

The Psychological Consequences of Midlife Men's Social Comparisons With Their Young Adult Sons

I examine how midlife men (N = 542) compare their work and family lives with those of their young adult sons, and how these comparisons affect the fathers' self-evaluations. Analyses are based on quantitative and qualitative data from the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study. Fathers who rate their work lives as more successful than their sons' have elevated self-esteem only when they also report being very close with their children. Open-ended interviews reveal that men derive pride from financially supporting their families, yet normative and economic constraints of the "good provider" role prevented them from pursuing their own career aspirations and from maintaining close parent-child ties. Intergenerational social comparisons highlight the distinctive work and family constraints felt by the midlife fathers.

At midlife and beyond, adults review their past experiences and gauge how successful they have been in important domains, such as family or work (Neugarten, 1968). Those who evaluate their lives positively tend to experience emotional well-being, whereas those who have not met their own or others' expectations may experience regret, poor self-esteem, or depression (Landman & Manis, 1992). The criteria for de-

fining and evaluating a "successful" life may fluctuate, however, particularly during periods of considerable social change. Shifting notions of success may have important ramifications for midlife and older men as they review their earlier choices and accomplishments, especially in the domains of work and family. Most White middle-class men and women who were young adults in the 1950s and early 1960s were socialized to specialize in work and family roles, respectively (Bernard, 1981). Behavioral realities meshed with normative expectations; in 1960, fathers of young children reported nearly universal full-time employment, and fewer than 10% of married women with children worked for pay (Spain & Bianchi, 1996). Most fathers were able to support their families on their income alone; even men with relatively limited education could find stable and well-paying jobs in the manufacturing sector (Bluestone & Harrison, 1982).

Social changes since the mid to late 1960s have created a new normative context, however, where fathers (and mothers) are expected to fulfill the roles of both successful breadwinner and actively involved parent (Williams, 2000). Economic realities also have contributed to the blurring of gender-based social roles and expectations. The erosion of young men's earnings since the 1970s, combined with rising costs of living, now make it economically necessary for both spouses to work for pay in many married couples (Spain & Bianchi, 1996). Husbands have adapted by playing a larger role in both childrearing and homemaking than their fathers did, although men still lag behind

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women in both activities (Coltrane, 1996). This new normative template for men's and women's work and family roles may have important implications for the ways that current cohorts of older men evaluate their earlier accomplishments. These men may experience regret or self-criticism if they use the *contemporary* cultural ideal (i.e., the *involved father*) as the standard for evaluating their *past* choices and actions, particularly their strong adherence to the good breadwinner expectation.

I propose that older men may use their young adult sons' lives as a benchmark for evaluating and understanding their own past experiences. The young adult sons, now in their 20s and 30s, were socialized to hold less rigidly demarcated gendered social roles and to have structured their work and family lives differently than their fathers did (Townsend, 2002). The sons' lives may provide a tangible example of the work and family roles promoted as the cultural ideal in the late 20th century. The fathers' intergenerational comparisons may bring into sharp focus the distinct advantages and challenges experienced by their own generation, as they evaluate their successes in the domains of work and family. In this article, I (a) identify the characteristics of midlife fathers (age 53) who evaluate themselves as more or less successful in the domain of work as compared with their adult sons (in their 20s and 30s); (b) examine whether and how these intergenerational comparisons affect fathers' self-evaluations; and (c) explore the fathers' beliefs about how and why their work and family lives differ from (or are similar to) their sons'.

The analyses are based on both quantitative and qualitative data from the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study, a sample survey of more than 10,000 men and women who graduated from Wisconsin high schools in 1957. Participants were interviewed at ages 18 (in 1957), 36 (in 1975), and 53 (in 1992), and a subsample of 200 participated in open-ended interviews at age 59 (in 1998). This research has broad implications for understanding the ways that older adults maintain positive self-evaluations during periods of rapid social and normative change, when the evaluative criteria used to gauge a successful life may undergo transformation. Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) provides a theoretical framework for understanding the ways that intergenerational comparisons may affect midlife self-evaluations.

Social comparisons are an important source of self-evaluation, particularly in social contexts marked by uncertainty. In order to better evaluate one's own accomplishments, opinions, and abilities, individuals compare themselves with similar others (Festinger, 1954). Upward comparison, or comparison with a more successful person, is believed to lower one's self-esteem, whereas downward comparison, or comparison with a less successful person, generally enhances one's self-evaluations (Wills, 1981). The linkage between social comparison and self-evaluation, however, may be contingent upon personal, situational, and relationship factors.

