

## **"My Daughter Has a Career; I Just Raised Babies": The Psychological Consequences of Women's Intergenerational Social Comparisons\***

DEBORAH CARR  
Rutgers University

*I examine how midlife women, who came of age in the 1950s, compare their career accomplishments with those of their young adult daughters who came of age in the 1970s. Analyses are based on quantitative and qualitative data from the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study, which has tracked a sample of adults since their high school graduation in 1957. Nearly two-thirds of the mothers report that they have been less successful than their daughters; yet these unfavorable comparisons are linked only weakly to self-esteem. The open-ended interviews suggest that the mothers who rate themselves as "less successful" than their daughters maintain positive self-evaluations by characterizing their own decision to give family responsibilities priority over career pursuits as "in step" with their cohort peers; by attributing their less successful careers to cohort differences in the freedom to choose one's career; and by focusing on their daughters' difficulties in balancing work and family demands.*

Midlife is characterized as the stage in the life course when adults review their past accomplishments and gauge how successful they have been in major life domains, including work and family. Those who evaluate their lives as meaningful and successful typically enjoy emotional well-being (Levinson et al. 1978; Levinson and Levinson 1996; Neugarten 1968), while those who fall short of their own or others' expectations may suffer regret or engage in self-criticism (Carr 1997; Gilovich and Medvec 1995; Landman and Manis 1992). The criteria for evaluating a "successful" life may be unstable, however,

and this instability may be particularly pronounced for current cohorts of midlife and older adults.

Current cohorts of midlife women and men came of age in the 1950s; most were socialized to specialize in family and work roles, respectively. At that time, young men expected to become the primary breadwinners and to leave most childrearing responsibilities to their wives; young women expected to exit the paid labor force while their children were young (Bernard 1981; Williams 2000). Behaviors generally complied with these expectations: in 1960, fewer than 10 percent of married women with young children worked for pay, while fathers of young children reported nearly universal full-time employment (Hayghe 1990).

Social changes since the late 1960s have created a new normative context in which women and men are expected to be *both* successful workers *and* involved parents (Carr 2002; Kaufman and Uhlenberg 2000; Williams 2000). Given this normative shift, midlife women who complied with the mid-twentieth-century expectation that they should stay home with their children (rather than work for pay outside the home) may suffer regret or self-criticism, especially if they use the contemporary cultural ideal as

\* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2001 annual meetings of the American Sociological Association. I would like to thank John Schulenberg, Pamela Smock, Elaine Wethington, the anonymous reviewers, and the editor for their helpful comments. The author was supported by Grant AG 16545 from the National Institute on Aging. The Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (WLS) receives its principal support from the National Institute on Aging (Grants AG 9775 and AG 13613). A public-use version of the quantitative data from the WLS is available from the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research at the University of Michigan. Direct correspondence to Deborah Carr, Department of Sociology and Institute for Health, Health Care Policy and Aging Research, Rutgers University, 30 College Ave., New Brunswick, NJ 08901; carrds@sociology.rutgers.edu.

the standard for evaluating their past decisions and experiences (Helson and Picano 1990; Landman et al. 1995; Stewart and Vandewater 1999).

I propose that midlife women may use their adult daughters' work and family lives as a benchmark for evaluating their own lives, and that these evaluations may have implications for the mothers' emotional well-being. The young adult daughters, raised in the 1970s, were direct beneficiaries of the women's movement of the 1960s, and enjoy richer educational and occupational opportunities than did their mothers. The daughters' lives may provide a tangible example of the work and family arrangements promoted as the cultural ideal in the late twentieth century. The ways in which mothers compare their lives with those of their daughters, their explanations for the observed differences (or similarities), and the psychological consequences of these comparisons may provide important insights showing how adults protect their self-esteem during periods of social change, when the criteria for evaluating a "successful life" may be in flux.

Using social comparison theory as a guiding framework, I identify the characteristics of midlife mothers who compare themselves favorably versus unfavorably with their adult daughters in regard to workplace accomplishments; examine whether and how these comparisons affect mothers' self-esteem; and explore mothers' explanations for why their work and family experiences differ from (or resemble) their daughters'. The analyses are based on both quantitative and qualitative data from the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (WLS), a long-term study of more than 10,000 Wisconsin high school graduates from the class of 1957.

## BACKGROUND

Research on life review suggests that midlife and older adults evaluate their past accomplishments critically; these evaluations have important implications for psychological well-being and the successful transition to late life (Carr 1997; Landman 1993; Levinson et al. 1978; Levinson and Levinson 1996; Neugarten 1968; Stewart and Vandewater 1999). The criteria for defining and evaluat-

ing one's successes and shortcomings may be unclear, however, for current cohorts of midlife adults. Young adults raised in the 1950s were socialized to specialize in gender-differentiated work and family roles; yet stark social changes in the subsequent decades have created a new normative context in which both genders are expected to hold the roles of both worker and parent (Williams 2000). Thus the gender-typed choices and accomplishments of midlife women today (and men, to a lesser degree) may be subtly devalued in the current normative context, which upholds a new definition of "success" (Gerson 1985; Kaufman and Uhlenberg 2000; Williams 2000).

Social change brings an additional consequence as well: generational differences in values, attitudes, and life experiences are most pronounced during periods of substantial social change (Mannheim 1952). Young men and women today are much more likely than their parents to share equally in household responsibilities (Shelton and John 1996), while young women are more likely than their mothers to have graduated from college, to work at a professional occupation, and to continue working for pay while raising children (Carr 2002; Spain and Bianchi 1996). Consequently young women today typically enjoy higher earnings and higher-status occupations than did their mothers at their age (Spain and Bianchi 1996). Their accomplishments may serve as an important (and inescapable) benchmark when their midlife mothers evaluate their own past choices. These intergenerational social comparisons may bring into sharp focus the constraints imposed on women's options and opportunities in earlier decades.

## *Psychological Implications of Social Comparisons*

Social comparisons, or comparisons with significant others (Festinger 1954), are an important source of self-evaluation, particularly in social contexts marked by ambiguity and uncertainty (Festinger 1954; Suls and Mullen 1982). In its original formulation, social comparison theory proposed that individuals have a drive to evaluate their opinions and abilities, and thus compare

themselves with similar others in order to obtain self-information (Festinger 1954). How one's own performance compares with that of the comparison target has important implications for self-esteem and emotional well-being (Suls and Mullen 1982). Upward comparison, or comparison with a more successful person, typically yields a negative self-evaluation, while downward comparison or a comparison with a less successful person, generally enhances self-evaluation (Wills 1981, 1991).<sup>1</sup>

Recent research and theory, however, challenge the assumption that upward comparisons always bring negative psychological consequences. First, negative mood or low well-being may be a cause rather than a consequence of upward comparison (Ahrens and Alloy 1997; Swallow and Kuiper 1988). Second, upward comparison may trigger ambition rather than self-criticism: witnessing another person's superior performance may inspire efforts toward self-improvement (Buunk et al. 1990; Collins 1996; Helgeson and Mickelson 1995; Taylor and Lobel 1989). A "midcourse correction," in which new strategies for achieving success are adopted, may be particularly meaningful for midlife women; their inspired efforts may be bolstered by the educational and occupational opportunities that flourished in the 1970s and beyond (Stewart and Vandewater 1999).

Finally, the psychological consequences of social comparison may be contingent upon personal and situational factors. The self-evaluation maintenance (SEM) model proposes that the psychological effect of a comparison is strongest when the comparison domain is important to the individual (Tesser 1988). The model also proposes that under some conditions, upward comparisons may lead to *enhanced* self-esteem: if the comparer is emotionally close to the target, she can "bask in the reflected glory" of the target's success (Tesser 1988). Research on assimilation effects further suggests that upward comparison enhances psychological well-being when the comparer feels responsi-

ble for the target person's success, and thus experiences the superior outcomes as if they were her or his own (McFarland, Buehler, and McKay 2001; Pelham and Wachsmuth 1995).

Assimilation is a particularly important consideration in exploring the psychological consequences of intergenerational comparisons. Midlife parents' self-evaluations may reflect their children's successes as well as their own, especially among mothers who bore primary responsibility for childrearing (Ryff, Schmutte, and Lee 1996). Preparing one's children for adulthood is considered the primary "developmental task" of midlife (Havighurst 1948). Similarly, Erikson (1963) proposed that the main challenge of midlife is "generativity," or nurturing the accomplishments of the younger generation (rather than pursuing one's own goals and interests).

#### *Social Comparison As a Self-Enhancement Strategy*

Social comparison theory originally focused on the need for accurate *self-evaluation* and the psychological consequences of these evaluations. Recent research, however, identifies the ways in which people use social comparison as a strategy for *self-enhancement* (Helgeson and Mickelson 1995; Wheeler 1991; Wood 1989). Four widely documented self-enhancement strategies are the purposive selection of a comparison target, selection of a comparison domain, self-protective attributions for success and failure, and reliance on "false consensus" beliefs.

