

Review Article

Exploring midlife identity negotiations in the context of the gender career gap: an interdisciplinary conceptual framework

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Abstract

The gender gaps in career outcomes (e.g., pay, promotion, leadership opportunities) observably widen during mid-career, yet research often neglects considerations of gendered age identities in explaining this disparity. The present paper addresses this through an integrative review of interdisciplinary literature and proposes a novel theoretical framework that combines midlife development and gender identity negotiations to better understand mid-career disparities. In this review, we (1) adopt an inter-categorical approach to explore how workers navigate the overlapping systems of gender and age in the workplace, (2) critically review midlife development literature, highlighting significant oversights in organizational research, and (3) we introduce a process model of midlife gendered identity negotiations. We detail the model, describing the antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes of gendered aging identity negotiations on mid-career inequities. We provide a foundation for advancing research and designing interventions to address gender disparities in mid-career outcomes.

Keywords: identity, gender, aging and individual differences, work-family interface, stereotyping and discrimination

Gender disparities in key career outcomes (e.g., pay, promotion, leadership opportunities) start narrow in one's early career but widen over time (Budig & England, 2001; Frintner et al., 2019; Goldin et al., 2017), culminating into a much more evident gap during mid-career (Schneer & Reitman, 1995). This mid-career gender gap is often explained as a product of socially driven barriers and decisions from early career culminating over time to maintain this gap (Kossek et al., 2017; Lyness & Grotto, 2018). Absent from this framing, however, are the other interconnected identities, particularly those that co-occur with career stages such as aging and development. Gender experiences are dynamic throughout the lifespan and thus it is important to consider simultaneous and interconnected identities of gender and age that impact career advancement for a demographic group that can be at the peak of one's career (Cho et al., 2013).

Further complicating things, organizational science scholars tend to confound age and career stage (Wang et al., 2013). Moreover, the validity of traditional psychological theories, such as models of career stages and workplace aging, has been called into question due to the androcentrism (i.e., tendency to focus on men) of theorizing in both domains (Bailey et al., 2019). The conceptual blur between midlife and mid-career along with the tendency to use androcentric framing in theory obscures the impact of gender differences in career trajectories

and aging on career advancement. Distinguishing between age and career stage as well as the specifics of these experiences by gender is crucial to better inform understanding of the gender career gap.

One potential key to understanding and reducing the gender career gap is to focus on midlife development. Midlife is a crucial period of biological and psychosocial changes that vary by sex and gender and likely play a critical role in mid-career advancement. By understanding how midlife transitions impact men and women differently, researchers can gain insights into the unique implications of gender and age in mid-career advancement. A focus on midlife development could provide a more nuanced understanding of the gender career gap and inform interventions to reduce disparities.

The present integrative review aims to make three key theoretical contributions to the literature. First, adopting an inter-categorical, or consideration of more than one demographic category, approach to examine the gender career gap (Crenshaw, 2013; Hall et al., 2019), we offer a new multi-disciplinary theoretical lens to understand the gender career gap in the workforce. We go beyond traditional explanations that isolate gender from other identities by recognizing the simultaneous and interconnected identities of gender and age in mid-career development. The physiological and psychosocial process of aging has implications for employees at all

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stages of their career and can have unique physical and social implications that depend on biological sex and social gender identity (Burke & Grandey, 2020; Infurna et al., 2020). An inter-categorical approach that recognizes how individual employees navigate intersecting gender and aging systems (i.e., norms, expectations, etc.) will enable a more nuanced understanding of the factors contributing to the gender career gap that emerges largely in mid-career and inform potential solutions to reduce it.

Second, we provide a comprehensive integrative review of the interdisciplinary literature on midlife development, which reveals key oversights in organizational sciences. The goal of an integrative review is not to identify every piece of literature that references or studies midlife, but to identify key articles, both historical and contemporary, as well as across many different disciplines to capture and integrate the breadth of theory and evidence. Our integrative review identifies gaps in organizational sciences and aims to reconcile these shortcomings using frameworks, evidence, and insights from several disciplines including lifespan psychology, gender and women’s studies, social psychology, gerontology, and life course sociology. By conceptualizing midlife development as a distinct and complex phenomenon, we disentangle research on midlife aging from the literature on mid-career, highlighting the importance of considering age-related changes and challenges in career advancement. The mid-career literature tends to focus on professional employees with linear career trajectories. However, midlife development occurs for employees across several stages of a career and in nonprofessional career trajectories. Our review also identifies and addresses theoretical blind spots in the literature due to androcentric bias (i.e., midlife workers are not genderless and are not, by default, men) and offers

a new conceptual model of mid-career development by gender.

Third, by integrating multidisciplinary theory on aging, gender, and identity negotiations at work, we put forth a novel process model of midlife gendered identity negotiations on the mid-career gender gap (see Figure 1). Focusing on the perspective of midlife employees, our model addresses the antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes of ongoing identity negotiations. It also identifies the interwoven role of gender across each stage of the process—that is, the ways gendered individual differences (e.g., gender of worker, gender identity centrality, gender of observer) and gendered workplace contexts (e.g., gender diversity of workgroup, masculinity contest culture) impact and interact with midlife workers’ aging experiences, identity negotiations, and workplace outcomes. Further, the integration of multiple disciplines by nature widens the lens of potential theoretical and empirical approaches to understanding aging to include but also expand on the quantitative survey approaches so central to the organizational sciences (Gerpott & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2022; Wilhelmy et al., 2022). Overall, our paper contributes to advancing knowledge and understanding in the field of organizational research by providing a novel framework for understanding mid-career gender disparities and identifying potential solutions to address them.

The rest of this paper is organized in the following manner: First, we provide a broad overview of midlife development, disentangling midlife aging and mid-career development as closely related but distinct concepts. Next, we outline a process model of midlife gendered identity negotiations on the mid-career gender gap. We describe the model within gendered contexts in the workplace as well as acknowledging group and individual gender differences in aging, identity

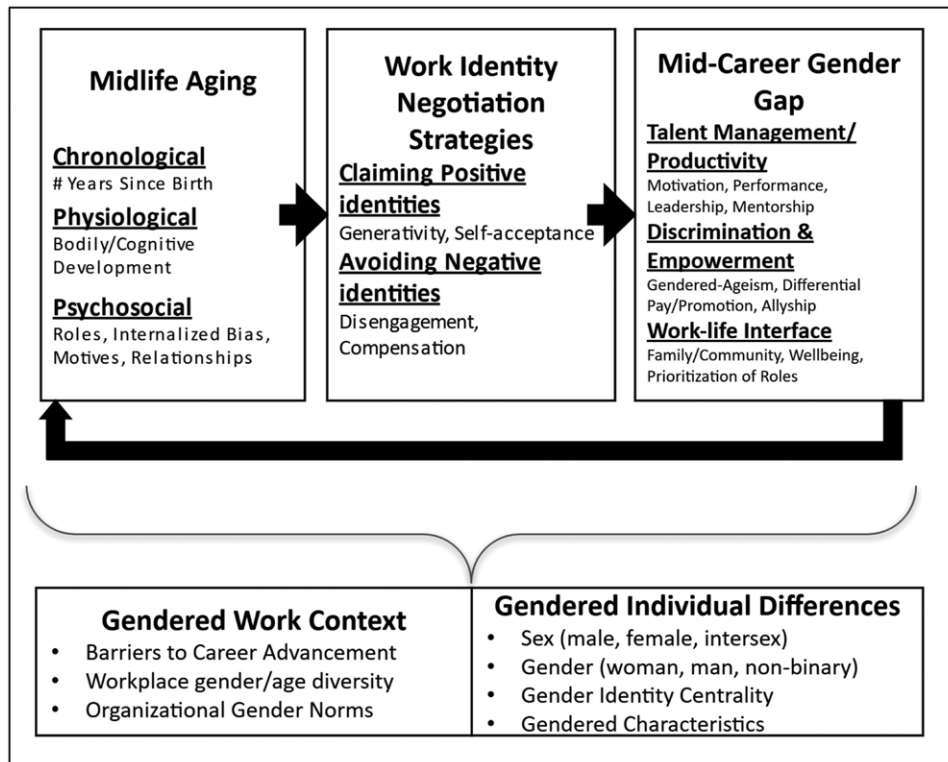


Figure 1. Process model of midlife gendered identity negotiations on mid-career gender gap.

negotiation, and workplace behaviors throughout. Finally, we identify research questions stemming from our conceptual model and future directions for this line of work. Throughout each section, we contextualize the midlife aging and identity negotiation process within gendered systems. This contextualization of gender recognizes the role of both individual gendered experiences of aging as well as how aging individuals are embedded within gendered contexts in the workplace.¹

Disentangling mid-career and midlife development

Workplace aging and career stages literature have traditionally treated career stages as parallel to chronological aging (i.e., number of years old). However, researchers have noted the changing patterns of contemporary career paths (Benko & Weisberg, 2007; Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005), raising concerns about the conceptual entanglement midlife and mid-career in a world where one does not necessitate the other. Indeed, Wang et al. (2013) argue that “chronological age is indeed distinct from career stage” (p. 5), highlighting the need for a clearer understanding of the relationship between the two constructs.

