

Newton Research Statement

To date, my research has been guided by two separate yet intersecting lines of study concerning adult development: the relationship between social roles and personality development in midlife and later; and the experience of regret and how it affects well-being in the course of aging. More recently, I have broadened my focus to include health indicators and their association with social roles and well-being in older adults.

The relationship between social roles and personality during adult development

The types of life paths people follow through adulthood are central to my research. Focusing on Erikson's adult stages of identity, intimacy and generativity, and using data spanning almost 20 years, Abigail Stewart and I examined the relationship between social role commitment and midlife personality development in women of the Radcliffe Class of 1964. Specifically, we found that social role commitments – family focus, career focus, or equal focus on both – were associated with different patterns of these three personality factors in late midlife (Newton & Stewart, 2010). For example, women who had from their twenties pursued careers without having children expressed higher levels of identity than both intimacy and generativity in late middle age, whereas women who had from early adulthood pursued having a family and not a career expressed higher levels of generativity than identity and intimacy in late middle age. This study demonstrated clearly that life experiences and personality concerns are deeply intertwined in the course of adulthood.

In a similar vein, my dissertation focused on longitudinal data to examine the personalities of late midlife women who followed normative and non-normative life paths. Participants were drawn from two continuing studies: the Radcliffe College Class of 1964, and the Women's Life Paths Study (WLPS). I compared three groups of women who took non-normative life paths to their more normative counterparts: single mothers (compared with married mothers), women without children (compared with those who have children), and women who undertook male-dominated professions (compared with those in female-dominated professions). Using the Q-sort method of observer ratings of personality traits, I found that each non-normative group exhibited a unique set of personality traits: women who pursued careers in male-dominated professions were viewed as being relatively higher on masculine gender-normative traits, whereas both single mothers and women without children were viewed as being relatively higher on masculine gender-normative traits as well as lower on feminine gender-normative traits (Newton & Stewart, 2013).

Shellae Versey and I have examined the relationship between generativity and successful aging in late midlife, using data from African American women and White women who participated in WLPS (Versey & Newton, 2013). We investigated the moderation of the generativity/successful aging relationship by race. Results showed that African American and White women exhibited different levels of generativity, as measured by the Loyola Generativity Scale. We also found that, for African American women, paid work moderated the relationship between generativity and successful aging, whereas spiritual commitment and sports and recreation activities were moderators of the relationship for White women. This research suggests that race is an important consideration for future research concerning correlates of successful aging.

Regret and well-being

Both Butler and Erikson explored the relationship between regret and well-being in the context of a life review in older adults. To explore this relationship at different stages of the lifespan, Cynthia Torges, Abigail Stewart and I examined the life regrets of three cohorts of women - in their 20s, 40s, and 60s - who graduated from the University of Michigan during different periods of history (Newton, Torges, & Stewart, 2012). Results confirmed our hypothesis

that different generations of women would have different regrets – whether not pursuing a career due to social restrictions, or not having had more children. Women who came of age in the 1970s, unlike women from earlier and later cohorts, often regretted both curtailing career aspirations and limiting family size, reflecting the fact that for this generation social expectations for college-educated women included both excelling as career women and being exemplary mothers.

Recent collaborations examining regret, social roles, personality, and health

Together with Abigail Stewart, I am currently conducting a qualitative examination of the correlates of longitudinal regret in a small sample of late midlife women for whom we have data spanning twenty years. We examine the relationship between how individuals deal with life events and their experience of regret, and whether individuals alter the way they express their regrets over time. We are comparing life events at various stages to overall patterns of regret expression, and whether these regret patterns reflect personality traits (such as resilience or a lack of adaptation) associated with responses to the events themselves.

Robin Edelstein, Abigail Stewart, and I examined the associations between women's narcissism levels in early midlife and health in later midlife (Edelstein, Newton, & Stewart, 2012). We found that mean levels of willful narcissism increased over time in this sample of women, whereas hypersensitive and autonomous narcissism decreased. Of the three types of narcissism, hypersensitive narcissism (characterized, for example, by self-defensiveness, concern about one's adequacy, over-sensitivity to perceived criticism) was most consistently associated with negative psychological outcomes, such as higher levels of anxiety.

Recent research conducted in collaboration with undergraduates at Northwestern University extends my focus on social roles and personality. The first project compares levels of generativity among middle-aged African American and White parents, grandparents, and non-parents (Newton & Baltys, 2014). Narrative data from the Foley Longitudinal Study of Adulthood (FLSA) were coded for four different types of generativity: legacy, productivity, caring, and the need to be needed, and the relationship between parent status and these types of generativity was studied within each race group. We found that profiles of the four types of generativity differed by both parent status and race, with African American non-parents exhibiting high levels of productive generativity. These findings highlight the need for contextualizing studies of adult development; in this case, the intersection of race and parent status was an important context. The second project brings previous research concerning generativity and narcissism together in a study of the correlates of intended legacy using the same FLSA data set. We found that narcissism and generativity were associated with legacies that combine elements of self-focused and other-focused intent; that is, in the presence of generativity, narcissism was not such a bad thing. Taken another way, this can also be interpreted to mean that generativity in the presence of narcissism was not necessarily a good thing (Newton, Herr, Pollack, & McAdams, 2014).

I am also broadening my program of research to include health and relationships as contexts for adult development. In collaboration with Jacqui Smith and Lindsay Ryan, and using data from two cohorts of middle-aged women in the Health and Retirement Study (HRS), I compared the self-reported objective health of two cohorts of women who had different marital histories: long-term single women (divorced, widowed, and never married) and long-term married women (Newton, Ryan, King, & Smith, under review). Results showed that not only did long-term marital status matter for health outcomes – i.e., married women of both cohorts were healthier overall), but there was also a relationship between cohort and health: women of the Baby Boom had significantly fewer functional limitations but more chronic diseases compared to women from an earlier cohort at the same age. Extending the focus on marriage to marital quality, Kira Birditt, Susannah Hope, and I used data from the National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project to examine the links between marital/partner quality, stress, and blood pressure in

middle-aged and older adults (Birditt, Newton, & Hope, 2012). We found that under high levels of stress, individuals' blood pressure benefitted from aspects of both high- and low-quality marital relationships. We have recently extended this particular line of research to examine the ways in which negative support from a spouse can affect blood pressure in the context of chronic stress, finding that wives had *lower* blood pressure when husbands reported greater stress and the relationship was more negative (Birditt, Newton, Cranford, & Ryan, under review).

Other research currently under review includes working with graduate students at Northwestern University to develop projects using Foley Longitudinal Study of Adulthood data. Data collection for this dataset of middle-aged adults is currently in its 6th year of follow-ups, and expected to run for a further four years. Two manuscripts under review include a study of the correlates of the types of legacies identified by African Americans and Whites in their life story narratives (Newton & Jones), and gender differences and similarities in the relationship between midlife body satisfaction and well-being (Russell, Newton, & McAdams).

Future goals

Broadly speaking, I would like to continue expanding the lines of research outlined above. Although much of my research has centered on the correlates of generativity in midlife men and women, I intend to broaden my range to encompass other facets of personality development, such as personality adjustment and growth. Using Health and Retirement Study data, I am currently developing a project to examine the relationship between personality and experienced well-being in older adults. I also intend to expand my research to focus on the earlier part of adulthood (or emerging adulthood). Questions to pursue include: Might there be qualitative differences in regret content; specifically, between younger and older adults in the type and incidence of regret? What might this mean for adult development and well-being? For instance, how are regrets concerning adolescent and early adulthood events associated with personality development, or emotional and physical outcomes in later life?