First, people can increase their subjective well-being by selectively comparing themselves with someone less successful (Wills 1981, 1991). Second, they may choose strategically the dimension along which the comparison is made (Taylor and Lobel 1989). By identifying and focusing on a domain where one is superior to the comparison target, a person may maintain positive self-evaluations in the face of threat. Third, individuals can make self-enhancing causal attributions for their own (and the target person's) performance outcomes (for elaboration see Heider 1958; Weiner 1985). For instance, people may protect their self-esteem by reasoning that they could have achieved as great a

<sup>1</sup> The psychological effects of comparison (i.e., *relative* levels of achievement) persist above and beyond the effects of one's *actual* level of achievement (Rosenberg and Pearlman 1978).

success as their superior comparison target if given the same opportunities to succeed (Wheeler 1966). Finally, individuals who are outperformed may protect their self-esteem by reasoning that their performance, opinion, or personal attribute is the norm, and that they are "in step" with members of their reference group (Festinger 1954; L. Ross, Greene, and House 1977). The "false consensus" hypothesis elaborates the idea that people tend to overestimate the extent to which their opinions and behaviors are shared by others (Dunning et al. 1990; L. Ross et al. 1977; Sussman et al. 1988).

These four strategies have been documented widely in experimental studies focusing on discrete laboratory-based tasks (e.g., Hakmiller 1966) or on narrowly defined domains such as breast cancer survival (e.g., Taylor and Lobel 1989), infertility, chronic pain, and arthritis (e.g., Affleck and Tennen 1991). Few studies, however, have explored the strategies used to maintain self-esteem when the comparison domain is broad and multidimensional, such as career success. Moreover, few studies take into account the larger social and historical context in which social comparison occurs. Most studies examine comparisons at a single point in time; historical change, individual-level change, and personal histories are neglected. Although studies of autobiographical memory reveal that individuals often focus selectively on aspects of their biography which protect their current self-concept (M. Ross and Conway 1986), this literature has remained relatively independent from social comparison research. When upward social comparisons are imposed, individuals may look beyond their current characteristics and experiences, and may focus on other points in the life course as a way to protect their self-esteem.

Drawing on past theory and research on social comparisons, I examine the factors that affect a mother's social comparison with her daughter in the realm of work. Of particular interest is whether a mother's comparative evaluation is affected by objective indicators of her own and her daughter's achievements, or by her own psychological characteristics (Ahrens and Alloy 1997). Next, I examine the effect of social comparison on women's self-esteem, and explore whether the relationship

between social comparison and mother's self-esteem is moderated by three theoretically guided sets of variables: the importance of work to the mother's identity; the nature of the mother-daughter relationship; and indicators of "midcourse corrections," including the mother's later-life educational and occupational pursuits. Finally, I examine the midlife mothers' explanations for why their daughters' lives differ from (or resemble) their own; these explanations may help to clarify the self-enhancement strategies used when one is facing a potential threat to self-esteem.

## DATA AND METHODS

The analyses are based on quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative analyses identify the predictors and psychological consequences of mothers' social comparisons with their daughters. The qualitative analyses reveal the mothers' interpretations of why their daughters' life courses have diverged from (or converged with) their own; these interpretations provide insights explaining how intergenerational comparison are made, and how mothers' perceptions of doing better or worse than their daughters may influence their self-evaluations.

### *Quantitative Data*

*Sample.* Quantitative analyses are based on data from the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (WLS), a long-term study of a random sample of 10,317 men and women who graduated from Wisconsin high schools in 1957. The respondents first were interviewed during their senior year in high school, when they were 17 or 18 years old (1957). Subsequent interviews were conducted when the respondents were age 36 (in 1975) and 53 or 54 (in 1992–1993). In 1992–1993, topical modules were administered to randomly selected subsamples of respondents.<sup>2</sup> An 80 percent subsample was asked retrospective questions about their lifetime history of depression (Robins et al. 1981), while a 50

<sup>2</sup> The topical modules were administered to random subsamples in order to shorten the overall questionnaire.

percent subsample received a series of questions asking them to compare themselves with one randomly selected child in terms of career accomplishments.

The quantitative analyses presented here focus on the 489 women who completed the 1975 and 1992 telephone surveys (including the questions on social comparison and depression history, administered in the 1992 wave), and the 1992 mail questionnaire, and whose randomly selected child was a daughter.<sup>3</sup> I impose these sample restrictions because self-esteem was evaluated on the 1992 mail questionnaire only, because social comparisons are most relevant when the comparison target is similar to the evaluator along performance-relevant traits such as gender (Festinger 1954), and because depression history may affect both one's comparison style (Ahrens and Alloy 1997) and one's educational and occupational accomplishments (Kessler et al. 1995).

The WLS sample does not represent the U.S. population at large. All sample members graduated from high school, and ethnic minorities are not well represented. One-fifth of the sample is of farm origin, but this proportion is consistent with national estimates for cohorts born in the late 1930s (Hauser et al. 1993). The sample is representative of white high school graduates: among Americans ages 50 to 54 in 1990 and 1991, roughly two-thirds were non-Hispanic whites who completed at least 12 years of school (Kominski and Adams 1992).

*Dependent variables.* Two dependent variables are considered in the quantitative analysis: the mother's social comparison response, and self-acceptance. Mother's social comparison with daughter was evaluated in 1992–1993 with the question "Thinking back to 19xx, when you were age xx (the

same 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 a dichotomy with 1 equal to "worse" or "much worse" and 0 representing "same" or "better." This variable also is used as a predictor in the second part of the analysis, where I examine the effect of social comparison on mothers' self-acceptance.<sup>4</sup>

Self-acceptance ( $\alpha = .68$ ) is one of six dimensions of the Ryff (1989) psychological well-being scale, and is conceptually similar to widely used self-esteem scales (e.g., Rosenberg and Pearlman 1978). High levels of self-acceptance reveal that one holds positive views of oneself and one's accomplishments. Respondents indicate their level of agreement with four statements: (1) In general, I feel confident and positive about myself; (2) I made some mistakes in the past, but I feel that all in all everything has worked out for the best; (3) The past had its ups and downs, but in general, I wouldn't want to change it; and (4) In many ways, I feel disappointed about my achievements in life (reverse-coded).<sup>5</sup> Response categories are strongly

<sup>4</sup> In analyses presented here I use the simple dichotomous measure of work-related social comparison because prior analyses revealed that the single-item measure best fits the data. I also estimated all models using a three-category version (worse/much worse, same, and better/much better) and a continuous six-level version of the social comparison variable. Logistic regression models predicting the dichotomous outcome fit the data significantly more closely than did either multinomial logistic regression models predicting the three-category outcome or OLS models predicting the six-level ordinal variable. I also reestimated OLS regression models predicting self-acceptance; the dichotomous indicator of social comparison fit the data better than either the three-category or the six-level version. In the three-category model, self-esteem was significantly lower for women rating themselves "worse/much worse" than their daughters ( $p \leq .05$ ), although women who reported that they had done "better/much better" did not differ from those women who reported doing the "same" as their daughters ( $p \leq .45$ ). Thus I present only models employing the two-category measure of social comparison.

<sup>5</sup> The original Ryff measure of self-acceptance is based on seven items. I dropped the following three measures because they tap a *comparative* evaluation of one's self, and thus may be confounded with the social comparison measure: (1) I feel like many of the people I know have gotten more out of life than I

<sup>3</sup> Of the 10,317 members of the original WLS sample, 9,139 (88.6% of the 10,317) were reinterviewed in 1975, and 8,493 (82.3% of the 10,317) were reinterviewed in 1992–1993. Mail questionnaires were completed by 6,535 (71%) of the 1975 respondents. The 1992 phone/mail respondents are more likely than the phone-only respondents to be married, to have slightly higher IQ scores, and to report slightly higher incomes. They do not differ with respect to educational attainment or occupational status (Hauser et al. 1993).

agree, moderately agree, slightly agree, slightly disagree, moderately disagree, and strongly disagree. Scores reflect a subject's average response for the four items; higher scores reveal greater self-acceptance.

*Independent variables.* Five sets of predictor variables are considered: mother's status attainment characteristics, mother's family characteristics, mother's socioeconomic background, mother's (retrospective) depression history, and daughter's characteristics. I control objective indicators of mother's and daughter's career success in order to ascertain whether self-esteem is a function of actual or perceived accomplishments. Mother's education is the number of years of schooling completed. Mother's occupational status is the Stevens-Featherman (1981) Total Socioeconomic Index (TSEI) score of the job she has held longest in her life. This scale is an updated version of the widely used Duncan Socioeconomic Index (SEI). TSEI scores range from 13.88 to 90.45: lower scores represent lower-status occupations such as waitress, and higher scores represent high-status occupations such as doctor.<sup>6</sup> Total years of work experience is the number of years a woman has worked for pay, including both full- and part-time employment.

Mother's family characteristics, social background, and depression history characteristics may account in part for both her occupational accomplishments and her current self-esteem. Family characteristics include age at first marriage, current marital status (1 = married; 0 = formerly or never married), and number of children. Mother's socioeconomic background includes number of siblings, whether her mother worked when

the respondent was growing up (1 = mother was employed for pay), and householder's (usually the respondent's father) occupational status in 1957. Occupational status is based on the Duncan SEI scale. Daughter's characteristics include marital status, age, years of completed education, and the occupational status of the job she was holding at the time of interview (or of her most recent job, if she was not currently employed).

