

*Psychological Well-Being across Three Cohorts:
A Response to Shifting Work–Family
Opportunities and Expectations?*

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The life course of women—and men, to a lesser degree—has undergone considerable transformation in the past four decades. The occupational and educational opportunities available to women and men have expanded drastically, with each cohort of young adults completing more years of school than their parents did (Bell 1973; Bianchi and Spain 1996; Meyer et al. 1977). At the same time, norms and expectations guiding appropriate gender-role behavior in the home and work place have undergone a “subtle revolution” (Gerson 1985, 1993). Men and women raised in the 1940s and 1950s could look forward to holding clearly demarcated gender roles in adulthood; married men would serve as the primary breadwinner and leave childrearing responsibilities to their wives, who would typically exit the labor force all together when their children were young (Baruch, Barnett, and Rivers 1983; Bernard 1981; Coontz 1992). In contrast, women and men who came of age in the late 1960s and beyond faced an entirely new set of expectations for appropriate work and family roles. Although men of the baby boom and baby bust cohorts are still expected to fulfill the traditional role of breadwinner, they are also expected to be involved fathers who play a larger role in childrearing and housekeeping tasks than their own fathers did (Gerson 1993; Hochschild 1989; Kaufman and Uhlenberg 2000; Wilkie 1993). Women, too, are now expected to maintain a household and care for their children as their mothers did but also to fulfill their career potential by working for pay outside the home.

These recent changes in structural opportunities and normative expectations raise an interesting puzzle for research on psychological well-being in different birth cohorts. On one hand, expanded opportunities for higher education and autonomous, white-collar work over the past four decades may have created a context in which younger cohorts have better psychological health than their parents did, given the widely documented linkages between socioeconomic status, broadly defined, and psychological well-being (e.g., Rosenberg and Pearlin 1978; Kessler and

Cleary 1980; Ross and Mirowsky 2002). Yet cultural changes that promote “having it all” among younger cohorts, that is, achieving a balance between fulfilling professional lives and involved family lives, may lead to decrements in psychological well-being across recent cohorts, as men and women strive to fulfill this lofty and potentially elusive expectation.

Using data from MIDUS, I answer three questions in this chapter: (1) Do the baby bust, baby boom, and silent generation cohorts differ in terms of their psychological well-being? (2) To what extent do these cohort differences reflect historical shifts in access to important structural opportunities, such as higher education and rewarding employment? and (3) Do work and family roles affect psychological well-being differently for the three cohorts, reflecting cultural shifts in the meaning, desirability, and importance of these roles? The cohorts considered are the silent generation, born between 1931 and 1943 (ages 52–64); the baby boom cohort, born between 1944 and 1959 (ages 37–52); and the baby bust cohort, born between 1960 and 1970 (ages 25–36). These research questions have important implications for understanding psychological well-being during a period of marked social change, when opportunities and expectations for fulfilling one’s work and family roles may be in flux.

Cohort Influences on Personal Experiences

A birth cohort is a group of individuals born at the same point in history and who “experience the same event within the same time interval” (Ryder 1965, 845). Given their shared age at a given point in history, members of a birth cohort also may face similar opportunities and constraints as they pass through the life course. For example, levels of educational attainment have risen steadily across recent birth cohorts, the result of expanding educational opportunities throughout the twentieth century (Meyer et al. 1977). Cohort shifts in educational opportunities are particularly pronounced for women. Although women earned approximately one-third of all college degrees in the early 1950s, they earned more than half (55 percent) by the 1990s (U.S. National Center for Educational Statistics 1995).

The transformation of the U.S. economy from a manufacturing to a postindustrial or service-based economy over the past fifty years also has presented the baby bust, baby boom, and pre–World War II cohorts with very different occupational opportunities and trajectories (Bell 1973). Men born in the 1930s and early 1940s entered the labor force during the postwar years, when the U.S. economy was prospering. Even men with

relatively limited education were able to secure stable and reasonably well-paying jobs in the manufacturing sector. In contrast, members of the large baby boom cohort, born between 1944 and 1959, faced intense competition for well-paying jobs when they entered the labor market during the recession years of the early 1970s (Easterlin 1980; Levy 1998). Spells of recession and widespread unemployment again in the late 1970s and early 1980s, declining employment in the manufacturing sector, job growth in the service sector, a tripling in the number of corporate mergers and acquisitions between 1976 and 1986 (*Mergers and acquisitions* 1987, 216), and the glut of workers created by the baby boom (Easterlin 1980) have created a context in which the men of the baby bust cohort may have had less stable occupational prospects than did earlier cohorts (Dunn 1993; Levy 1998; Schrammel 1998).

The labor market prospects and experiences of women also have changed dramatically over the past fifty years. The proportion of women who work for pay has increased steadily, and this increase has been sharpest among mothers of young children. The proportion of mothers of preschool children working for pay increased from just 19 percent in 1960 to approximately 64 percent in 1995 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1996, 399). Thus, having young children does not constrain paid employment for young women today, as it did for their mothers in the 1950s and 1960s. Additionally, the gender gap in earnings has declined for recent cohorts. In 1994, women ages 20–24 earned approximately 95 cents for each dollar earned by men, whereas that proportion drops to approximately 80 cents for women ages 25–34, 73 cents for women ages 35–44, and 66 cents among women ages 55–64 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 1995).¹ Thus, for current cohorts of young women, paid employment is both a more common and more financially rewarding role than it was for earlier cohorts.

Changes in women's labor force participation are due, in part, to a rising demand for workers in the service sector. Women's employment patterns also reflect historical changes in family structure (Bianchi and Spain 1996; Goldin 1990). Fertility rates have dropped steadily in the United States since the mid-1960s, largely a result of increased availability of effective birth control, changing gender roles in the home and workplace, and the changing economic and social costs of children (Butz and Ward 1979; Easterlin 1980; Cherlin and Walters 1981). These new family formation patterns, in turn, have created a context in which current cohorts of young women spend fewer years bearing and rearing children than their mothers did; consequently, they may have greater access

to continuous employment and rewarding occupational opportunities (Watkins, Menken, and Bongaarts 1987).

Implications of Macrosocial Change for Psychological Well-Being

Macrolevel changes in family structure, educational attainment, and industrial shifts may have important implications for understanding cohort differences in two important dimensions of psychological well-being: environmental mastery and self-acceptance. Environmental mastery refers to the process of shaping one's social environment to reflect one's needs and personality, as well as to the ability to manage one's environment and daily affairs (Ryff 1989). A large body of research demonstrates that levels of perceived mastery and personal control are highest for persons with advanced education, higher incomes, and more intellectually challenging occupations. Education promotes the development of proactive problem-solving strategies, which in turn increases one's perceived mastery over the environment. Moreover, those with higher-status, well-paying occupations have greater economic resources for molding their environments to their tastes, and may face fewer unanticipated and uncontrollable life events that may threaten their sense of control (e.g., Kessler and Cleary 1980). Occupations that allow for self-directed, autonomous work (i.e., typically white-collar and managerial jobs) tend to promote autonomous and self-directed behavior in other life domains (Andrisani 1978; Bird and Ross 1993; Kohn 1969; Kohn and Schooler 1973; Mirowsky and Ross 1998; Pearlin et al. 1981; Ross and Mirowsky 2002; Wheaton 1980).

Self-acceptance is also positively related to one's social and economic resources. Self-acceptance is conceptually similar to self-esteem—one of the most widely examined aspects of psychological well-being (e.g., Rosenberg and Pearlin 1978). It refers to having positive attitudes toward oneself, acknowledging and accepting multiple aspects of one's self, and feeling positive about one's past accomplishments (Ryff 1989). Socioeconomic status is an important predictor of adult self-esteem for at least three reasons. Social class is a salient or identity-relevant trait for most adults; social class is typically achieved rather than ascribed (or inherited) among adults and is thus perceived as an indicator of one's ability and self-worth; and persons of lower social classes who compare themselves unfavorably to more successful peers may develop negative self-attitudes (Rosenberg and Pearlin 1978).