Midlife aging and development are commonly defined by a chronological age period. However, the exact chronological age period deemed “midlife” varies somewhat across research. For example, consensus among authors in a recent special issue on adulthood in APA’s *American Psychologist* (Arnett et al., 2020) suggests it is between 45 and 65. Fodor and Franks (1990), who edited a special issue of *Psychology of Women Quarterly* on midlife, found that the feminist lifespan development scholars represented in their issue considered midlife beginning at different ages, including 40 and 50. Finkelstein et al. (2013), in an investigation of age stereotypes and meta-stereotypes in the workplace, used 31–50 as their middle-aged boundaries. As our conceptual model is centered around the idea of identity development, we frame midlife aging to be somewhat fluid and depending largely on self- and other-recognition that one is shifting into a life stage away from young but not quite yet old. Thus, our model also includes physiological and psychosocial indicators of midlife aging.

From both the lifespan psychological perspective and the life course sociological perspective, midlife can also be defined by the associated major life transitions such as career changes, family and social responsibilities and roles, and physical and psychological changes. Midlife research gained momentum in psychological and sociological research of lifespan and life course in recent decades (Infurna et al., 2020; Toothman & Barrett, 2011), but organizational sciences have been slower to catch up (Zacher et al., 2019). Much of the aging research in the organizational science literature has

focused on younger and older employees (e.g., Burmeister et al., 2020; Fasbender & Gerpott, 2022; Kollmann et al., 2020), resulting in a false dichotomy that overlooks the unique experiences of midlife employees. While some scholars have sought to reduce this grouping (e.g., Akkermans et al., 2016; Posthuma & Campion, 2009), using age as a continuous variable can also be limiting when chronological age serves as a proxy variable for other developmental constructs and linearity is assumed. As a result, even when using age as a continuous variable, we tend to still interpret results in terms of “younger” and “older” workers, overlooking unique phenomena that reside in the middle. While this work has been applied to understanding age-related issues such as age-related bias and discrimination toward older or younger workers (de Saint Priest & Krings, 2024; Kunze et al., 2011; Posthuma & Campion, 2009; von Hippel et al., 2019), retirement (Wang & Shultz, 2010), and adapting to changing work environments (Armstrong-Stassen & Templer, 2005), little attention has been paid to understanding and supporting the needs of midlife workers as a strategy to promote healthy aging in the workplace. Similarly, research on younger workers has explored motivating (Kollmann et al., 2020; Loughlin & Barling, 2001; Luyckx et al., 2010), attracting, and retaining (Ng et al., 2010; Wong et al., 2017; Zaharee et al., 2018) emergent young workers, yet the experiences of midlife employees remain understudied.²

Closely related but distinct, mid-career is a professional stage in which one has multiple years of work experience and expertise but is still several years away from the end of one’s career. Initially, Super’s (1957, 1969) model of career stages defined career stages based on age, with each stage corresponding to a particular age range. Midlife employees typically find themselves in either the end of Super’s Establishment Stage (ages 25–44), establishing stability in permanent positions in their career, or the Maintenance Stage (ages 45–64), preserving their position until retirement. Since their theoretical conception, career stages have been operationalized by chronological age despite criticisms (e.g., Super, 1980) advocating for career age. Nevertheless, recent research (e.g., Carse et al., 2017; Mallet & Wapshott, 2015) continues using chronological age to define career stages, conflating age and career stage effects. Naturally, career progression requires time. Thus, being midlife is often a necessary but not sufficient factor to being mid-career.

Individuals who follow nonlinear career paths may experience delays in career advancement or may not reach what has been traditionally considered the mid-career stage at all. For instance, many individuals take career breaks that last for months to years due to family responsibilities which is especially prevalent among women. Recent statistics indicate that nearly half of working mothers take extended career breaks beyond maternity leave to care for children (Fairchild, 2024). Furthermore, with shifts in economy and labor market, individuals are increasingly likely to have “episodic careers,” as they continue to change not only jobs and employers but also whole career paths after their early career days (Castrillon, 2024; Chideya, 2016). This evolving landscape has prompted the development of more modern career models, such as the idea of the protean career or “mini

¹It is important to note that while we describe gender as broadly binary in this review, we recognize that gender exists on a spectrum and individuals may choose to express their gender in a wide variety of ways. Furthermore, individual gender identity and sexual orientation may further intersect with their age and gender to influence their experiences. Other stigmatized identities, such as sexual orientation and race/ethnicity, also further introduce complications. For this paper, we opt to focus only on the broad binary gender differences due to the dearth of research in the area, but encourage future work to take a more nuanced view of the other social identities intersecting to influence one’s aging experience.

²While this review focuses on experiences of midlife employees, which often (but not always) can overlap with those mid-career, we acknowledge people at different age groups experience different challenges managing their age identity in the workplace (Finkelstein et al., 2013).

careers” characterized by self-direction, flexibility, continuous learning, and personal values (Feldman, 2002; Kim & Hall, 2013). Given that one could have several “mini careers” throughout one’s working years, each mini career could be characterized by phases of “learning” (beginning), “maturation” (mid), and “decline” (end), suggesting that the concept of “mid-career” is more relative to the career than the objective age or tenure of a worker.

Another common assumption is that mid-career is a term used to reference all workers when it has been primarily used to study professionals and white-collar workers; blue- and pink-collar workers also navigate this stage, albeit with distinct challenges and opportunities shaped by the nature of their occupations and industries. In the age of the protean and boundaryless career (Briscoe & Hall, 2006), the gig economy (Kuhn, 2016), and bridge employment (Beehr & Bennett, 2015), career trajectories can vary greatly in both linearity and trajectory. Further research is needed to go beyond this assumption to understand what midlife and mid-career look like in the many heterogeneous career paths available.

Furthermore, the rewards and opportunities that come with reaching the mid-career stage may vary depending on an individual’s career path and experiences. For instance, the introduction of additional categories (e.g., race, class, disability) introduces further diversity of experiences as one considers the intersecting systems that limit career opportunities and growth for these individuals. In this review, we will explore the literature on midlife development in the context of the workplace, considering mid-career as a *common but not ubiquitous* career stage during this time.

Midlife development and identity negotiation at work

Our integrative framework centers on the role of identity negotiations during these dynamic and complex transitions, drawing from lifespan psychological and life course sociological theorizing about identity and identity negotiations. Identity is a multifaceted concept that organizes individuals within society and influences their behavior (Gecas, 1982; Stets & Burke, 2000). Work identity, which encompasses organizational roles, group memberships, and personal attributes, holds value based on associated power and status (Acker, 2006; Katz & Kahn, 1966; Walsh & Gordon, 2008). Like most people, midlife employees, when faced with conflict or discrepancies in interpersonal roles, strive to adopt positively valued identities while avoiding devalued or stigmatized identities to enhance self-esteem, social influence, and access to resources (Higgins, 1997, 1998; Rosenberget al., 1995; Stets & Serpe, 2013; Taylor et al., 1994). Consequently, midlife employees may engage in identity negotiation processes, the process whereby two or more parties reach a consensus regarding “who is who” (Swann et al., 2009) to cultivate positive workplace identities. Through this lens, identity work primarily focuses on the individuals *doing* the identity work (i.e., the midlife worker) while often considering the perspective of those *observing* the identity work (i.e., coworkers, supervisors, clients, subordinates) and how they respond to the identity work (validation, rejection). We focus on the ways midlife employees seek to cultivate a positive identity, navigating the stigmas of agism (and gendered ageism) among

potential workplace observers. We posit that midlife is a hotbed for identity negotiation in the workplace, in large part due to the *liminal* and *dynamic* nature of the midlife identity.

A key tenet is that midlife represents a liminal transition (Ladge et al., 2012), between younger and older worker identities, affecting career opportunities and engagement. Using identity negotiation combined with management theorizing about liminal identity, we propose how midlife men and women navigate this career stage “betwixt and between” earlier and later stages (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016), impacting motives, behaviors, and outcomes. Rather than viewing midlife as a distinct third category separate from “younger worker” and “older worker,” it is more accurately understood as a spectrum. On this spectrum, “younger” and “older” represent continuous and varying experiences at the lower and upper ends, while “midlife” encompasses the fluid and transitional period in between.

Further, though many identities were originally understood to be static across time (e.g., nationality, race), identity can be fluid across life stages as key facets of one’s self-change (Swann et al., 2009). Literature in organizational sciences on identity fluidity often focuses on women transitioning to motherhood negotiating identities, as both worker and mother require substantial resources (Ladge et al., 2012, 2015). Though unevaluated in men, becoming a father likely prompts psychological changes from societal expectations as a provider (Höfner et al., 2011). We propose that similarly, midlife, by being a developmental phase of aging that involves drastic physiological and psychosocial development, can be understood as a fluid and dynamic identity.

