

Institute for Clinical Social Work

EXPERIENCES AT MIDLIFE OF INTENTIONALLY
CHILDFREE WOMEN

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By

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the subjective experiences of fifteen intentionally childfree, midlife women (age 40 to 60) who were married or partnered at least eight years. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview format and followed grounded theory methods to analyze the data. Findings were interpreted mainly from self-psychological and developmental perspectives. Results indicated that the women chose one of three pathways to their childfree status: Knew Early, Decision Evolved, or Circumstances. Subjects were distinguished by the thoughtful way they came to their decision to remain childfree and by their relational capacities. Although participants were not from one typical family of origin experience, most were encouraged in their families to think and to act independently. Many reported others pejoratively labeling them as selfish and odd because of the decision to forgo motherhood. Women also struggled with scrutinizing themselves in similarly critical ways. To manage painful feelings and to generate feelings of acceptance, many women created for themselves a community of understanding peers, other women without children. Most achieved levels of self-acceptance in midlife. For the majority of participants, menopause did not spark feelings of regret but did prompt concerns about care during their elder years. The study addresses clinical implications for working with this population and areas for future research.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

History of the Problem

Over the last few decades the United States, like many European countries, has experienced a slight trend toward women remaining childless. While the most common path for women may be the one leading to motherhood, it is, of course, not the only one. In 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that 43 % of women between the ages of 15 to 44 were childless. The 2004 Census figure for the same group was 44 %. In 2001, the Census estimated that about 19 % of women nearing the end of natural fertility (ages 40 to 44) were childless. Unfortunately, that percentage includes both unintentionally and intentionally childless women. The number does, however, depict a 10 % increase over 1980 statistics for the same age population. Using data from the National Center for Health Statistics' 2002 National Survey of Family Growth, Abma & Martinez (2006) in a study that differentiates voluntarily from involuntarily childlessness reported that 42 % of childless women aged 35 to 44 are voluntarily childless (p. 7). These researchers estimate that approximately 7% of all women aged 35 to 44 are voluntarily childless.

Researchers estimate that the current U.S. population includes about 76 million "Baby Boomers," those Americans born between 1946 and 1964. Of that number, approximately 51 % are midlife women. While women at midlife comprise both an enormous and influential segment of the population, their experiences have not been

adequately reflected in research, especially research focusing on their emotional perspectives. Lachman & Bertrand (2001) suggest that midlife development has been inadequately explored because researchers tend to believe that little happens during this phase. In 1979, Neugarten, however, found increasing “public awareness that adulthood is as complex, as dynamic, and, at least in some important ways, as amenable to change as is childhood or youth” (p. 888). While Census data point to a growing number of midlife women who live childfree, these women are insufficiently represented in qualitative research that describes their experiences of midlife.

Individuals often seek psychotherapy services when in the throes of significant changes or life phases such as midlife. Issues related to aging, forced retirement, achievement, illness, reappraisal of goals and ambitions, burdensome roles, relationship challenges, and various discrepancies between the reality of one’s life and one’s earlier dreams cause those at midlife to seek mental health treatment (Goldstein, 2005). Many of these triggers can disrupt self-esteem and result in narcissistic vulnerability (Goldstein). Researchers have found that women are the largest consumers of psychotherapy services. Olfson, Marcus, Druss, & Pincus (2002) examined trends in outpatient psychotherapy usage. They found that in 1997 nine out of every 100 adults between the ages of 45 to 64 used psychotherapy and that women between the ages of 45 and 64 used psychotherapy 33% more frequently than men of the same age group. From 1987 to 1997, use of psychotherapy increased almost 100 percent among all adults age 55-64. Given the more frequent rate of psychotherapy use by women, one might assume that more women than men in the 55 to 64 age group used psychotherapy. Therefore, it makes sense to expand research on this population in order to better understand their experiences and thus to serve their clinical needs.

This study explored and described the experiences of midlife for heterosexual, married or partnered (eight years or more) intentionally childfree women. Specifically, the study focused on exploring their experiences in terms of menopause, midlife, family,

and relationships. Subjects with partnerships or marriages of eight years or more were selected because U.S. Census data (February 2005) indicates that first marriages that end in divorce last about eight years. This study contributes to the social work knowledge base by providing specific accounts of this life phase for these women with the purpose of expanding our understanding of midlife development and the psychological issues and challenges childfree women face.

Researcher's note: In this study, women who chose not to have children are referred to as childfree. However, if a researcher or author cited in this dissertation has used the term "childless," then this researcher, for consistency in citing that work, will use the term childless.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

Introduction

The concept of midlife is a contemporary idea that evolved in the 20th century as fertility and birthrates declined and life expectancy lengthened (Lachman & Bertrand, 2001). In modern times, life expectancy after childbearing years can last decades but that was not always true. In 1900, men and women in the United States had a life expectancy of 48 years. In 1998, life expectancy for women in North America was 80 years and 73 years for men (U.S. Census). As life expectancy increased and thus expanded the time between youth and old age, that expanse of time became known as middle age or midlife.

A majority of women currently in midlife are “boomers,” those born between the years of 1946 and 1964. These women have lived through the social and cultural shift of feminism, benefited from advances in birth control, including the “pill,” and are the first generation of women in which many have worked outside the home. Since the first “boomers” reached midlife, the popular press has chronicled how both men and women are navigating this life phase. If reports are accurate, this group will not quietly move through their middle years and will perhaps redefine the midlife phase.

Many of the existing cultural examples about women at midlife do not adequately or accurately portray women at this stage. Much research on midlife has focused on the experiences of men. Lachman & Bertrand (2001) report that Levinson, for instance, studied a small group of white, middle-class males and then applied his findings to

women. Overall, research is insufficient on the psychology of midlife (Lachman & Bertrand) and on the subjective experiences of childfree women (Metropolis, 1998, Mintz, 1989, Spurling, 2001, Ziebler, 1999), especially at this life stage. Information about the development of women without children is also insufficient. One might say that their stories are undertold.