At first inspection, the changing life-course patterns of women and men over the past forty years would suggest that each successive cohort

should have higher levels of self-acceptance and mastery than did the previous cohort. Given the increases in educational attainment among recent cohorts (Meyer et al. 1977), and shifts in the economy whereby younger cohorts are more likely than prior cohorts to hold white-collar or professional occupations that offer opportunities for autonomous and self-directed work (Bell 1973; Levy 1998), one may conclude that baby bust men and women should have higher levels of mastery and self-esteem than baby boom men and women, who in turn would have higher levels of well-being than men and women born before World War II. Moreover, because historical changes in work and educational opportunities have been more drastic among women than men, the psychological benefits enjoyed by younger cohorts may be pronounced among women.

The psychological consequences of a role or status, such as education, one's job, or parental status, may not be so clear-cut, however, and may be contingent upon the meaning or importance the role holds for members of a birth cohort. Members of a birth cohort not only face similar structural opportunities and obstacles; they also may share a unique culture, or a "set of cognitive and evaluative beliefs about what is or what ought to be" (House 1981, 543). A cohort is most likely to develop a set of beliefs that are distinct from those of preceding cohorts during periods marked by rapid social changes, such as stark changes in gender roles in the home and workplace over the past forty years (Mannheim 1952, 291).

The baby bust, baby boom, and pre-World War II birth cohorts may hold very different standards for evaluating their successes, and thus their work and educational accomplishments may have very different consequences for their psychological well-being. For example, Inglehart (1977, 1985) proposed that in advanced industrial societies, cohorts born before World War II often grew up under conditions of poverty or scarcity, and consequently developed "materialist" concerns about economic and physical security. The baby boom and baby bust cohorts, born after World War II, grew up in conditions of relative affluence and found their material needs satisfied, and thus are believed to seek rewards such as self-expression rather than high pay, status, or job security in their work lives (Inglehart 1985). Consequently, the linkage between extrinsic work rewards, such as occupational status, may be more strongly linked to the psychological well-being of the older cohorts, for whom economic concerns were particularly salient.

Cohorts may also differ in their beliefs and expectations about appropriate gender roles in the home and workplace. Married women and men raised in the mid-1960s and earlier were socialized to exchange services

according to the traditional marriage contract, that is, women maintain the household and raise children, and men support the family financially (Bernard 1972, 1981). Women were socialized to believe that their families should take priority over their own careers and that they would exit the labor force completely when their children were young (Bernard 1972; Hartmann 1981; Hochschild 1989; Levant, Slattery, and Loisel 1987; Shelton and John 1993). In contrast, men and women of the baby boom and baby bust cohorts generally expect that both partners will participate in homemaking responsibilities and work for pay, even when their children are young (Bohannon and Blanton 1999; Moen, Erickson, and Dempster-McClain 1997; Morgan, Hayes, and Affleck 1989; Thornton 1989).

These generational differences in expectations about the way that work and family roles should mesh may have important implications for the psychological well-being of members of the silent generation, baby boom, and baby bust cohorts. The psychological consequences of having made a work–family trade-off (and of possible outcomes of those trade-offs, such as holding a lower-status occupation) may be heightened for baby bust and baby boom women. The baby boom cohort's formative years were punctuated by the women's rights movement; the passage of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which promised to remove official barriers to hiring and promotion of women and minorities; and the passage of the Equal Pay Act of 1963, which prohibited employers from paying women less than men for equivalent work (Reskin and Padavic 1994). These social movements and policies may have encouraged the baby boom and bust cohorts (especially their women members) to form idealized, although more difficult to attain, expectations about how their work and family lives should unfold. Interviews with young women growing up in the 1970s and 1980s revealed that their expectations for occupational opportunities were identical to those of their male peers, and that they believed parenthood and household tasks should impinge equally on husbands and wives (Hesse-Biber and Carter 2000, xiii–xv; Sidel 1990). Consequently, despite the higher absolute levels of educational attainment and the higher-status occupations generally enjoyed by the younger cohorts of women, they may suffer poorer psychological well-being than older women if their work and family lives do not match the expectations formed earlier in life.

For men, as well, the implications for psychological well-being of blending work and family roles (and the socioeconomic consequences thereof) may vary across the birth cohorts. As noted earlier, men who

were raised in the 1930s and 1940s, and who entered the labor market and formed families in the 1950s, were expected to provide economically for their families; any activity that reduced a man's earnings potential—for example, cutting back on his work hours to care for children—may have chipped away at an important source of his self-worth (Baruch, Barnett, and Rivers 1983). For younger generations of men, however, successfully combining the roles of involved parent and breadwinner may bolster psychological well-being. Because baby bust and baby boom men are more likely than their fathers to have wives who work for pay, the pressure of fulfilling the breadwinner role is less acute than it was for earlier generations of men (Bianchi and Spain 1996). Moreover, because of changing expectations regarding male gender roles, men who limit their labor force participation in order to play a greater role in family responsibilities may actually view themselves more favorably for complying with prevailing norms (Gerson 1993; Kimmel 1996; Levant and Kopecky 1995; Pleck 1974).

Do Psychological Consequences of Social Roles Differ by Age?

Thus far, the MIDUS participants have been characterized as members of three distinctive birth cohorts, each of which faced unique historical, economic, and normative contexts as they came of age, entered the labor force, and developed strategies for balancing their work and family responsibilities. Yet these three cohorts also represent three distinct stages in the life course; members of a birth cohort are at the same maturational stage or chronological age at a given point in time. The age at which an individual experiences a given event or holds a certain role also may condition its psychological consequences.

Age stratification theory (Riley 1996) suggests that age is an important basis for ascribing status or social roles. For example, work lives are loosely structured by age. In the first stage, young adults explore different employment opportunities. The second stage, occurring at young adulthood through midlife, involves the selection of an occupation and the establishment of a stable career. An assumption is that individuals should have more challenging work, higher status, and more income as they progress through the life course, with this upward trajectory leveling off at about age 50 for white-collar workers and slightly younger for blue-collar workers (Featherman and Hauser 1978; Spilerman 1977). Although younger workers typically anticipate upward occupational mobility in the future, midlife individuals may come to terms with their past work accomplishments and in some cases may abandon hopes of further

promotions. Older adults begin a deceleration or “disengagement” that prepares them for retirement (Super 1957).

The extent to which one’s occupational pursuits are constrained by family roles also varies over the life course (although these constraints are more pronounced for women than men at every point in the life course). Young adults generally enter into a permanent union, bear children, and care for young children; thus family responsibilities tend to place the greatest constraints on their work life at this stage in the life course. The time and labor intensiveness of family demands generally diminish over the life course, yet challenges exist even for midlife and later-life adults. Midlife adults are believed to be caught between the competing demands imposed by young adult children and aging parents. Older adults often must tend to sick or aging spouses, parents, siblings, and peers (Cowan 1991; Rexroat and Shehan 1987). Thus, both work–family strategies and work rewards, such as occupational status, may have different effects on psychological well-being at different stages of the life course.

Age group/cohort differences in psychological well-being may reflect developmental, role-related, or historical differences in the experience of individuals. Because the MIDUS is a cross-sectional data set, it is not possible to ascertain whether the patterns evidenced in the data are attributable to age or cohort effects. However, in the findings and discussion sections, both sets of explanations are considered.

