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Women's Regrets About Their Lives: Cohort Differences in Correlates and Contents

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Abstract In this paper we test hypotheses about the importance of life stage in moderating the relationship between acknowledging regrets and concurrent well-being, as well as how changes in women's social roles during the post-war period affected the content of the regrets they develop. We examine the relationship between women's life regrets and life satisfaction, and the content of life regrets, using data from 313 predominately white, college-educated women who graduated from the same university in the United States in 1951/2 (age 66), 1972 (age 46) and 1992 (age 26). Analyses revealed that the more types of regrets middle-aged and older women reported (the 1972 and 1951/2 cohorts respectively), the lower their life satisfaction; this pattern did not hold for the youngest women. In terms of the specific content of regrets, exact logistic regressions showed that women in the oldest cohort reported more regrets about prioritizing family over career compared with the later cohorts. Overall, few women reported regrets about prioritizing their careers over families;

however, women in the middle cohort were most likely to report these regrets. Results are discussed in terms of both developmental and socio-historical frameworks.

Keywords Regret · Cohort · Family · Career · Well-being

Introduction

The current research compares the experience of regrets concerning family and career in three cohorts of women who were raised before, during, or after the Women's Movement of the 1960s/1970s in the United States. Building on previous findings concerning the relationship between regret and well-being as individuals age, this study uses a more comprehensive measure of life regrets (combining both regrets of omission and of commission) than has been used previously to examine this relationship. We also assess whether regrets about prioritizing either family or career are different for these three cohorts of college-educated women, based on their experience of changes in women's opportunities. All studies reviewed in this work are based on women in the United States unless otherwise noted.

Given the opportunity to live life over, most people would do some things differently (Kinnier and Metha 1989; Roese and Summerville 2005; Timmer et al. 2005), but actually feeling regret about major life choices and decisions is associated with lower psychological well-being (Jokisaari 2003; Landman et al. 1995; Torges et al. 2005). Additionally, some groups have life experiences that incline them toward particular regrets. For example, women tend to list educational and/or career regrets most frequently (Jokisaari 2004; Landman and Manis 1992; Metha et al. 1989), and educational and career regrets have a particularly strong negative association with life satisfaction (Jokisaari 2004; Metha, et al. 1989).

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The predominance of educational and career regrets among women has implications not only for their life satisfaction and overall well-being, but also for their experience of aging. Reviewing one's past and confronting one's regrets is a crucial developmental task of older age (Butler 1963; Butler 1974; Erikson 1963; Erikson 1980; Erikson et al. 1986), and also plays an important role in development earlier in the life span, when people can use regrets to motivate changes or "midcourse corrections" (Staudinger 2001; Stewart and Vandewater 1999). Currently, however, little is known about how age or life stage may affect the relationship between regret and well-being. Thus, one of the current study's goals is to explore the connection between regret and psychological well-being during young, middle and late adulthood.

The second goal of the current study is to consider how the content of women's regrets is influenced by the social historical context coinciding with different periods in their life course (Stewart and Healy 1989); this influence is indexed by their cohort membership. The dataset employed for this study was collected by Zucker to test hypotheses about the role of cohort in shaping the identities of college-educated women raised in the United States, as well as their attitudes and lives. She drew on Stewart and Healy's (1989) theory of the linkage between developmental stage and the impact of social and political events to argue that women who reached young adulthood at the height of the second wave of the Women's Movement—the late sixties/early seventies (Chafetz and Dworkin 1987; Rosenfeld and Ward 1991)—would be most affected consciously by it (in terms of their identities and attitudes); that women who were already mature adults would take advantage of some of the opportunities it created but would be less affected in terms of identity; and that women born into a world already affected by it would be unaware of its impact, but would reveal its effects. Consistent with these theoretical expectations, Zucker showed (2004) that the women who were young adults at the time of the Movement were more likely to adopt feminist beliefs as well as the label "feminist" than women who were mature adults at that time. In related analyses, Zucker and Stewart (2007) found that the youngest cohort reported attitudes about gender as well as expectations for themselves that reflected the impact of the women's movement on their background assumptions. Although Zucker collected data on all of the women's regrets, she did not analyze those data.

In this paper, our hypothesis is that because three different cohorts of women raised in the United States (before, during, and after the Women's Movement) had different expectations and life experiences in terms of education and career, they will have different levels of regrets concerning education and career or marriage and family. Specifically, we expected that women in the oldest cohort, who were

subject to the strongest gender-norm-related pressure to pursue marriage and childrearing as life goals, would have the strongest tendency to report regrets about prioritizing family over career, whereas women in the middle cohort, who were subject to new pressure to pursue education and careers for themselves, would have the strongest tendency to report regrets about prioritizing career over family. The youngest cohort might be unlikely to report either kind of regret, since they were raised in a period in which college-educated women were encouraged to view themselves as having considerable freedom to choose a life path that suited them. Instead they were expected to be most likely (of the three cohorts) to report regrets about particular work opportunities, as a result of an increased perception of those opportunities as available to women.

The current study explores the relationship between regret and psychological well-being across adulthood, and how cohort membership affects its content. We use data collected at the same time from three cohorts of predominantly white, college-educated women who graduated from the University of Michigan at different times: 20 years before the second wave of the Women's Movement (age 66 at the time of data collection, the 1951/1952 or oldest cohort); at the height of the Women's Movement (age 46 at data collection, the 1972 or middle cohort); and 20 years later (age 26 at data collection, the 1992 or youngest cohort). Throughout this paper we will refer to the second wave of the Women's Movement as simply "the Women's Movement" or "the Movement."

We note that the youngest cohort was 26 years old at the time of study and their life regrets were based on relatively early and provisional life choices. However, young adults still have the capacity to experience significant and meaningful life regrets as is evidenced not only by their reports, but also in the large body of literature that seeks to elucidate processes and outcomes associated with life regrets in young adults in a variety of countries (e.g., Dijkstra and Barelds 2008; Jokisaari 2003; Lecci et al. 1994; Tomer and Eliason 2005; Wrosch et al. 2005; Wrosch and Heckhausen 2002); therefore, they are included in the current study. We anticipate that these early adult regrets may not carry the same emotional force that those reported in later age do, as they may be less tied to a life review process stimulated by middle age (Stewart and Vandewater 1999) and aging (Butler 1974).