Aurora Levins Morales addresses the idea of undertold, untold, and other kinds of stories in ‘The Historian as Curandera’ (1998). When Morales was writing a history of Puerto Rican women, she approached her research from the perspective of history as medicinal or “the power of history to provide those healing stories that can restore the humanity of the traumatized” (p. 25). In the process of writing her book, she constructed a “set of understandings or instructions to myself” (p. 26) about how one conducts medicinal, healing research and writing. Her instructions, which range from “Centering women changes the landscape” to “Reveal hidden power relationships” to “Show complexity and embrace ambiguity and contradiction” to “Show yourself in your work,” form a handbook for approaching qualitative research which seeks “to re-establish the connections between people and their histories” (p. 24). Her first “understanding,” which is “Tell untold or undertold histories,” connects with this study because the stories or experiences of intentionally childfree, midlife women are at best undertold. In my last year of course work at ICSW, I took a required class on adult development. In this course with its focus on midlife and aging, we studied gay men who adopted a child during midlife, discussed midlife couples, midlife parents, midlife lesbians, midlife women who energize their careers at a time when their husbands become less driven and more nurturing, and various other adult situations. But women who married or who never married but did not have children were missing from the readings or class discussions. It is my hope, whether my research is medicinal or not, that I have told parts of the undertold stories of the women in this study.

Overview of Midlife for Women

In researching the midlife experiences of men and women, Neugarten (1979) found that among the psychological aspects of midlife is a “changing sense of self” especially as children move on with their lives. She also found midlife individuals rework established relationships and adjust to new relationships (p. 890). Yet much of what is written about midlife women focuses on problems, including physical changes and children leaving home or the “empty nest.” Mintz (1989, dissertation) stated that much of the literature on midlife focuses on women becoming symptomatic and men becoming more nurturing. But as McQuaide (1998a) points out “midlife is not just about mortality, crumbling bones, and hot flashes” (p. 22). Inadequate research on midlife women leaves a gap in what is accurately known about the group. From McQuaide’s perspective this information gap places “a woman at the mercy of cultural stereotypes and media portrayals, or lack of portrayals. Negative images of aging women abound and, without alternative images, serve to elicit a woman’s own internalized ageism and sexism” (p. 22). Without alternate images of what midlife can be, a woman may seize upon a limited vision for herself. McQuaide states that unfavorable images of women at midlife or absence of positive images affect women in employment and promotions.

In McQuaide’s study of 103 White middle and upper class women in the New York City area, she found these women generally satisfied with this life stage, although most found it a challenging time. The happiest women were those who had a family income above \$30,000, were healthy, and were not involuntarily out of the job market. “It seemed that it was not so much what the women had but what they did with it that made the biggest difference to their well being” (1998a, p.29). For women in McQuaide’s study, involvement with others, including having women friends and positive role

models, added to their feelings of satisfaction. Of note is that the women who were doing well at midlife felt a distressing discrepancy between the affirmative way they viewed themselves and negative cultural stereotypes and media portrayals. Apter (1995) described these cultural expectations for women as “consensus about feminine goodness, truth, and value” (p. 62) and dubbed these expectations the “Over-Eye.” Those in McQuaide’s study cited increased freedom as what they enjoyed the most. “Freedom from worrying about what others think, from responsibility for children, and from menstrual periods and freedom to develop an identity based on pursuing their own and not others’ interests” (1998a, p. 27) while their physical changes were their least favorite. Some described this phase as like “adolescence” and awaking as though from “general anaesthesia” (1998b, p. 45).

Apter (1995) notes, as others have, that midlife women experience an increase in energy and self-assertion. For women who have experienced interrupted careers, midlife can be a time of career focus. Sterns & Huyck (2001) report that “Women who have returned to school and launched a career in early or even middle age often have the enthusiasm, ambition, and energy of younger adults venturing forth into their adult responsibilities” (p. 472). Nevertheless, Apter also “heard” as she studied midlife women their frustrations, self-recriminations, and anger.

Like adolescents emerging into a new self, these midlife women were foraging among their pasts and presents to forge their futures. The pivot of development from anxiety and anger to liberation and energy was defined as women confronted the question: ‘Why did it take so long to trust myself?’ (p. 27)

While midlife can be characterized by demands to fill multiple roles, such as spouse, adult child, caregiver, parent, employee, student, those roles can be “enriching and result in a sense of mastery and well-being or can lead to overload, strain, and conflict” (Goldstein, 2005, p. 29).

Definition of the Self: Psychological and Midlife

Lachman and Bertrand (2001) define self by referring to three components: the cognitive self or the content of who we think we are; the affective self or our feelings about who we are; and the conative self or our actions on the basis of our self-perceptions. Much of the following material describes the self from a developmental perspective. However, this research study primarily focused on learning more about the psychological self at midlife. Therefore, self will be defined in a psychological manner. Heinz Kohut's conceptualization of the self evolved over time (Palombo, 2004). Kohut (1979) conceived of the whole self as "an independent center of initiative" (p. 454), as "the core of our personality" (p. 454), and as "a specific structure in the mental apparatus" (1977, p. 310). He envisioned the self as an enduring structure that has continuity in time (Kohut, 1979). Kohut also differentiated self from identity in that the whole self is "a depth-psychological concept and refers to the core of the personality made up of various constituents in the interplay with the child's earliest selfobject" (Kohut, 1979, p. 451). A fuller definition is that the:

self is the center of initiative, the recipient of impressions, and the depository of the individual's constellation of nuclear ambitions, ideals, talents, and skills. These motivate and permit the self to function as a self-propelling, self-directed, self-aware, and self-sustaining unit, providing a central purpose to the personality and yielding a sense of meaning to the person's life. (Moore & Fine, 1990, p. 177)

Lachman and Bertrand (2001) point out that there are multiple ways of viewing the self at midlife, including by personality traits, Erikson's stages, and the self-concept model among others. Those who support theories about personality traits, suggest that personalities are "consistent across adulthood" (Lachman & Bertrand, p. 283). Stage theorists, like Erikson, offer evidence that personality evolves over life. The self concept

model centers on the subjective way an individual views herself and includes a cognitive dimension. One's self concept is "conceived as a web of mental constructions called schemas that guide and regulate an individual's behavior (p. 299). Personality development is seen as evolving as new information is integrated into existing schemas and one's self concept fluctuates between stability and change (Lachman & Bertrand). Other aspects of the self such as identity, sense of control, self-efficacy, and well-being have also been studied. Overall although researchers have found that these parts of the self can change in reaction to environmental and personal stresses, the midlife self is fairly resilient. Lachman and Bertrand report that evidence is increasing that despite the various ways personality and self change during midlife, "The experiences of midlife and later adulthood are determined in large part by individual differences in personality and self" (p. 279).

Galatzer-Levy & Cohler (1993) discuss observable shifts "in the experience of self as people move through midlife" (p. 294). The shifts are identified by the capacities for mentoring, viewing oneself as active or receptive, and acknowledging life as finite (p. 294). Neugarten (1979) also described a "changing time perspective" (p. 890) in which time is conceived as years left to live. Recognizing that life is finite rather than infinite introduces a major psychological shift in the self at midlife. In describing these shifts or the reorganization of the self at midlife, Galatzer-Levy & Cohler emphasize the support of "essential others" to the process. A supportive, social network is an important aspect of coping with midlife changes (p. 303). As the literature points to a shifting, reorganizing self at midlife, it is logical to assume that selfobject needs also shift and individuals seek relationships that provide the needed selfobject dimensions.