Strengths of the MIDUS

Despite the limitation of being a cross-sectional survey, the MIDUS data are ideally suited for examining cohort differences in psychological well-being. The MIDUS includes data on a full age range—men and women ages 25–74 in 1995—so it is possible to investigate differences between three cohorts exposed to very different opportunities, obstacles, and normative contexts over the life course. Few data sets obtain information on both the baby bust cohort and those men and women born before World War II. The baby bust cohort is the first to come of age in an era in which women and men have educational equity, and this cohort is more likely than other generations to have had two working parents. Their experiences may provide an important comparison when examining the effects of macrosocial conditions on three generations of adults.

The MIDUS is also particularly well suited to exploring work–family strategies and their implications for psychological well-being. The data set is unique in that it measures whether one has *ever* adjusted one’s

work life to accommodate family responsibilities. If only current work–family strategies were evaluated, we would not have a complete picture of the work and family lives of the older adults who have completed their childrearing years. Moreover, information on work–family trade-off histories allows for a new perspective on an old sociological question: How do competing work and family roles affect psychological well-being? Most research on the work–family interface is guided by the assumption that combinations of work and family duties impact mental health in one of two ways. Role strain theory holds that multiple roles are stressful in the short term and may impair psychological well-being because competing work and family demands outstrip an individual’s abilities and resources for juggling these demands (Verbrugge 1986). The alternate hypothesis, the role enhancement hypothesis, suggests that multiple roles contribute to greater psychological well-being because shortcomings in one domain are offset by benefits achieved in other life domains. Multiple roles also provide multiple sources of meaning and access to more sources of social support (Sieber 1974; Thoits 1983).

Neither of these perspectives considers the longer-term view—that the strategies one takes to manage competing roles in the short term may have important longer-term consequences for psychological well-being. Men and women who adjust their work lives to accommodate childrearing demands end up diminishing their earnings and prospects for occupational mobility (Mincer and Polachek 1974; Goldin 1990). Given the widely documented linkages between socioeconomic status and psychological well-being, it is possible that work–family trade-offs are a critical explanatory pathway that has previously been overlooked.

DATA AND METHODS

Analyses are based on the 2445 adults (1308 men and 1137 women), aged 25–64, who completed both the telephone survey and the self-administered questionnaire of MIDUS, and who are currently employed.

Dependent Variables

Two dependent variables are considered: self-acceptance and environmental mastery. These two dimensions of well-being are among the six subscales of the Ryff (1989) psychological well-being scale, which also encompasses autonomy, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and personal growth (Ryff and Keyes 1995). Respondents indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with three self-descriptive statements for each subscale. Response categories are based on a seven-point

Likert scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Sub-scale scores range from 1 to 7, on the basis of one’s average response across the three items. Self-acceptance and environmental mastery were selected as outcomes because of their widely documented linkages to social structural characteristics, including occupational status, educational attainment, family roles, and gender (e.g., Rosenberg and Pearlin 1978; Ross and Mirowsky 2002).

Self-acceptance ($\alpha = .62$) is assessed with three items: (1) I like most parts of my personality; (2) When I look at the story of my life, I am pleased with how things have turned out so far; and (3) In many ways I feel disappointed about my achievements in life (reverse-coded). *Environmental mastery* ($\alpha = .58$) is measured by participants’ response to three statements: (1) The demands of everyday life often get me down (reverse-coded); (2) In general, I feel I am in charge of the situation in which I live; and (3) I am good at managing the responsibilities of daily life.

Independent Variables

The main objective of this research is to explore cohort differences in psychological well-being. Three cohorts are considered: *older adults*, born between 1931 and 1943 (ages 52–64); *baby boom cohort/midlife adults*, born between 1944 and 1959 (ages 37–51); and *baby bust cohort/young adults*, born between 1960 and 1970 (ages 36 and younger). Although these categories differ slightly from those typically used in demographic research (persons born between 1960 and 1964 are often referred to as “late baby boomers” rather than as members of the baby bust cohort), each of these three cohorts faced distinct opportunities in terms of work, education, and gender-role expectations as they matured (Baruch, Barnett, and Rivers 1983; Coontz 1992).² Each category also represents a distinct stage in an individual’s work and family life course (Hagestad 1990; Settersten and Hagestad 1996).

OCCUPATION. Occupational status is assessed with the Stevens–Featherman (1981) TSEI scale, a widely used indicator of occupational ranking, based on occupation-specific education and income data from male and female job holders in the 1980 U.S. Census. This scale is an updated version of the Duncan socioeconomic index. Lower scores represent lower-status occupations such as domestic servant, and the highest scores represent prestigious and well-paying occupations such as physician and lawyer.

HUMAN CAPITAL CHARACTERISTICS. Access to rewarding work opportunities is affected by human capital characteristics, including

educational attainment, *total years of work experience*, and the number of hours worked per week, that is, *full- or part-time status*. *Educational attainment* is coded into four categories: less than 12 years, 12 years (reference group), 13–15 years, and 16 or more years of schooling. *Total years of work experience* is the total number of years a respondent has worked for pay, including both part- and full-time work. *Full/part-time status* is a dummy variable set equal to 1 if an individual works at least thirty-five hours per week, in the average week, on his/her main job. (The reference group is those working fewer than thirty-five hours per week.)

CURRENT FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS. Current family characteristics include *marital status* and *number of children*. Marital status is captured with two dummy variables: *currently married* and *formerly married* (i.e., widowed, divorced, or separated). The reference group is *never married*. In preliminary analyses, I considered using two separate indicators for married persons, to denote those persons married to employed spouses and those married to non-employed spouses. The two coefficients did not differ significantly from one another, and thus the single indicator is used. Number of children (including biological, adopted, and step-children) is indicated with two dummy variables: one signifies persons with *no children*; the other signifies persons with *three or more children*. The reference group refers to those with one or two children only.

WORK–FAMILY TRADE-OFFS. The extent to which family and childrearing demands impinge on men’s and women’s work lives is captured with the following questions: “We are interested in how having children may have changed your work situation. Which of the following changes did you make because you were living with children? Did you: (1) stop working at a job to stay home and care for the children; (2) cut back on the number of hours worked at a job to care for the children; (3) switch to a different job that was less demanding or more flexible to be available to the children?” A dummy variable is set equal to 1 if a respondent reports *any* of the three behaviors.³

CONTROL VARIABLES. Race and adolescent health status are controlled in all analyses.⁴ Early physical and mental health are controlled in order to address the possibility that one’s educational and occupational prospects may have been impeded by early life health problems—which may also affect adult psychological well-being (see Dohrenwend, Levav, and Shrout 1992 for a review). Respondents were asked: “Think about when you were 16 years old. Was your [physical] and [mental] health at

that time poor, fair, good, very good, or excellent?" For each question, responses of fair or poor are coded as 1; the reference group includes responses of good, very good, or excellent. *Race* is a dummy variable equal to 1 for those who indicate that they are not white (i.e., African American, Asian, or Native American).⁵ Racial minorities account for a larger proportion of the baby bust cohort than older cohorts (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1996) and also tend to be disadvantaged in terms of occupational and educational attainment (see Hacker 1992). Descriptive statistics for all variables, by age/cohort and sex, are presented in table 1.

MISSING DATA. The sample mean value is imputed to item-specific missing data on continuous variables, and the median value is imputed for dichotomous variables. Dummy variables are constructed to indicate item-specific missing data and are included in all models.

Methodology

Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models are used. Preliminary analyses using gender-interaction terms indicate the independent variables that have significantly different effects ($p \leq .05$) on men's and women's psychological well-being. Sex-specific models are presented in tables 2–4, and significant gender differences in coefficients are noted with superscripts.