Regret, Well-being and Age

Most researchers who study regret consider it to have both emotional and cognitive elements (e.g., Stewart and Vandewater 1999; Wrosch and Heckhausen 2002). Life path regrets, or regrets about major life choices or experiences (including those related to career and family), are associated with negative feelings (Wrosch and Heckhausen

2002). Understandably, people who report having regrets, particularly more intense or unresolved regret, have been shown to experience lower levels of life satisfaction (Jokisaari 2004; Lecci et al. 1994; Torges et al. 2005), psychological well-being (Dijkstra and Barelds 2008; Landman et al. 1995), and physical health (Dijkstra and Barelds 2008; Stewart and Vandewater 1999). For instance, Jokisaari (2003) found that the more people consider their regrets to influence their present life, the lower their physical health and life satisfaction.

Since regret has such negative associations, it can serve as a strong motivator. That is, experiencing regret can lead people to make changes in their lives, either in their behavior or cognitions. In a Finnish study, regrets were found to be most likely to stimulate behavioral changes at younger ages when most people perceive they have opportunities to change regrettable situations through their own actions, such as pursuing a dream job (Jokisaari 2003); further, in a study of German men and women, their psychological adjustment benefited from making such action-oriented attributions (Wrosch and Heckhausen 2002). Stewart and Ostrove (1998) suggested, and Stewart and Vandewater (1999) found evidence, that recognizing regret in early midlife can motivate “midcourse corrections,” or behavioral changes aimed at addressing those regrets (e.g., returning to school to pursue a degree). On the other hand, as people age, and available resources and opportunities for behavioral changes dwindle, they are more likely to address their regrets by transforming the way in which they think about them (Torges et al. 2008; Wrosch et al. 2005; Wrosch and Heckhausen 2002).

Developmental theories characterize this age-related shift from external-focused to internal-focused processes as moving from primary control or assimilative coping in younger adulthood to secondary control or accommodative coping in later adulthood (Brandstädter 1999; Heckhausen and Schulz 1995; Rothermund and Brandstädter 2003). In the specific case of regret, both Erikson (1963; 1980; Erikson, et al. 1986) and Butler (1963; 1974) theorized that addressing life regrets through cognitive changes (i.e., coming to terms with them internally) is a developmental task of older age when regrets come to the forefront of one’s thoughts. In Erikson’s view, less complete integration of life regrets is accompanied by a higher level of despair (or lower level of well-being).

Thus existing theory and research demonstrate that regret is associated with well-being, and that regrets are managed differently in different stages of adulthood. However, there is only a relatively small body of evidence that seeks to explain the specific relationship between regret and well-being for different age groups. For example, building on their previous research with German individuals concerning better psychological adjustment as a result of perceiving

their regrets as controllable, Wrosch and colleagues (2005) examined Canadian adults and found that age consistently moderated the relationship between regret and three indicators of well-being. That is, higher levels of regret intensity (i.e., intrusive thoughts and negative affect associated with the life regret) were more strongly associated with health problems, depressive symptoms and lower life satisfaction for older adults, whereas these associations were mostly nonsignificant for younger adults. Somewhat similarly, across an age-diverse sample, Lecci et al. (1994) found no relationship between the number of regrets of omission people reported and their life satisfaction. However, when a subsample of the oldest group in the study was analyzed, an inverse correlation emerged.

In short, these studies support theories suggesting that the consequences of regret vary across adulthood. In the current study, we focused on the relationship between number of type of regrets and life satisfaction (Jokisaari 2004; Metha, et al. 1989). As in Lecci et al.’s (1994) study, we expect that life satisfaction will be negatively correlated with number of regrets for the oldest cohort in this study. However, whereas Lecci et al. only assessed regrets of omission (i.e., participants were asked to list goals they “wished they had pursued, but never did”), the current study gives participants the opportunity to report both errors of commission (e.g., “I married the wrong man”) and omission (e.g., “I wish I had married”). In line with Stewart and Vandewater’s (1999) finding that women with life regrets in early midlife who did not make “midcourse corrections” by age 47 experienced lower levels of well-being than women who made such changes, we suspect that number of type of regrets will also be negatively correlated with life satisfaction for the middle cohort in the current study. For the youngest cohort, who have considerable time to contextualize their life decisions differently in the future, we did not expect a relationship between number of regrets and life satisfaction (consistent with Wrosch et al. 2005).

In sum, the current study extends Lecci et al.’s (1994) previous findings by assessing the relationship between number of type of regrets and life satisfaction in three cohorts of college-educated women, using a more comprehensive measure of life regrets. Specifically, we hypothesized that life satisfaction will be negatively correlated with the number of types of life regrets reported by women of the two oldest cohorts (those who graduated from college in 1951/2 or 1972).

Women and Prioritizing Family

Regrets associated with one’s life path (e.g., pursuing a family versus pursuing a career) are particularly pertinent to the lives of many women (e.g., Landman and Manis 1992; Levinson and Levinson 1996). Women in the postwar period, subject to

what Betty Friedan called “the Feminine Mystique,” were expected to prioritize having and caring for a family over educational or career pursuits. Many social institutions perpetuated this expectation by limiting women’s access to relevant resources, such as higher education, child care (Bernard 1983; Carr 2004; Russo 1976), and employment (Acker 1990; Ridgeway 1997). Not surprisingly, many women who came of age in that period report regrets related to prioritizing a family over, or to the exclusion of, education and/or career opportunities (e.g., Ginzberg & Associates 1966; Stewart and Vandewater 1999).