First, the psychological impact of a social comparison is most powerful when the comparison domain is very important to the individual (Tesser, 1988). Comparisons about work success may be particularly important to men, given the widely documented importance of work to men's self-worth and to others' judgment of their worth (Townsend, 2002). Second, assimilation theory proposes that the personal impact of a social comparison may reflect the nature of the relationship between the comparer and target. For example, if a father feels personally responsible for his son's success (McFarland, Buehler, & MacKay, 2001) or is emotionally close to his son, then he may derive a self-esteem boost from an upward comparison by "basking in [his son's] reflected glory" (Tesser). The assimilation model is a potentially important consideration when exploring the psychological consequences of fathers' intergenerational social comparisons. Encouraging and facilitating the accomplishments of one's children is a central feature of successful midlife development (Erikson, 1959). A son's successes may bolster a father's self-evaluations, especially if the two have a close relationship.

Drawing on the ideas proposed by social comparison and assimilation theories, I first evaluate whether intergenerational social comparison (i.e., father's perception that he is more or less successful than his son in terms of work) affects a father's self-acceptance level, net of objective indicators of both his and his son's socioeconomic characteristics, such as occupational status and education. Objective indicators of father's and son's socioeconomic standing are controlled in order to ascertain whether self-acceptance is a function of actual or perceived accomplishments (see Rosenberg & Pearlin, 1978). Second, I evaluate whether

the psychological consequence of this comparison is contingent upon the importance of work to the father, and both psychological and structural aspects of the father-son relationship.

Psychological aspects of the father-son relationship included in this study are the father's perceived closeness to his son, and his perception that he is responsible for his son's work outcomes. Structural aspects of the father-son relationship that may either foster or impede father-son closeness and the father's contributions to his son's outcomes include (a) whether the father is still married to his son's mother (compared with whether the marriage ended when the son was under age 18, or whether the marriage ended when the son was an adult), and (b) whether the father has any children from a new marriage—that is, a marriage that followed his marriage to his son's mother. Parent-child emotional ties, as well as a father's psychological and economic investment in his child, are linked to the father's marital status, the number of marriages the father has had, and residential (e.g., whether and for how long father and son coresided), legal (e.g., custody arrangements), and biological (e.g., biological or stepchild) aspects of his relationship with his child (Manning & Smock, 2000).

Social comparison theory has an important limitation as a framework for understanding intergenerational comparisons, however. The theory was formulated to understand domain-specific comparisons, and does not acknowledge explicitly that success in one domain may be accompanied by compensations in a second and equally important domain. For example, men who are successful at work can provide their children with a secure economic foundation that enables them to pursue higher education and establish successful work lives (Christiansen & Palkovitz, 2001). Successful performance of the breadwinner role, however, may limit the time and energy available for active nurturance of one's children (Coltrane, 1996). Work and family are "greedy institutions," and success in one domain may necessitate compensations in the other (Coser, 1974). Midlife men may experience regrets about having prioritized work obligations over family relationships; these regrets may temper the self-esteem gains obtained from recognizing one's career successes. I examine qualitative data from the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study to explore the ways that men evaluate their accomplish-

ments in the work and family domains, with an emphasis on how they view their own experiences as distinct from those of their sons. These data may highlight the ways that personal evaluations of past choices and accomplishments affect self-esteem during periods of social and normative change.

METHOD

Quantitative Data

Sample. The Wisconsin Longitudinal Study is a long-term study of 10,317 men and women who graduated from Wisconsin high schools in 1957. A one-third sample of all high school seniors in Wisconsin in 1957 were randomly selected to participate. They were first interviewed during their senior year in high school, when they were 17–18 years old (1957). Subsequent interviews were completed at ages 36 (in 1975) and 53–54 (in 1992–1993). Retention rates are very high. In 1975, 9,138 (89%) of the original 10,317 respondents completed interviews. Telephone interviews were completed with 8,493 persons in 1992 (93% of all 1975 respondents); of these 8,493 persons, 6,515 (3,013 men and 3,502 women) also completed mail questionnaires. Persons who completed both the 1992 telephone and mail questionnaires have slightly higher IQ scores and incomes than persons who completed the 1992 phone interview only. The samples do not differ with respect to education, occupational status, or self-acceptance (Hauser et al., 1993).