FINDINGS

Bivariate Analyses

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics by birth cohort and gender. Two-tailed *t*-tests were conducted to evaluate significant differences in means (1) by cohort, for men and women, and (2) by sex, within each cohort. The older adults (b. 1931–43) comprise the reference group for the cohort comparisons. The bivariate analyses reveal significant differences in psychological well-being and educational, work, and family experiences across the cohorts, especially for women.

No single birth cohort has a clear advantage in terms of psychological well-being. Rather, the oldest adults fare best in terms of environmental mastery, while the baby bust cohort reports the highest levels of self-acceptance. Among both women and men, self-acceptance levels are significantly higher for each successive generation. In contrast, the oldest cohort fares significantly better than the younger two cohorts in terms of environmental mastery; the scores of the older women and men are approximately .2 higher than the scores of the baby bust

TABLE 1 Descriptive Statistics, by Gender and Age

| Variables | Men (<i>N</i> = 1308) | | |
|---|---------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| | Age 52–64 (b. 1931–43) | Age 37–51 (b. 1944–59) | Age 25–36 (b. 1960–70) |
| Dependent variables | 5.41 | 5.64* | 5.69** |
| Self-acceptance | (1.36) | (1.16) | (1.14) |
| Environmental mastery | 5.57 (1.17) | 5.41 ⁺ (1.17) | 5.42 ⁺ (1.08) |
| Independent variables | | | |
| Occupational status, current/last job | 40.97 (13.64) | 43.04* (14.01) | 41.92 (14.93) |
| Human capital | 0.095 | .043*** | .057 ⁺ |
| <12 years | (.293) | (.203) | (.232) |
| 13–15 years | 0.233 (.423) | .297* (.457) | .302* (.460) |
| 16 years + | 0.167 (.374) | .216 ⁺ (.412) | .277*** (.448) |
| Total years work experience | 39.67 (10.41) | 26.39*** (9.69) | 14.27*** (10.85) |
| Full-time worker, current/last job | 0.826 (.380) | .919*** (.273) | .923*** (.266) |
| Current family characteristics | | | |
| Currently married | 0.796 (.403) | .741 ⁺ (.438) | .602*** (.490) |
| Formerly married | 0.178 (.383) | 0.167 (.373) | .111* (.315) |
| Has no children | 0.073 (.260) | .149*** (.357) | .473*** (.500) |
| Has 3 or more children | 0.571 (.496) | .381*** (.486) | .134*** (.341) |
| Has made at least one work–family trade-off | 0.087 (.283) | .162*** (.369) | .139*** (.346) |
| <i>N</i> | 275 | 629 | 404 |

Notes: Two-tailed *t*-tests were conducted to assess within-gender cohort differences (significant differences denoted with superscripts) and within-cohort gender differences (significant differences denoted by asterisks). The 1931–43 cohort is the reference group, where ⁺*p* ≤ .10; **p* ≤ .05; ***p* ≤ .01; ****p* ≤ .001. For the within-cohort gender difference analysis, ^adenotes a gender difference among older adults, ^bdenotes a gender difference among baby boomers, ^cdenotes a gender difference among baby bust cohort. Only gender differences significant at *p* ≤ .05 are noted.

and baby boom cohorts. Interestingly, the gender gap in environmental mastery appears to converge with age. Baby boom and baby bust men have significantly higher scores than their female peers, yet the oldest men and women do not differ significantly from one another. This gender convergence may reflect the fact that the demands of balancing work

Group/Cohort, of Men and Women of the MIDUS

| Women (N = 1137) | | |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Age 52–64 (b. 1931–43) | Age 37–51 (b. 1944–59) | Age 25–36 (b. 1960–70) |
| 5.46 (1.14) | 5.58 (1.26) | 5.72 ^{***a,c} (1.34) |
| 5.44 (1.17) | 5.24* (1.15) | 5.21 ^{*b,c} (1.22) |
| 38.00 (14.49) | 40.06* (13.94) | 39.82 ^{a,b,c} (14.12) |
| 0.081 (.273) | 0.052 (.222) | .032 ^{***} (.176) |
| 0.311 (.464) | 0.321 (.467) | 0.356 ^a (.479) |
| 0.099 (.299) | .189 ^{***} (.392) | .257 ^{***a} (.438) |
| 30.95 (15.53) | 21.88 ^{***} (10.83) | 12.81 ^{***a,b,c} (8.33) |
| 0.733 (.443) | 0.724 (.447) | 0.723 ^{a,b,c} (.448) |
| 0.546 (.498) | 0.556 (.499) | 0.549 ^{a,b} (.499) |
| 0.392 (.489) | 0.363 (.481) | .156 ^{***a,b} (.363) |
| 0.062 (.242) | .126 ^{***} (.332) | .425 ^{***} (.495) |
| 0.568 (.496) | .386 ^{***} (.481) | .121 ^{***} (.327) |
| 0.637 (.482) | .569 ⁺ (.496) | .390 ^{***a,b,c} (.488) |
| 273 | 518 | 346 |

and family attenuate with age, and thus an important threat to women's sense of mastery weakens with age when their stressful roles disappear. These cohort differences in mastery and self-acceptance underscore the importance of examining separately the subscales of the Ryff well-being scale; if cohort differences in the *aggregate* (i.e., the six subscales) well-being scale had been examined, the opposite patterns documented among the subscales may have cancelled out one another.

Both occupational status and educational attainment differ significantly across the cohorts/age groups. Occupational status scores are

highest among the midlife group for both men and women, likely reflecting the widely documented pattern whereby career trajectories peak and then plateau at midlife (Spilerman 1977). Younger workers are beginning their careers and can expect to experience some career advancement in the coming years. Older workers, in contrast, often enter “bridge jobs” before retirement; these are relatively low-status and low-paying jobs clustered in a small set of industries and occupations (Barth, McNaught, and Rizzi 1995; Couch 1998). Moreover, older workers may be disproportionately represented in lower-status blue-collar jobs and farming jobs, given secular shifts in educational attainment and historical shifts in occupational availability over the past half-century (Bell 1973).

Educational opportunities have improved considerably for recent cohorts, especially for women members. Each successive cohort has a higher proportion of college graduates than the last. Women’s educational attainment has converged with men’s for the most recent two cohorts; although silent generation women are significantly less likely than their male peers to have graduated college, the proportions of baby bust and boom men and women who have graduated college are very similar. Despite the educational strides made by women in recent years, women are still concentrated in less financially rewarding jobs than men are. Women’s occupational status scores lag behind their male peers’ by approximately three points, for each of the birth cohorts. This may be partly because women (regardless of birth cohort) are far more likely than men to have cut back on their paid work in order to accommodate their family responsibilities, and thus they receive fewer extrinsic work rewards.

Less than 10 percent of the oldest group of men have made a work–family trade-off, whereas 64 percent of the oldest women have made such a sacrifice, reflecting traditional gender-based allocation of work and family roles among those who made the transition to adulthood in the 1950s and early 1960s (Baruch, Barnett, and Rivers 1983). The gender gap is smaller, yet still pronounced, for the younger two cohorts. Among women, generational changes are also pronounced. Baby bust women are significantly less likely than the older two cohorts of women to have made a work–family trade-off. On the one hand, this may reflect a more egalitarian division of labor in the home currently enjoyed by cohorts of young adults. Baby bust women are significantly more likely than the baby boom and older women to report that their *spouses* have at some point adjusted their work schedules to accommodate family demands: 13 percent versus 7 percent and 2 percent, respectively. (The percentages are

not shown in the table.) On the other hand, this pattern may reflect life-course stage; women under age 36 may not yet have made the transition to parenthood or marriage. Because the MIDUS data are cross-sectional, however, it is not possible to ascertain whether this pattern reflects cohort differences in fertility behavior, or the fact that the youngest cohort has not yet completed its childbearing.