Although midlife women experience physical changes and societal messages, many of which are negative, about aging, midlife does not seem a time of crisis (Chiriboga, 1997, Hunter, Sundel, & Sundel, 2002). While not crisis ridden neither is midlife an uneventful time or a time when life is slower. If a midlife crisis does occur, it

is associated with concerns about aging, questions about the self, maladjustment, and life reappraisal (Lachman & Bertrand, 2001). “For many adults, this reappraisal and questioning of the self had positive consequences for personal growth and psychological well-being” (p. 303). Off-time events or “nonnormative” events also can be disruptive for women at midlife for many women hold in their minds a timeline for events. When events occur off-time (early retirement, children not leaving home, someone dying) midlife women may feel increased distress (Hunter, Sundel, & Sundel, 2002). Nevertheless, these researchers also report that many women anticipate midlife as a time of transitions and midcourse corrections.

Menopause

Menopause is a medical term that means the permanent pause of menses (Love, 1997), while perimenopause is the transitional time that occurs before menopause when menstrual cycle patterns change. Some people think of menopause as a central feature of a midlife woman’s life and perhaps the catalyst for development. Apter (1995), however, in her study of women at midlife, found that menopause accompanies women at midlife but is not the cause of their psychological growth or development. In Apter’s view, the post menopausal zest of which Margaret Mead wrote probably results from “the crisis and resolution of midlife women’s psyche” rather than from biological change (p. 201). With that said, Apter states that she believes menopause sparks questions and increases conflicts, triggering concerns about aging and for some about fertility. She found that with women who never had children, “menopause could ‘ring a panic button’ as it brought them face to face with their past decisions” (p. 212).

Apter concludes that while menopause does not determine a woman’s mood, an individual woman may react to menopause with anger, anxiety, and depression. Hunter, Sundel & Sundel (2002) in reviewing research on depression at menopause did not find a link between the two. Nevertheless, they do report, from longitudinal studies, that

depression is a “stable characteristic over a lifetime. If women report psychological distress at menopause, they are likely to have histories of previous episodes of distress, such as anxiety or depression” (p. 175). From studies, these researchers gleaned that psychological peril does not result from menopause (Hunter, Sundel & Sundel). Still when childbearing is considered a woman’s most important role, loss of that capacity “may be experienced profoundly and may result in a conscious or unconscious depression” (Spira & Berger, 1999, p. 262).

Various other views of menopause exist. Some view this phase as a process related to the “biological, cultural, and social aspects of a woman’s life” (Spira & Berger, p. 271) and as part of “the climacteric life phase” or turning point. From this perspective, menopause is seen as “a time for reflection, growth, and development as well as a time to experience natural loss” (p. 271).

Childfree Women

Women without children have been under researched and what has been published has focused on understanding and conceptualizing identity (Ireland, 1993, Metropolis 1998) and understanding generativity in childfree women (Spurling, 2001). Much of the research has been conducted for doctoral dissertations. Some popular and scholarly writings have sought to categorize childfree women based on their histories and how their choice has shaped their identities (Cain, 2001, Ireland, 1993). Others such as Houseknecht (1979) compared “early articulators” to “postponers” in terms of family background factors, autonomy, achievement, and reference group support. This current researcher’s study of married or partnered childfree women focused on the life span phase or developmental phase of midlife in order to explore what this phase is like for these women. It seems important to note that from certain perspectives, childfree women have passed over what Benedek (1959) called the developmental phase of parenthood. Benedek posited that one’s personality continues to develop beyond adolescence. She

stated, writing from a psychoanalytic perspective, that adolescent maturity and readiness for procreation “initiates motivation for the next phase of development which is parenthood” (p. 389). For Benedek, motherhood/parenthood is the result of a biological drive. She seemed to imply all women will mother. While Benedek wrote of the biological drive, Elson (1984) describes how narcissism can be altered by parenthood.

Nancy Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering* states that a female child’s shared gender with her mother creates the child’s identification with the mother. The identification fuels the reproduction of mothering. “Women, as mothers, produce daughters with mothering capacities and the desire to mother. These capacities and needs are built into and grow out of the mother-daughter relationship itself” (Chodorow, 1978, p. 7). She sees the reproduction of motherhood as neither a product of biology or of role-training but rather occurring through “social structurally induced psychological processes” (p. 7). Elsewhere Chodorow writes (2003) that for women motherhood is an unconscious fantasy first and then a conscious thought; fantasies of babies and parenthood are common and even young girls and boys have such fantasies (Fast, 1984). While Chodorow details the psychological process by which one comes to mother, she notes that “all women do not mother or want to mother, and all women are not ‘maternal’ or nurturant” (p. 215).

What then is known about women who choose not to mother? Ireland (1993) interviewed 100 women who were childless and found that these women clustered in three categories: The traditional woman who wanted motherhood but was infertile; the transitional woman who, for a variety of reasons, delayed motherhood until it was “seemingly too late to have a child” (p. 41); and the transformative woman who chooses to remain childfree. Ireland’s work focused on understanding these women’s identities and was an early effort at examining childfree women.

Mintz explored the experiences of midlife women (ages 50 to 55) without children (1989) for her dissertation. She found that the women in her study expressed the

same feelings about midlife (“It’s my time”; “I want to have fun”) as midlife women with children voiced. The participants in her study were positive about midlife; most articulated a sense of loss at never having children, but had grieved the loss years earlier. Mintz writes “If women with children and without children experience themselves in a similar way at this point in the life cycle, there is something far more commanding than childbearing that defines us as women” (p. 130). Mintz recommended that others conduct more research on childfree women at midlife.