Mother's depression history is measured with the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) Diagnostic Interview Schedule (Robins et al. 1981). In 1992, mothers were asked to recall whether and at what ages they experienced their first, worst, and longest spells of depression lasting two weeks or more. Depression at or before age 35 (pre-1975) and depression between ages 35 and 52 (1975 through 1991) are each indicated with a dummy variable: 1 represents at least one spell of depression in the period. I used these indicators because they approximate the time periods before and after the mother was the age of her adult daughter today.<sup>7</sup>

*Potential moderator variables.* Work importance is evaluated with the question "Different people value different things in life. How important to you is work?" (1 = very important; 0 = somewhat, not very, or not at all important). I consider two indicators of the parent-child relationship. One dichotomous variable indicates that the mother feels "very close" to her daughter (0 = not at all, not very, or somewhat close). A second dummy variable indicates that the mother takes "a lot" of credit for her daughter's educational and occupational outcomes (0 = not at all, some, or a little credit). These variables are recoded into dichotomies because of the highly skewed response distributions.

A second set of moderators includes indicators of later-life occupational plans and accomplishments. Women who experience regret over earlier lost or scarce opportunities may respond with a "midcourse correc-

have (reverse-coded); (2) When I compare myself to friends and acquaintances, it makes me feel good about who I am; (3) My attitude about myself is probably not as positive as most people feel about themselves (reverse-coded). The remaining four items closely resemble the items making up the Rosenberg self-esteem scale.

<sup>6</sup> Preliminary models included alternative indicators of occupational success: major occupational group, whether one holds a supervisory role, managerial status, self-employment status, and job characteristics such as workplace demands and controls. The inclusion of these variables did not alter the effect of the work-related social comparison indicator on mother's self-esteem.

<sup>7</sup> Current affective state may bias retrospective reports of depression history: currently distressed respondents may be more likely to report (or recall) past depression. In the present study, however, the correlations between current self-esteem and reports of prior depression are quite low (-.12 to -.15).

tion" and may pursue new opportunities at midlife (Stewart and Vandewater 1999). Thus the analysis examines whether the psychological toll of an unfavorable comparison is less acute for women who obtained further schooling in adulthood (i.e., after age 35), who aspired to a professional occupation at age 35 (in 1975), or who held a professional occupation at age 53 (in 1992). In 1975, respondents were asked to name the occupation they hoped to hold 10 years in the future. In 1992, respondents reported their current (or most recent) occupation. In both cases, I recoded specific occupations into broad major occupational groups (according to the U.S. Census). Dichotomous variables indicate whether a professional occupation was named; the reference category includes lower white-collar, blue-collar, and farming occupations.

#### *Qualitative Data*

The qualitative analysis draws on in-depth interviews conducted in 1998–1999 (ages 59–60) with a randomly selected subsample of 200 (100 men and 100 women). The subsample was limited to persons living within a five-hour drive of Madison, WI. More than 75 percent of the WLS sample lived in Wisconsin at that time; thus the geographic restriction should not bias the results. More than 90 percent of the eligible persons contacted agreed to be interviewed. The qualitative subsample does not differ from the full sample in education, occupational status, self-acceptance, or family characteristics.

Interviews were conducted with respondents in their own homes. The interviews produced detailed information on topics including work, family relationships, and health. The data presented here come from questions about social comparisons with respondents' adult children, and from explanations for these comparisons. Tape recordings of all interviews were transcribed, and emergent themes were content coded. I conducted computer searches on the codes in order to identify all references to information relevant to my research questions. The quotes selected for presentation illustrate these themes and are typical of other responses.

In the qualitative portion of this paper, I seek to explore and generate hypotheses—not to test hypotheses—about the ways social comparisons are made, explained, and interpreted. The interview excerpts presented here are based on the 46 women whose randomly selected child was a daughter. A 50 percent sample of these interviews was selected randomly for presentation in this paper; the 23 cases include 17 women who rated themselves worse off than their daughters, and six who rated themselves more successful or the same as their daughters.<sup>8</sup> Biographical information is summarized in Appendix Table A1.<sup>9</sup>

### RESULTS: QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

#### *Bivariate Analysis*

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for the analytic sample as well as the results of *t*-tests contrasting descriptive statistics for women who report doing worse than their daughters versus better or the same. (Zero-order correlations among all variables are presented in Appendix Table B1). Most of the women (65%) say they are less successful than their daughters, while 23 percent report that they have done equally well, and 12 percent say they have done better. The daughters range in age from 22 to 40, with an average age of 32. On average, the daughters have more education than their mothers (14 versus 13 years) and hold higher-status occupations (TSEI scores of 42 versus 38). The disparities between mothers' and daughters'

<sup>8</sup> Of the 100 women who participated in open-ended interviews, 96 percent had children. Roughly one-half of these ( $n = 46$ ) were asked about their daughters. Of these 46, two-thirds ( $n = 32$ ) had reported in 1992 that they were "less successful" than their daughters in regard to workplace accomplishments, while one-third ( $n = 14$ ) reported that they were doing "the same as" or "better than" their daughters. Interviews from a random 50 percent sample of these women are presented (16 who reported doing worse, and seven who reported doing better or the same).

<sup>9</sup> Biographical data presented in Appendix Table A1 are altered slightly to protect the respondents' anonymity. Changes are minor, however, such as increasing or decreasing educational attainment by one year, or altering occupational titles among comparable jobs (e.g., secondary versus elementary school teacher).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, by Social Comparison: Women of Wisconsin Longitudinal Study, 1957-1992/93 (N = 489)

Dependent Variable	Total Sample	Work, Compared With Daughter	
		Worse	Same/Better
Self-Acceptance	4.79 (.85)	4.72 (.88)	4.90* (.80)
Independent Variables			
Has done worse than daughter at work	.65 (.48)		
Has done the same as daughter at work	.23 (.42)		
Has done better than daughter at work	.12 (.33)		
Mother's Status Characteristics			
Education (in years)	13.3 (1.90)	13.1 (1.74)	13.67*** (2.11)
Occupational status, longest-ever job	37.45 (17.12)	35.73 (16.03)	40.63*** (18.59)
Years of work experience	21.55 (8.00)	20.55 (8.36)	23.27*** (6.88)
Mother's Family Characteristics			
Age at first marriage	21.49 (2.60)	21.21 (2.36)	22.00*** (2.93)
Number of children	3.25 (1.48)	3.33 (1.47)	3.09† (1.49)
Currently married	.84 (.37)	.87 (.34)	.79* (.41)
Mother's Social Background			
Occupational status, householder, 1957	33.6 (23.2)	31.32 (21.35)	37.79** (25.81)
Number of siblings	3.48 (2.67)	3.72 (2.74)	3.03** (2.49)
Mother worked when R was growing up (1957)	.38 (.49)	.36 (.49)	.41 (.49)
Mother's Retrospective Depression History			
Had 2-week depression spell before age 35	.10 (.30)	.10 (.30)	.10 (.30)
Had 2-week depression spell, age 35-52	.18 (.38)	.16 (.37)	.20 (.40)
Daughter's Characteristics			
Age	32.04 (3.91)	32.49 (3.55)	31.21*** (4.39)
Education (in years)	14.07 (2.22)	14.28 (2.28)	13.69** (2.09)
Current occupational status	41.66 (18.60)	45.15 (18.56)	35.21*** (16.93)
Currently married	.59 (.49)	.62 (.49)	.52* (.50)
Formerly married	.07 (.26)	.07 (.26)	.08 (.27)
Never married	.34 (.47)	.30 (.46)	.40* (.49)
Number of children	.85 (1.02)	.80 (.96)	.96† (1.10)
Potential Moderator Variables			
Work is "highly important" to respondent	.81 (.40)	.79 (.41)	.84† (.37)
Respondent and daughter are "very close"	.80 (.40)	.81 (.39)	.76† (.43)

(continued on next page)



Table 1. (Continued)

	Total Sample	Work, Compared With Daughter	
		Worse	Same/Better
Respondent feels responsible for child's success	.45 (.50)	.47 (.50)	.41 (.49)
Aspired to professional occupation, 1975	.32 (.47)	.29 (.45)	.38* (.49)
Returned to college after age 35 (1975)	.27 (.44)	.24 (.43)	.30 (.46)
Professional occupation, 1992/most recent job	.34 (.48)	.29 (.46)	.44*** (.50)
Occupational status (TSEI), 1992/most recent job	40.74 (16.6)	38.81 (15.15)	44.29*** (18.55)
<i>N</i>	489	317	172

Note: Two-tailed *t*-tests evaluate significant differences in means between the two social comparison categories.  
†  $p \leq .10$ ; \*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$

accomplishments are widest among women who report doing less well than their daughters.