Respondents were asked a series of questions about the educational and occupational characteristics of one randomly selected child. Their children are ages 22–39, with an average age of 30. A 50% subsample of the 1992–1993 participants was randomly selected to receive additional questions on parent-child social comparisons and relationship quality. Topical modules were given to subsamples to reduce the overall interview length.

The quantitative analyses presented in this article focus on the 542 men (a) who completed the 1992 mail and telephone questionnaires ($N = 3,013$); (b) who have any living children ($n = 2,781$, 92%); (c) whose randomly selected child is a son ($n = 1,381$, 46%); (d) who were included in the random 50% subsample that received the social comparison question ($n = 622$, 21%); (e) whose randomly selected son is

currently employed ($n = 613$, 20%); and (f) who were included in a randomly selected 90% subsample that was administered depression history questions ($n = 542$, 18%). These sample restrictions are imposed because self-acceptance was evaluated on the 1992 mail questionnaire, and because social comparisons are most relevant when the comparison target is similar to the evaluator along performance-relevant traits such as gender or employment status (Festinger, 1954). I also included only those persons for whom I had information on depression history. In prior analyses, I examined whether one's social comparison and self-acceptance levels were affected by depression history; neither relationship was statistically significant. The 542 men in the analytic sample do not differ significantly from the sample of 3,013 men who completed the 1992 telephone and mail questionnaires in terms of key variables, including educational attainment, occupation, or self-acceptance. This similarity is expected given that the main screening criteria described above are based on random selection.

Dependent variables. Two outcomes are considered: intergenerational social comparison and self-acceptance. At age 53 (in 1992), the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study respondents were asked, "Thinking back to 19-, when you were the age your child is today, how were you doing in terms of work? Were you doing much better, better, the same, worse, or much worse?" Responses are recoded into three categories: better, same, worse. This trichotomy is used as the dependent variable in the multinomial logistic regression analysis, and is considered as a predictor of self-acceptance in the second part of the analysis. Self-acceptance ($\alpha = .72$) is one of six subscales of the Ryff (1989) psychological well-being scale, and is similar conceptually to widely used self-esteem scales. Respondents indicate their level of agreement with four statements using six response categories ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The items are: (a) In general, I feel confident and positive about myself; (b) I made some mistakes in the past, but I feel that all in all, everything has worked out for the best; (c) The past had its ups and downs, but in general, I wouldn't want to change it; and (d) In many ways, I feel disappointed about my achievements in life (reverse-coded). Although the original Ryff self-acceptance scale is based on

seven items, I omitted three items that tap a comparative evaluation of one's self (e.g., "I feel like many of the people I know have gotten more out of life than I have") and may be confounded with the social comparison item. Responses to the four items were averaged; higher scores reveal higher levels of self-acceptance. Possible scores range from 1 to 6; in this analytic sample, actual scores ranged from 1.6 to 6.

Independent variables. Three sets of predictor variables are considered: father's socioeconomic characteristics, father's family characteristics, and son's characteristics. *Father's education* is categorized as 12 years (reference category), 13–15 years (some college), and 16 or more years (at least a 4-year college degree). *Father's longest ever occupation* is the major occupational group (according to U.S. Census categories) of the job he has held for the longest duration. Categories include professional (reference category), managerial, lower white collar, upper blue collar, and lower blue collar. The latter includes operatives, laborers, farmers, and service workers. Father's family characteristics include *age at first marriage*, *number of children*, *marital history*, and *whether father has children from a later marriage*. Marital history indicators include: currently married to son's mother; not married to son's mother, marriage ended when son was under age 18; and not married to son's mother, marriage dissolved after the son reached age 18 (reference category). Finally, a dummy variable indicates whether the father has *any children from a marriage subsequent to his marriage to the son's mother*. The simple dichotomous indicator is used because most men in the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study have had stable marital histories. Fully 83% have been married only once, and only 4% of fathers have children from later marriages.

Son's characteristics include *marital status*, *age*, *education*, and the *occupation he was holding in 1992–1993* (or most recently, if not employed at the time of interview). Marital status categories include currently married (reference category), never married, and formerly married, including divorced, separated, or widowed. *Educational attainment* includes the categories of fewer than 12 years, high school diploma/GED (reference category), 13–15 years (e.g., some college), and 16 or more years (i.e., college graduate). Occupations are coded

according to the U.S. Census major occupational categories described above.