The participants in Mintz’s study mentioned loss over not having children. Jeffries & Konnert (2002) investigated regret and well-being among middle-aged and older voluntarily and involuntarily childless women. Their study asked the question: Do women who choose to remain childless experience regret in later life or are these regrets limited to those women who would have had children if given the opportunity? Jeffries & Konnert found that women who consider themselves childless by choice are less likely to experience regret over their status and if they do, the feelings are “minor and transitory” (p. 103). Those who did not choose childlessness are more likely to express serious, sustained regret. They found no significant difference in well-being between parents who maintain close relationships with their children and women who are childless by choice. In this study, voluntarily childless women rated higher on psychological well-being, autonomy and environmental mastery and “closer to their ideal level of autonomy” than involuntarily childless women (p. 102). Koropecj-Cox (2002) reports results consistent with Jeffries & Konnert. She compared parents and childless adults and found that well-being in childless women was tied to whether or not they choose childlessness. Participants who chose to remain childfree scored similarly to mothers with excellent parent-child relationships (p. 962) on loneliness and depression scales.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

This study is theoretically and conceptually framed from life course, developmental, and self psychology perspectives. A life course perspective assumes that midlife can be viewed as a distinct life phase characterized by certain markers. Although chronological age is one marker of midlife, it is considered a poor one (Galatzer-Levy & Cohler, 1993) because age alone does not indicate the meaning one attaches to midlife. Midlife is a time when individuals appraise their lives and begin feeling that life is finite as they experience biological and physical changes. A focus on life events, roles or relationships, both achieved or not achieved, are characteristic of this time. Mitchell & Helson (1990) report that for many women their early 50s are the best time of their lives and considered prime time. Factors associated with a positive, satisfying midlife include good health, interpersonal factors such as a partner, family, children, social supports, mastery and pleasure (Hunter, Sundel, & Sundel, 2002).

Self psychology provides the clinical frame for analyzing and understanding the experiences or self narratives of the childfree midlife women in the study. Daniel Stern's (1985) developmental theory underpins self psychology. These are inherently different theories, although they share some common vocabulary such as the term self. Stern posits a developmental process which results in a narrative self while self psychology describes the creation of a healthy self. Yet the theories are similar in that they both attempt to explain how early relational experiences shape the unfolding of a personality and ultimately an individual's narrative.

Stern's (1985) developmental theory proposes a means for understanding the evolution of a sense of self that becomes a narrative self, an articulated summary of an individual's life story. Stern initially describes four different domains of self-experience

and social relatedness and later adds the fifth domain, the narrative sense of self. The four initial domains are: An emergent self (forms from birth to two months), the core self (forms between the ages of two and six months), the subjective self (forms between seven to fifteen months) and a verbal self (forms after 15 months). Once formed each self domain continues its function throughout life. With age and experience, the domains grow and elaborate in an increasingly complex coexistence.

In the beginning, an infant's self forms in the relationship interaction between infant and caregiver. In the emergent self domain, an infant, according to Stern is "predesigned to be selectively responsive to external social events" (p. 10). The emergent self is a self coming into being or emerging in organization and is the basis for learning and new experiences throughout life.

In the core self domain, the infant experiences self-agency (sense of one's own action), self-coherence (sense of being whole, nonfragmented), self-affectivity (feelings/affects that belong to the self), and self-history (sense of continuity, of enduring). These four self experiences are essential for adult psychological health and form the basis of an individual's sense of self worth, self esteem, and self confidence.

The subjective self, the next domain, is marked by the infant's "discovery" that others have minds and mental states such as feelings, motives, and intentions (p. 27). "The new organizing subjective perspective defines a qualitatively different self and other who can 'hold in mind' unseen but inferable mental states, such as intentions or affects, that guide overt behavior" (p. 27). The new perspective opens up the possibility for intersubjective relatedness during the course of life.

The fourth domain of the verbal self is one in which the infant has the capacities to "objectify the self, to be self-reflective, to comprehend and produce language" (p. 28). "Once the infant is able to create shareable meanings about the self and the world, a sense of a verbal self that operates in the domain of verbal relatedness has been formed" (p. 28).

Stern's domains comprise the foundation for understanding relatedness within the self and between self and other as it unfolds throughout life. Nevertheless, the question remains as to how an individual sense of self forms in a particular individual. If as Palombo (2004) states the "totality of a person's experiences, which is organized as a whole that is more than the sum of its parts, constitutes the sense of self" (p. 255) how are these experiences captured, encoded, and organized in an individual?

Stern states that real-life interpersonal experiences are stored in episodic memory. These interpersonal interactions or episodes are averaged, represented preverbally and stored in one's memory as RIGs or Representations of Interactions that have been Generalized. The RIGs become the basic memory units which form internal working models (Palombo, 1992). An internal working model is comprised of related, elaborated RIGs (Stern, 1985) and internalized selfobject functions as well (Palombo, 1992). As interactions with external others are recorded as RIGs, so are internal selfobject functions, especially as they pertain to the core self experiences. Once a child reaches the domain of the verbal self and has the use of language, the child has the capacity to narrate his/her life story. The internal working models, then, become part of the narrative (Palombo, 1992, Stern, 1985). At that point, the fifth sense of self, the narrative self, emerges. This narrative self "can be added onto and at times can embrace the already existing sense of self" (Stern, 1989, p. 168). Self narratives are the stories individuals tell about their lives. These narratives often contain the elements of a coherent story: Agents or actors who express feelings and whose various actions, based on their motives, unfold in a time sequence. When individuals tell their stories in psychoanalysis or psychotherapy, they are presenting their narrative self, which is their understanding of who they are and how they became this person (Stern, 1989). It is also the self encountered in research interviews about one's life.

Self psychology, a depth psychological theory, offers an understanding of the characteristics comprising the psychological development of a healthy self. The traits of

cohesion (intactness), agency (initiative), stability, and flexibility relate to the developmental achievements of emergent, core, and subjective self domains. Like all psychoanalytic or psychodynamic theories, Kohut's theory of the psychology of the self evolved from Freud's theories. Briefly, Freud viewed individuals as struggling with psychic conflicts, including feelings of guilt over forbidden wishes. Kohut viewed human experience differently. While individuals feel guilty from Freud's perspective, Kohut viewed individuals as suffering from a life without meaning. Kohut's individual is tragic (Mitchell & Black, 1995).

A key concept in Kohut's self-psychology, that of the psychological self, is what he conceptualized as the "core of the personality" (Kohut & Wolf, 1978, p. 414). This self has three constituent parts: "strivings for power and success," "idealized goals" and "talents and skills" (Kohut & Wolf, 1978, p. 414). In Kohut's theory, the caregiver inevitably fails the infant, disrupting the infant's natural, blissful, primary narcissistic state (Kohut, 1966, Siegel, 1996). In an attempt to restore the narcissistic state, the infant creates two new systems: The grandiose self and the idealized parent imago (Kohut, 1966, 1968, Siegel, 1996). The grandiose self is the perfect self where good is experienced as inside and bad belongs outside (Kohut, 1966, Siegel, 1996). The condition of the self results from the quality of the interactions between an infant and its earliest caregivers (Kohut, 1966, Palombo, 2004). Through the idealized parental imago the infant bestows the parent with perfection and power and in connecting with the parent, the infant regains a sense of bliss (Kohut, 1966, Siegel, 1996). An individual's ambitions derive from the grandiose self while one's ideals derive from the idealized parental imago. Both the grandiose self and the idealized parental imago follow their own developmental line.