Extrapolating these ideas to midlife, we propose that midlife is also another unique identity that is liminal and dynamic in nature. Through the lens of identity negotiation (Berger et al., 2017; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Moore & Radtke, 2015; Swann, 1987), midlife adults have copious opportunities to try to claim and maintain positive work identities while shedding negative ones. Through a process lens, we posit that identity negotiations are catalyzed by aging events (physiological and psychosocial) that create conflict or discrepancies in one’s work identity evoking the individual to renegotiate their work identity. We also recognize this process as a recursive one, in which an employee may engage in this process frequently and repeatedly during this transitional stage with the strategies and success of past identity negotiations influencing the next round of the process. In our discussion of the identity negotiation process, we draw on the limited literature addressing gender and sex differences in aging events. However, it is important to recognize that the concept of the “midlife worker,” while often treated as gender-neutral, is nonetheless shaped by gendered and sex-specific experiences, which have historically been interpreted through an androcentric lens.

Physiological and psychosocial development as catalysts of identity negotiation

Midlife development involves significant physiological and psychosocial changes that introduce novel challenges and uncertainty about identity and roles. Given the importance of physical appearance (Hosoda et al., 2003; Nault et al., 2020), cognitive ability (Nye et al., 2022; Schmidt & Hunter, 2004), and impression management at work (Bolino et al., 2016), midlife employees may struggle with how physical and cognitive changes impact their work identity on a regular basis.

Thus, we draw from psychology, sociology, biomedical, and public health research to outline key developmental changes midlife employees face that could produce the need to maintain or negotiate one's work identity. In this section, we focus on the perspective of the midlife worker, how they experience the physiological and psychological developmental experiences in midlife, and why that may prompt identity negotiations.

Aging naturally brings visible changes like wrinkles, sun damage, hair loss, increased body fat, reduced skin elasticity, photoaging, hair pigmentation loss, and a peak in body fat around age 50 (Baumgartner et al., 1995; Whitbourne, 2001; Whitbourne & Collins, 1998). While some changes are observed across sex, others are sex-specific³. For instance, hair loss manifests differently in men and women. Male pattern baldness involves a receding hairline and crown thinning, driven by genetics and androgenic hormones (Hamilton, 1951; Olsen, 2003; Tamashunas & Bergfeld, 2021). Female hair loss, less common, shows diffuse thinning at the crown, influenced by genetics, hormonal imbalances, and aging, often starting after menopause in the 40s or 50s (Asfour et al., 2023). Hair loss in both sexes can affect gender expression, lowering self-esteem and body image (Birch et al., 2001; Tamashunas & Bergfeld, 2021).

Beyond visible changes, midlife adults experience muscle loss, reduced bone density, and cartilage deterioration, impacting strength, flexibility, and movement (Baumgartner et al., 1995; McArdle et al., 2002; Sowers, 2001; Whitbourne & Collins, 1998). Women face fluctuating estrogen and progesterone levels, leading to menopause, while men experience slight testosterone reductions linked to symptoms like vasomotor instability (Burns-Cox & Gingell, 1997; Vermeulen & Mustard, 2000; Monteleone et al., 2018; Morales et al., 2000). These changes can challenge age and gender identity, especially in workplaces where physical markers of masculinity or femininity influence perceptions (Whitbourne, 2001). Despite older findings, recent research shows that women aged 40–60 still face appearance-based workplace discrimination, while men are often favored (Little et al., 2011).

Neuropsychological research indicates both growth and losses in cognitive ability during midlife. Crystallized intelligence (e.g., language, cultural knowledge) continues to slowly grow, while fluid intelligence (e.g., memory, problem solving) begins to decline (Salthouse & Maurer, 1996; Soederberg Miller & Lachman, 2000). Compared to young adults, middle-aged adults perform lower on speed and reasoning tests but better on vocabulary tests (Soederberg Miller & Lachman, 2000). While midlife employees may benefit from slowly crystallized intelligence and presumptions of growing "wisdom" can serve as an advantage in the workplace, decline in fluid intelligence, such as memory failure during task performance or in a meeting, may create a sense of threat of an emerging "older" identity (Finkelstein et al., 2013).

Psychologically, the framework for understanding midlife development has evolved significantly over time, with early perspectives often focusing on identity as a central theme. The

initial framework, known as the crisis perspective, emerged from research on stages of psychological development and emphasized identity negotiations during various life stages. Erikson (1959, 1963, 1968) was a key contributor to this perspective, exploring the existential question of "does my life count?" faced by adults in middle adulthood. This stage, according to Erikson, involved grappling with the reality of aging and the proximity of death, which could lead individuals to either strive for generativity by establishing a legacy or succumb to stagnation and resignation. Psychoanalyst and management consultant Elliot Jaques (1965) introduced the term "midlife crisis" while observing patients who experienced declines in career productivity and interest, noting patterns of career withdrawal and reengagement with new motives (Laviates, 2003). Jaques' observations align with Erikson's concepts of stagnation and generativity. Nevertheless, the crisis perspective is now considered outdated and obsolete due to the lack of evidence for the midlife crisis as a phenomenon (e.g., Lachman, 2004; Wethington, 2000), the myth of the "midlife crisis" remains a prevalent concept in modern culture (Forbes Coaches Council, 2017; Petersen, 2020; Schwandt, 2015). Moreover, the crisis perspective was developed from the perspective of male researchers and samples with traditional linear careers (Berger, 2014), making it incompatible in interpreting modern experiences considering the more modern flexible career patterns observed today.

In the latter half of the 20th century, the gains and losses perspective provides a more nuanced understanding of midlife—one that acknowledges a vast diversity in developmental trajectories. Neugarten (1974) emphasized that midlife is not solely a time of reflection on mortality but also a period characterized by authority, autonomy, resources, and competence. Baltes (1987) further developed this perspective, highlighting the joint interplay between gains and losses in midlife and challenging the assumption of linear decline.

Challenging the traditional perspective, and expelling the notion that midlife is a time of fixation on mortality, the more modern gains and losses perspective in developmental psychology provides a nuanced understanding of midlife by recognizing the diverse trajectories individuals experience during this stage (Neugarten, 1974). Midlife has been described as the prime of life, characterized by authority, autonomy, resources, and competence but also presenting unique personal, professional, and familial challenges (Neugarten, 1974). Baltes (1987) advanced this perspective by introducing the lifespan developmental perspective in psychology, challenging the linear decline assumption and highlighting the joint interplay between gains and losses in midlife. For instance, the Selection, Optimization, and Compensation model proposed by Baltes and Baltes (1993) describes adaptive methods employed in midlife to address the challenges of aging. It suggests that midlife can be a time of personal growth and adaptation, where individuals selectively focus their resources on specific goals, optimize their skills, and compensate for any declines or losses (Baltes & Baltes, 1993).

Roles have also been identified as a key psychosocial factor in midlife gains and losses. Midlife adults fulfill various roles related to the workplace, family, and community, which can produce complementary and conflicting expectations. These roles vary greatly depending on individual characteristics and circumstances (Wang et al., 2013). Indeed, both research from both the psychological lifespan perspective and sociological life course perspective highlight the ways

³While our review of the literature on midlife, identity, and the workplace primarily focuses on the experiences of middle-aged individuals in relation to binary sex/gender categorizations, it is important to acknowledge the existence and unique experiences of middle-aged transgender and nonbinary workers. The bulk of existing literature often overlooks these populations, highlighting the need for more inclusive gender measurement as described later in our Agenda for Future Research.

changes in family composition, including the rise of nontraditional arrangements and the sandwich generation phenomenon, present new challenges and opportunities for midlife adults (Elder, 1975; Infurna et al., 2020). The involvement of midlife adults in the lives of their adult children, as well as grandparenting roles, can provide meaning and purpose, but finding the right balance is essential. Additionally, midlife employees often engage in active leadership and community involvement, making positive contributions to community development and social well-being. Recognized by Riley and colleagues (1972), role-specific gains in midlife often include stability, autonomy, leadership, career resources, and community that midlife adults can experience. Roles can also become sources of stress and constraint (Riley et al., 1972).

Overall, midlife is understood as a complex interplay of gains and losses, challenges and opportunities, and dynamic roles producing synergy and conflict. It is crucial to consider the influence of physiological changes in shaping psychosocial motivations and work roles during midlife.

(De)valued work identities and the transitional space inbetween

Consistent with regulatory-fit theory, a psychological framework proposed by Higgins (1997, 1998), people are motivated to minimize any space between one's actual self and their desired self (i.e., seeking positive states) and maximize the space between real and an undesired self (i.e., preventing negative states). Luckily for midlife employees, stereotypes of their typical professional positioning and behavior may present opportunities to negotiate positive identities. Midlife employees are often assumed to be positioned at the peak of their career path (Infurna et al., 2020) having reached their full potential regarding income (Bhuller et al., 2017). They are stereotyped as hardworking, reliable, and ambitious compared to younger and older workers (Finkelstein et al., 2013), congruent with the prototypical ideal worker (Davies & Frink, 2014; Dumas & Sanchez-Burks, 2015; Padavic et al., 2020) and leader (Lord, 1985).

These advantages are critical for career advancement in mid-career. Workers with ideal characteristics are rewarded through financial incentives, promotions, power, and status; those not seen as ideal are at risk of professional consequences (Davies & Frink, 2014). Similarly, those who closely align with prototypes of leadership (e.g., "Think manager, think male," Duehr & Bono, 2006; Schein & Davidson, 1993) are more likely to successfully seek and be granted leader identities (DeRue, 2011).