Women who believe that they have done worse than their daughters have worked in significantly lower-status occupations than mothers who offer more favorable self-evaluations (TSEI scores of 36 versus 41,  $p \leq .001$ ). They also have less education (13.1 versus 13.7 years,  $p \leq .001$ ) and less work experience (20.6 versus 23.3 years,  $p \leq .001$ ); their fathers held lower-status jobs in 1957 (31 versus 37.8,  $p \leq .01$ ). Women who describe themselves as less successful also report lower self-acceptance scores (4.7 versus 4.9,  $p \leq .05$ ); yet they do not differ in terms of depression history.

Women who report doing less well than their daughters also lead more traditional family lives; they were younger at first marriage (age 21 versus 22,  $p \leq .001$ ), have more children (3.3 versus 3.1,  $p \leq .10$ ), and are more likely to be currently married (87 versus 79%,  $p \leq .05$ ). The two groups of women also differ as to their daughters' characteristics: mothers who report doing worse than their daughters are comparing themselves with daughters who are older (age 32.5 versus 31,  $p \leq .001$ ), more educated (14.3 versus 13.7 years,  $p \leq .01$ ), and working in higher-status occupations (TSEI scores of 45 versus 35,  $p \leq .001$ ).

The two comparison subgroups do not differ in the degree to which they claim responsibility for their daughters' accomplishments, although women who say that they have done worse than their daughters

are slightly more likely to report being "very close" to them (81 versus 76%,  $p \leq .10$ ). Work accomplishments are less salient for women who perceive doing worse than their daughters; these women are slightly less likely to report that work accomplishments are "very important" to them (79 versus 84%,  $p \leq .10$ ). Perceived shortcomings in one's work life, however, do not appear to trigger a "mid-course correction." Rather, women who evaluated themselves as less successful than their daughters also evidenced poorer occupational prospects later in life.

#### *Predictors of Social Comparison Response*

Next I estimated logistic regression models in order to identify the factors that influence the mothers' social comparisons. The outcome variable is a response of "mother has done worse/much worse," while the reference category comprises responses of "same" or "better". Odds ratios and *p*-values are presented in Table 2. Model 1 displays the effects of mother's and daughter's work and family characteristics; the two latter models evaluate whether the social comparison is affected by the mother's self-esteem (Model 2) or by prior depression (Model 3).

Mothers' social comparisons reflect their own and their daughters' actual accomplishments as well as characteristics that enable workplace achievement, including later marriage, more extensive work experience, and a more affluent social background. Daughters' characteristics also predict mothers' comparisons: as the daughter's occupational status

Table 2. Logistic Regression Predicting Mother's Evaluation That She Is "Doing Worse" in Work Life Than Daughter: Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (N = 489)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<b>Mother's Status Characteristics</b>			
Education (in years)	.89 (.13)	.90 (.16)	.89 (.14)
Occupational status, longest-ever occupation	.99 (.17)	.99 (.20)	.99 (.18)
Total years of work experience	.94*** (.000)	.94*** (.000)	.94*** (.000)
<b>Mother's Family Characteristics</b>			
Age at first marriage	.92† (.09)	.91† (.08)	.91† (.09)
Currently married	1.16 (.62)	1.18 (.57)	1.08 (.79)
Number of children	1.03 (.68)	1.03 (.72)	1.03 (.71)
<b>Mother's Social Background</b>			
Occupational status, householder (1957-61)	.99** (.004)	.99** (.004)	.99** (.003)
Number of siblings	1.07 (.11)	1.08† (.09)	1.07 (.13)
Mother worked for pay when R was growing up (1957)	1.04 (.85)	1.06 (.81)	1.05 (.83)
<b>Daughter's Characteristics</b>			
Age	1.05 (.18)	1.05 (.17)	1.05 (.17)
Education (in years)	1.08 (.17)	1.08 (.18)	1.09 (.15)
Current occupational status	1.03*** (.000)	1.03*** (.000)	1.03*** (.000)
Never married	.56* (.04)	.57† (.06)	.55* (.04)
Formerly married	.78 (.56)	.81 (.61)	.76 (.51)
Number of children	.62*** (.000)	.61*** (.000)	.62*** (.000)
<b>Mother's Retrospective Depression History</b>			
Self-acceptance		.96 (.17)	
Had 2-week depression spell before 35			1.03 (.93)
Had 2-week depression spell, age 35-52			.69 (.23)
Chi-square; df	107.4; 15	109.2; 16	108.9; 17

Note: Exponentiated betas and *p*-values are presented.

† *p* ≤ .10; \* *p* ≤ .05; \*\* *p* ≤ .01; \*\*\* *p* ≤ .001

increases, the likelihood of a mother's "worse" assessment increases. The more children the daughter has, the less likely the mother is to view herself as worse off. Social comparisons do not reflect mother's feelings toward her daughter, however. Neither the quality of the mother-daughter relationship nor the degree to which the mother takes credit for the daughter's success predicts her social comparison response. (Coefficients not shown.)

Comparisons also do not reflect the mother's current or past affective state. Neither current self-acceptance (Model 2) nor depression history (Model 3) is a statistically significant predictor of social comparisons. On the basis of these results, I use OLS regression models rather than structural equation models (which can estimate endogenous relationships) to examine the effect of social comparison on mothers' self-evaluations.

Table 3. OLS Regression Predicting Self-Acceptance, Based on Mother's Social Comparison With Daughter: Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (N = 489)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<b>Mother's Status Characteristics</b>				
Education (in years)	.02 (.03)	.02 (.03)	.02 (.03)	.02 (.03)
Occupational status, longest-ever occupation	.005† (.003)	.005† (.003)	.004† (.002)	.005† (.003)
Total years of work experience	.002 (.005)	-.002 (.005)	-.002 (.005)	-.002 (.005)
<b>Family Characteristics</b>				
Age at first marriage	-.04* (.02)	-.04* (.02)	-.04* (.02)	-.04* (.02)
Currently married	.35* (.11)	.36** (.11)	.36*** (.11)	.36*** (.11)
Number of children	.01 (.03)	.01 (.03)	.01 (.03)	.02 (.03)
<b>Daughter's Characteristics</b>				
Age	-.02 (.01)	-.02 (.01)	-.01 (.01)	-.01 (.01)
Education (in years)	.02 (.02)	.02 (.02)	.02 (.02)	.02 (.02)
Occupational status, current/latest job	-.004 (.002)	-.003 (.002)	-.003 (.002)	-.004 (.002)
Never married	.02 (.10)	.004 (.10)	.004 (.10)	.009 (.10)
Formerly married	.19 (.15)	.18 (.15)	.17 (.15)	.20 (.15)
Number of children	.03 (.05)	.02 (.05)	.004 (.05)	.008 (.05)
<b>Social Comparison</b>				
Mother has done "worse" than daughter in work life		-.18* (.09)	-.05 (.11)	-.06 (.11)
<b>Potential Moderators</b>				
Mother takes "a lot" of credit for child's success			.36** (.13)	.32* (.13)
Mother takes credit X "worse" comparison			-.32* (.16)	-.31* (.16)
Mother and daughter are "very close"				.23*** (.10)
Constant	5.27 (.79)	5.43 (.79)	5.19 (.79)	4.88 (.80)
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.052	.058	.069	.078

Note: Unstandardized regression coefficients (and standard errors) are presented. Depression history and mother's social background characteristics are controlled in all models.

†  $p \leq .10$ ; \*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$

#### *Effect of Social Comparison on Mother's Self-Acceptance*

Table 3 displays regression models predicting mothers' self-acceptance. Model 1 estimates the effects of mothers' and daughter's objective work and family characteristics only (net of mother's depression history and social background); Model 2 incorporates an indicator of social comparison. Model 2 reveals that mothers who rate themselves as less successful than their daughters

have lower self-esteem than mothers who rate themselves more positively ( $b = -.18, p \leq .05$ ), even when objective status attainment characteristics are controlled. The magnitude of the relationship is small, however: an unfavorable social comparison is associated with a decrement in self-acceptance equal to just one-fifth of a standard deviation, and explains less than 1 percent of the variance in self-acceptance. Although an unfavorable comparison is associated with mothers' poorer self-esteem, the impact is modest.

Next I evaluated whether the psychological consequences of social comparison are contingent on the quality of the relationship, domain salience, and "midcourse corrections." I estimated Model 2 seven additional times, each time adding one two-way interaction term between social comparison and each of the seven potential moderator variables. Only one of the seven interaction terms was statistically significant at the  $p \leq .10$  level: the extent to which the mother takes credit for her daughter's accomplishments. Model 3 incorporates this statistically significant interaction term. (All other models are available on request). Finally, Model 4 evaluates whether the effects observed in Model 3 change when mother-daughter closeness is controlled. The interaction term from Model 4 is plotted in Figure 1. Mothers who believe that they are just as successful as their daughters (or more so) enjoy a self-esteem boost, yet this benefit holds only for women who feel responsible for their daughters' accomplishments. This finding suggests that mothers' self-esteem may be enhanced by viewing their own accomplishments as a key part of their daughters' success, perhaps by serving as a role model.

