical separation were reported by 5/18 of participants (1 NF, 4 ST), with one man further commenting that the death of his father was secondary to the loss of not having children.

(3) Loss of meaning/identity: Loss of personal meaning/identity as a result of job loss was identified by 4/18 of participants (3NF, 1ST) with a typical observation that it had resulted in considerable self-doubt. For all four cases, loss of identity was related to job loss.

(2) Midlife crisis versus smooth transition

A majority (14/20) of participants (8 NF, 6 ST) reported experiencing a smooth transition into midlife and typically reported that they had mellowed and gained a broader perspective on life's priorities (refer Table 2). “Achieving” and “proving” themselves to others no longer seemed as important. Interestingly, even participants who had high levels of stress on the SRRS reported their midlife transition as smooth.

Six (30%) of the participants (2 NF, 4 ST) reported their experience of transition into midlife as a “crisis”. Of these men, the four STs commented on the lack of meaning and purpose in their lives when entering midlife. By contrast, neither of the NFs who reported a crisis mentioned meaning or “existential” issues but instead attributed their crisis to relationship difficulties.

Of the six men who reported a crisis, four of the participants (2 NF, 2 ST) reported experiencing depression and two others, both ST, indicated that their crisis involved suicidal thoughts or actions which led them to seek professional intervention. A typical

comment was:

I sought professional help – I saw a psychologist for six to eight months and learnt how to talk [openly about my emotions], which is unbelievable.

Of note is that men who reported midlife transition as a crisis indicated that they had grown and learnt from that experience. A typical comment was:

Something inside me said it was time to grow...I [now] feel so much better. I'm looking forward to the next twenty years so much more ... it was probably an awakening thing. [ST]

To test whether those who had reported a crisis may have differed in life stressors a post-hoc analysis was undertaken comparing the SRRS scores for those reporting a crisis (N=6, mean (SD) = 223.2 (97.9)) versus men reporting a smooth transition (N=14; 190.4 (89.4)). No significant group differences were observed ($t(18) = .7, p > .05$).

(3) Self/Masculine identity

Eighteen of the participants reported experiencing change in midlife in their self/masculine identity. Of note was that 8/10 of the ST group (and none of the NF group) responded by talking about the importance of being the family breadwinner while this was not reported by any of the NF group. When asked about masculinity, each group answered very differently. STs responded with comments regarding family and career roles, which signified an external locus of control. NFs responded more regarding self, which indicated an internal locus of control.

A typical ST comment was about the importance and sense of responsibility he attached to being the family provider:

[I have a] strong need... to support the family; to be able to provide for the family...I would harbour a deep fear of being in a position [of not being able to provide] because [of the negative impact it would have on] your sense of masculinity, your sense of worth, your sense of responsibility, your role as a breadwinner and your self-esteem....You can have three jobs if you have to, but you can always do that if you have to do it. [ST]

By comparison, the NF group did not describe themselves in such traditional terms. The emphasis was more on being “human beings” and honouring individual differences. One NF comment was illustrative of this view:

[I have become] more adroit and articulate in terms of [my] masculinity. [It's] more effective, it's more informed. I mean I am much more comfortable with so-called masculine/feminine behaviours or personality traits [and with the individual] mix of these.

(4) Intimacy/connectedness

Table 3 summarises the major themes and illustrative quotations for men of both personality type who reported a positive change in levels of intimacy/connectedness with their spouse/partner, children/offspring and friends. The number of participants reporting

positive, negative or no change is summarised for each of these three key areas of personal relationship.

Positive change in the spouse/partner relationship was characterised by the dual themes of improved communication and a greater sense of “friendship”. Another common theme identified was one of friendship with their maturing children/offspring. In terms of increased intimacy/connectedness with friends, the number of participants to report a positive change was the same as those who reported less/no change.

Spouse/partner

Increased intimacy: Increased levels of intimacy with spouse/partner were reported by a majority (12/20) of the participants (8 NF, 4 ST). Two major themes evident amongst those experiencing heightened intimacy or connectedness were improved communication skills such as listening, empathy and self-expression and an awareness of the importance of friendship with their spouse/partner. Half (6/12) of those to report enhanced intimacy (3 NF, 3 ST) commented on improved communication skills with their partner. Of note is that 4/8 of NFs commented on the importance of finding friendship with their partner/spouse. It could be hypothesised that NF males in midlife begin to discern and appreciate the practical day to day realities of a relationship that the ST males already acknowledge because of their innate preferences for practicality.

No change/less intimacy: Six of the participants (2 NF, 4 ST) reported either no change or were not in a relationship and two men (both ST) reported a deterioration in intimacy/connectedness. One of the two STs to report a deteriorating relationship indicated a “worsening” marriage since his job loss several years ago. The other reported that his previous primary relationship had ended at his instigation and that his “deep connection” with family and friends was of great importance to him.

Children/offspring

Increased intimacy: Of the fifteen participants (7NF, 8ST) who had children, a majority (12/15) of these (6NF, 6 ST) reported a positive change in the level of intimacy or connectedness with them in midlife, although it was not clear if this was due to psychological change within the father or to the maturation process in the children.