Levinson and Levinson (1996) observed that middle-aged women born during the Baby Boom era who solely pursued a traditional role (i.e., wife and mother) had more serious regrets than women of that generation who also pursued a career. These “transitional” women (Stewart and Vandewater 1993) were in the unusual situation of having been reared with the explicit expectations that above all they become a wife and mother, but then they experienced a dramatic change in young adulthood: the Women’s Movement. The Movement exposed them to new ways of thinking about themselves and their lives as well as new opportunities to pursue educational and/or career interests, often leading to ‘midcourse corrections’ in their lives as a result of regrets concerning traditional roles (Stewart and Vandewater 1999). Additionally, these same women expressed higher levels of well-being compared to women who did not make mid-course corrections.

Therefore when thinking about women and their life regrets, it is important to consider their social-historical context, especially as it relates to gender role norms. Women reared in a culture that encouraged them to devote their lives to their children experienced different normative pressures and opportunities than women reared in a culture that supported women’s aspirations for higher education and professional careers.

Many social scientists have acknowledged the importance of social historical influences in individual lives (Elder et al. 2009; Erikson 1963; MacLean and Elder 2007; Mannheim 1952; Veroff 1983). Stewart and Healy (1989) provided a model that enables specific predictions about how these social events affect personality development based on their intersection with an individual’s life course. Social events that occur during late adolescence and early adulthood influence conscious identity and values. In contrast, that same event occurring at the height of work and family commitments (usually middle adulthood) may affect a person’s opportunities and choices, but fail to shape identity and values. For individuals in later adulthood who have fewer work and family constraints, these same experiences may lead to revisions of existing identities. On the other hand, girls raised during a period that shapes adult women’s identities are likely to take the very same events for granted, and to simply build a view of the world that assumes the influence of those events (see

Zucker and Stewart 2007). Thus we hypothesize that because women’s expectations are shaped by the social historical context in which they develop, their life regrets were also influenced by that same context.

In particular, the timing of the Women’s Movement with respect to three cohorts of women’s developmental paths should have implications for their expectations, opportunities, and resultant regrets. Duncan and Agronick (1995) found that women who had been young adults at the time of the Women’s Movement were more likely to describe the movement as personally meaningful than were women who had been mature adults, given that younger women could more easily assimilate the independent personalities encouraged by the Movement. Similarly, Zucker (2004) found that the middle cohort of women who were young adults at the time of the Movement took on both feminist views and identities more than did women in the older cohort who were already mature adults then.

Following from both theory and research, women who were young adults during the Movement would be more likely to be affected by it in terms of their development of a conscious identity than women who were already mature adults with many responsibilities. Mature adult women would still experience the Movement as a change in social expectations of increased possibilities for women; it is possible that their perception of the opportunity for an alternative and valued outcome could lead them to regret their more traditional path (see Roese and Summerville 2005, for a review). Women who experienced the impact of the Women’s Movement during their childhood (e.g., those born during or after the 1960s, in this case the class of 1992) would be more likely to have their “fundamental values and expectations” shaped by the Movement (Stewart and Healy 1989; Zucker and Stewart 2007). These women would not experience the Movement as having changed fundamental expectations about the world and their place in it; instead, the world they inherited would have already incorporated those changes. Therefore, these women would be more likely to internalize the values represented by that Movement than would women who were young or mature adults at the time (i.e., the 1972 or 1951/2 cohorts).

Applying these ideas to the present study, we propose that the women of the oldest cohort would have already made life commitments that were consistent with the strong social expectations of their youth that they prioritize a family above all else. However, as a result of observing the increased opportunities available to women, many regretted the paths they had taken or those they had left behind. Therefore, we hypothesized that the oldest cohort would have more regrets about prioritizing family than either of the other two cohorts. Further, relative to the middle cohort, the youngest cohort benefitted from the changed norms and opportunities associated with the

Movement; we hypothesized that women from this cohort would be less likely to report regrets about prioritizing family than the women in the middle cohort.

Women and Prioritizing Career

Although women who came of age during the Women's Movement had more opportunities to pursue their educational and vocational interests than women from older cohorts, it was not an easy road. Work environments did not change overnight. These women experienced incivility and harassment in the workplace that was not recognized as a legal issue until the late 1970s/early 1980s (MacKinnon 1979; Equal Employment Opportunity Commission 1980). They also had to contend with colleagues and managers who questioned not only their capabilities but also their legitimacy in the work place (Acker 1990; Ehrenreich and English 1989; Reskin 1993; Ridgeway 1997).

Additionally, the new opportunities and expectations available to women were accompanied by slow recognition of the need to renovate societal infrastructure in order to take advantage of these opportunities. Hence, many experienced work environments in which they felt forced to commit much of their time and energy if they were to succeed, given not only the social pressure to get married and start a family (Bernard 1983; Morrell 2000; Parry 2005; Russo 1976), but the lack of social supports (e.g., day care) that would allow them to easily commit to both a career and a family. Many women of this generation who were interested in pursuing a career may have felt forced to choose between pursuing their career and having a family, and/or guilty if they pursued both. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect women who came of age during the Women's Movement would experience more regrets about prioritizing career over family than older women.

Social institutions are slowly catching up with these trends. Parental leave and day care have become more available and accommodating; women who choose to pursue both career and family are more able to do so. Further, social expectations of heterosexual parents have shifted so that family and child rearing responsibilities are not viewed as solely a mother's domain but fathers are increasingly expected to play a role in their children's lives (Hochschild and Machung 2003). These changes in social expectations and structures have been associated with a steady increase in the proportion of women working for pay over the past 50 years (Carr 2004). Therefore, women who came of age *after* the Women's Movement (the youngest cohort in the current study) did not experience the same sorts of constraints that the middle and older cohorts did and likely felt more able to pursue their educational and career goals. In summary, we expected the women who came of age during the Movement (i.e., the class of 1972) would have more

regrets than either of the other two cohorts about prioritizing their careers.

In sum, we will test these hypotheses about the content of women's life regrets:

1. Women of the 1951/2 cohort will be more likely to report regrets about prioritizing family than will women of the later cohorts. Women of the 1992 cohort will be least likely to report regrets about prioritizing family.
2. Women of the 1972 cohort will be more likely to report regrets about prioritizing career than will women of either of the other cohorts.
3. Women of the 1992 cohort (the youngest) will be more likely to report regrets about specific career or work choices they have made, rather than regrets concerning choices about prioritizing family or career.