The results presented thus far depart from past studies, which show the negative psychological consequences of upward comparisons (e.g., Heidrich and Ryff 1993; Rosenberg and Pearlin 1978; Wills 1981). My findings also depart from propositions that upward comparisons enhance self-esteem when the comparer and the target are emo-

tionally close (Tesser 1988) or when the comparer has a personal stake in the target's outcome (Pelham and Wachsmuth 1995). Rather, my analyses show no disadvantage (or benefit) to self-esteem among women who perceive themselves to have done less well than their daughters. The only mothers with enhanced self-esteem are those who view themselves as equally successful or more than successful than their daughters, yet who also take credit for their daughters' outcomes.

These findings raise two questions: How do women maintain their self-esteem in the face of an upward comparison with their daughters? And why do successful women who take responsibility for their daughters' outcomes enjoy elevated self-esteem, even when they view those outcomes as lesser than (or the same as) their own?

#### RESULTS: QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

I used the open-ended interviews to highlight and contrast the explanations given by women who viewed themselves as less successful than their daughters, versus the same or more successful. Women who described themselves as less successful than their daughters offered four explanations. First, they attributed their daughters' success to unique personal characteristics such as ambition and their adeptness at juggling work and family roles. Second, these mothers referred to macrosocial trends that benefited the younger generation, such as the availabil-

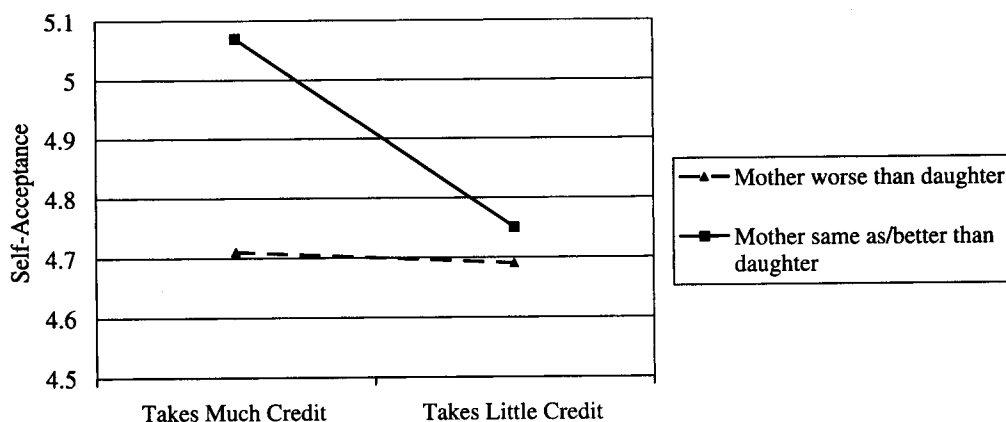


Figure 1. Mother's Social Comparison, by Perceived Responsibility for Daughter's Success

ity of college scholarships. Third, they emphasized that their daughters actively chose their vocations, while they themselves were pushed or passively guided into their work and family trajectories. Finally, they described their daughters' lives as mixed blessings: the daughters' careers often are accompanied by marital strain and difficulties in blending work and family. The mothers viewed their own decision to focus solely (or primarily) on child rearing as a more desirable, less stressful life path. In contrast, mothers who rated themselves as more (or equally) successful reported that their choices served as a model for their daughters' lives.

#### *Daughters' Unique Traits As Enablers of Success*

Most WLS mothers who rated their daughters as more successful than themselves attributed their daughter's successes to their ability, hard work, and competence in juggling multiple roles. Betty, a high school graduate who was employed as a social worker after raising her four children, boasted that her daughter had two college degrees: "She has an associate's degree in dietary tech and another in human resources and business administration. And to get those degrees she's really worked her little butt off." Her daughter is a hospital manager.

The mothers also viewed the differences between their own and their daughters' paths as a reflection of the daughters' ability to juggle work and family demands simultaneously, rather than sequentially. Carol, a college graduate who taught high school before leaving her job to have children, noted that her two daughters—a marketing professional and a lawyer—managed their lives differently from her. "They've continued on with their professional lives and managed to coordinate that with their family lives. I didn't do that. I chose just the family life. They chose to work professionally and I chose to stay at home and be a mother and a wife." Diane, a homemaker, offered a similar explanation for her daughter's career as a hospital administrator: "I was more of a homebody and my daughter is more career-oriented. She sets goals for herself and makes sure she [meets them].

She's done everything she ever set her mind to. I was just a homebody. I just wanted to stay home and raise babies."

Despite their retrospective accounts of focusing solely on domestic roles, the majority of the mothers *did* juggle work and family responsibilities when they were in their twenties and thirties. Nearly 70 percent of the WLS mothers were working for pay at age 35 (roughly the same age as their daughters are today). Yet, the mothers now recount their pasts so as to comply with the 1950s edict that "good mothers" should stay at home with their children (Coontz 1992; Williams 2000). Evelyn, a high school graduate, worked at several part-time jobs when she was raising her children in the 1960s and 1970s; yet she insisted that her work was unimportant both to her and to her family's economic well-being. She recalled: "When the kids were little, I had a lot of different jobs. When my husband came home from work, I cleaned the post office uptown, I cleaned the basement of the Catholic church. . . . Okay, so I had little jobs here and there. But they were just part-time jobs. What I wouldn't do to get extra money for Christmas gifts back then!"

#### *Educational Expansion: Macrosocial Explanations for Daughters' Successes*

The mothers often attributed their daughters' successes to gender-neutral social changes over the past three decades, including expanded access to higher education and the availability of college scholarships. Evelyn, who has two children, indicated that her 37-year old daughter was doing much better than she herself had done. The daughter, a college graduate, works as an activities director at a psychiatric hospital. Evelyn attributed her daughter's success to changes in the way young adults pay for college, and to normative support for college attendance. She recalled: "When I graduated, I don't think there was one person in my class that went on to school. It was like, you graduate and go out and find a job. I don't think there were as many grants and things like that. My folks wouldn't have been able to afford to send me."

Nearly all the women referred to changes in access to higher education; yet

none referred directly to changes in gender roles or expanded opportunities for *women* as a source of their daughters' advantages. Betty, the social worker whose daughter works as a hospital manager, hinted at gender-related social changes, however: "I think [my daughter] had more advantages growing up as a child . . . When I wanted to go to college my father threw the [recruiting officer] out of the house . . . because girls didn't go to college [at that time]."

Although Betty reported that women received little support or encouragement for their educational pursuits in the late 1950s, the WLS survey data from 1957 reveal a different story: 49 percent of the female high school seniors reported that their parents encouraged them to go to college, while 44 percent stated that their teachers did so. Again, the women's recollections of their own and their peers' early education, work, and family experiences diverge from the patterns revealed in the earlier WLS survey data.

*The Development of Agency: Daughters' Choice of Their Own Life Path*

Overwhelmingly, the mothers who rated their daughters as "more successful" reported that their daughters had purposefully chosen careers to which they were highly committed, and which matched their skills and interests. In contrast, the mothers recalled that when they were young adults, they had few independent ideas about how their work lives would unfold. They simply complied with the expectations that others imposed on them. The mothers commonly reported that career planning was not available when they were growing up, and that young people did not think about designing a life plan that would bring them professional and personal rewards.

Frances, a high school graduate who worked as a customer service representative at the telephone company for over 30 years, compared herself with her 33-year-old daughter, a children's book illustrator with a bachelor's degree in art and design. Frances commented about her daughter: "She says, 'They'll just pay me to draw all day.' She's got a college degree and she's doing what she

really likes to do. I don't know that at [the telephone company] I was doing what I really liked to do. I think kids nowadays know what they want to do. We were kind of pushed, or told what to do." Pauline, a high school graduate with two daughters, both of whom have master's degrees, offered a similar characterization: "I worked with [company name] Paper Company 'cause my father and my cousins worked there and my uncle, and everybody in town wanted a job at [company name] Paper Company. I didn't like school so I just thought 'Well, that's good enough, that's what I will do.' Silly me, huh?"

Nearly all the women mentioned the perceived lack of personal control in charting their life course. Helen, mother of five children, worked at various blue-collar and low-paying jobs throughout her life, including stints as a factory worker, a mail handler, and a maid. In recalling her early work life, she said: "I got married in high school. I really didn't think about the future, or work, or anything. . . . You know, now everyone pushes so much to think about future; we never did." Lois, a high school graduate with two daughters, recalled: "I wanted to be a librarian but felt that I would lose my boyfriend if I went away to school. We had a good beauty school in town so I went there instead." Nancy, mother of nine children and a radiologic technician, recounted a similar experience: "I didn't have a real firm commitment to anything. I just thought, well, I'll go to this [local] X-ray school. I thought about it a little bit, but not like these young kids today and all the goals they have. They're real serious."

Almost unanimously, when the women discussed their limited control over their work and family experiences, they emphasized that most of their peers behaved exactly as they did. This perception of being in step with their cohort was summarized most clearly by Irene, a high school graduate who worked as a traffic clerk: "I didn't make any great plans for my career [when I was in high school] because at that time it was basically, you graduate from high school, get married, and have a family. That was the focus at the time. This was what I think about 99 percent of the people in my [graduating] class did. That's the way it was."