However, these newfound gains also come with losses—especially with new challenges in negotiating work identities. In Western societies, there is value placed on youthfulness and stigma to growing older (Whitbourne, 2001). Not only do people face rejection, discrimination, and invisibility as they grow "old" (e.g., Gordon & Arvey, 2004; Lieber, 2007; Ng & Feldman, 2012; Voss et al., 2018), but many people fear the age-related declines they may face in the future. Furthermore, the maintenance of youthful identities is associated with higher life satisfaction, morale, and self-esteem, as well as lower depression and loneliness (Barak & Stern, 1986). As such, the advantages midlife employees have in negotiating positive work identities may feel precarious (i.e., threatened by imminent physiological aging) and produce emotionally charged identity negotiation and coping strategies.

Together, people adopt identity negotiation strategies that create distance from "older" identities. In fact, research from lifespan psychology on subjective age suggests relative to one's current age, people tend to claim younger ages—a strategy that increases across the lifespan (Barrett, 2005; Kaufman & Elder, 2002; Montepare & Lachman, 1989; Seccombe & Ishii-Kuntz, 1991; Wettstein et al., 2023). Indeed, recent research based on nationally representative longitudinal data suggests that individuals are increasingly likely to report a younger subjective age as well as feel like they are getting "older" much more slowly than previous generations (Wettstein et al., 2023). The growing gap between subjective and chronological age can drive identity negotiations, consistent with research finding individuals seek to reconcile discrepancies in self-perception by adopting roles that align with that self-perception (Weiss & Lang, 2011). Psychological research on age meta-stereotypes (beliefs about how others stereotype one's own group) at work provides initial evidence that midlife employees are *aware* of their advantageous stereotypes but also sense threats related to their aging identity (Vorauer et al., 1998; Bal et al., 2015). Finkelstein and colleagues (2013) find that midlife employees report that they expect their colleagues to see them as reliable, responsible, and hardworking, but they also expect younger employees to see them as boring, slow, and out of touch (stereotypes of older but not midlife employees).

The identity negotiation process and role in shifting work motives

Synthesizing across the midlife, identity, gender, and mid-career literatures, we outline at least four broad identity negotiation strategies that may be critical for midlife workers: generativity, disengagement, self-acceptance, and (over)compensation. While each of these strategies are not exclusive to midlife workers and can be understood in the context of other identity negotiations throughout the lifespan, we select these four given their relevance to theorizing about midlife psychosocial transitions. Moreover, within the context of midlife these strategies contribute to the diverse trajectories observed in mid-career experiences with long-term impacts on career outcomes and successful aging. Our model challenges androcentric limitations of past theorizing to highlight how theorizing about the average midlife employee may be limited to the average midlife working man, recognizing major theoretical blind spots toward understanding the gender career gap. Drawing from the limited literature on women in midlife and mid-career, we explore how and why women select certain identity negotiation strategies. While we can infer men's experiences from some of this research, direct evaluation of men's experiences in midlife and mid-career is nearly nonexistent, limiting our analysis. From the perspective of the midlife workers, we examine the ways social norms and the reception of others could impact the identity negotiation strategies they select. We connect these processes to specific work behaviors including motivation, performance, career advancement, leadership, mentorship, work-family conflict, and discrimination.

Generativity: seeking opportunities to claim valued identities successfully

Employees seeking to claim a more positive work identity during midlife may channel their efforts into workplace

generativity, a set of behaviors that guides and supports younger people and benefits the next generation of the workplace (Doerwald et al., 2021; Erikson, 1963; Joshi et al., 2020; Zacher et al., 2011). Within the identity negotiation framework, those hoping to claim a more positive identity may do so through generativity by claiming a valued work identity that is defined by success in either/both task and personal work domains.

Stemming from Erikson's (1963) theory of psychosocial development, generativity has long been noted as being connected to a desire to build a legacy with the time one has remaining. A recent meta-analysis found a positive relationship between age and generativity; however, this relationship disappears in samples under 40 (Doerwald et al., 2021). This finding highlights the relevance of midlife as a period when generativity tends to emerge and become more prominent. The same meta-analysis reported several positive associations between generativity and various work-related factors including generative behavior, work motivation, occupational self-efficacy, job satisfaction, occupational affective commitment, and motives to continue working (Doerwald et al., 2021). These findings suggest that individuals who exhibit generative tendencies in the workplace are more likely to experience positive work-related outcomes and have a higher level of engagement and commitment to their work. Interestingly, men and women express equal generative motives and behavior in meta-analytic research (Doerwald et al., 2021), but societal expectations and gender roles play a significant role in shaping *how* individuals navigate generativity at work.

Generativity can be expressed through both agentic and communal expressions (Doerwald, et al., 2021; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). Agentic generativity may manifest as a desire to build a legacy via productivity, achievement, and status. Generative behaviors are often agentic acts such that generative individuals are more likely to take initiative, utilize and optimize their skills and resources, and actively contribute to their communities or fields of expertise. More generative employees may seek leadership roles (e.g., team leadership, managerial positions, CEO) a position that affords one control over company resources, influence over other people, and opportunities to optimize the impact of their behaviors. Generativity empowers individuals to exercise their agency in ways that benefit organizations and the members of those organizations. Agentic forms of generativity may be a more attractive strategy for men in the workplace or in masculine contexts (e.g., military, tech, financial). Men face expectations to engage in generativity that aligns with agency, such as taking leadership roles and pursuing individual accomplishments (Fiske et al., 2007).

Communal generativity, in contrast, leads individuals to provide support and care to the next generation. While leadership may be one path to accomplishing the communal goals of generativity, these goals may also be pursued through other interpersonal avenues (e.g., mentorship, committees, service roles, volunteer work). The communal approach to generativity may be particularly attractive to feminine individuals or employees working in feminine work contexts (e.g., nurses, service workers, performance arts; Doerwald et al., 2021; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). Women face societal pressures to prioritize communal generativity, focusing on nurturing, mentoring, and supporting others, due to traditional gender stereotypes (Fiske et al., 2007).

Men are more likely to occupy top business leadership positions compared to women (Catalyst, 2022, 2023), limiting women's ability to apply increasing generative motives to leadership at work (Zacher et al., 2011). Men's dominance in business leadership roles such as CEO means they have greater influence over succession planning and communication with top management teams, allowing them to shape the future direction of the organization through their generative actions (Joshi et al., 2020). However, it is important to note that gender equality efforts are progressing, enabling more women to break through barriers and assume leadership positions, expanding their opportunities for generativity, and different forms of generativity, in these roles (Lean In, 2022).

In the meantime, studies have shown that women (vs. men) are more inclined to take on mentoring roles and provide support to their colleagues, contributing to the development and success of younger employees (Levesque et al., 2005). Despite not having the same control over resource allocation or decision latitude as men in upper leadership, these generative behaviors foster a sense of shared purpose and collaboration within the organization (Eby & Robertson, 2020). Gendered expectations can influence the types of generative behaviors individuals are more likely to exhibit in the workplace and the broader impact they have on others and the organization as a whole (Chen et al., 2022).

Although the generativity of a single midlife worker may seem inconsequential to organizational outcomes at a glance, recent theorizing in organizational behavior suggests that the generativity of CEOs plays a critical role in succession planning and communication with top management teams (Joshi et al., 2020) with major implications for the future success of the organization. This is likely a phenomenon that translates to lower levels of organizational management (e.g., middle managers, team leaders) with implications for the success of smaller units within organizations. Further organizational settings and demands on employees may constrain generativity in mid-career as job burnout has been negatively associated with generativity (Berkowitz, 1987; Lan et al., 2021)—unsurprising given the impact of burnout on a variety of motivational and performance outcomes (see Bakker & de Vries, 2021).

Together, generativity highlights how midlife employees strategically shape their work identities for positive impact and legacy. While agentic and communal expressions of generativity exist, societal roles can influence gender-specific approaches. The evolving landscape of gender equality is gradually reshaping these dynamics.

Disengagement: avoiding identity negotiations with low success rates

When midlife employees face negative aging evaluations and identities at work, they may avoid situations in which a negative identity would be reinforced (e.g., highly visible work roles like leadership) hindering their ability to grow and develop professionally. Within the management literature, disengagement has been defined as the "simultaneous withdrawal and defense of a person's preferred self in behaviors that promote a lack of connections, physical, cognitive and emotional absence, and passive, incomplete role performance" (Kahn, 1990, p. 700). Disengagement from previous roles is reflected in Erikson's (1963) conceptualization of stagnation during midlife with Jaques (1965) examining

stagnation in famous examples of creative geniuses (e.g., Michelangelo, Donatello, Racine) manifested as disengagement with their career in midlife. Similarly, research on disengagement sheds light on how midlife employees might respond when confronted with the possibility of negative evaluations in the workplace (see [Rastogi & Chaudhary, 2018](#), for a review). Through the identity negotiation lens, midlife employees who fear devalued identities are inevitable or nonnegotiable with others may avoid the identity negotiation process in the workplace.