Even as the infant imbues the parents with perfection, such idealization does not end the process. Ultimately, the infant must reclaim the idealization through internalization. Over time and through disappointments with the parents, the child's

idealization of the parents is gradually modified. As the child experiences disappointments and minute, manageable unavoidable losses of the idealized parent, qualities of the parent become part of the personality through the process of transmuting internalization (Kohut, 1984, Kohut & Wolf, 1978, Siegel, 1996). As a result of this psychic structure building process, the child develops realistic appreciation of her talents and skills. Kohut believed that a child's narcissism needed to transform on its own as the child comes to view both himself and his parent more realistically (Mitchell & Black, 1995). Just as the idealized parental imago transforms, so must the grandiose self. The grandiose self and its characteristics of omnipotence, grandiosity and exhibitionistic narcissism undergo transformation in the creation of a healthy self (Kohut & Wolf, Siegel). Such a transformation occurs when parents accept and even enjoy their child's grandiosity (Kohut & Wolf, Siegel).

Parents and caregivers function as selfobjects and their ability to perform these functions is key to the development of a healthy self. "A positive cohesive sense of self is the central developmental task for us all" (Fosshage, 1998, p. 5). An infant experiences a caregiver who performs psychological functions for the infant not as a separate entity but as part of him/her (Kohut, 1978). By comparison, a true object is viewed as both "psychologically separate and distinct from the self" (Siegel, 1996, p.71). The earliest selfobject experiences in which the parent or caregiver is a psychological function rather than a true object occur during the onset of Stern's emergent, core, and subjective domains. In these selfobject experiences the caregiver is facilitating the emerging nuclear self (Fosshage, 1998, Hagman, 1997, Kohut, 1978). Over time, Kohut clarified the term selfobject, stating that the specific meaning refers to archaic selfobjects and "relates to the beginning stages of the development of selfobjects" (1984, p. 49). The general meaning is "that dimension of our experience of another person that relates to this person's functions in shoring up our self" (Kohut, p. 49). From Stern's perspective, these are the lived experiences that lead to episodes that are eventually generalized and stored

in episodic memory. A mature selfobject experience differs from this archaic selfobject experience. In the mature experience, an individual has the capacity to view another individual as independent or as a true object (Siegel). This capacity relates to the domains of subjective and verbal senses of self. In the total self, lived experiences or RIGs and selfobject/true object experiences and functions exist within internal working models. Individuals need to idealize, feel affirmed, valued, validated, and connected to others and need selfobjects throughout life (Kohut, Siegel).

Midlife Psychology

Psychologically healthy women generally find midlife a satisfying yet challenging and eventful time. While midlife is not crisis ridden for most women (Hunter, Sundel & Sundel, 2002, Chiriboga, 1997) it is a time of reappraisals, transitions, and midcourse corrections (Lachman & Bertrand, 2001). For many women, their early 50s are considered prime (Mitchell & Helson, 1990). Nonetheless, managing multiple, sometimes stressful roles, also distinguishes this phase (Galatzer-Levy & Cohler, 1993, Goldstein, 2005). McQuaide (1998a) found in her study of midlife women that it wasn't so much what the women had but what they did with what they had that made the difference in their lives. Women in her study with family incomes above \$30,000, who were healthy and not involuntarily out of the job market and who had a group of women friends were happiest. Researchers have found that women who postponed careers until midlife or made midlife career changes often approach their work with the energy of younger women (Galatzer-Levy & Cohler, 1993).

Major shifts in the view of the self take place in midlife, including the emotional awareness that life is finite (Galatzer-Levy & Cohler, 1993). "This confrontation with a finitude of life may lead to an intensified appreciation of the value of time, sadness about lost opportunities, or a sense of moving with painful swiftness" (p. 298). A capacity for mutual, mature selfobject experiences and engagement with others "is essential for the

elaboration of the mature self” (Hagman, 1997, p. 86). A responsive mature selfobject milieu could be “composed of his family, his friends, his work situation” (Kohut, 1984, p. 71, Fosshage, 1998).

This research project focused on examining the full range of experiences childfree women have at midlife. The literature indicated these experiences include pursuing and maintaining supportive, sustaining relationships, gratifying careers, a coherent sense of themselves, recognition of the finitude of life, flexibility, capacity to reappraise life choices and to manage the stresses of multiple roles. Based on what has been described one can assume that the following are the characteristics of a healthy self at midlife: a sense of personal agency, flexibility, self awareness, relatedness, and self coherence.

Overall Question Explored

The organizing question of the study was: What are the experiences at midlife of intentionally childfree women who are partnered or married? I used a semi-structured interview format and worked from a protocol of questions to elicit additional information and to uncover information about the participants’ psychological states. (See Appendix B Interview protocol).

Specific areas of inquiry, especially for probe questions, included (a) Describe your life (b) What is family life like for you? (c) Tell me about your marriage (d) What are your other relationships like? (e) Any thoughts about not having children? (f) How did you decide not to have children? (g) Are you perimenopausal or menopausal? (h) What are your experiences of menopause? (i) Thoughts about aging? Physical changes? (j) Anything surprising about midlife?

Theoretical and Operational Definitions of Major Concepts

Intentionally childfree: A woman who has consciously chosen not to have children.

Menopause: The “permanent pause of menses” (Love, 1997).

Midlife: Defined by age: Certain researchers define the entrance to midlife slightly differently, although many see age 40 as the beginning (Lachman & Bertrand, 2001) and the exit year as around 60. Lachman & Bertrand point out that “the older the person, the later one expects midlife to begin” (p. 280). However, for the purposes of this study, midlife is defined as beginning at age 40 and ending at age 60.

Perimenopause: Perimenopause is the period before menopause which often lasts three to six years and is highlighted by a variety of symptoms. Symptoms include menstrual irregularity, hot flashes or flushes, night sweats, vaginal dryness, insomnia, waking in the early hours of the morning, onset of new allergies or sensitivities, fluctuations in sexual desire and sexual response, indigestion, chin whiskers, long fine facial hairs, memory lapses, painful intercourse, depression, anxiety and loss of self-confidence, weight gain, frequent urination, graying scalp and pubic hair, thinning scalp (Love, p. 39).

Self: The self is the psychological self (Kohut, 1978) and refers to the core of the personality.

Selfobjects: General meaning is “that dimension of our experience of another person that relates to this person’s functions in shoring up our self” (Kohut, 1984, p. 49).

Statement of Assumptions

The following assumptions guide this study.