Method

Participants

Participants were 313 American female graduates of the University of Michigan; 94 (30%) from the classes of 1951 and 1952 (i.e., the oldest cohort), 134 (43%) from the class of 1972 (i.e., the middle cohort), and 85 (27%) from the class of 1992 (i.e., the youngest cohort). In 1996, a random sample of women from each graduating class was contacted by then-graduate student Alyssa Zucker using University of Michigan Alumni Association records. Data were collected from a mailed questionnaire when the women were, on average, 66 (range: 65–70), 46 (range: 44–50), and 26 (range: 23–30): 25% of the oldest cohort, 37% of the middle cohort and 27% of the youngest cohort provided responses to the 20-page questionnaire that included questions concerning personal characteristics and attitudes, life satisfaction, meaningful historical events, and group membership and identification. These response rates reflect that the alumni samples were first contacted a long time after graduating (Abramowitz and Nassi 1981; Cole et al. 1998). Response bias (i.e., the number of women who responded versus those who did not) was explored using two pieces of available information: current state of residence, and undergraduate major. There was no difference in participation based on college major. However, women residing in a state other than Michigan were more likely to respond than women residing in Michigan. As Zucker (1998) speculated, "...because they had moved away from Michigan they have fonder feelings about their time there and thus decided to participate" (p.35).

The majority of the participants were White, although the youngest cohort was the most racially diverse of the three, with 13% being women of color. Table 3 displays specific demographic information. A high percentage of all cohorts

obtained graduate degrees; educational attainment was actually significantly higher for the middle cohort, and we therefore controlled for level of education in the analyses. Highest level of education was coded as Bachelor's degree (1); current student (1.5—these women were all at least college graduates, and all current students were in the youngest cohort); Master's (2); and Doctoral degree (3). Not surprisingly, given their ages, the two older cohorts had the highest rates of ever being married; motherhood rates were also higher in the two older groups. The middle cohort also earned significantly more than either of the other two cohorts. As the youngest cohort was only 26 at the time, some differences between this cohort and the older cohorts are likely a function of age.

Measures

Regret Type

Five open-ended questions were taken from the three-cohort survey and specifically coded for the presence and content of regret. All three cohorts of women - despite varying widely in age - responded to these questions with answers that were codable. These questions were:

1. "Were there any attractive opportunities for career or other long-range activities which you did not pursue?"
2. "Why did you not pursue them?"
3. "If you had it to do over again, would you choose the same lifestyle pattern—with respect to your home versus career decision(s)?"
4. "Can you describe what might be a path you did not take, but might have?"
5. "Why didn't you take it?"

The nature of these questions allowed participants to include both regrets of omission and commission. For instance, participants were prompted to think of regrets of omission in the first and fourth question; however, in each of the follow-up questions (i.e., second and fifth), participants could have discussed a corresponding regret of commission. And asking participants to consider how they would live their life if they had the opportunity to do it over (i.e., question three) encourages them to consider both kinds of regret.

From these five questions, the authors examined responses from each cohort to identify the types of regrets that emerged. Development of coding categories was therefore based on a thematic analysis of the respondents' answers (see Boyatzis 1998, pp. 130ff) rather than pre-existing theories. It should be noted that previous coding systems for women's regrets have also focused on prioritizing career or prioritizing family (see, e.g., Ginzberg & Associates, 1966; Stewart and Vandewater 1999). Thus, it is not surprising that these two broad themes arose, but the

coding categories used in the current research were created based on the responses that were given, rather than previous research. The authors identified six codable categories related to the women's life paths: social constraints, limited career, start family later, pursued career too aggressively, start family sooner, different career (see Table 1). Participants' responses were coded for the presence or absence of each type of regret across all of their five responses to the regret prompts; thus individuals could express multiple themes within and across their answers. The first two authors coded an initial sample of 75, refined the categories by comparing coding, and produced a revised code manual. They used this manual to code all responses, with each coding half, but both coded a subsample of 30. Based on that subsample, an overall estimate of reliability (Cohen's kappa) across categories was calculated, as were percent agreement for each category. Coders were unaware of the participants' cohort membership and other data during the coding process. The rate of occurrence of each category overall, along with coding definitions and reliability estimates for each category in terms of percent agreement (Boyatzis 1998), is presented in Table 1; rates of category frequency by cohort is included in Table 2. This is the best way to estimate agreement when using categories that are not mutually-exclusive, as in this case (Boyatzis 1998). However, the estimate of overall agreement across all six categories in terms of Cohen's kappa is .94.

These codes were used to create four measures:

Number of regret types A score was tabulated to indicate the total number of different types of regret categories the participant's responses fit into. Thus participants who indicated they had no regrets scored 0, those who reported only one type of regret scored a 1, and those who indicated having more than one regret scored a 2; $M = 1.03$, $SD = .78$.

Prioritizing family Three categories are related to the regrets these women experienced about prioritizing family (see Boyatzis 1998, on clustering themes to create category clusters; pp. 136ff). Responses were coded for *social constraints* that resulted in prioritizing family if the participant mentioned any sort of societal, resource (i.e., time or money) or spousal restriction on educational or career opportunities. *Limited career* was coded when a participant mentioned the possibility of having followed a full-time career when she in fact pursued either part-time work and/or was a stay-at-home mother. Finally, *start family later* was coded when participants expressed regret about not waiting long enough to get married or to have children, although participants frequently mentioned these regrets together. In addition, a participant need only mention an early marriage (e.g., "not married at such a young age") or child rearing (e.g., "I'd choose to work a while before having children") to be coded in this category. It should

Table 1 Categories of regret with examples

Type of Regret	% Agreement on Coding	Example
Prioritizing family		
Social constraints	1.00	I feel that opportunities for women were not as wide as opportunities today. No available childcare.
Limited career	.91	I never thought when I was President of the Women my senior year at U of M that I would have no career at all other than taking care of a husband and children. I could have joined N.Y. publishing world & pursued full-time career.
Start family later	1.00	I think I would wait longer to get married & to have children. I'd choose to work a while before having children.
Prioritizing career		
Pursued too aggressively	.67	Too much focus on work! I didn't protest when given too much work and lack of staff, resulting in migraines, fatigue, excess stress and a minimal social life. I would have stopped being so career driven at an earlier age.
Start family sooner	1.00	I would have tried to have children sooner. I expected to be married by now but am not yet.
Work-related regret		
Different career	.97	Job in a well-known research lab. Discovered I did not have the talent to be really good.

be noted that participants were coded as present if they had any of these three themes, and absent if they had none.