During midlife, physiological and psychosocial changes prompt employees to question their career choices, goals, and motivations ([Allemand et al., 2010](#)). These internal reflections can lead to a loss of interest or passion in their work, resulting in disengagement from work roles that they may have previously been engaged with. Disengagement is characterized by decreased work motivation, reduced productivity, a lack of initiative, declining job satisfaction, and potential career stagnation. The downstream consequences of disengagement include reduced job performance, subjective well-being, and organizational commitment as well as increased counterproductive work behaviors and turnover intentions ([Allemand et al., 2010](#)). Moreover, disengagement can also impact an individual's relationships with colleagues, managers, and subordinates. Disengaged workers may become more critical or negative toward their coworkers, and the lack of enthusiasm can spread ([Barsade, 2002](#)), producing a negative work environment.

The consequences of disengagement can be particularly significant for midlife employees who have invested a substantial amount of time and effort in their careers. At this stage, many workers may hold important responsibilities and leadership roles, making disengagement particularly detrimental. Given that the majority of organizational leadership is composed of midlife adults, it is unsurprising that theorizing on the "lifecycle" of a CEO suggests that the last stage is "dysfunction" wherein a CEO may have diminishing interest in the role ([Hambrick & Fukutomi, 1991](#)). Diminishing interest in the role of leadership may mean stalling of organizational, team, and individual development efforts that are critical in a quickly evolving work environment. It can result in a loss of influence and impact, ultimately leading to missed opportunities for career advancement.

Unfortunately, little work has explored potential gender differences in disengagement in the workplace. On the one hand this may indicate that midlife men and women experience workplace disengagement at similar rates and/or with similar consequences. On the other hand, it is possible men and women disengage from work in different ways similar to our discussion of generativity. Given evidence to suggest men are more likely than women to be in higher status positions by midlife and women are being overlooked for promotions ([Eagly & Carli, 2007](#)), it is also possible men are more likely to opt out of already established roles while women may be opting out of opportunities that could lead to promotion. This latter idea aligns with organizational literature on women "opting out" as being one of a few drivers of gender disparity in the workplace ([Kossek et al., 2017](#)).

To mitigate the negative consequences of disengagement for midlife employees and those they may be responsible for, it is crucial to identify the signs of disengagement early on and take proactive measures to address the underlying causes. This may involve providing organizational support systems

that help midlife employees to reevaluate career goals, seek new challenges, or find ways to reignite passion and enthusiasm for work.

Compensation: offsetting devalued characteristics by emphasizing valued characteristics

Rather than avoiding work roles, midlife employees may proactively engage in compensatory behaviors to counter the threats of negative aging stereotypes to their identity and self-esteem ([Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985](#); [Steele, 1988](#)). Through the lens of identity negotiation, a compensation strategy involves claiming identities related to extraordinary success in a particular domain as a means of compensating for devalued domains of the identity. The domain selected to focus on and optimize may also depend largely on gender norms and expectations.

Midlife employees may feel the need to assert themselves more strongly to counter negative evaluations and preserve their self-worth. In the context of aging, antiaging identity work becomes a form of compensation where employees strive to counter the physical changes associated with aging and maintain a youthful worker identity ([Trehewey, 2001](#)). This may involve engaging in behaviors such as concealing one's age or adopting more youthful identities. Both men and women may engage in antiaging identity work, but women may face greater pressure to conform to societal beauty ideals, leading them to invest more effort and resources into maintaining a youthful appearance. Indeed, research suggests that women are more likely than men to engage in identity work to preserve their youthfulness ([Clarke & Griffin, 2008](#); [Harris, 1994](#); [Pinquart & Sörensen, 2001](#)). Men may experience distress during midlife due to concerns about physical changes that challenge their negotiation of masculinity, such as balding and changes in muscularity ([Murray et al., 2013](#); [Muscarella & Cunningham, 1996](#)).

Compensation can manifest through assertiveness ([Baumeister et al., 1996](#)) with both men and women feeling the need to assert themselves more strongly to counter negative evaluations and preserve their self-worth. However, this strategy is more likely to be adopted and successful for men compared to women. As a compensation strategy, men may seek work roles that allow them to behaviorally express masculinity, reasserting dominance, status, competence, and assertiveness, particularly in masculine work contexts ([Belmi & Pfeffer, 2016](#)). This reaction to identity threats may veer into unhealthy levels of compensation or "overcompensation" in which men engage in excessive or extreme behaviors to compensate for perceived shortcomings or threats to one's identity. This may culminate in extreme professional ambition, workaholicism, hypercompetitiveness, and exaggerated displays of strength, aggression, and dominance ([Berdahl et al., 2018](#)). In contrast, women are dissuaded from being assertive in the workplace through gender policing and backlash ([Berdahl, 2007](#); [Phelan et al., 2008](#); [Rudman & Glick, 1999](#)). Thus, women may veer away from this strategy or if they do adopt it, have less success in effectively changing the negative evaluations of others. Together, this may contribute to the lack of women in leadership and high-power positions in organizations.

In summary, midlife employees may adopt compensation strategies to counter negative evaluations related to aging. These strategies can take the form of defensiveness,

assertiveness, and even aggression. While both men and women report engaging in identity negotiation activities specific to their gender as a way to combat the negative impact of agism on their status (Calasanti & King, 2018), women tend to engage in identity work to preserve their youthful femininity (i.e., antiaging work; Brooks & Garratt, 2017; Twigg, 2013), while men may seek work roles that allow them to express masculinity and maintain a sense of productivity (Calasanti & King, 2018) or even power and dominance (see Vandello & Bosson, 2013, for review). Understanding these gender differences and compensatory behaviors is crucial in comprehending how midlife employees navigate the challenges associated with aging evaluations at work.

Acceptance: redefining the aging identity at work

Some midlife employees may choose to practice self-acceptance at work to navigate the challenges related to aging and their work roles. Self-acceptance involves recognizing and embracing one's aging identity as a reality without seeking external validation (Petriglieri, 2011). Put into identity negotiation terms, the individual is focused more on self-validation of a positive identity and less concerned with whether that identity is granted or validated by others.

Transitioning into an older identity during midlife can lead to a radical acceptance of aging by rejecting negative societal meanings associated with getting older (Hayes et al., 1996; Kishita & Shimada, 2011). This coping strategy involves enduring psychological experiences without actively trying to change or avoid them (Hayes et al., 1996; Kishita & Shimada, 2011). Adopting an acceptance approach can result in a sense of pride in one's aging identity. Indeed, research has shown that between midlife and retirement, women report more pride in work than men (Magee, 2015). Those who practice self-acceptance and embrace their aging identity are less likely to feel the need to seek changes in their work trajectories (Petriglieri, 2011). Counter to expectations, many midlife women report feelings of ambivalence or relief regarding the physiological aspects of aging and choose to accept these changes (Clarke, 2010; Rossi, 2004).

Midlife employees who employ an acceptance approach to identity negotiation may seek work opportunities that align with their individual differences and preferences, regardless of age-related changes (e.g., volunteer work or career transitions) (Petriglieri, 2011). This is particularly true if their current work environment lacks opportunities or imposes strong gender norms that do not meet their needs.

It is important to note that although self-acceptance and generativity are moderately related to each other (Joshnloo, 2022), self-acceptance, in contrast to generativity which focuses on the perceptions and benefits of others, focuses primarily on personal growth and mastery. By embracing their aging identity rather than accepting negative stereotypes about aging, men and women can maintain positive core self-evaluations which are positively linked to performance, career success, job attitudes, and well-being (Chang et al., 2012; Judge, 2009). Thus, physiological and psychosocial changes in midlife may serve as a catalyst for improving or maintaining previously held positive self-evaluations with positive downstream effects on the individual's career trajectory. Acceptance may allow midlife employees to focus on personal growth and seek opportunities that align with their

individual values and preferences, irrespective of age-related changes or societal expectations.

Differences in the acceptance and redefinition of aging identities at work between men and women can be attributed to a combination of societal expectations, workplace experiences, personal values, coping strategies, and priorities. While both genders face age-related challenges, societal norms and gender roles often impose distinct pressures on men and women as they age. Women may prioritize self-acceptance as a coping mechanism, embracing aging and navigating midlife transitions, particularly in the face of gender-based discrimination or limited career opportunities. Conversely, men may focus more on generativity than self-acceptance, seeking to leave a positive legacy and maintain a sense of vitality in the workplace. Understanding these nuanced differences is crucial for fostering inclusive work environments that support individuals of all genders in navigating aging and career trajectories with confidence and fulfillment.

Career implications of midlife identity negotiation strategies

While the previous sections highlighted the importance of recognizing gender differences in midlife aging experiences and identity negotiation strategies, we now turn our attention to the gendered implications of these identity negotiation strategies on career trajectories. More importantly, we draw connections to how this process plays a critical role in the gender career gap. We discuss these implications on talent management, workplace discrimination and empowerment, and work–life interface.

Talent management

Talent management is vital for organizational success, covering various aspects such as personnel planning, engagement, learning, performance management, recruiting, onboarding, succession, and retention (Cappelli & Keller, 2014; Lewis & Heckman, 2006). Understanding how gender and midlife aging influence talent management is crucial for organizations to develop effective strategies and support midlife employees, who are pivotal for organizational success and well-being.