1. Midlife is a distinct life stage, within a life course, and has its own challenges.
2. Life span can be understood, in part, in terms of development.
3. Being intentionally childfree has distinct features at midlife.
4. Women have certain experiences at midlife and these experiences have meaning to them.
5. While tremendous variation exists among women at midlife, some commonalities exist for most women.
6. Physical and biological changes such as menopause and certain age markers prompt psychological changes.
7. Creating and consolidating a midlife self involves reconciling issues from earlier life phases. Such reconciliation might include past decisions about childbearing.
8. Women will be able to articulate their experiences of midlife.
9. The qualitative methodology grounded theory will allow the researcher to capture the nuances of psychological experiences of these women. The methodology will also allow the researcher to take these articulated midlife experiences and generate a new interpretive frame for the experience.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In this exploratory study, the researcher explored the question: What are the experiences of married or partnered intentionally childfree women at midlife? The qualitative research method of grounded theory was used to investigate the subjective experiences of the participants because grounded theory methodology allowed the researcher to capture aspects of the lives and the social and psychological processes of the participants studied (Charmaz, 2006). The research design, a constructivist grounded theory approach based on the method outlined by Kathy Charmaz (2006, 2000), evolved from the work of Strauss, Glaser, & Corbin (1998).

A philosophical split exists between those who take a constructivist approach to grounded theory and those who take a more positivistic approach (Charmaz, 2000). Charmaz argues that the grounded theory approaches of Strauss, Glaser, & Corbin are positivist and assume “an objective external reality, aims toward unbiased data collection, proposes a set of technical procedures, and espouses verification” (p. 510). The split seems most apparent in the idea of “data themselves do not lie” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 45) or in other words, that only one reality of the data exists. Constructivist grounded theory, according to Charmaz, assumes that many social realities exist, that knowledge is co-created, and attempts to interpret subjects’ meanings. Geertz (1973) in discussing

thick descriptions and addressing the idea of reality writes “what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to” (p. 9). Echoing Geertz, Charmaz points out that the data that emerges from interviews are actually reconstructions of experience; they are not the original experience itself.

While Charmaz conceives of positivist grounded theory methods as rigid, she explains that they need not be. She argues that: “(a) Grounded theory strategies need not be rigid or prescriptive; (b) a focus on meaning while using grounded theory furthers, rather than limits interpretive understanding; and (c) we can adopt grounded theory strategies without embracing the positivist leanings of earlier proponents of grounded theory” (2000, p. 510). Charmaz advocates a social constructivist approach to grounded theory that emphasizes the “lived experience” of the participants with those experiences presented in what Geertz (1973) calls “thick descriptions” (p. 6). Creswell (2003) also views constructivists as favoring meanings and writes that constructivists believe that people seek to understand the world in which they live and develop “subjective meanings of their experiences -- meanings directed toward certain objects or things” (p. 8). In summary, Charmaz views grounded theory methods not as directives but as a collection of principles and practices that guide the researcher.

Participant Recruitment

Two primary means were used to recruit participants. Recruitment messages were posted on local, childfree web sites, requesting subjects for the study. Flyers were also distributed to colleagues and a message was posted on the ICSW Yahoo Groups message service. Approximately half the participants contacted me after reading my message on the childfree sites. Colleagues referred many more and a few participants referred friends. Thus the sample is a snowball sample.

Description of Participants

My intention was to interview 15 subjects for the study. Overall, seventeen women volunteered for the study. One subject completed the first interview but declined a second interview, stating she had nothing more to say. Another participant completed only the first interview. This participant lived out-of-state and scheduling the second interview proved complicated. Fifteen women completed both first and second interviews. Six subjects participated in member checking interviews. Two of the fifteen subjects lived outside Illinois.

Participants ranged in age from 42 to 60. Approximately 60% of the subjects were between the ages of 50 and 60. All subjects were college graduates and employed. Some held advanced degrees. One subject was of color and the rest were Caucasian. Every subject was in a long term marriage or partnership of at least eight or more years. U.S. Census data indicates that first marriages that end in divorce last approximately eight years. The average length of partnership or marriage was 16.11 years. This sample is consistent with the known profile of voluntarily childfree women who are typically educated, disproportionately White, and employed.

Data Collection

The data were collected using a semi-structured interview protocol. Most participants were interviewed face-to-face, although two subjects were interviewed by telephone. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. While the researcher began the process with a set protocol of questions, over the course of the interviews, the list was expanded as new fields of inquiry emerged.

Each interview began with the researcher giving an overview of the study and the subject signing a consent form. Participants were then asked basic demographic

information: Age, years of marriage or partnership, highest education level achieved, and employment status. All participants were asked the same opening question: Tell me what midlife is like for you. If a subject had difficulty answering such a broad question, the researcher narrowed the scope to specific areas such as relationships, partnership or marriage, or career to facilitate the interviewing process. Fifteen women were interviewed two times each with interviews lasting between one to one and a half hours.

The actual interviews were conducted in a variety of private settings. In order to accommodate participants' schedules, I conducted interviews at their work sites, in their homes, at this researcher's office, and in ICSW offices. I digitally recorded the interviews and took brief notes following the interview. All digital recordings were transcribed.

Interview Process

The process of gathering information proved unexpectedly complicated for this researcher. This was my first time conducting field research, and my first time, outside of a clinical setting, interviewing strangers regarding personal aspects of their lives. It took time for me to assume the role of researcher. When I began the interviews, I was blissfully naïve about how complicated, consuming, and overwhelming conducting qualitative research can be. After transcribing a few interviews and beginning to analyze a rapidly growing amount of information, I felt overwhelmed by the data. A lesson learned early and relearned throughout the process was how to control the data. With help from my dissertation chair, I bit-by-bit learned to manage an ever increasing quantity of complex information.

An interesting pattern emerged within each individual interview. As a first interview would draw to a close, consistently participants would ask me why I selected this particular topic. Some asked directly if I had children. I answered honestly that my interest in the topic was based on my own life as a midlife, childfree woman. Usually the person asking would say "that makes sense" and the discussion ended. Sometimes the

subject would ask follow up questions. A few participants asked me how I made my decision to remain childfree; others asked if I'd ever experienced critical remarks from others. After this happened the first time, I discussed the situation with my committee chairperson who replied that these were fair questions. His remark helped me feel more comfortable responding to subjects honestly.