Prioritizing career The participants in this study also expressed regrets about prioritizing their careers that were captured by two categories: pursued career too aggressively; and start family sooner. A response was coded as *pursuing a career too aggressively* if the participant mentioned the possibility of having put too much time or energy into her career. Participants were coded for *starting a family sooner* if they indicated they wished to have married sooner or they wished to have children sooner or that they had more children (or even one). As above, participants were coded as present or absent for any of these two themes.

Work-related regret Many of the women in this study, particularly the younger women, also indicated there were alternative career or job possibilities (i.e., *different career*) they could have pursued but did not. This regret was not due to prioritizing either career or family, but focused more on choices between work alternatives. Therefore, this category was coded and included separately in the current analysis.

Psychological well-being The Satisfaction with Life scale (Diener et al. 1985) was used to assess psychological well-being in the current study. Participants rated themselves from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) on items such as 'In most ways my life is close to my ideal.' In the current study, "If I could live my life over, I would change

Table 2 Frequency of regrets about prioritizing family and prioritizing career

The number of women in each cohort as well as the percentage are given for each regret category. Significant results of logistic regression analyses are indicated by superscripts (a, b) to denote group differences at $p \leq .05$

Regret	By Cohort			All Cohorts Combined (N = 313)
	1951/2 (total N = 94)	1972 (total N = 134)	1992 (total N = 85)	
Prioritizing family				
Social constraints	(N = 42) 45% ^a	(N = 55) 41% ^b	(N = 21) 25% ^{ab}	(N = 118) 38%
Limited career	(N = 21) 22% ^a	(N = 18) 13% ^b	(N = 1) 1% ^{ab}	(N = 40) 13%
Start family later	(N = 9) 10% ^{ab}	(N = 3) 2% ^a	(N = 0) 0% ^b	(N = 12) 4%
Prioritizing career				
Pursued too aggressively	(N = 0) 0% ^a	(N = 8) 6% ^a	(N = 1) 1%	(N = 9) 3%
Start family sooner	(N = 1) 1% ^a	(N = 22) 6% ^{ab}	(N = 3) 4% ^b	(N = 26) 8%
Work-related regret				
Different career	(N = 32) 34% ^a	(N = 55) 41%	(N = 44) 52% ^a	(N = 131) 42%

Table 3 Key variables by Cohort

	Cohort		
	1951/52 N = 94	1972 N = 134	1992 N = 85
Current participation in paid labor force	(N = 36) 38%	(N = 114) 85%	(N = 76) 89%
Graduate degree	(N = 45) 48%	(N = 99) 74%	(N = 51) 60%
Ever married	(N = 92) 98%	(N = 121) 90%	(N = 24) 28%
Has children	(N = 88) 94%	(N = 110) 82%	(N = 10) 12%
Retired	(N = 19) 20%	(N = 0) 0%	(N = 0) 0%
Life satisfaction	4.83 (1.3)	4.97 (1.06) _a	4.60 (1.04) _b

The number of women in each cohort as well as the percentage are given for each demographic

Means (and Standard Deviations) are given for life satisfaction; the response range for this measure are 1(*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Significant results of ANOVA analyses are indicated by subscript (a, b) to denote group differences at $p \leq .05$

almost nothing” was removed from this scale because of its conceptual overlap with the independent variable (i.e., regret). For the 5-item scale, Diener and colleagues have demonstrated high internal consistency ($\alpha = .87$) as well as high test-retest reliability (.82), and several studies have found moderate relationships between the measure and the Beck Depression Inventory (Beck et al. 1961; Pavot and Diener 2008). In the current study, the modified 4-item version of the Satisfaction with Life scale also exhibited high internal consistency for each cohort: class of 1951/2 $\alpha = .93$; class of 1972 $\alpha = .89$; class of 1992 $\alpha = .87$. Descriptive statistics for each cohort are displayed in Table 3; there was a significant difference between the middle cohort (1972) and the youngest cohort (1992).

Results

Prior to conducting any analyses, we found that the three cohorts significantly differed in terms of completion of graduate education, $\chi^2(6, N = 308) = 61.74, p < .001, \phi = .45$. In addition, education was significantly related to the number of types of regrets, $\chi^2(12, N = 308) = 27.11, p < .01, \phi = .30$. Therefore we needed to control for graduate education completion when testing hypotheses involving these variables.

Initial ANOVA analyses (which can be used with count data [Cohen 2001, see p.343 and p.348]) also indicated a significant difference in the total number of regrets reported among the three cohorts, $F(5,308) = 2.21, p = .05$. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicate that the women of the oldest cohort ($M = 1.07, SD = .82$) and the middle cohort ($M = 1.14, SD = .76$) were not significantly different from one another in the number of regrets reported; however,

the middle cohort reported significantly more types of regrets than did the youngest cohort ($M = .81, SD = .75$).

Regret and Life Satisfaction

To test the first hypothesis that life satisfaction is negatively related to the number of life regret types, we used multiple regression, with cohort and types of regrets as the predictors and life satisfaction as the outcome (Table 4). Regression analyses confirmed our prediction that the negative relationship between number of types of regrets and life satisfaction was significantly different by cohort, β for the interaction = .24, $p < .05$. Simple slopes calculations showed that, as predicted, the middle and oldest cohorts did not differ, $t = .12, p > .05$, but there was a significant difference in this relationship for the middle cohort (1972) compared to the youngest cohort (1992), $t = 2.11, p < .05$. Figure 1 graphs the relationship between regret and life satisfaction for each cohort; the similarity in the slope for the two older cohorts is obvious, as is the difference from the youngest cohort.