A number of the men (5/12) who reported a positive change indicated that once their children had entered adolescence or early adulthood they interacted with them more as “friends” or “mates” (3NF, 2 ST).

No change/less intimacy: Only one participant (ST) reported feelings of “loss” which was due to an “empty nest” as his two adult children no longer went camping with him on weekends.

Friends

Increased intimacy: Half (10/20) of the participants (5NF, 5ST) reported experiencing greater intimacy with friends in midlife. Typically they reported being able to open up and talk more about matters of interest and concern to them.

No change/less intimacy: Of note was the difference in the nature of the responses from the two subgroups (5NF, 5 ST) reporting no change. The NFs generally spoke of the need to move on from some friendships while maintaining a small number of close friends with whom they shared common values and ideas with. By comparison, the STs reported lower levels of intimacy and openness in their friendships.

(5) Stress and anxiety

The reported major life events for each personality group are ranked according to the percentage of participants to experience each event and are summarised in [Table 4](#).

To test whether reported differences were due to stress levels, the SRRS scores of the NFs and STs were compared and found to be broadly comparable. [The mean (SD) SRRS NF= 189 (116) and ST = 211 (61)]. There were two key areas of reported difference between the two groups on the SRRS – “revised personal habits” (ST=4/10 and NF=1/10) and “sleeping habits changed” (ST=3/10 and NF=0/10). On interview, participants were also probed regarding the life events that they had identified on the SRRS.

In regard to revised personal habits, the one NF attributed this to not being able to exercise regularly due to a serious injury. Of the four STs to specify that they had experienced a change of personal habits over the preceding twelve months, three described this change in positive terms (and attributed it to improved family relationships) while the other ST described the change in negative terms and attributed this to the tension between his new partner and his children from a previous relationship.

A change in sleeping habits was reported by three STs but none of the NFs. At interview, one ST said sleep deterioration was due to his children moving back into the family home and another attributed it to relationship/work problems. The third reported a positive change in sleeping habits due to a more balanced lifestyle.

Discussion

The present findings tentatively suggest that personality type does influence the male experience of midlife, in particular, relationships and self-identity. Men who identified with an ST compared to an NF preference were more likely on entry into midlife to have experienced an existential crisis, and to view their self-identity primarily in terms of career/work, and were less likely to have experienced increased intimacy with their spouse/partner. Despite the differences, the midlife trajectory was comparable across individuals. In particular, an overwhelming majority reported a more robust self-identity with subsequent gains in life mastery, wisdom and enhanced personal relationships with their spouse/partner. In addition, the majority experienced smooth transition into midlife rather than a “crisis” as is so often depicted in the media and in some midlife literature (Gerzon, 1996; O’Connor, 1988; Levinson 1978). For half of the participants reporting crisis, job loss and major career dissatisfaction were precursors, which emphasises the importance of work in the wellbeing and self-image of men (Lee and Owens, 2002; Colling, 1992). The present findings also support Erikson’s suggestion that midlife is

associated with generativity and rejuvenation. Participants who described midlife in positive terms generally commented that they wanted to “make a difference” and contribute more to the community. This may manifest in the form of some men aspiring to change their career or occupation (and possibly seeking career-related counselling to assist them with this process).

There was some support for the contention that the way males experience midlife varies with personality type (as indicated by the MBTI), especially when comparing NF and ST males (Pederson, 1993). Three main differences between the NF and ST groups were identified: (1) the experience of crisis; (2) self/masculine identity and; (3) the experience of relationships.

Although only a small proportion of men were affected, a major area of difference between personality types was the nature of midlife crisis. The ST group typically reported experiencing a lack of meaning, with related existential concerns upon entry into midlife, whereas relationship issues were more likely to underlie reports by the NF group of a crisis. As a possible explanation, men with a preference for ST are less likely to have addressed existential issues earlier in life compared with those men with a preference for NF, who, consistent with their more developed Intuition function (Myers et al, 1998), typically process big picture life issues earlier on in life. Men who reported as ST were also more likely than those with an NF preference to report suffering from depression during midlife. This may reflect an inability of the ST to utilise their NF function to place things into perspective and honour the need to address the feelings they experienced at the time (Myers et al, 1998).

The two personality types differed in their self/masculine identity. The ST group emphasised a more traditional view of masculinity, with the majority stressing the importance of their role as family breadwinner. By contrast, the NF group reported self-development and increased self-awareness as integral to their self/masculine identity. A surprising finding was that while men with a preference for ST projected a more traditional view of masculinity, they demonstrated more emotionality when talking about their feelings of loss and grief.

It is generally assumed that midlife is a period in which men place increasing value on companionship, emotional warmth and tenderness in their primary relationship (Vickers-Willis, 2004). Most men in this study reported increased intimacy or connectedness with their spouse/partner in midlife, and only two (both ST) indicated they had experienced reduced intimacy. The experience for the NF group was one of learning to reframe the relationship to one of friendship which resulted in greater intimacy. For the ST group the capacities of listening and empathy were instrumental in improving intimacy. Both of these changes are consistent with the Jungian precept that underdeveloped functions, such as ST for NFs and NF for STs, are addressed in midlife. Increased psychological wellbeing is generally associated with greater intimacy over the adult lifespan. It is not surprising that major personal difficulties, such as job loss, had a consequential effect on intimacy in midlife.