Multivariate Analyses

The first two questions addressed by the multivariate analyses are (1) Do the three birth cohorts differ in their levels of self-acceptance and environmental mastery? and (2) To what extent can these differences be explained by the different structural opportunities and constraints—such as education, work, and family experiences—facing the three cohorts? Results from OLS regression models are presented in tables 2 (self-acceptance) and 3 (environmental mastery). The baseline model displays the effect of cohort/age group only, model 2 incorporates occupational status, model 3 includes human capital characteristics, model 4 includes family status variables, and model 5 adjusts for whether one has made a work–family trade-off. By adding variables in a stepwise fashion, it is possible to identify the mediators, or pathways, linking cohort status to psychological well-being.⁶

Cohort Differences in Self-Acceptance

The bivariate analyses revealed that each birth cohort has significantly higher levels of self-acceptance than the preceding cohort does. The multivariate analyses show that the baby bust women's self-esteem advantage is mediated largely by their occupational status, educational attainment, and family roles. Although the baby bust women have self-acceptance levels .30 points higher than older women do in the baseline model, their advantage drops to .23 after occupational status, educational attainment, and work characteristics are controlled (model 3). Thus, the richer educational and occupational opportunities afforded to the youngest cohort of women accounts for approximately 25 percent of their advantage in self-acceptance scores. This young cohort of women is further advantaged in the labor market—relative to their mothers and grandmothers—because marriage and childbearing are less constraining to their work options. After family characteristics are controlled (see model 4), the baby bust women's advantage further declines ($\beta = .187, p \leq .05$), and it is only marginally significant when work–family trade-offs are adjusted ($\beta = .187, p \leq .10$). Thus, if the baby bust, baby boom, and silent

TABLE 2 OLS Regression Predicting Self-Acceptance,

| Independent Variables | Women (<i>N</i> = 1137) | | | | |
|---|--------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 |
| Age/cohort | | | | | |
| Baby boom cohort | 0.134 (.089) | 0.099 (.087) | 0.079 (.091) | 0.062 (.117) | 0.062 (.092) |
| Baby bust cohort | .304*** (.096) | .267*** (.087) | .229* (.109) | 0.187* (.091) | 0.187+ (.117) |
| Occupational status | | | | | |
| Stevens-Featherman TSEI score, current occupation | | .017*** (.002) | .008** (.003) | .007* (.003) | 0.007* (.031) |
| Human capital | | | | | |
| Total years work experience | | | 0.001 (.003) | 0.001 (.003) | 0.001 (.003) |
| Full-time worker, current/last job <12 years | | | 0.015 (.078) | 0.061 (.079) | 0.061 (.080) |
| 13–15 years | | | –.374* (.162) | –.344* (.162) | –.344* (.162) |
| 16 years + | | | 0.139 (.089) | .162+ (.089) | .163+ (.089) |
| | | | .452*** (.106) | .466*** (.109) | .466*** (.109) |
| Current family characteristics | | | | | |
| Currently married | | | | .273* (.130) | .273* (.130) |
| Formerly married | | | | –.008 (.138) | –.008 (.138) |
| Has no children | | | | 0.029 (.119) | 0.027 (.132) |
| Has 3 or more children | | | | –.067 (.080) | –.066 (.080) |
| Made work–family trade-off | | | | | –.004 (.083) |
| Constant | 5.49 (.072) | 4.83 (.002) | 5.02 (.158) | 4.85 (.208) | 4.86 (.218) |
| Adjusted <i>R</i> ² | 0.012 | 0.052 | 0.071 | 0.081 | 0.08 |

Notes: Unstandardized regression coefficients and standard errors are shown. Models were also estimated for a pooled sample of men and women, and all gender interaction terms were tested. No gender interaction terms were statistically significant. Physical and mental health at age 16 and race are controlled in all models.

+ $p \leq .10$. * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$.

Women and Men of MIDUS ($N = 2445$)

| Men ($N = 1308$) | | | | |
|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 |
| .235** (.086) | .285** (.092) | .347** (.122) | .355** (.125) | .372** (.126) |
| .301*** (.093) | .202* (.085) | .221** (.095) | .218* (.095) | .229* (.095) |
| | .016*** (.002) | .010*** (.003) | .010*** (.003) | .010*** (.003) |
| | | 0.003 (.003) | 0.003 (.003) | 0.003 (.003) |
| | | 0.058 (.109) | 0.016 (.109) | 0.013 (.109) |
| | | -.448** (.149) | -.453** (.148) | -.463** (.148) |
| | | -.009 (.090) | -.003 (.089) | -.003 (.089) |
| | | .247* (.097) | .254** (.098) | .254** (.098) |
| | | | .311* (.124) | .311* (.124) |
| | | | -.062 (.140) | -.051 (.140) |
| | | | 0.009 (.108) | -.014 (.109) |
| | | | -.071 (.076) | -.068 (.076) |
| | | | | -.121 (.096) |
| 5.42 (.073) | 4.77 (.118) | 4.78 (.205) | 4.64 (.239) | 4.65 (.239) |
| 0.015 | 0.049 | 0.063 | 0.076 | 0.077 |

generation women had equal levels of educational attainment and occupational status, and had similar marriage and childbearing patterns, their levels of self-acceptance would not differ significantly ($p \leq .05$) from one another.

For men, a different scenario is evidenced. Even when work, human capital, and family characteristics are controlled, men of the baby bust and baby boom cohorts have significantly higher levels of self-acceptance than the older men do. The baby bust men's advantage is mediated

TABLE 3 OLS Regression Predicting Environmental Mastery,

| Independent Variables | Women (N = 1137) | | | | |
|---|------------------|-------------------|------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 |
| Age/cohort | | | | | |
| Baby boom cohort | -.176* (.088) | -.192* (.088) | -.161+ (.092) | -.194* (.093) | -.201* (.093) |
| Baby bust cohort | -.179+ (.096) | -.197* (.096) | -.135 (.111) | -.236* (.119) | -.242* (.119) |
| Occupational status | | | | | |
| Stevens-Featherman TSEI score, current occupation | | .008*** (.002) | 0.005 (.003) | 0.004 (.003) | 0.004 (.003) |
| Human capital | | | 0.005 (.003) | 0.004 (.003) | 0.004 (.003) |
| Total years work experience | | | 0.048 (.079) | 0.042 (.081) | 0.021 (.082) |
| Full-time worker, current/ last job | | | -.116 (.165) | -.098 (.165) | -.110 (.165) |
| Less than 12 years | | | 0.079 (.091) | 0.06 (.092) | 0.067 (.092) |
| 13–15 years | | | .204* (.107) | 0.161 (.111) | 0.168 (.111) |
| 16 years + | | | | | |
| Current family characteristics | | | | | |
| Currently married | | | | 0.101 (.133) | 0.101 (.133) |
| Formerly married | | | | 0.043 (.141) | 0.046 (.141) |
| Has no children | | | | 0.132 (.122) | 0.028 (.134) |
| Has 3 or more children | | | | -.147+ ^c (.082) | -.145+ ^c (.082) |
| Made work–family trade-off | | | | | -.156* (.082) |
| Constant | 5.47 (.072) | 5.16 (.118) | 5.08 (.161) | 5.11 (.213) | 5.23 (.222) |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.013 | 0.021 | 0.023 | 0.025 | 0.027 |

Notes: Unstandardized regression coefficients and standard errors are shown. Models were also estimated for a pooled sample of men and women, and all gender interaction terms were tested. Significant gender differences are noted by superscripts: ^a($p \leq .10$); ^b($p \leq .05$); and ^c($p \leq .01$).