Type of Regret by Cohort

Chi-square analyses were used to gauge the overall relationship between cohort and regrets about either prioritizing a family or prioritizing career, among those women who reported regrets of either kind. The majority of women who reported regrets reported them about prioritizing family, $\chi^2(4, N = 164) = 20.80$. More specifically, 98% ($N = 56$) of the women in the oldest cohort, 68% ($N = 56$) of the women in the middle cohort, and 83% ($N = 20$) of the women in the youngest cohort who experienced family and/or career regrets experienced regret(s) solely about prioritizing family.

In order to test the second set of hypotheses—that regret type varies by cohort—chi-square analyses were conducted to gain a sense of the overall pattern in each case. To control for completed graduate education (which differed by cohort), we conducted a series of exact

Table 4 Regression analyses predicting life satisfaction from cohort and number of regrets

Variable	Life Satisfaction		
	B	β	95% CI
Cohort	-.12	-.08	[-.28, .05]
Number of Regrets	-.26**	-.18**	[-.42, -.10]
Cohort x Number of Regrets	.23**	.12*	[.03, .44]
R^2	.06		
F	6.06**		

N=312. CI=confidence interval

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

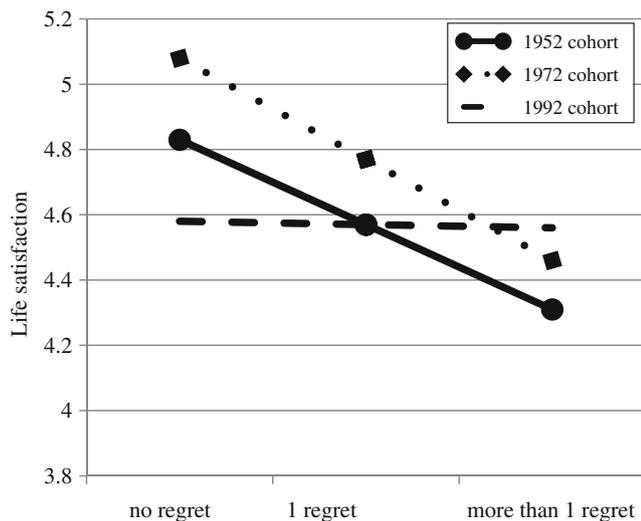


Fig. 1 Life satisfaction by cohort and number of regrets

logistic regressions, used when a dependent variable is categorical (Agresti 2002), as the presence-absence regret categories are. These analyses were conducted using SAS 9.1. Cohort (as a 3-level variable) was modeled to predict the presence of each type of regret and education level was controlled.

Prioritizing Family

We predicted that women of the 1951/2 cohort would be more likely to report regrets about prioritizing family than will women of the later cohorts, and that women of the 1992 cohort would be least likely to do so. To test this prediction, we used both chi-square and logistic regression analyses (as outlined above).

In general, the oldest cohort was more likely to express regrets about prioritizing family than either of the other two cohorts, $\chi^2(2, N = 313) = 11.33, p < .01, \phi = .20$. This result showed a linear relationship across cohorts, meaning that as predicted, the women from the youngest cohort were also less likely to report these regrets than the women from the middle cohort. Table 2 depicts the frequency of each of these regrets by cohort as well as the overall combined frequency.

In particular, from the exact logistic regression analyses, the older two cohorts reported social constraints limiting career and education opportunities more frequently than the youngest cohort. That is, in comparison to the youngest cohort, the oldest cohort was 2.4 (95% CI: 1.2, 4.8, $p \leq .01$) times more likely and the middle cohort was 2.0 (95% CI: 1.0, 3.9, $p \leq .05$) times more likely to report social constraints that produced regrets.

Both the oldest and middle cohorts were more likely than the youngest cohort to have regrets about limited careers. More specifically, in comparison to the youngest cohort, the

oldest cohort was 27.9 (95% CI: 3.7, 1,000.0, $p \leq .0001$) times more likely, and the middle cohort was 17.3 (95% CI: 2.3, 825.2, $p \leq .001$) times more likely to report regrets related to feeling that their career was in some way limited.

The oldest cohort was more likely than the younger two cohorts to report regrets related to not waiting longer to start a family. Namely, the middle cohort was one fifth (95% CI: .0, .9, $p \leq .05$) as likely and the youngest cohort was one tenth (95% CI: 0, .6, $p \leq .01$) as likely as the oldest cohort to report they wished they had started a family later.

Prioritizing Career

We predicted that women of the 1972 cohort would be more likely to report regrets about prioritizing a career than women of either of the other cohorts, and the same sequence of chi-square and logistic regression used to test predictions concerning the prioritizing of family was used to test predictions concerning the prioritizing of career. In general, our hypothesis was supported: the middle cohort reported more regrets about prioritizing career than the other two cohorts (though no cohort reported these regrets very much), $\chi^2(2, N = 313) = 20.60, p < .001, \phi = .26$. The frequency of these regrets by cohort is also illustrated in Table 2.

The results of the logistic regression show that, in comparison to the oldest cohort, the middle cohort reported more regrets about pursuing their career too aggressively. More specifically, the middle cohort was 10.2 (95% CI: 1.5, infinity, $p \leq .05$) times more likely than the oldest cohort to report that they had pursued their career too aggressively.

Finally, as expected, the middle cohort was the most likely of the three cohorts to report regret about not starting a family sooner. That is, the middle cohort was 18.2 (95% CI: 2.8, 766.5, $p \leq .001$) times more likely than the oldest cohort and 5.1 (95% CI: 1.4, 28.5, $p \leq .005$) times more likely than the youngest cohort to report regrets about not starting a family sooner.

Work-related Regret

Our final hypothesis, that the youngest cohort of women would be more likely to report regrets about specific career or work choices they had made, was confirmed. Logistic regressions showed that the youngest cohort was twice (i.e., 2.2; 95% CI: 1.1, 4.3, $p \leq .05$) as likely as the oldest cohort to report regrets about passing up possibilities of pursuing different careers.