Potential moderator variables. The following variables are evaluated as possible moderators of the relationship between social comparison and self-acceptance. *Work importance* is evaluated with the question, "Different people value different things in life. How important to you is work?" The variable is coded as 1 for responses of *very important*, and 0 for responses of *somewhat*, *not very*, or *not at all important*. Two indicators of the father-son relationship also are considered: *perceived closeness* and *father's perceived responsibility for son's outcomes*. Perceived closeness is a dichotomous variable indicating that the father feels *very close* with his son, and the reference category comprises responses of *not at all*, *not very*, and *somewhat close*. Perceived responsibility is a dichotomous variable indicating that the father takes *a lot of credit* for his son's educational and occupational outcomes; the reference category includes *not at all*, *some*, and *a little credit*.

Qualitative Data

Sample. Open-ended interviews were conducted with a subsample of 200 Wisconsin Longitudinal Study sample members (i.e., 100 men and 100 women) in 1998 (age 59). The subsample was selected from persons who lived within a 5-hour drive of Madison, Wisconsin. More than 75% of the sample resided in Wisconsin at that time, thus the geographic restriction is not expected to substantially bias the results. More than 90% of those contacted agreed to be interviewed. Participants in the qualitative subsample are not significantly different from the overall sample in terms of education, occupational status, self-acceptance, or family structure.

Interviews were conducted with respondents in their homes, and obtained detailed information on work, family, personal accomplishments and disappointments in the work and family domains, and social comparisons with children. Respondents were asked to think about their own lives when they were the age that their randomly selected child is today, and to provide their own accounts as to why their and their son's lives differ or turned out similarly.

Tape recordings of the interviews were transcribed. I analyzed transcripts and identified and coded emergent themes, such as "family

responsibilities limited work options." I modified and aggregated the thematic categories to accommodate new data until "saturation" was reached (Millar, 2000). I conducted computer searches on key phrases to identify all references to information relevant to my research questions. The findings presented here are based on men ($N = 100$) whose randomly selected child was a son ($n = 46$). These 46 cases include fathers who report that they have done worse ($n = 14$), the same ($n = 19$), or better ($n = 13$) than their son in terms of work. The quotes selected for presentation are representative of the views of fathers in each of the three comparison categories.

RESULTS

Bivariate Analysis

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics. Forty percent of men believe that they and their sons have done equally well, and slightly smaller proportions reported that they have done worse (34%) or better (26%) than their sons in terms of work. The sons have completed more years of schooling than their fathers, yet hold lower status jobs and are more likely to work in service occupations. The disparities between fathers' and sons' characteristics vary across social comparison categories. In general, fathers with more education and higher occupational status than other fathers in the sample described themselves as more successful than their sons. Fathers whose sons have more education and higher status occupations reported doing worse than their sons. Fathers of unmarried sons were more likely to describe themselves as more successful than their sons. Social comparisons also are related to some aspects of the father-son relationship. Perceptions of father-son closeness are inversely related to a father's perceptions of his own success; the proportion of fathers who reported being *very close* with their sons is lowest among fathers who rated themselves as more successful than their sons.

Predictors of Social Comparison Responses

Table 2 displays the predictors of father's social comparison responses. Fathers are more likely to rate themselves unfavorably when their sons have higher levels of educational attainment, and they are more likely to compare themselves