Although not the focus of the pilot study, there was some indication of a possible desire to develop the less-developed mental functions (NF) amongst the midlife men with ST preferences. Those with NF preferences appeared less likely to express a desire to develop their ST functions. This aspect of personality type in midlife could be explored in more depth in a future study. Of note is that, similar to other studies that have utilised psychological instruments such as the Big 5 (Costa et al, 2000), personality characteristics appear to remain relatively stable in midlife. (In terms of MBTI/Jungian theory, preferences remain constant throughout the entire life cycle.) It also needs to be acknowledged that other studies by Costa et al (2000), for example, have also produced similar findings regarding the lack of midlife crisis for many men, changes in relationships and the impact of external events like job loss and divorce.

Counselling midlife men effectively can be supported by some knowledge of the sort of person they are as framework to assist them for where they are going in terms of development. Knowledge of personality type can assist the counsellor to better know their preferred communication and counselling style and to modify their approach in response to the needs and personality preferences of their clients. An understanding of some of the key issues and concerns that confront midlife men and the implications for those of different personality preferences may assist professionals in providing highly person-centred support and therapy. The results of this pilot study provide a starting point for issues and responses that may be appropriate for men with ST preferences compared to those with NF preferences. [Table 5](#) provides a summary of the results of the pilot study and contains key learning points regarding some possible implications for counselling and therapy.

A limitation of the research is the small number of participants and the selection bias inherent in the snowballing recruitment approach that was used. As with all studies conducted using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the sample is highly selective and not representative of the general male population. All are white, middle class, heterosexual and able-bodied, thereby impacting on the confidence with which the present findings can be generalised to all men.

Another limitation is that the developmental models described, including those of Jung and Erickson, were initially articulated in the early/mid twentieth century and do not (and could not) reflect the contemporary social context within which individual development takes place in western society. More specifically, in recent decades there have been significant demographic shifts across the life course in contemporary western society and assumptions regarding marriage, divorce, lifetime monogamy and heterosexuality (amongst others) need to be challenged. With increasing life expectancy and “credentialising” of the workforce, many are commencing their career later in life. The authors acknowledge that there is a case for questioning some of the assumptions about midlife, including when it commences. There is clearly a need for further research in this domain in order to clarify and challenge some of the long-standing theories and assumptions about midlife.

The MBTI has been criticised for its limitations as a psychological instrument in terms of its reliability and validity. In particular, there has been criticism regarding its low test-retest reliability, with some studies indicating a significant proportion of those completing the questionnaire reporting a different category when re-testing at a later date. (Pitinger 1993; Gardner & Martinko 1996). Test-retest reliability is sensitive to the time between tests. One study found that about 83% of categorizations remain the same when individuals are retested within nine months, and around 75% when individuals are retested after nine months. About 50% of people tested within nine months remain the same overall *type*, and 36% remain the same type after more than nine months (Harvey 1996). Despite these criticisms, the MBTI has currency in the field of personality type and is used extensively by practitioners in areas such as career counselling, general counselling and human resources management.

A further limitation of this pilot study is its Eurocentric and western emphasis. Caution is required when applying and generalising the findings to men from non western cultural, ethnic and language backgrounds as well as to men with non-heterosexual preferences.

The pilot study is the first of its kind to research the influence of personality type on the male experience of midlife. Despite the limitations, there does appear to be some differences between the two personality groups.

Conclusion

The present pilot study tentatively supports the view that men in midlife experience a number of gains including a greater sense of life mastery, wisdom/self-awareness and enhanced spouse/partner intimacy. There is some support for Erikson's notion of midlife generativity as individuals become increasingly focused on contributing to their community. The data also provides cautious evidence for the idea that the transition into midlife is a relatively smooth process for most men and is generally not the time of crisis as depicted in some midlife literature (Gerzon 1996; O'Connor 1988; Levinson 1978).

This study is unique in that it has focused on the hypothesis that Myers-Briggs personality preferences influence the male experience of midlife. There is some evidence to support the hypothesis that personality type does influence the male midlife experience, which was based on an idea by Pederson (1993) of contrasting differences between men with NF and ST preferences. Several differences were observed between midlife the two groups, consistent with observations of adult males with NF and ST preferences by Pedersen (1993). Specifically, the ST compared to the NF cohort was more likely to have experienced an existential crisis, viewed their self/masculine identity primarily in terms of career/work and were less likely to have experienced greater intimacy with their spouse/partner.

The present findings suggests that personality type may have some influence on the male experience of midlife and that knowledge of personality type and its impact on the midlife experience is of value when providing counselling and psychotherapy support to men. This knowledge would also be advantageous to human resources practitioners who are

increasingly required to emotionally and psychologically support employees by coordinating a range of counselling and psychotherapy related services such as Employee Assistance Programs, critical incident debriefing sessions and career transition counselling services (in instances where there is involuntary job loss).

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