In midlife, individuals often undergo shifts in motives and interests, impacting their workplace engagement and motivation. Occupational Future Time Perspective (OFTP; Rudolph et al., 2017) is a cognitive construct encompassing one's perception of future time in their work life and the quality of future opportunities. OFTP becomes significant in midlife, potentially driving developmental opportunities that enhance efficacy and motivation. Although a slight gender difference in OFTP exists favoring women (Rudolph et al., 2017), further research is needed to comprehend this pattern (Henry et al., 2013).

Identity negotiation strategies rely on alignment and available opportunities in a job or organization. While midlife employees may grow out of (reduced alignment) or into (increased alignment) their previously selected career path. Some employees may adapt to changing alignment better than others. Midlife employees who find increasing alignment between their changing midlife identity and their work environment can expect similar outcomes to those with any kind of person–environment fit—increased motivation, performance, job attitudes, well-being and reduced stress, burnout, and

turnover (see [van Vianen, 2018](#), for a review). Misalignment, however, can produce a number of work behaviors that should be considered.

First, misalignment of identity and environment can prompt mid-career employees to seek leadership, mentorship, or other high-status positions. This could allow the employee to satisfy identity work motives through leadership roles. It may be important to understand how midlife employees see these roles as instrumental to their identity negotiation and what implications that has for their effectiveness in these roles. For instance, in research on motives to lead, [Chan and Drasgow \(2001\)](#) identify affective (enjoyment of, and identification with leadership role), social-normative (see leadership as a duty or obligation), and calculative (motivated by benefits:costs of leadership) motivations to lead. For those driven to reconcile their aging identity with generativity, leadership and mentorship roles provide midlife employees with opportunities to contribute to the growth and development of others, preparing them for future challenges and passing on knowledge and expertise ([Plimmer & Schmidt, 2007](#)). For those seeking to compensate for negative identities, midlife employees may seek leadership and mentorship positions as a means to maintain their status and power within the organization.

Second, it is not surprising that midlife and mid-career have long been recognized as hotbeds for occupation and organization changes ([Barclay et al., 2011](#); [Levinson, 1977](#); [Neapolitan, 1980](#)). Individuals often seek new opportunities that align with their evolving motives and interests ([Thomas, 1980](#)). During midlife identity negotiations, individuals may seek new jobs or organizations that align better with their evolving values and preferences than their current arrangement. For example, an employee disengaging from identity negotiations to avoid negative aging and gender identities might seek roles that have lower visibility while a generative midlife employee may seek new jobs, roles, or opportunities that better align with their value to be of service to the next generation. Research has highlighted that mid-career changers often engage in these transitions to find work that better accommodates their shifting needs and aspirations ([Strauss et al., 2012](#)).

For some, misalignment may not be resolved with a new work role, job, or organization. Retirement and work exit is another critical aspect of talent management influenced by gender and midlife aging. While retirement age and timing often depend on personal finances and health, it also depends on core self-beliefs and negative attitudes about work ([Bidwell et al., 2006](#)). Based on these relationships, those who disengage from work roles in midlife as a form of identity negotiation may seek to retire earlier, whereas those who have fortified their core self-evaluations in midlife (i.e., acceptance) may prefer a later retirement age. Identifying these identity negotiation strategies during midlife may allow organizations to better plan for the retirement and exit trajectories of their aging workforce with ample time to adapt and intervene.

There is some evidence that women leave the workforce at an earlier age than men and that their reasoning for leaving differs ([Vo et al., 2015](#)). What remains unclear is how this may be a product of the identity negotiations in midlife that may result in differential work (and life) experiences. Traditionally, in response to family roles, women tend to reduce their working hours or quit their jobs to manage family responsibilities across different stages of the career, while men

increase their working hours to generate additional income ([Hamermesh, 1996](#); [Vo et al., 2015](#)). These gendered patterns can impact retirement projections, as women may have fewer years of continuous employment and lower retirement savings compared to men. For example, in a recent study of working Spanish women, unstable careers (prolonged periods of inactivity or part-time work) with two or more children tend to retire at a later age than women with steady careers regardless of number of children ([Tambellini et al., 2024](#)). Addressing gender disparities in retirement planning and ensuring equitable opportunities for both genders is essential for effective talent management and will require an understanding of the identity negotiations women are experiencing in the workplace in the years that lead up to their exit.

Together, understanding the impact of gender and midlife aging on talent management is crucial for organizations seeking to create inclusive and supportive environments. Motivation, engagement, leadership, mentorship, occupation changes, and retirement projections are all interconnected factors that shape individuals' career decisions. By recognizing the unique challenges and opportunities faced by men and women during midlife, organizations can develop strategies to foster career development, promote gender equity, and effectively manage talent throughout individuals' professional journeys.

Workplace discrimination & empowerment

We discuss workplace discrimination as a twofold issue in midlife. Stereotyping and discrimination are key contributors to the gender gap at work, not just because of biased beliefs regarding gender itself, but also because of the different ways we perceive *aging* men and women at work. Aging in midlife may be double-edged. While some may be more vulnerable to negative treatment due to identity development, others may be empowered, particularly midlife women, to ignite change for themselves and possibly other marginalized groups in the workplace. This section aims to explore the double-edged nature of workplace discrimination for midlife men and women, shedding light on the complex dynamics of gendered workplace age discrimination and the potential for midlife employees to play a key role in effecting positive change.

Gender discrimination can manifest at any point in an individual's life, but limited systematic research explores whether it occurs differently or to varying degrees as people age. Legal provisions against gender and age discrimination exist separately in the United States, making addressing gendered age discrimination challenging ([McLaughlin & Neumark, 2022](#)). Age bias affects individuals of all ages, even younger employees ([Finkelstein et al., 2013](#)). Sociological research reveals a curvilinear pattern of age discrimination perception, with peaks in the 20s and 50s for women regardless of cohort ([Gee et al., 2007](#)), and varied effects of age discrimination legislation by gender, with older women experiencing increased discrimination ([McGann et al., 2016](#)). Middle-aged individuals may face positive stereotypes ([Finkelstein et al., 2013](#)), but systematic analysis is lacking, particularly regarding gender differences.

Middle age, especially for women, is a critical period where gender expectations become incongruous ([Chatman et al., 2022](#)). Specifically, agency tends to increase from a younger age as women gain experience, but this is where

they are likely to seem less warm. Because women are expected to be low in agency and high in warmth, this lack of adherence leads them to be rebuked with reduced liking and fewer opportunities. It should be noted that average ratings were not low per se (below midpoint), but they decreased for warmth and increased for agency. Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts that recognize age should make clear that it is in middle age where women may begin to be age-disparaged in a different way than men and include this in training on biases.

Qualitative inquiries on gendered ageism across disciplines bring to life some of the lived experiences of treatment-experienced or perceptions of others (e.g., Cecil et al., 2022; Hart, 2016; Isopahkala-Bouret, 2017; Jyrkinen et al., 2017; McGann et al., 2016; Skinner, 2014). Midlife women, from various backgrounds and careers, consistently report receiving messages that suggest they are losing value and relevance, feeling pressure to maintain a youthful appearance without looking like they are trying, and trying to demonstrate competence and reliability without appearing overly knowledgeable. As discussed earlier, these negative perceptions typically start in midlife with the onset of physical aging and changing treatment, driving identity work.

The “we can’t win” feelings of some women can feed into disengaging from a leader and work identities for women, which may preclude reaching full potential later. For example, in a qualitative in-depth case study of women associate and full professors in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) at a major research institution, Hart (2016) found evidence to support a consistent pattern of grappling with a gendered university system (i.e., Acker, 2012). Hart noted that these women did not often recognize the skills that they have used successfully to be leaders on research teams, committees, and classrooms demonstrating their leadership success and potential. Similarly, Settles, (2004) found in a sample of women scientists that perceived interference between identities as a woman and as a scientist led to negative outcomes; the ideal scientist identity has strong masculine descriptors.

Competing narratives about midlife experiences at work are emerging, highlighting identity empowerment. Positive identity work is also evident in these qualitative studies, with midlife managers expressing self-confidence and personal power (Jyrkinen et al., 2017), and women believing that growing older grants credibility and freedom for personal expression (Isopahkala-Bouret, 2017). This self-acceptance identity work, noted earlier, can empower women to adopt leader identities and promote positive visions of aging as a form of generativity, despite discrimination. Despite discrimination, midlife employees, particularly women, may engage in generative behaviors such as mentorship and support to counteract negative stereotypes and contribute positively to organizational culture. Moreover, gendered executive leadership coaching is advocated to support this process (Skinner, 2014). Increased representation of women in leadership roles may lead to organizational cultures more inclusive for all marginalized groups, including older workers. However, true equality requires cultural change efforts beyond individual maneuvering within existing structures (Hart, 2016).