TABLE 1. MEANS (SD) OR PROPORTIONS, BY SOCIAL COMPARISON STATUS

	Own Work Life, Compared With Son			
	All (N = 542)	Worse (n = 183)	Same (n = 219)	Better (n = 140)
Dependent variable				
Self-acceptance (range = 1 to 6)	4.16 (.53)	4.16 (.56)	4.22 (.48)	4.09* (.58)
Independent variables				
Has done <i>worse</i> than son at work	.34 (.47)			
Has done <i>the same</i> as son at work	.40 (.49)			
Has done <i>better</i> than son at work	.26 (.44)			
Father's status characteristics				
12 years of education	.52 (.50)	.56 (.49)	.54 (.49)	.45 (.50)
13–15 years of education	.18 (.39)	.19 (.39)	.17 (.38)	.19 (.38)
≥ 16 years of education	.30 (.46)	.25 (.43)	.29 (.45)	.36 (.48)
Professional occupation	.25 (.43)	.20 (.39)	.25 (.43)	.31* (.46)
Administrative occupation	.20 (.40)	.20 (.39)	.22 (.42)	.16 (.37)
Lower white-collar occupation	.13 (.34)	.13 (.33)	.11 (.32)	.16 (.37)
Upper blue-collar occupation	.18 (.39)	.23 (.42)	.19 (.39)	.11* (.32)
Blue-collar, service, or farm occupation	.24 (.43)	.25 (.43)	.23 (.42)	.26 (.44)
Father's family characteristics				
Age at first marriage	23.35 (2.76)	23.52 (2.78)	23.43 (2.87)	22.99 (2.55)
Number of children	3.12 (1.34)	3.01 (1.41)	3.15 (1.31)	3.19 (1.28)
Currently married to son's mother	.79 (.41)	.84 (.37)	.78 (.42)	.76 (.343)
Marriage ended when son was younger than age 18	.14 (.34)	.08 (.28)	.13 (.34)	.26* (.44)
Father has any children from subsequent marriage	.04 (.19)	.03 (.18)	.02 (.13)	.07* (.26)
Son characteristics				
< 12 years of education	.03 (.16)	.02 (.13)	.04 (.20)	.01 (.12)
12 years of education	.36 (.48)	.32 (.47)	.38 (.49)	.39 (.49)
13–15 years of education	.27 (.45)	.24 (.43)	.27 (.45)	.32 (.47)
≥ 16 years of education	.34 (.47)	.42* (.49)	.30 (.46)	.28 (.45)
Professional occupation	.21 (.41)	.30** (.46)	.19 (.39)	.14 (.34)
Administrative occupation	.10 (.30)	.10 (.31)	.13 (.35)	.05* (.20)
Lower white-collar occupation	.16 (.37)	.14 (.35)	.16 (.37)	.19 (.39)
Upper blue-collar occupation	.15 .36	.15 (.36)	.15 (.36)	.16 (.37)
Lower blue-collar, service, farm occupation	.36 (.48)	.30 (.46)	.36 (.48)	.45 (.50)
Age	30.44 (3.82)	30.34 (3.68)	30.39 (3.91)	30.61 (3.89)
Currently married	.38 (.48)	.44 (.49)	.40 (.49)	.25*** (.44)
Formerly married	.04 (.19)	.04 (.19)	.03 (.16)	.05 (.22)
Never married	.59 (.49)	.52 (.50)	.57 (.50)	.70** (.46)
Number of children	.44 (.88)	.39 (.75)	.53 (1.0)	.38 (.84)
Psychological variables				
Work is <i>very important</i> to father	.87 (.33)	.86 (.35)	.88 (.33)	.89 (.31)
Father and son are <i>very close</i>	.54 (.50)	.61 (.49)	.54 (.50)	.43* (.49)
Father takes <i>a lot of credit</i> for son's outcomes	.33 (.47)	.41* (.49)	.32 (.47)	.24 (.43)

Note: Two-tailed *t* tests evaluated significant differences between values for *better* versus *same* categories, and *worse* versus *same* categories.

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

favorably when their sons have lower status jobs and when their sons have never married. Fathers who dissolved marriages to their son's mother when the son was young are more likely

to report that they have done better than their son; these men may have more tenuous ties with their son, and may have less invested psychologically in the success of that son. Neither

TABLE 2. MULTINOMIAL LOGISTIC REGRESSION
PREDICTING FATHER'S EVALUATION OF OWN WORK
LIFE COMPARED WITH SON ($N = 542$)

	Compared With Son, Father Reports Doing	
	Worse	Better
Father's status characteristics		
13–15 yrs. education	1.07	1.24
≥ 16 years education	.76	1.55
Administrative job	1.26	.61
Lower white collar	1.44	1.14
Upper blue collar	1.76	.50
Lower blue collar	1.73	1.06
Father's family characteristics		
Age at first marriage	1.01	.90*
Currently married to son's mother	1.14	3.06
Ended marriage when son younger than 18	.62	3.91*
Number of children	.95	.91
Father has kids from subsequent marriage	3.35	4.70*
Son characteristics		
Age	.81	1.03
< 12 years education	.50	.40
13–15 yrs. education	1.09	1.23
≥ 16 years education	1.58	1.28
Administrative job	.54	.71
Lower white collar	.52*	2.01
Upper blue collar	.66	2.11
Lower blue collar	.56	2.51*
Never married	.59*	2.46**
Formerly married	1.38	2.84
Number of children	.72*	.97
Psychological factors		
Father takes a lot of credit for son	1.59*	.69
χ^2 (df)		113.5 (46)

Note: Odds ratios are presented where the odds for the reference category is 1.0.