Discussion

We found evidence to support our hypotheses that regret content is associated with cohort, or the timing of social

historical events in individuals' life courses; and that number of regrets is negatively associated with life satisfaction for women in the older and middle cohorts but not for women in the youngest cohort. More specifically, we found that women in the oldest cohort (the 1951/2 cohort), who were mature adults during the Women's Movement, were more likely to report regrets related to prioritizing family than were women who came of age or were children during the Women's Movement (the 1972 and 1992 cohorts, respectively). Further, women in the middle cohort, who came of age during the Women's Movement, reported more regrets about prioritizing career than those born either 20 years earlier or 20 years later.

Regret Type by Cohort

We expected that the content of these women's regrets was connected in meaningful ways to their cohort, or the intersection of their life course with social history (Stewart and Healy 1989). Women who were mature adults during the Movement (i.e., the oldest cohort in the present study) were reared with the explicit expectation that they be first a wife and mother, and only after committing to this identity were they exposed to alternative possibilities for education and career offered through the Movement. For that reason, we expected them to experience relatively high levels of regret about prioritizing family, and low levels of regrets about prioritizing career. Because the middle cohort came of age during the Movement, they were more likely to view as attainable the educational and career opportunities the Movement made available. However, since these women were still influenced by the postwar feminine mystique as children, and many felt pressured to "have it all" (a career and family) but did not have the supporting social structures, we expected them to experience relatively higher levels of regrets about both prioritizing family and career. Finally, we expected the cohort whose fundamental expectations about the world were shaped by the Women's Movement—the youngest cohort—to report relatively *low* levels of both types of regret. These expectations were borne out.

Prioritizing Family

In general, regrets about prioritizing family followed the hypothesized pattern. That is, they were most prevalent in the oldest cohort and least prevalent in the youngest. However, we also note the lack of differentiation between the oldest and middle cohorts: of the three categories assessed, the oldest cohort reported more regrets than the middle cohort in only one category (i.e., wishing they had started a family later), perhaps signaling that the pervasive social expectation for women to prioritize a family over all else

was not easily displaced by the opportunities opened up by the Women's Movement.

Nearly half of the women in the oldest and middle cohorts reported experiencing social constraints on educational or career opportunities whereas only one quarter of the youngest cohort reported these regrets (this difference was statistically significant). It is interesting that although 92% of the youngest cohort was currently employed at the time of data collection, one quarter still expressed regrets about constraints on their opportunities. Thus, none of the cohorts in the current study reported feeling immune from social constraint, which was illustrated in comments such as "the University discouraged female candidates," "no available childcare," "husband's frequent transfers kept me from a career".

A slightly different pattern emerged for regrets about experiencing limitations on pursuing a career outside their home. Although just over one fifth of the oldest cohort, and one tenth of the middle cohort reported regrets related to a limited career outside the home, only one of the 85 women in the youngest cohort reported this regret. Hence, both of the older cohorts experienced significantly more regrets about experiencing limitations on their career (such as working part-time instead of full-time) than did the youngest cohort, and there was no statistical difference between the older two cohorts.

Regrets about starting a family too soon were expressed by the cohorts mostly as anticipated. One tenth of women in the oldest cohort reported wishing they had started a family later—significantly more than the number of women in either of the other cohorts, supporting our expectation that this cohort was under the most intense pressure (associated with the post-war baby boom) to marry and raise children. While only a minority of this cohort, it is also likely that the average age at which they actually had their first child was significantly younger than for the other cohorts.

Prioritizing Career

Taking advantage of the opportunities offered through the Women's Movement enabled the middle cohort of women to pursue their career goals. As expected, relative to the other cohorts, more women in the middle cohort experienced regret about pursuing their career too aggressively and about not starting a family sooner. For women in this cohort, combining career and family was often a sequential rather than a simultaneous project, and it is regret about putting career first that characterizes a few women in this cohort but very few in the oldest or youngest cohorts.

In particular, women from the middle cohort were more likely than women from the oldest cohort to report regrets about pursuing their career too aggressively. They were also more likely than either of the other two cohorts to state that they could have started a family sooner. Further examination

of the responses of those who regretted not starting a family sooner reveals that 4.5%, or only one of the women, reported issues with infertility whereas 41% did not have a child. Thus it appears that though these women had more opportunities to pursue their vocational interests than women from previous cohorts, they faced difficult choices. Many likely felt compelled to prove their abilities and legitimacy in ways men did not (Acker 1990; Ehrenreich and English 1989; Reskin 1993; Ridgeway 1997), and this could easily lead to later regrets about pursuing a career too aggressively. This, added to a lack of social supports, would make it difficult to simultaneously raise a family while pursuing a career, and again, lead to regrets down the road about waiting too long to start a family.

However, surprisingly few women from any cohort reported regrets about prioritizing their career. For instance, although 85% of the 1972 (or middle) cohort participated in the paid labor force, only 22% of them reported regrets about prioritizing their career. These results indicate that despite the Women's Movement, and their participation in the paid labor force, relatively few of these women felt they had placed too great an emphasis on their career. Women still continued to have families as they had done prior to the Women's Movement; however the Movement enabled them to also pursue and enjoy life-long careers. In the face of media attention to the small number of women who did experience this new freedom as negative, our data suggest that most college-educated women experienced the freedom to pursue education and career associated with the women's movement as positive, even many years later.

In contrast, the majority of women in this study experienced regrets about prioritizing their family. More specifically, within each cohort, women were more likely to express family rather than career regrets. Future research could specifically assess the manner in which women of different cohorts prioritize their career versus family. Such research could also assess whether prioritizing one's career has become a more common regret for women reared in a post-Women's Movement environment.