Research beyond the workplace offers insights into the positive identity work happening in midlife. For example, in communications sciences, McGrath (2018) explores how midlife women use social media, such as Instagram and

personal blogs, to celebrate their age, showcasing various approaches from defiance to humor. This public display aims to challenge cultural invisibility and provide positive models for others navigating identity work. Consistent with that notion, Skerrett et al. (2022) present a model for understanding of later-midlife identity negotiations in the workplace, emphasizing a shift in narratives from decline to growth. They identify identity work strategies such as accepting the reality of aging and finding new goals as part of emerging into elderhood, using a rough estimate of 55–75 years as the time of the transition from midlife to emerging elderhood. These tasks may happen at different times for people in different stages of life and may be more challenging than some for others. Moreover, individuals may be more or less successful at different aspects of their lives, work being one of them. Moderating variables can influence the likelihood that identity work leads to a positive shift that can help midlife workers promote fair treatment based on age, gender, and other factors. For instance, Giasson et al. (2017) found self-perceptions of aging influence how identity work can promote fair treatment based on age and gender, with the relationship being strongest in midlife. Although this correlational work could indicate that the valence of age perceptions stems from experiences of mistreatment rather than predicts them, the association is worth exploring as evidence of positive age identity negotiations in midlife. Likewise, negative self-perceptions of aging could be associated with disengagement as an identity negotiation strategy.

While gendered ageism often focuses on women, men also experience unique challenges in middle age. For example, McGann et al. (2016) found that several men in their sample worried about the effects of their own physiological changes on others’ perceptions at work. Interestingly, men in the trades discussed lookism in terms of no longer looking strong and quick. This may be linked to findings in nonwork contexts that point to midlife men struggling with body image and eating disorders (Matsumoto & Rodgers, 2020). Heightened evaluation of looks (i.e., weight, physique) can lead to (over) compensatory identity negotiation strategies such as restrictive or binge-eating (Fairburn et al., 2003), to maintain a positive body image and a masculine identity among colleagues. This finding reinforces the need to consider context in terms of the job, organization-, or profession-based age norms (Perry & Finkelstein, 1999).

Work–life interface

Recent rise of life expectancy, later childbearing age, and delayed financial independence by young adults have given rise to a sandwich generation, who are juggling both caregiving and financial responsibilities toward children and older parents during their midlife (Miller, 1981). Indeed, recent statistics indicated approximately one in five U.S. adults belong to the sandwich generation, and more than half of the Americans in their 40s have living parents that are over 65 as well as financially dependent children (Horowitz, 2022). The increasing diversity in family structures, such as more individuals being unpartnered and not having children, as well as the rise in multigenerational households and nontraditional family arrangements, has created new challenges and opportunities for midlife adults. This balancing act can have significant implications for their health, well-being, employment status, and work–family outcomes.

First, as caregiving and educational costs increase over the years, those in the sandwich generation experience high levels of financial stress, with 60% reporting being stressed about cost of care for three generations (i.e., their parents, spouse/self, and children). Caregivers often have to make financial sacrifices, such as reducing retirement savings and taking out loans, to cover ever-rising costs of caregiving (AARP Public Policy Institute, 2008). Accordingly, a robust body of literature has demonstrated the detrimental impact of financial stress on a wide range of work and personal outcomes. Most notably, financial stress is related to both physical and psychological health outcomes such as physical pain, sleep disturbance, and depressive symptoms (Odle-Dusseau et al., 2019; Ryu & Fan, 2023; Wickrama et al., 2015).

Although the research on the effects of financial stress on work outcomes is much more limited, there is some evidence of financial stress relating to greater risk-taking behaviors and decreased long-term planning (von Helversen & Rieskamp, 2020; Wang & Ford, 2020), which can impact decision-making and performance at work. One possible explanation for the effects of financial stress on these work and personal outcomes is work–family conflict. Specifically, as individuals experience financial stress or inadequacy, they have less resources for things that may otherwise alleviate their ability to balance work and family demands, such as quality care for children and/or elderly parents (Odle-Dusseau et al., 2018). Indeed, individuals in low-income households report higher family strain and experience higher work–family conflict (Ford, 2011). Beyond tangible resources, individuals in a scarcity mindset may also more likely have a poor appraisal of their ability to navigate both work and family responsibilities, resulting in burnout and other negative personal outcomes (Odle-Dusseau et al., 2018). They may also be more likely to engage in overcompensating identity strategy, which results in further overstretching themselves and as a result experience higher work–family conflict.

While men and women in the sandwich generation may experience financial stress equally, women shoulder a disproportionate amount of caregiving responsibilities. Unsurprisingly, women report greater involvement in caretaking, higher role stressors, greater responsibility for childcare, and participate in more care tasks for a (step)parent than men (Neal & Hammer, 2017). Similar to the pregnancy and early motherhood that many working women have to navigate during their early career days, caretaking, whether for children or elderly, continues to be stigmatized in the workplace (Clancy et al., 2020; Henle et al., 2020). Even though many workplaces offer family-friendly accommodations such as remote work and leave, those who request to make use of them are often perceived to be less committed and suffer negative career outcomes (Leslie et al., 2012; Vandello & Bosson, 2013). This can contribute to the gender mid-career gap, as women are forced to scale back or even temporarily opt out of the workforce (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Reitman & Schneer, 2005). This is in contrast with men's careers, which are often seen as more important due to the traditional belief of men being the main breadwinner (Eagly, 1992; Zuo & Tang, 2000). Due to the differences in gender role expectations, men can be even more penalized than women are when seeking family-friendly accommodations (Rudman & Mescher, 2013; Vandello & Bosson, 2013), which may further deter men from partaking

in caregiving and inadvertently allowing the responsibilities to fall disproportionately on women's shoulders.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has made remote work widely available, an increasing number of organizations are requiring employees to return to the office for at least part of the week (Aksoy et al., 2023) indicating the challenges in using flexibility policies persist in the post-pandemic workplace. Gender differences in career trajectories independent of children's roles are observable. Past research has found that while men and women both prioritize taking on challenges earlier in their careers, women are more likely than men to prioritize balance and authenticity in their career pursuits starting mid-career (Cabrera, 2009; Sullivan & Mainiere, 2007a, 2007b). This is not to say men do not prioritize balance during mid-career, as there is evidence suggesting there are increasing within-gender differences in employment patterns (McMunn et al., 2015), though the influence of gender roles on career trajectories remains persistent (Ek et al., 2021). Women are also more likely to be influenced by their family status when deciding to return to school during their midlife (Hostetler et al., 2007), possibly as a way to catch up with deferred career goals due to having children. Identity negotiation strategies may further these gender differences in trajectories, as men may be more concerned with generativity and therefore seek to leave their mark through their careers, while women may more likely disengage from their careers as they are overburdened by caregiving responsibilities. These gender differences in career trajectories may contribute to the mid-career gender gap, as men's emphasis on challenges and authenticity over balance early on may give them an advantage in career progression.

Despite these challenges, midlife can also be a time of opportunities. Depending on individual circumstances, some individuals find themselves with an "empty nest," or when grown children move out of the family home, during midlife. While this phenomenon can be related to negative mental health outcomes such as depression and anxiety (Kristensen et al., 2021), it also opens up new opportunities as individuals experience reduced family demands if they can psychologically navigate this transition successfully. Specifically, those who engage in generativity and self-acceptance identity work may be more successful in weathering or even avoiding the negative consequences of having an "empty nest." For instance, those who are more accepting of their new shifting identities may take advantage of their newfound time and resources and take on new hobbies, which may help them relieve stress from other more obligatory roles in life (e.g., work, family). Indeed, psychological lifespan and sociological life course research suggest that compared to early parenthood, empty nesters perceive lower levels of work–family conflict and as a result, higher levels of well-being (Allen & Finkelstein, 2014; Hill et al., 2014; Kulik, 2019). People also report engaging in more life roles, now that they have more bandwidth to develop relationships and interests outside of work and family responsibilities (Agahi et al., 2006; Freysinger & Ray, 1994).