Reference categories are 12 years of schooling (educational attainment), professional occupation (occupational group), and currently married (marital status).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

work importance nor father-son closeness is a significant predictor of the comparison. Self-acceptance is not a significant predictor of social comparison, thus ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models (rather than nonrecur-

sive path models) were used for analyses predicting self-acceptance.

Effect of Social Comparison on Father's Self-Acceptance

Table 3 presents the regression model used to evaluate whether intergenerational social comparisons affect fathers' self-acceptance. The statistically significant interaction term of father-son closeness and social comparison indicates that the psychological effect of an intergenerational social comparison is contingent upon the quality of the father-son relationship. The perception that one is more successful than one's son is associated with slightly enhanced self-acceptance only for those men who are *very close* with their sons. The effect of the comparison does not vary significantly based on any other proposed moderator variables.

Qualitative Analyses

The qualitative data reveal the fathers' interpretations of why and how their lives differ from those of their sons; the sons were not asked parallel questions.

Family responsibilities impede pursuit of personal career goals. The fathers believe that they have had less freedom than their sons to pursue their professional interests or to take career risks, because obligations imposed by the good provider role restricted them to secure and stable jobs. They described work success in terms of providing financially for their families rather than finding personal fulfillment through work. The constraints of the breadwinner role were apparent at two points in the life course. First, as young adults choosing occupations, the fathers' main priority was achieving financial stability rather than pursuing a personal avocation. Second, as they progressed in their careers, the fathers did not feel free to take risks or to leave unsatisfactory jobs because their families depended on their earnings. The men characterized their behavior as in step with their cohort peers, and as consistent with expectations facing men in earlier decades (e.g., "that's how it was back then").

The constraints of the good provider role were mentioned by most men, but were described as particularly restrictive by working-class men. Carl, who worked with the Corps of

TABLE 3. ORDINARY LEAST SQUARES (OLS) REGRESSION PREDICTING FATHER'S SELF-ACCEPTANCE (N = 542)

	SE	SE B
Father has done <i>worse</i> than son in work life	-.09	.08
Father has done <i>better</i> than son in work life	-.21**	.08
Father and son <i>very close</i>	.04	.07
Interaction terms		
Father <i>worse</i> at work × father & son <i>very close</i>	.03	.11
Father <i>better</i> at work × father & son <i>very close</i>	.24*	.12
Constant	4.07	.47
Adjusted R ²		.081

Note: Higher scores indicate higher levels of self-acceptance. Father's and son's education, occupational, and family, characteristics are controlled in the model.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Engineers for 35 years, recalled that he took the job of surveyor simply because it provided security for his family. He recalled starting his career with the Corps of Engineers in the late 1950s:

It was a whole different lifestyle back then... You were looking for a good paying job and it could be in industry, it could be in construction, it could have been carpentry, it could have been masonry, it could have been anything like that... You were looking at it from the perspective of "Where could I make enough money to support a family?"

The pressures to support a family also restricted men later in their careers. Many men recalled that they had wanted to take career risks, yet family responsibilities prevented them from doing so. Bob, a stock handler at a warehouse, described his job: "I couldn't stand it. It was so repetitious, the same thing every day... I knew I was going nowhere, and I couldn't do much about it. You have to just keep on working and keep up with the obligations day to day." He recalled that he wanted to start his own business, but "I didn't know how I could swing it."

Ed, in automobile sales, believed that family responsibilities prevented him from starting his own used car business: "I had a wife and three kids so it's pretty hard to make a career change without some sort of guarantee. And you don't get any guarantee in sales." Larry, a real estate broker, did launch his own real estate firm, but he waited until age 39, when he had greater eco-

nomonic security and his children were in school. He recounted, "10 years before that ... I would have been scared to death. I needed the security of a regular paycheck when the kids were little. By that time [age 39], the kids were older, and my son was able to help me after school."