+ $p \leq .10$. * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$.

somewhat through occupational status; their self-esteem advantage declines by approximately 33 percent when occupational status is controlled. In contrast, educational attainment and family-role variables do little to mediate the effect of baby bust status on self-acceptance levels; the coefficient changes only vary slightly when these variables are controlled.

Women and Men of MIDUS ($N = 2445$)

| Men ($N = 1308$) | | | | |
|--------------------|--------------------|---------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 |
| -.156* | -.165* | -.122 | -.111 | -.098 |
| (.081) | (.082) | (.092) | (.093) | (.093) |
| -.145 ⁺ | -.149 ⁺ | -.058 | -.018 | 0.003 |
| (.089) | (.089) | (.118) | (.123) | (.123) |
| | .004* | 0.004 | 0.004 | 0.004 |
| | (.002) | (.003) | (.003) | (.003) |
| | | 0.004 | 0.004 | 0.003 |
| | | (.003) | (.003) | (.003) |
| | | 0.124 | 0.097 | 0.094 |
| | | (.107) | (.106) | (.106) |
| | | -.055 | -.055 | -.067 |
| | | (.145) | (.145) | (.145) |
| | | -.072 | -.060 | -.060 |
| | | (.087) | (.088) | (.088) |
| | | 0.023 | 0.039 | 0.039 |
| | | (.095) | (.095) | (.095) |
| | | | .269* | .269* |
| | | | (.122) | (.121) |
| | | | 0.161 | 0.174 |
| | | | (.137) | (.138) |
| | | | 0.049 | 0.021 |
| | | | (.105) | (.107) |
| | | | 0.025 ^c | 0.029 ^e |
| | | | (.074) | (.074) |
| | | | | -.146 |
| | | | | (.093) |
| 5.54 | 5.36 | 5.15 | 4.92 | 4.94 |
| (.069) | (.114) | (.199) | (.233) | (.233) |
| 0.015 | 0.017 | 0.017 | 0.019 | 0.02 |

For baby boom men, in contrast, their self-esteem advantage cannot be explained by increased access to education and high-status occupations among recent cohorts. To the contrary, the advantage of the baby boom cohort ($\beta = .235$) shown in the baseline model *increases* by a full 50 percent (from .24 to .35) when occupational status is controlled. The addition of human capital and family variables does little to further alter relationship. The self-esteem advantage of the baby boom men is actually suppressed—rather than mediated—by work, and educational and family characteristics.

Other significant predictors of men's and women's self-acceptance are consistent with past research on the social correlates of self-esteem. Not one of the gender interaction terms (evaluated in preliminary models) was statistically significant, suggesting that the correlates of self-acceptance are generally similar for women and men. Those with richer social and economic resources—college graduates, married persons, and those with higher-status occupations—have significantly higher levels of self-acceptance. Childbearing status, however, is not significantly linked to self-acceptance. As later analyses will reveal, however, *adjustments* to childrearing—or work–family strategies—have distinct effects for each of the three cohorts.

Cohort Differences in Environmental Mastery

The bivariate analyses revealed that older adults have a significant advantage in terms of environmental mastery. The multivariate analyses show that although the cohort gap in environmental mastery levels is mediated fully by work experiences for men, the advantage of the older women persists even when mediating pathways are considered.

Results in table 3 show that baby boom and baby bust men have environmental mastery scores approximately .15 points lower than those of the older men, and this effect persists even after occupational status is controlled. However, when educational attainment is adjusted, the effect of cohort on environmental mastery is no longer statistically significant. In contrast, the lower environmental mastery scores reported by the baby bust and baby boom women persist even when their work and family roles are controlled. Models 1 and 2 show that the baby boom and bust women have mastery scores nearly .2 lower than those of older women. Interestingly, when family characteristics and work–family trade-offs are controlled, the disadvantage of the baby bust and boom cohorts *increases* (see models 4 and 5). This finding suggests that if the younger two cohorts had the same childbearing histories and work–family strategies as the oldest cohort of women (i.e., higher fertility and a higher proportion of members making career sacrifices to raise their children), they would have even lower levels of mastery.

Few other characteristics are significantly linked to environmental mastery for either men or women. Marital status is a large positive predictor of men's but not women's mastery. Moreover, having three or more children negatively affects women's mastery ($\beta = -.15$, $p \leq .10$), and this effect is significantly larger for women than men. Given that women typically bear the brunt of childrearing responsibilities, it is not

surprising that having a large family takes a larger toll on women's sense of control.

Changing Meaning of Work–Family Strategies across Three Cohorts

The third objective of the multivariate analysis is to explore whether work and family characteristics have different psychological consequences for members of the three birth cohorts. If an independent variable has significantly different effects for each of the three birth cohorts, this pattern could reflect changing cultural views, evaluations, or expectations across the three cohorts. To address this objective, cohort interaction terms were added individually to model 5 (of tables 2 and 3). Surprisingly few interaction terms were statistically significant. Of the 44 possible interactions (birth cohort by each of the 11 independent variables, for each of the two dependent variables), only a handful were significant. Only occupational status and work–family strategies have different psychological consequences for members of the three birth cohorts.

Occupational status has significantly different effects on the self-acceptance levels of the three cohorts of women and men (models not presented). For women, the relationship between occupational status and self-acceptance is significantly stronger for midlife/baby boom women than for the older or younger age groups. Each one-point increase in occupational status increases baby boom women's well-being by .013 points, yet only .004 points for baby bust and .002 points for older women. This pattern may reflect either the elevated importance that work pursuits have for women at midlife or the importance of one's own accomplishments for women of the baby boom cohort. In contrast, occupational status has a significantly larger effect on the self-acceptance levels of the older men than either the baby boom or baby bust men. Each one-point increase in occupational status increased older men's self-acceptance levels by .021, compared with just .005 points for baby bust men and .008 points for the baby boom men. Men who came of age in the 1940s and 1950s were expected to be good economic providers and to support their families (Easterlin 1980). Pre–World War II cohorts are also believed to have “materialist” concerns, and thus they may place greater importance on economic well-being than do younger generations (Inglehart 1985). Consequently, their self-evaluations may be particularly closely tied to their occupational and financial success.

The work–family trade-off variable also has significantly different consequences for psychological well-being across the three cohorts. The cohort by work–family trade-off interaction term is statistically significant

for women in models predicting both self-acceptance and environmental mastery, and for men in models of self-acceptance only. Regression models are presented in table 4, and interaction terms are plotted in figures 1 (self-acceptance) and 2 (environmental mastery).

Older men who have ever altered their labor force participation in order to fulfill family duties had self-acceptance levels .55 points (i.e., one-half standard deviation) lower than their peers who did not make such a trade-off (see table 4, col. 3). Older men who altered their work behavior to meet family demands not only have significantly lower levels of self-acceptance than that of their peers who did not make such adjustments, but they also have significantly lower levels of self-acceptance than do the men of the younger two cohorts who made similar adjustments. In contrast, baby bust men who altered their work lives to meet family demands have self-acceptance levels that are .285 points higher than that of their peers whose work schedules were untouched by family demands. Among the baby boom men, having made a work–family trade-off did not significantly affect a man’s self-evaluation. These findings suggest that social norms and expectations guiding gender-appropriate behavior and, consequently, the benchmarks used for evaluating one’s self-worth may have shifted in recent decades. As noted earlier, men who came of age in the 1940s and 1950s were expected to work continuously to support their families, abiding by the “good provider” norm (Bernard 1972, 1981). The baby bust men, in contrast, are expected both to provide financially for their families and to be active involved parents (Gerson 1993). Current cohorts of young men who both work for pay and who modify their work schedules to accommodate family responsibilities may be fulfilling the new expectations of the “good father” role, and may derive positive self-evaluations from the recognition that they are living up to this cultural ideal.