The data obtained in 1957 portray a different (and less restrictive) scenario. One-third of the WLS women attended college immediately after high school, and only 25 percent had married within two years of graduating from high school. The mothers' retrospective accounts offer a more confining picture than was reported in 1957; these recollections may reinforce the choices of women who took the traditional path of early marriage and childbearing.

*Work-Family Strain: The Downside of Women's Progress?*

The midlife mothers who view their daughters as more successful than themselves are proud of their children; yet few describe their daughters' lives as more desirable than their own. Most believe that the younger women's simultaneous pursuit of work and family goals carries considerable psychological costs. The strains of combining work and family, the stressors of professional careers, and the difficulties accompanying nontraditional family forms—whether step-families, single parenthood, or singlehood—are viewed as problems unique to the daughters' generation. Mothers referred to their daughters' "stresses" as something that they themselves had been spared.

Betty, the social worker whose daughter works as a hospital manager, described her daughter's life as more difficult than her own had been: "Her husband wanted her at home, she wanted a career, so there's conflict there." In contrast, she herself had been single-minded about pursuing her role of wife and mother when in her thirties: "I didn't have any conflicts going on at that time. I pretty much followed my husband's wishes. . . . I was just raising kids, where she's had 20 million things going on in her life. She's raising two kids and going to college at night and weekends. That's a real big strain on two people."

In addition to grappling with work-family demands, the daughters also are described as having stressful, and often nontraditional, family arrangements. Helen, the high school graduate with five children who worked as a mail handler, a factory worker, and a maid, observed that her daughter, at age 37, was

much less happy than she herself had been at that age. Her daughter had graduated from college and was working as a scheduler at a factory, but her life was complicated by her marital status and her stepchildren: "She's having a lot of problems. She married somebody with three kids, and they're giving her a lot of trouble. One week he's got the kids, and then [the ex-wife of the daughter's current husband] has the kids. I never had the problems she has . . . the stress."

The mothers are not only concerned about their married daughters' work-family stressors, but they are also troubled by their unmarried daughters' personal lives. Janice, a bank teller whose daughter is a junior high school teacher, feels that despite her daughter's education and career, her personal life is not as good as Janice's had been when she was in her late twenties: "At her age, I was married, I had a house, had a husband. She's single, no boyfriend, she lives in an apartment by herself. I'd say it's better for her to be married, but that's just my opinion." By focusing on family (rather than career) experiences, the mothers may maintain positive evaluations of their own life choices.

*Daughters' Choices As Reflections of Mothers' Positive Models*

Women who considered themselves to be as successful as their daughters (or more successful) emphasized that their choices provided a model for their daughters. These mothers' own early choices were affirmed when they saw their daughters making similar decisions for their work and family lives. Tammy, a college graduate and elementary schoolteacher, pointed to the similarities between herself and her daughter, a college graduate who is working part-time in display merchandising while she raises her young children: "We both have the best of both worlds. We worked when we wanted to, to buy luxury things. We both have college degrees; our husbands are both professionals." She also boasted that her daughter had graduated from her own alma mater.

Wilma, a college graduate who operates her own home decor business, described the life of her daughter, a college graduate who formerly worked as a nurse: "She chose not

to work. She doesn't have to work, so she stays home with her two little ones. She always thought it was important to stay home with her children because I always did that." In sum, these mothers appear to gain self-affirmation from seeing their daughters structure their work and family lives in ways similar to their own—and in accordance with the midcentury cultural ideal rather than the cultural ideal promoted during the daughters' formative years.

### DISCUSSION

Women growing up in the 1950s encountered a drastically changing social world in subsequent decades. Women of the WLS cohort were raised to believe that "good mothers" were full-time homemakers who gave family responsibilities priority over work demands; their daughters' generation was encouraged to pursue career and family goals simultaneously (Baruch 1984; Coontz 1992; Williams 2000). This particular historical context provides an opportunity to study personal strategies for maintaining self-esteem during a period of substantial social change.

At midlife, nearly two-thirds of the WLS mothers reported that they were less successful than their daughters in terms of work accomplishments. These comparative evaluations were linked closely to both mothers' and daughters' actual work and family experiences, and did not reflect the mothers' depression history. In contrast with past research on social comparisons, I found that the mothers' upward comparisons exerted extremely weak effects on self-esteem. Self-esteem was elevated, however, among women who evaluated themselves as equally successful as their daughters or more so, and who felt responsible for their daughters' outcomes. The former finding raised an important question: How do women protect their self-esteem in the face of an inescapable and potentially threatening upward comparison?

The WLS women evidenced four self-protective strategies that may account in part for the relatively weak connection between upward comparison and self-evaluation. First, they viewed their own life choices as "in step" with those of their cohort peers.

Second, they emphasized that their daughters chose their own paths, while they themselves had little control over their choices. Third, they highlighted their daughters' special aptitudes and traits. Finally, they focused on life domains in which they believed their own lives were more rewarding and more successful than their daughters'.

### *Mothers In Step With Cohort Peers*

Overwhelmingly, the mothers described their own work and family experiences as in step with those of their cohort peers. When they explained why they did not attend college or choose careers that fit their interests, they commonly used phrases such as "That's how it was back then." These responses suggest that in periods of considerable social change, people may maintain high levels of self-acceptance by defining their behaviors as both normative and desirable in the earlier (i.e., pre-change) historical context. Experimental research demonstrates that people may overestimate the extent to which their current opinions or behaviors are shared by others (e.g., Dunning et al. 1990; L. Ross et al. 1977). My research reveals that those facing a potential threat to self-esteem also may overestimate the extent to which their past behaviors meshed with their peers' and with prevailing cultural norms endorsing such behaviors.

Although the midlife women mentioned very high levels of consensus for their work-family behaviors (e.g., "Ninety-nine percent of my graduating class did the same thing"), the actual behaviors and plans reported by the WLS women at ages 18 and 35 do not corroborate the more extreme retrospective portrayals offered at age 59. Research on autobiographical memory shows that adults are motivated to protect their current self-concept by recounting the past so as to reveal high levels of personal continuity over time (M. Ross and Conway 1986). These studies, however, typically focus on individual-level traits. My analysis shows that historical context and cohort identity may be additional frameworks that adults use to organize their narratives about early life experiences and accomplishments. This tendency may be heightened during periods of social change,



when cohort differences in values and behaviors are most pronounced, and when the distinctive experiences of one's own generation are brought into sharp focus (Mannheim 1952).

#### *Cohort Shifts in Personal Control*

The WLS mothers who characterized their work lives as less successful than their daughters' appear to maintain their positive self-regard by attributing their own disadvantaged position to forces beyond their control, including less access to higher education as well as generational differences in actual or perceived control. Studies of mental health generally conclude that taking responsibility for both positive and negative life experiences is associated with better psychological adjustment because people who take such responsibility believe that they can manage whatever stressors occur (C. Ross and Sastry 1999).

My results, however, support an alternative perspective: that disavowing responsibility for disadvantaged outcomes can be a self-enhancing strategy when obstacles to success are external, temporary, or context-specific (e.g., Crocker and Major 1989). The WLS mothers thus can maintain the belief that they would have enjoyed the same successes as their daughters, had they entered adulthood in an era when richer career opportunities were available for women and when career planning was encouraged.

#### *Shift of Focus to a Different Domain*

Finally, the mothers maintained positive self-evaluations by focusing on shortcomings in their daughters' family lives. By highlighting the stressors faced by their daughters as they attempt to balance work and family, the mothers subtly defended their own decision to specialize in family roles. They stated repeatedly that they were not subject to the same "stresses" that their daughters currently face because they focused solely on family responsibilities when they were young adults. A closer inspection of the mothers' accounts (and of 1975 survey data), however, reveals that many WLS mothers were grappling with work and family demands in young adulthood, just as their daughters do today. Yet by

emphasizing that work duties were far less important to them than child rearing duties, the mothers can protect themselves from the threat to self-esteem posed by their daughters' greater career success.

#### *Imitation As Enhancement of Self-Esteem*

The mothers with the highest self-esteem were those who considered themselves to be just as successful as their daughters (or more so), and who took credit for their daughters' outcomes. The qualitative data revealed that these mothers experienced pride and satisfaction from seeing their daughters replicate their own choices. The mothers' "traditional" choices were affirmed when their daughters followed life paths more consistent with the 1950s ideal than with the late-twentieth-century expectation that work and family goals will be pursued simultaneously.

These results, however, do not necessarily support (or counter) assimilation effects and SEM theories because in most of the cases in the WLS, the mother rated herself as similar (rather than superior) to her daughter. Future research should explore how upward comparison affects self-esteem when the success of the superior target is related directly to contributions made by the comparer.