In answering questions about my own childfree status, I seemed to foster participants' identification with me and with the study. In the second interview, subjects routinely asked me when I planned to graduate and what I planned to do with the study and the results. They also thanked me for including them in the study and frequently told me how much they gained from reflecting on their decisions. Many also came to the second interview with new insights. For a number of women, the interviews were their first experiences of telling their stories in a coherent, organized, and reflective manner. As the interviewing continued, I grew increasingly protective of the participants and felt a growing responsibility to accurately convey the details of their lives. In hindsight, I suspect my feelings of protectiveness, in part, were rooted in knowing that most in the study had received harsh treatment by others at various times in their lives. Perhaps I was trying to mitigate past hurt feelings. Based on my own feelings of difference, I identified with the participants and their feelings of being on the outside. My focus on accurately portraying subjects' lives and feeling responsible and protective, I believe, stymied me when it came time to write the results. As I moved through the processes of data collection, data analysis, writing and rewriting, I also found myself moving from naïve, overwhelmed doctoral student to embracing the more balanced position of emerging qualitative researcher.

Data Analysis

Data in this study consisted of words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs from the interviews and from memos written by the researcher. Once an interview was transcribed, coding began, using the methods detailed by Charmaz (2000, 2006) and adapted from Strauss & Corbin (1998). In data analysis, the researcher seeks to uncover the respondents' meaning through an interpretative coding process.

Three main methods of analysis were used: line-by-line coding, comparative analysis, and axial coding. Beginning with a line-by-line coding of the transcript (data), each line of data is examined and labeled with words that categorize and summarize the information (Charmaz, 2006). "Line-by-line coding sharpens our use of sensitizing concepts -- that is, those background ideas that inform the overall research problem. Sensitizing concepts offer ways of seeing, organizing, and understanding experience"(Charmaz, 2000, p. 515). In this process of fracturing the data, the researcher generated codes by asking herself questions, including what is happening in the data and what do the codes mean? This initial coding produced categories of data. The researcher hand coded all transcripts.

The next step was analyzing the data by looking for similarities and differences. In this "constant comparing" method, data are compared within the same transcript and then compared from one interview transcript to another. Through this process, initial categories of data evolved and meaning began to fall into place. As the amount of data increased in volume, the researcher constructed a visual "map" or diagram of the evolving categories and properties. Maps or diagrams help with visualizing connections between pieces of information and help organize categories (Charmaz, 2006). Once the data were fractured and categorized, analysis moved into axial coding. In axial coding, categories of data were further related to subcategories. In this process, fractured data were reassembled (Charmaz, 2006).

Writing memos about selected codes or categories was another step in the analysis process. Thoughts, comparisons, details, and connections to the data were written in an

effort to further crystallize the data and move toward deeper levels of analysis. Charmaz (2000) writes that “Memos record researchers’ stages of analytic development. Memo writing helps researchers (a) to grapple with ideas about the data, (b) to set an analytic course, (c) to refine categories, (d) to define the relationships among various categories, and (e) to gain a sense of confidence and competence in their ability to analyze data” (p. 517-18). While the analysis process is described in a linear fashion, the process was much more recursive in actual practice. Eventually through coding, categorizing, and memo writing the major categories or groups of data emerged and were integrated into drafts.

Member Checking

Follow up interviews or “member checks” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were conducted with six participants. In this member checking method, six participants were asked to read and respond to the five chapters of results. The researcher then either met with each participant in a face-to-face interview or spoke with her on the telephone and discussed her reactions to and thoughts about the results. Some subjects’ reactions and responses were integrated into the results chapters, while other responses are described below.

I identified six subjects to contact for member checking, each one a different age and from a different family experience. Participants willingly assisted with this process. Two women contracted pneumonia prior to our meeting and the member checks were delayed until they recovered. But each wanted to contribute to this final piece and felt honored to be included.

All subjects were asked if she felt the chapters fairly represented her experience of the interviews. All felt their narratives were accurately portrayed. The most compelling aspect of their responses in this process was the identification each felt with other women’s stories. Chapter VII Am I Normal? elicited the strongest reactions from the women. Comments ranged from a mild “I enjoyed reading other women’s stories” to “I

feel better knowing others have gone through this too” to “It is like being a member of a club.” One woman stated that she cried when she read the hurtful comments other women had experienced because she too had experienced similar wounding remarks. When I questioned her about her crying, she assured me it was cathartic. She reported feeling better after she cried. Another subject associated to a non-fiction book she had read about how inhumanely women behave toward other women. She connected the theme of the book to how participants in the study felt assaulted by others.

Participants reading the results also expressed empathy toward the subjects whose pieces of narratives they read. For instance, several mentioned the subject who “passed” as a mother from time to time. While none of the readers had themselves “passed,” they could “understand” a woman deciding to do this. None criticized the woman. Empathy was also extended to women who allowed others erroneously to think they were infertile. While none of the readers had done this they could “understand a woman needing to do that.” In other words, the “checkers” were kind in their assessments of the other participants.

Additionally, some women were surprised that childfree women chose different paths to their childfree status. They thought all childfree women were pretty much the same. Yet another stated she knew childfree women were not a type and were not easily categorized, either. Interestingly, none were surprised that childfree women are not regretful or that they feel satisfied at midlife.

Limitations and Generalizability

A major limitation of this study is the small sample. Only 15 women completed both first and second interviews. The characteristics of the sample (Caucasian, educated, employed) are consistent with the known demographic profile of voluntarily childfree women. A larger sample and one less homogeneous could possibly produce different

results. Those who volunteered for the study represent a segment of childfree women who are articulate, willing to respond publicly to questions, and able to reflect upon their lives. They also represent urban childfree women. A second limitation is that participants were recruited through a snowball technique. Snow ball sampling is a nonprobability method which potentially reduces the generalizability of the results. A final limitation is my bias. As an intentionally childfree woman I bring a certain perspective to the study.

Several measures were taken to help counter the limitations. Through out the process, the data were reviewed and discussed with the dissertation chair. Later in the process, committee members also reviewed and discussed the data. After the results were drafted, six participants read and responded to the results in “member checking.”

Statement on Protecting the Rights of Human Subjects

A proposal for this study, which outlined the researcher’s plans to use human subjects, was approved by The Institute for Clinical Social Work’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to the commencement of the interviews. In carrying out the study, the researcher followed ICSW’s standards, policies, and procedures for conducting research. Participation in the study was voluntary, and subjects were informed of procedures and signed and were given a copy of the “Individual Consent for Participation in Research” (Appendix A).

Prior to the start of the interviews, all participants were informed of the potential risks involved in participating. Potential risks included experiencing negative feelings or distress. Subjects were instructed at the beginning of the interview that they could stop the process for any reason and could choose not to answer certain questions. Additionally, all subjects were told that three, free debriefing sessions were available if they felt any distress from the interviews. The researcher, who is also a trained clinician, paid close attention to participants’ reactions and watched for signs of distress. One

participant declined a second interview, stating that she had nothing more to talk about. She did not exhibit any signs of distress during the interview process and did not request debriefing sessions.