Among women, work–family strategies affect psychological well-being differently for the three cohorts. Among the oldest cohort of women, those who either quit work, reduced their hours, or changed jobs while raising children have self-acceptance levels .37 points *higher* than that of their peers who did not alter their work lives in response to family demands ($p \leq .05$). Older women who made such a trade-off presumably complied with the social expectations imposed on young mothers in the 1950s and 1960s, whereby for women, paid employment would be second in importance to family responsibilities (Coontz 1992). Moreover, they have higher levels of self-acceptance than those of the baby bust and boom women who adopted a similar work–family

TABLE 4 OLS Regression Predicting the Effect of Cohort by Work–Family Trade-offs on Environmental Mastery and Self-Acceptance, Women and Men of MIDUS ($N = 2445$)

| Independent Variables | Women ($N = 1137$) | | Men ($N = 1308$) |
|---|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| | Environmental Mastery | Self-Acceptance | Self-Acceptance |
| Age/cohort | | | |
| Baby boom cohort | 0.066 (.171) | .414** (.144) | .203* (.099) |
| Baby bust cohort | 0.056 (.147) | .466** (.168) | .259* (.131) |
| Occupational status | | | |
| Stevens-Featherman TSEI score, current occupation | 0.004 (.003) | .007* (.003) | .009*** (.003) |
| Human capital | | | |
| Total years work experience | 0.005 (.003) | 0.002 (.003) | 0.002 (.003) |
| Full-time worker, current/last job <12 years | -.015 (.083) | 0.025 (.081) | 0.026 (.109) |
| 13–15 years | -.091 (.165) | -.323* (.162) | -.465** (.148) |
| 16 years + | 0.063 (.091) | .162+ (.090) | 0.001 (.089) |
| 16 years + | 0.161 (.111) | .470*** (.108) | .263** (.097) |
| Current family characteristics | | | |
| Currently married | 0.083 (.133) | .254* (.130) | .302* (.124) |
| Formerly married | 0.034 (.140) | -.023 (.138) | -.050 (.140) |
| Has no children | -.044 (.139) | -.015 (.136) | 0.019 (.109) |
| Has 3 or more children | -.153+ ^c (.081) | -.073 (.080) | -.053 (.076) |
| Made work–family trade-off | 0.154 (.150) | .372* ^c (.147) | -.551* ^c (.248) |
| Trade-off * baby boom cohort | -.396* (.181) | -.562** ^c (.178) | 0.323 ^c (.277) |
| Trade-off * baby bust cohort | -.509* (.209) | -.432* ^c (.204) | .836** ^c (.300) |
| Constant | 5.07 (.116) | 4.66 (.116) | 4.69 (.239) |
| Adjusted R^2 | 0.031 | 0.086 | 0.082 |

Notes: Unstandardized regression coefficients and standard errors are shown. Models were also estimated for a pooled sample of men and women, and all gender interaction terms were evaluated. Significant gender differences are noted by superscripts: ^a($p \leq .10$); ^b($p \leq .05$); and ^c($p \leq .01$). Physical and mental health at age 16 and race are controlled in all models.

+ $p \leq .10$. * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$.

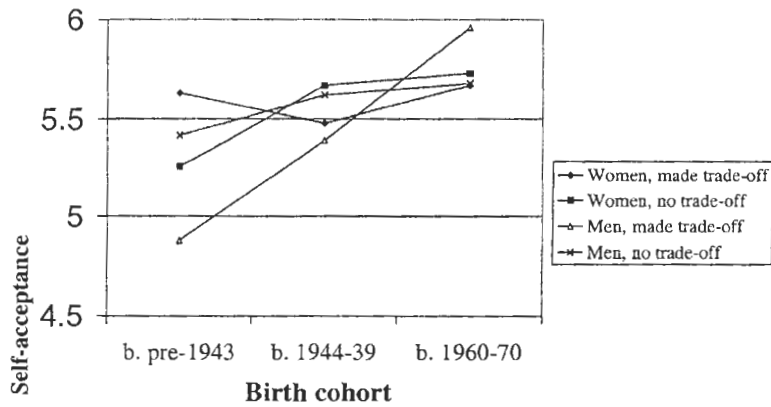


FIGURE 1. Self-acceptance, by gender, cohort, and work-family strategy.

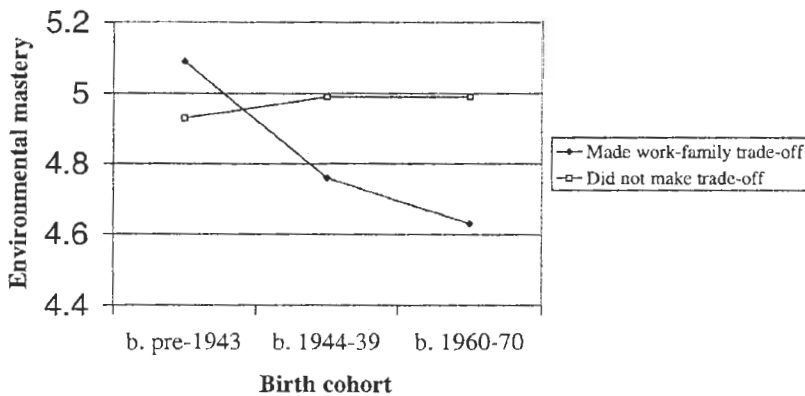


FIGURE 2. Environmental mastery by cohort and work-family strategy among women.

strategy. Among the baby boom and bust women, in contrast, having made a workplace sacrifice for their children is linked to significantly *lower* levels of self-acceptance. Women who do not make work-family trade-offs have work lives that are similar to most men's; their continuous employment generally brings with it the benefits of more rapid occupational mobility, higher earnings, and greater responsibilities on the job (Goldin 1990). For the younger two cohorts who came of age during and after the women's rights movement of the 1960s, the financial rewards and personal fulfillment associated with paid work may be much more closely tied to a woman's sense of self-worth than they are for the older women.

A different set of patterns emerges for environmental mastery. Among those women who did not make work-family trade-offs (i.e., women who worked continuously despite having children), the three birth cohorts are nearly identical in their levels of environmental mastery. In contrast,

among those women who did make a trade-off, each successive cohort of women has significantly lower levels of environmental mastery (see fig. 2). Among the oldest women, the effect of having made a work–family trade-off is not statistically significant ($\beta = .154$, $SD = .150$). However, among the baby bust and baby boom cohorts, having made a trade-off is linked to significantly lower levels of environmental mastery. These findings likely reflect age differences rather than cohort differences in the psychological meaning and relevance of work–family strategies. The baby bust women are at the stage in the life course when they are currently rearing young children, thus their lower levels of mastery may reflect the contemporaneous pressures of managing work and family. For the older women, work–family trade-offs were likely made in the distant past and may no longer pose a threat to the women’s sense of mastery and control.

DISCUSSION

This chapter explored three questions: Do the baby bust, baby boom, and silent generation cohorts differ in terms of their psychological well-being? Can these cohort differences be explained by historical shifts in access to opportunities and resources that may enhance psychological well-being? Finally, do work and family roles have different psychological consequences for members of the three birth cohorts, reflecting cultural shifts in the meaning and desirability of these roles? The empirical analyses revealed five important findings. First, the elevated levels of self-acceptance enjoyed by baby bust women can be explained fully by the young women’s greater access to self-esteem-enhancing resources, such as higher education, higher status occupations, and fewer family-related obstacles to their work lives. Second, baby bust and baby boom women have significantly lower levels of environmental mastery than do older women, likely reflecting the intense pressures of balancing work and family which threaten young adult and midlife women’s sense of mastery. Third, the three cohorts of men do not differ in terms of environmental mastery, once occupational status and education are controlled. Fourth, baby bust and baby boom men have significantly higher levels of self-acceptance than the silent generation men do. Fifth, cohort differences in psychological well-being are conditioned by one’s work–family strategies. These specific findings also have broader implications for understanding historical shifts in structural opportunities and normative expectations, and the implications of these macrosocial patterns for individual-level psychological well-being.