#### *Future Directions*

This study has several limitations. First, it assumes that adult daughters are an appropriate comparison group for midlife mothers as they engage in life review; yet the WLS does not ask respondents directly whether they think of their children as a comparison target. Evidence suggests that family members are a widely used standard for comparison. Important sociological works, including Easterlin's (1980) relative income theory and Hochschild's (1989) study of women's justification of unfair division of household labor, are based on the assumption that intergenerational comparisons are common and have psychological implications. In addition, only 2 percent of the mothers responded "Don't know" to the social comparison questions in the survey interview; none hesitated or showed difficulty in answering the questions in the open-ended interviews. Finally, the

WLS mothers' comparisons reflect their own and their daughters' objective characteristics; this finding suggests that they can compare their lives with their children's.

A further limitation is that I used a narrowly defined population and comparison dimension to evaluate and generate hypotheses about maintenance of self-esteem during periods of social change. The self-protective strategies evidenced among the WLS women show the need for further evaluation in other domains, populations, and social contexts. Particularly important is whether current cohorts of midlife men, who specialized in market work at the expense of interpersonal

and familial relationships (Eggebeen and Knoester 2001), report regret at midlife. Conceptualizations of the "good father" ideal have shifted over the past 30 years: the "good provider" has been replaced by the "involved father." Men who pursued the "good provider" role may find their past behaviors devalued when appraised against the new standard of involved parenthood. An investigation of midlife men's interpretations of their earlier choices, and an exploration of how they compare their lives with those of their sons, may help to clarify maintenance of self-esteem during periods of social and normative change.

Appendix Table A1. Summary of Midlife Mothers Interviewed in 1998-99 Wisconsin Longitudinal Study and Selected Randomly for Analysis

	Mother Characteristics			Daughter Characteristics	
	Education	Longest-Ever Occupation	Number of children	Education	Longest-Ever Occupation
<b>Mother Has Done "Worse" Than Daughter</b>					
Alice	12	Nursing aide	2	16	Practical nurse
Betty	12	Social worker	4	16	Manager/administrator
Carol	16	Elementary schoolteacher	4	18	Lawyer
Diane	12	Homemaker	4	16	Hospital manager
Evelyn	12	Restaurant manager	2	18	Activities director
Frances	12	Customer service representative	3	16	Book illustrator
Gwen	12	Nursing home activities director	2	16	Quality control manager
Helen	12	Factory worker	5	16	Scheduler, paper mill
Irene	12	Clerical worker	3	18	Vice-president, hospital
Janice	12	Bank teller	4	18	Secondary schoolteacher
Karen	18	Secondary schoolteacher	2	18	Secondary schoolteacher
Lois	12	Hairdresser	2	12	Waitress
Mary	12	Factory worker/assembler	3	16	Elementary schoolteacher
Nancy	12	Radiology technician	3	14	Health administrator
Olive	13	Librarian	2	16	Personnel worker
Pauline	12	Bank teller	2	18	Therapist
<b>Mother Has Done "Same As" or "Better Than" Daughter</b>					
Rose	12	Secretary	1	13	Animal caretaker
Sara	16	Elementary schoolteacher	4	19	Pharmaceutical sales rep.
Tammy	16	Elementary schoolteacher	2	16	Compositor/typesetter
Ursula	12	Typist	3	13	Hairdresser
Vivian	17	Manager/administrator	2	14	Building manager
Wilma	16	Purchasing agent/buyer	4	16	Registered nurse
Yolanda	12	Retail sales clerk	3	12	Childcare worker

Appendix Table B1. Zero-Order Correlations Among All Variables Used in Analysis

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)
(1) Self-acceptance	1										
(2) Social comparison, mother worse	-.10*	1									
(3) Mother's education (in years)	.059	-.14**	1								
(4) Mother's occupational status, longest job	.10*	-.17**	-.04	1							
(5) Mother's years of work experience	-.02	-.15**	.41**	.30**	1						
(6) Mother's age at first marriage	-.03	-.15**	-.18**	-.21**	.03	1					
(7) Mother's number of children	.04	.08	-.14**	-.07	-.15**	-.27**	1				
(8) Mother is currently married	.16**	.11*	-.25**	-.20**	.04	-.05	.14**	1			
(9) Daughter's age	-.07	.16**	.35**	.22**	-.05	.21**	.07	-.06	1		
(10) Daughter's education (in years)	.02	.13**	.17**	.17**	-.001	.10*	-.17**	.08	-.07	1	
(11) Daughter's occupational status	-.05	.25**	-.06	-.04	.02	-.10*	-.11*	.09	.12**	.48**	1
(12) Daughter, formerly married	.03	-.02	-.10*	.18**	-.001	.30**	-.13**	-.04	.16**	-.18**	-.08
(13) Daughter, never married	.03	-.10*	.20**	-.21**	.01	-.32**	.19**	.001	-.51**	.16**	-.02
(14) Daughter, number of children	-.01	-.08	-.24**	-.03	.01	-.01	-.06	-.04	.44**	-.30**	-.19**
(15) Mother depressed before 1975	-.12*	.01	.06	.08	-.12**	.02	-.03	-.16**	.07	.03	-.03
(16) Mother depressed 1975-92	-.15**	-.06	.08	.03	-.01	-.02	-.06	.07	.05	.07	.02
(17) Work is very important	.01	-.05	.07	.11*	.14**	.02	-.03	-.17**	.05	-.01	.001
(18) Mother takes credit for daughter	.08	.05	.11*	.11*	.03	.08	-.10*	.02	-.06	.14**	.17**
(19) Mother & daughter very close	.11*	.06	-.001	0	-.011	.03	-.05	.03	-.07	.06	.13**
(20) Mother had professional aspirations, 1975	.09*	-.09*	.45**	.42**	.02	.29**	-.11*	-.08	-.20**	.24**	.16**
(21) Mother attended college, post-1975	.08	-.07	.60**	.40*	.07	.18**	-.13**	-.15**	-.08	.22**	.10*
(22) Mother had professional occupation, 1992	.14**	-.14**	.49**	.61**	.14**	.23**	-.19**	-.12**	-.12**	.13**	.09*
(23) Mother's occupational status, 1992	.16**	-.16**	.59**	.70**	-.03	.25*	-.22**	-.06	-.13**	.21**	.13**
(12) Daughter, formerly married	1										
(13) Daughter, never married	-.20**	1									
(14) Daughter, number of children	.09	-.52**	1								
(15) Mother depressed before 1975	-.02	-.07	.02	1							
(16) Mother depressed 1975-92	-.01	-.06	.05	.36**	1						
(17) Work is very important	.02	-.04	.04	-.06	-.01	1					
(18) Mother takes credit for daughter	-.05	.03	-.07	.027	-.02	.04	1				
(19) Mother & daughter very close	-.09*	.04	-.08	-.05	.04	.08	.17**	1			
(20) Mother had professional aspirations, 1975	-.01	.11*	-.20**	.11*	.07	.07	.09	.02	1		
(21) Mother attended college, post-1975	.01	.14**	-.11*	.05	.08	.04	.05	-.04	.33*	1	
(22) Mother had professional occupation, 1992	-.04	.17**	-.17**	.02	.013	.09*	.02	.03	.45**	.37**	1
(23) Mother's occupational status, 1992	-.03	.17**	-.18**	.01	.04	.14**	.02	.01	.41**	.41**	.77**

Note: Mother's social background characteristics are not shown above.  
 \*  $p \leq .05$ . \*\*  $p \leq .01$