Work responsibilities inhibit close family relationships. The fathers believe that their work responsibilities limited the development of close family relationships. Nearly every man interviewed said that he regretted not having spent more time with his children when they were young. Al, a farm foreman with four children, recalled, "when we first bought [our] house, I worked a [second] part-time job. I used to work until five, and I'd come home, grab lunch, and then I worked for a contractor driving trucks until 10 at night. When the kids were 6 and 7, I didn't have much home life with them. I look back now and I wish I had spent more time with them. But, I wanted to get the house paid off."

Don, a heavy machinery mechanic at a paper mill, regretted that he regularly worked nights and weekends. He explained, "I had four children and changing jobs wasn't an option." In contrast, his son works for a bank from 9 to 5, and is able to spend more time with his children than Don was able to. He noted, "The [long] hours I put in helped the family out. But everything has a price. I would have liked to have been with my family more. He [son] has weekends off, I didn't. There is a value to weekends." Don reported both pride and regret about his work: "All four kids now have good educations and good homes in good neighborhoods. I just wish that I could have been around more when they were little."

Sons' delayed transition to adulthood. The fathers believe that their sons were slower to make the transition to adulthood than they themselves had been, and thus have fewer of the traditional signifiers of success, such as home ownership or job seniority. This was not necessarily a sign that their sons were less successful in their fathers' eyes, however. Rather, the fathers seem to believe that their sons are less impelled to establish stable careers at young ages (as they themselves had) because their sons' generation has several advantages that relieve them of such obligations. These advantages include widespread patterns of delayed marriage, delayed childbearing, and wives'

increased labor force participation. Although delayed childbearing and working wives meant that the sons often had richer economic resources in absolute terms, it also meant that they had not successfully fulfilled the role of good provider. Fathers of unmarried and childless sons were much less likely to evaluate their sons' lives as successful. Although the fathers viewed children as a drain on one's economic well-being, having children was also viewed as an important motivator for socioeconomic achievement. Ed, in sales, compared himself with his 37-year-old son, an administrator for the city water department:

I had a family at a much younger age than my son did. I was married at 19, and had three kids by 23. He wasn't married till he was about 25 or so. I was probably more motivated than he was at that particular time, because I had to be.

According to the fathers, by either delaying or sharing with their wives the obligations of the good provider role, the sons had greater latitude in choosing their professions. The fathers sought economic stability in their careers, whereas their sons are able to pursue their personal interests and goals. For example, John, a police officer, believed that his unmarried 30-year-old son, an assistant stage manager in a regional theater company, is less successful than he himself had been at that age. John is ambivalent about his son's work: He wants to encourage his son's interests, yet he also wishes that he had a more lucrative job. John explained,

My son is doing what he wants to do, so that's satisfactory. I've always told him ... life's too short to spend it hating to go to work every day just for the money. It's just I have hopes for him to ... get into something where he'll have an adequate income. ... Maybe this [theater] can be an avocation rather than a vocation.

Other fathers saw their sons' transitions to adulthood as delayed because of indecision or difficulty in establishing a career. Karl, a regional planner, described his son as less successful than he because his son only entered the formal workforce at age 30. His son now works as a language translation software designer. Karl explained, "This is his first real job. ... At his age, I owned a house, and a better car. We just had more assets." In contrast his son has

... mixed play in with his lifelong goals. He lived a year in Europe, and he took one year off of college to work at a ski hill, then he came back and got that English as a Second Language thing [master's degree]. But he's never really worked ... I think he's done a good job of sorting those things out now, though. From what I can tell, he's done a good job of selecting something he enjoys.

Few fathers attributed their sons' delayed entry to adulthood to economic forces, such as the importance of a college degree for securing employment, or the financial pressures facing young adults who entered the labor force in the last decades of the 20th century. Only one father raised such issues. Ray, a factory foreman and father of two, described the challenges facing his 28-year-old son, a college graduate working in corporate sales:

He's got a college education, but he's having a hard time. With the economy and the way the job market is today. ... things have changed as far as the demands on employees. He's been struggling to get ahead in his chosen field, which is sales. There's a lot of competition there and long working hours. ... I think the new generation of workers is having a much harder time to be successful and to make a lot of money in certain fields.

CONCLUSION

This research has explored the ways that normative expectations and economic realities molded the work and family experiences of a cohort of men who came of age in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the implications of these experiences for their self-evaluations at midlife. The study's findings have potentially important implications for understanding the ways that older adults evaluate personal success during periods of social change, and the ways that these self-evaluations are affected by intergenerational social comparison processes.