Historical Change in Access to Resources May Promote Well-Being

Macrosocial changes over the past four decades have created a context in which the baby bust, baby boom, and silent generation cohorts faced very different opportunities and obstacles to occupational success, particularly during their young adult years. On average, members of each cohort have more education than their parents. Economic restructuring has created a context in which younger cohorts are more likely to hold white-collar or professional occupations and less likely to hold manufacturing or farming jobs. Reduced fertility means that childbearing and rearing tasks are less of a constraint to young women's work lives today than they were for earlier generations (e.g., Bell 1973; Bianchi and Spain 1996; Easterlin 1980; Meyer et al. 1977). The linkages between social and economic resources (such as higher education, income, and occupational status) and psychological well-being have been widely documented (Andrisani 1978; Bird and Ross 1993; Kohn 1969; Kohn and Schooler 1973; Mirowsky and Ross 1998; Pearlin et al. 1981; Rosenberg and Pearlin 1978; Ross and Mirowsky 2002; Wheaton 1980). However, few studies have explored explicitly the possibility that cohort differences in access to such resources may, in part, explain cohort differences in psychological well-being.

The research presented here suggests that historical transitions in the availability of important resources do, in part, explain cohort differences in well-being. For instance, although the baby bust women appear to have significantly higher levels of self-acceptance than those of earlier cohorts of women, this advantage is explained mainly by their higher levels of educational attainment, higher-status occupations, and lower levels of childbearing. Thus, if the educational and occupational opportunities and constraints imposed by family demands were identical for the three cohorts of women, they would enjoy equivalent levels of self-acceptance.

Historical Change in Norms and Values May Condition Psychological Effects

This research has also shown that a role or status, in and of itself, may not be sufficient for explaining subgroups' differences in psychological well-being. Rather, cohort-related cultural changes—such as the shifting normative context surrounding one's behaviors or the evaluative criteria used for determining success—must also be considered. The analyses have shown that the psychological ramifications of one particular behavior—cutting back on (or quitting) work in order to fulfill

parenting demands—have very different consequences for the psychological well-being of the baby bust, baby boom, and silent generation men and women. Cutting back on one's work to tend to childrearing responsibilities enhanced the self-acceptance levels of silent generation women and baby bust men. In contrast, the same behavior is associated with significantly lower self-acceptance scores for silent generation men and both baby bust and boom women.

These patterns suggest that historical changes in the meaning and perceived appropriateness of a behavior may condition the behavior's effect on well-being. Engaging in a behavior that conforms to prevailing norms and expectations may enhance one's self-evaluations (see Jackson 1966, 25). For instance, older women who earlier cut back on work to raise their children abided by the prevailing expectation of the 1950s and 1960s—that mothers should give higher priority to their family responsibilities than to their occupational pursuits (Baruch, Barnett, and Rivers 1983). Similarly, for young men who entered adulthood in the 1970s and beyond, fulfilling the “good father” role means both supporting the family financially and playing an active role in childrearing (Gerson 1993; Kaufman and Uhlenberg 2000). Consequently, adjusting one's work life to accommodate family responsibilities is an appropriate and positively evaluated activity for older women and baby bust men.

In contrast, for silent generation men and the baby bust and baby boom women, making a work–family trade-off may indirectly chip away at one's self-evaluations. For the oldest men, altering one's work behavior (and presumably, forsaking earnings and mobility prospects in the process) may violate the norms that prevailed during their young adult years—that men should be primary breadwinners (Bernard 1981). Likewise, the baby bust and baby boom women may be less willing than their mothers to accept the career hindrances that inevitably accompany making work–family trade-offs (Budig and England 2001). Women who expect to achieve equity in the workplace may be particularly disappointed and self-critical upon finding their career trajectories curtailed. In sum, these findings suggest that behaving in a way that either violates one's personal goals and preferences or violates society's expectations for appropriate behavior may take a psychological toll.

Considering Age- and Cohort-Based Explanations for Social Phenomena

These analyses also have underscored the importance of considering both age- and cohort-related explanations when exploring subgroup

differences in well-being, where appropriate. For instance, the strong relationship between occupational status and self-acceptance among the midlife/baby boom might reflect either cohort- or age-related factors. Jung (1933) and Giele (1993) have argued that at middle age, a role “crossover” occurs in which women experience a heightened interest in activities earlier associated with typically “male” domains, such as employment and the pursuit of personal accomplishment. At midlife, women are also at the stage in the life course when their childrearing responsibilities diminish, and they are free to pursue their own goals and interests. Consequently, work accomplishments may be a particularly meaningful source of self-esteem. The strong relationship between occupational status and self-acceptance might also reflect a cohort phenomenon. Women who came of age during the women’s rights movement of the late 1960s and 1970s are characterized as a generation who placed great emphasis on personal fulfillment and career pursuits; thus their occupational status may be a particularly powerful influence on their self-esteem (Fodor and Franks 1990). Although women of the baby bust cohort also were raised to place great importance on occupational attainment, they are still young enough that they will likely anticipate job promotions in the future, and thus their current occupational status is not necessarily a strong correlate of their self-acceptance levels.

In conclusion, this chapter has investigated the processes through which macrosocial patterns have implications for microlevel outcomes: the self-acceptance and environmental mastery scores of three cohorts of adults. Although historical changes in educational and employment opportunities and family structure explain, in part, why older adults enjoy higher levels of mastery and younger adults report higher levels of self-acceptance, structural factors alone are not sufficient for understanding cohort differences in well-being. Rather, the values, attitudes, and normative expectations facing each of the three cohorts must be considered when exploring the psychological consequences of their life-course experiences. In doing so, scholars may obtain a richer understanding of how both structural and cultural aspects of social change affect the inner lives of American men and women.

NOTES

1. These statistics may also reflect women’s declining earnings capacity over the life course. Young women who work full time have earnings higher than those of women in their thirties and forties who are working part time while raising children.
2. I present analyses here that define the baby bust cohort as those born between

1960 and 1970. I also conducted preliminary analyses in which this group was subdivided into “late boom cohort” (b. 1960–64) and “baby bust cohort” (b. 1965–70), in order to ascertain whether the two cohorts differed significantly in their psychological well-being. The coefficients for the two groups were nearly identical (i.e., $< .05$ of a standard deviation difference), and the regression models with two cohort indicators did not fit the data significantly better than did models with only one indicator. Thus, the final analyses use the single indicator only to capture the baby bust cohort.

3. A continuous variable ranging from 0 to 3 trade-offs was also considered. The dichotomous and continuous variables behaved in generally similar ways in the multivariate analyses. The dummy variable is used here because a small proportion of men (12 percent) made any form of work–family adjustment.

4. Social background characteristics (*parental education, urban/rural status, number of siblings, maternal employment, and family structure at age 16*) were controlled in earlier analyses because such characteristics are significant correlates of occupational achievements in adulthood (see Sewell and Hauser 1975 for a review), as well as values, gender-role attitudes, and one’s criteria for evaluating adequate standards of living (Baumrind 1971; Brown and Harris 1978; Easterlin 1980; Kohn 1969). The social background indicators were not significant predictors of psychological well-being net of education and occupational status, nor did they mediate the effect of birth cohort, and thus they are omitted from the analysis.

5. Racial minorities are coded simply as white or nonwhite, because more fine-grained subgroup analyses are beyond the scope of the chapter.

6. Physical and mental health at age 16, and race are controlled in all models.

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