## REFERENCES

- Affleck, Glenn and Howard Tennen. 1991. "Social Comparison and Coping With Major Medical Problems." Pp. 369-93 in *Social Comparisons: Contemporary Theory and Research*, edited by Jerry Suls and Thomas A. Wills. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Ahrens, Anthony H. and Lauren B. Alloy. 1997. "Social Comparison Processes in Depression." Pp. 389-410 in *Health, Coping and Well-Being: Perspectives From Social Comparison Theory*, edited by Bram P. Buunk and Francis X. Gibbons. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Baruch, Grace. 1984. "The Psychological Well-Being of Women in the Middle Years." Pp. 161-80 in *Women in Midlife*, edited by Grace Baruch and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn. New York: Plenum.
- Bernard, Jesse. 1981. "The Good Provider Role: Its Rise and Fall." *American Psychologist* 36:1-12.
- Buunk, Bram P., Rebecca Collins, Shelley Taylor, Gayle Dakof, and Nico Van Yperen. 1990. "The Affective Consequences of Social Comparison: Either Direction Has Its Ups and Downs." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 62:717-27.
- Carr, Deborah. 1997. "The Fulfillment of Career Dreams at Midlife: Does It Matter for Women's Mental Health?" *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 38:331-44.
- . 2002. "The Psychological Consequences of Work-Family Tradeoffs for Three Cohorts of Men and Women." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 65:103-24.
- Collins, Rebecca L. 1996. "For Better or Worse: The Impact of Upward Social Comparison on Self-Evaluations." *Psychological Bulletin* 119:51-69.
- Coontz, Stephanie. 1992. *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*. New York: Basic Books.
- Crocker, Jennifer and Brenda Major. 1989. "Social Stigma and Self-Esteem: The Self-Protective Properties of Stigma." *Psychological Review* 26:608-30.
- Dunning, David, Dale W. Griffin, James D. Milojkovic, and Lee Ross. 1990. "The Overconfidence Effect in Social Prediction." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 58:568-81.
- Easterlin, Richard. 1980. *Birth and Fortune: The Impact of Numbers on Personal Welfare*. New York: Basic Books.
- Engelbeen, David J. and Chris Knoester. 2001. "Does Fatherhood Matter for Men?" *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 63:381-94.
- Erikson, Erik H. 1963. *Childhood and Society 2nd ed.* New York: Norton.
- Festinger, Leon. 1954. "A Theory of Social Comparison Processes." *Human Relations* 7:117-40.
- Gerson, Kathleen. 1985. *Hard Choices: How Women Decide About Work, Career, and Motherhood*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gilovich, Thomas and Victoria H. Medvec. 1995. "The Experience of Regret: What, When, and Why." *Psychological Review* 102:379-95.
- Hakmiller, Karl L. 1966. "Threat As a Determinant of Downward Comparison." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 2 (Suppl. 1):32-39.
- Hauser, Robert M., Deborah Carr, Taissa S. Hauser, Jeffrey Hayes, Margaret Krecker, Hsiang-Hui Daphne Kuo, William Magee, John Presti, Diane Shinberg, Megan Sweeney, Theresa Thompson-Colon, S.C. Noah Uhrig, and John Robert Warren. 1993. "The Class of 1957 After 35 Years: Overview and Preliminary Findings." Working Paper 93-17, Center for Demography and Ecology, University of Wisconsin, Madison.
- Havighurst, Robert J. 1948. *Developmental Tasks and Education*. New York: McKay.
- Hayge, Howard V. 1990. "Family Members in the Work Force." *Monthly Labor Review* 113:14-19.
- Heider, Fritz. 1958. *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*. New York: Wiley.
- Heidrich, Susan and Carol Ryff. 1993. "The Role of Social Comparison Processes in the Psychological Adaptation of Elderly Adults." *Journal of Gerontology* 48:P127-36.
- Helgeson, Vicki S. and Kristin D. Mickelson. 1995. "Motives for Social Comparison." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 21:1200-1209.
- Helson, Ravenna and James Picano. 1990. "Is the Traditional Role Bad for Women?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 59:311-20.
- Hochschild, Arlie. 1989. *The Second Shift*. New York: Avon.
- Kaufman, Gayle and Peter Uhlenberg. 2000. "The Influence of Parenthood on the Work Effort of Married Men and Women." *Social Forces* 78:931-41.
- Kessler, Ronald C., Cindy L. Foster, William B. Saunders, and Paul E. Stang. 1995. "The Social Consequences of Psychiatric Disorders I: Educational Attainment." *American Journal of Psychiatry* 152:1026-32.
- Kominski, Robert and Andrea Adams. 1992. "Educational Attainment in the United States: March 1990 and 1991." *Current Population Reports: Population*

- Characteristics*, Series P-20, No. 463. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Landman, Janet. (1993). *Regret: The Persistence of the Possible*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Landman, Janet and Jean Manis. 1992. "What Might Have Been: Counterfactual Thought Concerning Personal Decisions." *British Journal of Psychology* 83:473-77.
- Landman, Janet, Elizabeth A. Vandewater, Abigail J. Stewart, and Janet E. Malley. 1995. "Missed Opportunities: Psychological Ramifications of Counterfactual Thought in Midlife Women." *Journal of Adult Development* 2:87-97.
- Levinson, Daniel J., Charlotte N. Darrow, Edward Klein, Maria H. Levinson, and Braxton McKee. 1978. *Seasons of a Man's Life*. New York: Knopf.
- Levinson, Daniel J. and Judy D. Levinson. 1996. *Seasons of a Woman's Life*. New York: Knopf.
- Mannheim, Karl. 1952. "The Problem of Generations." Pp. 276-322 in *Essays in the Sociology of Knowledge*, edited by Paul Kecskemeti. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- McFarland, Cathy, Roger Buehler, and Laura McKay. 2001. "Affective Responses to Social Comparisons With Extremely Close Others." *Social Cognition* 19:547-86.
- Neugarten, Bernice L. 1968. "The Awareness of Middle Age." Pp. 93-98 in *Middle Age and Aging*, edited by Bernice L. Neugarten. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Pelham, Brett W. and Jeff Orson Wachsmuth. 1995. "The Waxing and Waning of the Social Self: Assimilation and Contrast in Social Comparison." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 69:825-38.
- Robins, Lee N., John E. Helzer, Jack Croughon, and Kathryn Ratcliff. 1981. "National Institute of Mental Health Diagnostic Interview Schedule: Its History, Characteristics, and Validity." *Archives of General Psychiatry* 38:381-89.
- Rosenberg, Morris and Leonard I. Pearlin. 1978. "Social Class and Self-Esteem Among Children and Adults." *American Journal of Sociology* 84:53-78.
- Ross, Catherine and Jaya Sastry. 1999. "The Sense of Personal Control: Social-Structural Causes and Emotional Consequences." Pp. 369-94 in *Handbook of the Sociology of Mental Health*, edited by Carol S. Aneshensel and Jo C. Phelan. New York: Kluwer.
- Ross, Lee, David Greene and Pamela House. 1977. "The False Consensus Effect: An Egocentric Bias in Social Perception and Attribution Processes." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 13:279-301.
- Ross, Michael and Michael Conway. 1986. "Remembering One's Own Past: The Construction of Personal Histories." Pp. 122-44 in *Handbook of Motivation and Cognition: Foundations of Social Behavior*, edited by Richard M. Sorrentino and E. Tory Higgins. New York: Guilford.
- Ryff, Carol D. 1989. "Happiness Is Everything, or Is It? Explorations on the Meaning of Psychological Well-Being." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57:1069-81.
- Ryff, Carol D., Pamela S. Schmutte, and Young Hyun Lee. 1996. "How Children Turn Out: Implications for Parental Self-Evaluation." Pp. 383-422 in *The Parental Experience at Midlife*, edited by Carol D. Ryff and Marsha M. Seltzer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Shelton, Beth Anne and Daphne John. 1996. "The Division of Household Labor." *Annual Review of Sociology* 22:299-322.
- Spain, Daphne and Suzanne M. Bianchi. 1996. *Balancing Act: Motherhood, Marriage and Employment Among American Women*. New York: Russell Sage.
- Stevens, Gillian and David L. Featherman. 1981. "A Revised Socioeconomic Index of Occupational Status." *Social Science Research* 10:364-95.
- Stewart, Abigail J. and Elizabeth A. Vandewater. 1999. "'If I Had It to Do Over Again': Midlife Review, Midcourse Corrections, and Women's Well-Being in Midlife." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 76:270-81.
- Suls, Jerry and Brian Mullen. 1982. "From Cradle to the Grave: Comparison and Self-Evaluation Across the Life Span." Pp. 97-125 in *Psychological Perspectives on the Self*, edited by Jerry Suls. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Sussman, Steven, Clyde W. Dent, Jill Mestel-Rauch, C. Anderson Johnson, William B. Hansen, and Brian R. Flay. 1988. "Adolescent Nonsmokers', Triers', and Regular Smokers' Estimates of Cigarette Smoking by Prevalence: When Do Overestimations Occur and by Whom?" *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 18:537-51.
- Swallow, Stephen R. and Nicholas A. Kuiper. 1988. "Social Comparison and Negative Self-Evaluation: An Application to Depression." *Clinical Psychology Review* 8:55-76.
- Taylor, Shelley and Marci Lobel. 1989. "Social Comparison Activity Under Threat: Downward Evaluation and Upward

- Contacts." *Psychological Bulletin* 103:193-210.
- Tesser, Abraham. 1988. "Toward a Self-Evaluation Maintenance Model of Social Behavior." Pp. 181-227 in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 20, edited by Leonard Berkowitz. New York: Academic.
- Weiner, Bernard. 1985. "An Attribution Theory of Achievement Motivation and Emotion." *Psychological Review* 92:548-73.
- Wheeler, Ladd. 1966. "Motivation as a Determinant of Upward Comparison." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 2 (Suppl. 1):27-31.
- . 1991. "A Brief History of Social Comparison Theory." Pp. 3-21 in *Social Comparison: Contemporary Theory and Research*, edited by Jerry Suls and Thomas A. Wills. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Williams, Joan. 2000. *Unbending Gender: Why Work and Family Conflict and What to Do About It*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wills, Thomas A. 1981. "Downward Comparison Principles in Social Psychology." *Psychological Bulletin* 90:245-71.
- . 1991. "Similarity and Self-Esteem in Downward Comparison." Pp. 361-91 in *Social Comparison: Contemporary Theory and Research*, edited by Jerry Suls and Thomas A. Wills. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Wood, Joanne V. 1989. "Theory and Research Concerning Social Comparisons of Personal Attributes." *Psychological Bulletin* 106:231-48.

**Deborah Carr** is an assistant professor in the sociology department and Institute for Health, Health Care Policy and Aging Research at Rutgers University. Her research focuses on the psychological consequences of work and family roles. She also researches the psychological consequences of late-life widowhood as well as end-of-life issues.