First, the findings provide insights into how one cohort of men conceptualizes success, and the ways that their criteria for defining success affect their self-evaluations as they review their past choices and experiences. The fathers recognized that work and family are greedy institutions (Coser, 1974), and that the pursuit of success in one domain may reduce the time or effort one can dedicate to the other. The fathers felt that they could not pursue their own career

aspirations because the constraints of the good provider role confined them to secure and well-paying—though not necessarily personally rewarding—jobs. At the same time, however, the pursuit of financial success prevented men from spending time with their children. In retrospect, the men reported mixed feelings: regret over lost time with their children, yet pride that the hours devoted to paid employment provided financial security for their children. Despite these mixed feelings, several of the fathers felt that they were more successful than their sons precisely because they were able to provide for their families. In contrast, their sons were able to pursue their personal career goals, yet most also delayed marriage and childbearing and thus were not yet considered successful in their fathers' eyes. The quantitative analyses also suggest that the fathers define work success in terms of fulfilling the good provider role; fathers of unmarried and childless sons were much more likely to view themselves as more successful than their sons.

Whereas many sociological studies of perceived success are based on the assumption that success is defined largely on the basis of occupational status or income (e.g., Della Fave, 1974), the fathers' interviews revealed that personal definitions of work success also may reflect the attainment of other equally desirable social goals, including maturity and being a good father and provider. It is also possible, however, that the fathers' retrospective life appraisals focus specifically on the fulfillment of the good provider role as a way to maintain positive self-evaluations. Past research on social comparisons has suggested that if self-evaluations are threatened, individuals will focus their attention on those life domains where they feel superior to the reference person (Taylor & Lobel, 1989). If the fathers' self-evaluations were threatened by their belief that their sons had the benefits of greater latitude in career choice, or more time with their children than they themselves had, the fathers may focus on the one domain where they feel superior to their sons: in the pursuit of the good provider role.

The tendency to focus on those comparison domains in which one perceives that he or she is superior may be an important self-enhancement strategy during periods of social change. Although current social norms define successful fatherhood in terms of "involved" parenting (Townsend, 2002), most midlife fathers cannot

redo their pasts and spend more time with their children. They can focus on their successful performance of the breadwinner role, however, and their contributions to their children's educational and economic success. In this way, the fathers may maintain positive self-evaluations even if their past actions do not mesh with the current cultural ideals. (Others may enter second marriages and establish new families later in life; these new families may provide a fresh opportunity for active and involved parenting.)

The findings also point to a potential limitation in social comparison theory. The theory is formulated to focus on domain-specific comparisons and does not take into consideration that success in one domain may require compensations in other equally important domains. Classic social comparison theory suggests that comparing one's self with a superior other leads to negative self-evaluations (Festinger, 1954). Recent theoretical perspectives suggest that comparing one's self with a more successful person may enhance one's self-evaluations if a person feels either very close to or responsible for the successes of the other (McFarland et al., 2001; Tesser, 1988). My findings did not directly support either perspective. Rather, this study showed that men who compared themselves favorably with their sons enjoyed elevated self-acceptance only when they also were very close with their sons. Perceived occupational success enhanced self-evaluations only when it occurred along with, rather than at the expense of, close personal relationships.

This study has several limitations. First, it is based on the assumption that adult sons are an appropriate comparison group for midlife fathers as they engage in life review. The Wisconsin Longitudinal Study did not ask respondents whether they think of their children as a relevant comparison group, however. Nevertheless, the fathers' comparisons reflect their and their sons' objective characteristics, and fewer than 2% of men responded *don't know* to the social comparison question, suggesting that they can effectively compare their lives with their sons'. Second, the quantitative analyses focused on a narrowly defined comparison domain: work. Moreover, the father's longest-ever job was considered the sole indicator of his work success. Late-life career redirections pursued after one's children are grown were not considered. Fathers who were dissatisfied with their earlier work experiences may have pursued

new career directions when freed from daily constraints of the breadwinner role (Carr & Sheridan, 2001). Future research should explore the effects of a broad array of intergenerational comparisons on fathers' emotional well-being, and identify the ways that relative success in one domain may be, in part, conditional upon decisions made in other life domains.

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