Extant research, which heavily centers around women, mostly focuses on its effects of spousal relationship. However, a small body of research on women with adult children that have left home suggest that work provides a source of satisfaction toward individuals during midlife (Adelmann, 1989; van Steebergen et al., 2014). This is also corroborated with other research that found middle-aged women generally

Table 1. Example research questions to advance scholarship across research domains

Research domain	Research questions
Talent Management & Productivity	<p>How do midlife physiological and psychosocial developmental changes impact one's commitment to mentoring, leadership, allyship, and occupational citizenship behaviors in the workplace? Does this manifest differentially for men and women either due to or exacerbating the mid-career gender gap?</p> <p>How can organizations leverage the unique strengths midlife employees bring to their company to promote both immediate and long-term performance?</p> <p>How can employers provide physical and psychological support to midlife employees in ways that optimize positive identity negotiation processes (e.g., self-acceptance, generativity, compensation) and delay early exit, especially for women workers.</p> <p>How do men's fear of physical feminization during aging impact their work behavior as they try to maintain a valued work identity? How does this impact the goals set, roles pursued, and leadership style?</p>
Stigma, Discrimination, and Barriers to Equality	<p>Do the stereotypes of working women change during midlife in ways that converge with the "ideal worker"? Do new biases emerge that challenge women's ability to negotiate valued work identities?</p> <p>What individual differences foster a positive midlife identity, do those differ across genders, and how do these identities protect people from stigma later in their work life?</p> <p>Can women's use of positive performative age identity management on social media change ageist attitudes and behavior in the workplace?</p>
Work-life Interface	<p>How do shifting caregiving responsibilities influence midlife men and women's experiences with work-life conflict and facilitation?</p> <p>How does midlife development influence individual decision-making in work and nonwork domains, especially as it pertains to resources devoted to each domain?</p> <p>How does having children (or not) impact identity renegotiations in midlife and does it depend on worker gender?</p>
Methodological	<p>Can nonlinear models be applied to better understand employees in midlife rather than just at the extremes of a trend?</p> <p>Would measuring self-identified age group in the workplace serve as a more theoretically valid measure when studying psychosocial aspects of the workplace?</p> <p>Can the exploration of the interaction of age and gender in existing data sets provide new insights into different experiences of aging across gender?</p> <p>How do employees in nonprofessional and non-white-collar jobs define and identify with the mid-career stage?</p> <p>At what age do employees see themselves as midlife? Does this correspond with how their colleagues view their age identity?</p> <p>Could we utilize continuous measures of gender expression and identity to capture nonbinary experiences with aging.</p>

report higher levels of work-family enhancement than work-family conflict (Fischer et al., 2015; Gordon et al., 2007). One possible explanation is that compared to men, women during midlife enjoy greater emotional support, which is then related to greater life satisfaction (Liebler & Sandefur, 2002; Marcinkus et al., 2007).

Another possibility, posed by both psychological and sociological researchers is that throughout children's development from birth through adulthood, women face more interference from family to work (Allen & Finkelstein, 2014; Martinengo et al., 2010), so the change from having children at home to an empty nest may be more drastic for women than for men. As women may have disengaged from their careers to partake in caregiving responsibilities, being freed from some of those caregiving demands during the empty nest stage may allow them to actually allot the time and resources for themselves instead of simply redirecting them to work or other obligatory roles, which in turn allow them enjoy greater well-being. It is important to note, however, that individuals' work-life interface during midlife is extremely context-dependent, as their parental status, age of children, financial status of grown children, and whether they can successfully navigate transition to empty nest all influence their ability to navigate and juggle work and family responsibilities. Therefore, we are merely highlighting the broad trends identified by the literature rather than stating this is the monolithic experience of all midlife employees.

An agenda for future research

The aim of the current paper is to introduce an integrated framework and agenda for reconciling the role of midlife, both in the mid-career gap by gender, but in broader work experiences as well. Toward this goal, we present a detailed agenda for future work (see also Table 1) augmenting the adoption of our framework into future literature on midlife and gender in organization. We hope that the proposed framework can catalyze research on midlife identity negotiations as they impact talent management, discrimination, and work-life interface for aging workers, recognizing the gendered contingencies in this process.

First, research is needed to consider the role of midlife aging and identity negotiations in talent management. One line of inquiry could examine how physiological and psychological shifts during midlife intersect with individuals' commitments to a variety of positive and/or productive work behaviors such as mentoring, allyship, leadership, organizational citizenship behaviors, and beyond. Research has already linked generativity to key work outcomes (e.g., Doerwald et al., 2021; Henry et al., 2015). Interpreting these findings through the lens of middle-aged men and women negotiating more positive identities can offer insights into the mechanisms and conditions driving these effects. Moreover, delving into the nuanced motives and experiences of midlife workers offers a rich avenue and novel perspective for understanding leadership emergence, behavior, and effectiveness within organizational contexts. How may motivations of generativity versus

compensation influence individuals' leadership outcomes? Researchers can investigate how midlife identity negotiations shape leadership behaviors and outcomes, providing valuable insights for leadership development initiatives. Additionally, there is a need to explore how organizations can leverage the unique strengths of midlife employees to drive short- and long-term performance. Research could focus on the barriers men and women face in their mid-career and the associated differential implications for work exit years later. Research is needed to better inform evidence-based practices on selection, retention, and motivation of midlife workers.

Second, research is needed to investigate the evolving landscape of gender dynamics in the workplace that intersect with aging stigma to produce a double-edged experience with discrimination. There is a need for research on whether and when stereotypes against working women transform during midlife to potentially better align with the image of the "ideal worker," reducing negative gendered stereotypes women face compared to when they are younger or older workers. Additionally, research should consider whether novel biases that challenge women's abilities to negotiate positive work identities may emerge during midlife. This goal aligns with recent calls to research menopausal transitions in women as a stigmatized developmental phase (Grandey et al., 2020). Alongside developing a better understanding of gendered agism is understanding the individual differences that contribute to fostering a positive midlife identity. Moreover, exploring whether these factors vary across genders and how such identities serve as protective mechanisms against stigma later in individuals' work lives is imperative. Finally, research is needed that considers midlife as a time for empowerment and allyship. For example, what is the potential impact of women's utilization of positive performative age identity management on social media or in public-facing work environments? Can such strategies influence ageist attitudes and behaviors in the workplace, thereby contributing to more inclusive and age-diverse organizational cultures. Or could middle-aged employees leverage their workplace experience and status to serve as allies to marginalized populations at work? It is important to note that while we focus on both gender and age on mid-career experiences, there are other intersecting social identities, such as sexual orientation and race/ethnicity, that may further complicate employees' experiences with aging stigma. Further research is needed to not only integrate gendered dynamics into understanding employees' aging experience, but also consider how other intersecting stigmatized social identities may introduce additional challenges.

Third, to delve deeper into the dynamics surrounding midlife individuals' experiences with work-life balance and shifting caregiving responsibilities. Through the midlife transition, caregiving responsibilities can undergo significant shifts such as sandwiched caregiving or empty nesting just to name two of countless caregiving configurations. Understanding how these responsibilities influence perceptions of conflict and facilitation between work and personal life is paramount. For instance, research has shown that caregiving needs of aging parents or dependent children can create work-family conflict (Eby et al., 2005) or facilitate positive interactions between work and life (Frone, 2003). Moreover, gendered identity renegotiations occur when one becomes a parent (Kossek & Ozeki, 1999) but do they also occur as caregiving roles shift in midlife. Given that midlife is a hotbed for role

and responsibility shifts, and the gendered norms around caretaking responsibilities, this may open opportunities to better understand how men and women use identity negotiations across domains to try to maintain work-life balance. Additionally, how do midlife identity renegotiations shape decision-making processes across work and nonwork domains, particularly regarding resource allocation, offers valuable insights into individual behaviors and organizational outcomes.

Finally, innovative methodologies offer fruitful avenues to better understanding midlife identity negotiations in the workplace. Like the literature we have drawn on in this review, the methodologies used for future research will likely involve both qualitative and quantitative components, providing a comprehensive, nuanced understanding of complex research questions by offering both measurable data and rich contextual insights (Wihelmy et al., 2022). This approach enhances the validity of findings through triangulation and allows for the exploration of both broad trends and the underlying mechanisms behind them. By integrating participant perspectives with empirical data, mixed methods offer flexibility in addressing complex questions, particularly in research involving human behavior and marginalized groups. In quantitative research, applications of nonlinear models can move beyond interpreting the extremities of linear trends (younger vs. older) and better understand the complexities of employees in midlife. Additionally, investigating the utility of self-identified age group measurements in workplace studies (vs. numerical age) can offer theoretically robust insights into psychosocial dynamics. Furthermore, examining the interplay between age and gender within existing data sets holds promise for uncovering nuanced experiences of aging across gender lines. Most studies on aging have likely measured gender as demographic variable but may not have utilized this to understand gendered aging beyond describing the sample. For data being collected in the future, scholars should adopt measurement that is inclusive of trans and nonbinary gender identities or make considerations for what aspect of gender/sex is theoretically relevant (Hart et al., 2019; Lindqvist et al., 2020). Lastly, exploring the discrepancy between self-perceived midlife age and colleagues' perceptions can shed light on individual and social constructions of age identity. By addressing these questions, researchers can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of midlife experiences and inform strategies for supporting employees across various career stages and sectors.

In conclusion, midlife identities offer a unique vantage point to advance organizational scholarship to understand and resolve the mid-career gender gap. Drawing from the abundance of multidisciplinary research on midlife, organizational research on gender and aging can shift focus from the two extreme poles (young vs. old) to understand gendered aging identities at work when employees must navigate the time and space between, a space that coincides with critical junctures of one's career. Research in this area is crucial for understanding how midlife aging and identity negotiations intersect with work behaviors, leadership roles, and organizational citizenship. Additionally, the evolving landscape of gender dynamics, especially in the context of aging, demands further exploration to address the double-edged experiences of discrimination that midlife workers may face. Understanding how caregiving responsibilities and work-life balance shift during midlife, along with the development of innovative

methodologies to study these phenomena, will contribute to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of midlife experiences. Ultimately, this agenda aims to bridge the gap in the literature on midlife and gender, offering insights that can inform organizational practices and policies. By addressing these critical issues, future research can contribute to more inclusive and equitable workplaces that recognize and value the contributions of midlife employees across different career stages and sectors.

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