Work-related Regret

Based on our assumption that only the youngest cohort would have experienced the labor market as offering a wide range of different alternatives, we predicted that this cohort would report regrets about the specific work or career choices they had made (one over another, rather than pitting career against family). As predicted, we found that regret concerning particular type of career was more common for the youngest cohort (a little over half of them reported it) than for the oldest cohort (just over a third). Revisiting the overall pattern of the youngest women's responses revealed that: 1) it was not always clear why these women did not

pursue this different career, and 2) when their reason was clear, it was not related to prioritizing family or career (e.g., "at the time I believed I wanted more than anything else to teach history").

Additionally, a qualitative difference between the oldest and youngest cohort emerged from the data. For instance, a woman from the oldest cohort described how she did not accept a promotion because her "husband had a good position, thus [she] did not want to force a move." In stark contrast, a woman from the 1992 cohort discussed how her own personal choices factored into her decision to pursue a career in psychology instead of as a professor of English. Elsewhere, she explained her reasoning behind her decision to break up with a man she had dated for several years and expected to marry, further clarifying that the presence of a husband (or even a potential one) did not [and perhaps would not] influence her career path:

My boyfriend (and just about everyone else I know) expected that I would make an extremely unsatisfying move in my career, because it would have been better for his career. However, I could never be satisfied being just wife and mother (no matter how much I liked those roles), and I was unwilling to sacrifice the career that I had wanted for so long just because 1. I was a woman and 2. I would not make as much money in my career as he would in his.

For many women in the youngest cohort, it seems reasonable that this regret was not related to prioritizing career over family or vice versa, but simply about finding the 'right' career. Thus, women reared after the Women's Movement felt they had many career choices, and though they may not have yet found their occupational 'true calling,' are still in a position to make necessary changes in their lives. In this sense at least some of their regrets may help motivate life changes rather than being reflections on irreversible past decisions that were based on prioritizing a husband's and children's needs before one's own.

Regret, Life Satisfaction, and Age

Although theory and evidence suggest that life regrets correspond to lower life satisfaction and that development affects the way in which people manage their regrets (Erikson, et al. 1986; Lecci, et al. 1994; Torges, et al. 2008; Wrosch et al. 2005; Wrosch and Heckhausen 2002), little is known about how the relationship between regret and life satisfaction varies across adulthood. The current study of female college graduates supports Lecci et al.'s (1994) finding that the life satisfaction of women in older adulthood corresponds negatively with the number of life regrets they report. In addition, we also assessed this relationship for young and middle-aged women. As expected, the relationship was not significant for women in

the youngest cohort, but it was for the middle cohort. These findings corroborate Lecci et al.'s (1994) findings, despite a considerable difference in methodology used to assess number of regrets. Lecci et al. only assessed regrets of commission by asking participants to list goals they “wished they had pursued, but never did” whereas participants in the current study were prompted to consider both regrets of commission and omission with multiple questions (e.g., “If you had it to do over again, would you choose the same lifestyle pattern - with respect to your home versus career decision(s)?”).

Thus this study fits with existing - although limited - evidence that regret and its correlates should be understood in a developmental context. We suspect that the findings of a relationship between regret and life satisfaction for middle and older cohorts reflects the fact that women in these life stages perceive that their available resources could not change these regrets (Heckhausen and Schulz 1995; Rothermund and Brandstätter 2003; Wrosch and Heckhausen 2002; Wrosch et al. 2005). Women in young adulthood presumably view their regrets as related to temporary conditions that are both under their control and likely to change. Therefore, instead of eliciting dissatisfaction or lowering their satisfaction with life, acknowledging regret may serve as a motivator, or impetus for future behavior and goals. In contrast, acknowledging such regrets in middle and older age generates feelings of life dissatisfaction. Presumably at this point in life, people feel they should have already made such changes and feel they have relatively few resources to address their regrets.

Though regrets in middle age have not been extensively studied, previous research suggests that women who have not made lifestyle changes to address their regrets by their late forties experience lower levels of well-being as well as life satisfaction (Stewart and Vandewater 1999), as the current study's findings support. Thus it appears that somewhere between early and middle adulthood, women begin to perceive that it is unlikely that they will be able to make changes in their lives that will address their regrets. Future research needs to confirm that this perception of resources is indeed the key factor that links life regrets and well-being. Moreover, all of our findings relate to life regrets, which are not the only important regrets that adults experience. Regrets about particular actions in relationships, for example, may have different implications for well-being.

Future Research

The current study relies on a cross-sectional dataset. Hence, we cannot be assured that developmental stage is the cause of differences in the regret-well-being relationship, or that the difference in reported regret type is caused by the impact of social events and not age or stage of life. For instance, it is possible that the youngest cohort will never evidence an association between their number of regrets and life

satisfaction (i.e., in middle and older age) or that life satisfaction is driving the number of regrets these women reported instead of the other way around. In line with existing theory and prior studies (Brandstätter 1999; Erikson 1963; 1980; Erikson et al. 1986; Heckhausen and Schulz 1995; Lecci, et al. 1994; Rothermund and Brandstätter 2003; Wrosch et al. 2005), we suspect that the differences in life satisfaction reported here are driven by developmental changes and not cohort differences, but of course additional research is required to substantiate this. We also suspect that the difference in content, particularly between the oldest two cohorts, is driven by cohort and does not reflect developmental differences; it is difficult to construct a developmental explanation for why women would peak in experiencing regrets about prioritizing career in midlife and then peak in regrets about prioritizing family in late adulthood. However, following these and other cohorts over time would be useful in teasing apart cohort effects from developmental change, since only cohort-sequential research can actually do that (Miller 2007; Schaie 2008; Schaie et al. 2005).

Other considerations—such as culture or socioeconomic status—may influence what people regret. Moreover, a similar analysis of men could also help to distill the effects of age and cohort on regret. Thus, within the United States, it would be informative to study the regrets of both women and men with less education, fewer economic resources, and from different racial-ethnic groups.

Conclusion

In the current study, we found evidence to support the idea that the relationship between regret and life satisfaction varies across adulthood and that for college-educated, predominately white American women, cohort membership is associated with different regrets about life choices. However, this study only provides a first step in understanding these issues. Additional longitudinal research needs to be conducted with more diverse groups of women within and beyond the U.S.

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