The researcher ensured the confidentiality and privacy of the study's participants. Each participant was identified by a code; names were not used. Interviews were conducted in a mutually agreed upon private location. The digital recorder files were destroyed after transcription. The data collected are in a secure, locked location and will remain there for three years and then will be destroyed.

CHAPTER IV

INTRODUCTION TO THE RESULTS

The study's results are grouped into five categories. These categories illustrate the subjective experiences of midlife, childfree women who are partnered or married. Each of the five categories is comprised of several properties, each adding further elaboration.

In the first category, *The Pathways to Becoming Childfree at Midlife*, participants described the pathways to their childfree status. While the pathways *Knew Early*, *Decision Evolved*, and *Circumstances*, are fluid with some overlapping characteristics, each is also distinctive. Typically, women in the *Knew Early* group realized at an early age that they were not interested in motherhood. Many knew this about themselves in their teen years. Women in the next group, *Decision Evolved*, initially assumed they would have children at some point in their marriages or partnerships. However as their relationships progressed, the women and their partners felt "no compelling" reason to have children. The partners were satisfied with a family of two. In the final group, *Circumstances*, women felt less that they made a choice regarding children. Many felt that their life situations led to their childfree status.

Childfree at Midlife: Not a Type, the second category, depicts participants' experiences, perspectives, and characteristics. The five properties of this category, Family of Origin Experiences, From a Traditional Model, Marriage/Partnership, Child Equation, and Birds of a Feather, explicate aspects of the subjects' experiences. The property Family of Origin Experiences shows the diversity of subjects' families. Despite differences in family backgrounds, these women shared the childhood and adolescent experiences of having been encouraged to think and act independently. In the property Marriage/Partnership, participants discussed their primary relationships and the struggle some had finding a partner who was a good match. The next property, Child Equation, demonstrates the deliberations, both past and more currently, participants engaged in concerning their decisions not to bear children. The second part of the property portrays the deep connection many subjects had to children. The category ends with the property, Birds of a Feather, in which the women discussed their friendships with other women who do not have children.

The third category of findings, Am I Normal? is divided between Views of the Self and Views from Others. The sub-properties within those properties are Unusual, Selfish, Other Women, Family Views, But You Are So Good with Kids, and Unusual and Self Accepting. In this category, participants articulated their experiences of feeling different, unusual, or odd and their experiences of characterizing themselves as selfish for their choice to live childfree. The second part of the category illustrates the participants' negative experiences with others who reacted toward them in critical, harsh ways. Subjects who were helped in their families with their experiences of otherness found ways of reconciling their feelings of difference. The reconciliation led to self acceptance.

The fourth category of results is Menopause: Catalyst to Regret? The three properties are Perimenopause and Menopause, Points of Re-Examination, and Who Will Care for Me? In the first property, subjects explored their thoughts and feelings concerning nearing or reaching the physical and psychological marker of menopause. They also discussed any feelings of regret about the choice not to have children. In the next property, Points of Re-Examination, several participants explained various points or times when they intensely revisited their decisions about children. The final property is Who Will Care for Me? In this property, subjects expressed expectable worries about aging and care in their older years.

The final category of results, The Midlife Self describes both the psychological and physical experiences subjects had in midlife. The properties are Transitions, Aging, and Attitude. For some participants, midlife was a time of transitions as they attempted to figure out their next steps; others had recently transitioned to more meaningful work or were pondering a time when pursuing more gratifying employment was a possibility. In the property Aging, women explained their reactions to the loss of physical attractiveness and vitality. The final property, Attitude, portrays how many of the subjects were not just successfully managing midlife but seeking full, rich lives. If physical aging is the down side to midlife, discovering ways to meaningfully live is the upside.

CHAPTER V

THE PATHWAYS TO BECOMING CHILDFREE AT MIDLIFE

I knew what my limitations were. I think I knew more than most people what children take away from parents in time because I'm a family therapist. Whereas lots of people just get married and have three kids and then find themselves overwhelmed by their lives. They don't seriously think about it ahead of time; how many people make a conscious choice?

Introduction

The category, The Pathways to Becoming Childfree at Midlife, depicts how women in the study arrived at midlife childfree. Participants chose one of three pathways to their childfree status: Knew Early, Decision Evolved, or Circumstances. Surprisingly, these were not discrete paths but remarkably fluid, with some overlapping characteristics. For instance, many of the women in the Knew Early category kept open the option to have children when they entered a committed relationship. Such a stance is similar to the one adopted by women in the Decision Evolved group. Overall to arrive at midlife childfree, a woman usually thinks through her life with a certain level of awareness as she

considers who she is and the decision regarding having children. The three properties of the category Pathways are Knew Early, Decision Evolved, and Circumstances.

Knew Early

I looked at my brothers and what they have and I realized that I've never looked at a little baby and thought I want one.

Women in this group knew from an early age that having children was not an experience they desired. A couple of the women felt firmly from their teen years on that they did not want children. Others in the Knew Early group did not actively seek to have children but kept the child option open to some extent within their partnerships or marriages. Several expressed an openness or flexibility to a potential change in their feelings and thoughts should their lives evolve in new ways. This potential flexibility was a feature women in the group shared with those in the Decision Evolved group.

However others held an early, resolved, almost core sense of their decision. They had an "I just knew it wasn't for me" sense about motherhood.

I didn't want any. That started when I was a teenager I guess. I have two older sisters, one had a child when I was nine, so I have been around children and I could see that it was a lot of work and trouble. I have a sister who is two years older than me and she had a baby when she was 17 and I was 15 and I could see it was a wonderful thing but just very difficult.

While another reported:

I can consciously say not wanting to be a mom when I was little. I think around age 12 I thought 'I am never having a child.' That was when I found out about birth control and that I knew you didn't have to have a child.

Others stated, “I never thought I would have children; I don’t think I ever had the desire.” Or “Never occurred to me to be a mother. Never wanted it.” And “Never had any appeal for me whatsoever.”

Selecting a partner proved complex for these women as some “had to go through a lot of guys” before finding a like-minded match. One woman doubted she would have been “drawn” to a man who wanted children, a sentiment expressed by several others. Women in the Knew Early group typically sought partners who also had consciously decided that they did not want children. These subjects held exploratory conversations on the topic with men early in the relationship, making evident their stances on motherhood.

When I dated guys and it would come up that I didn’t want to have kids, some of them were appalled by that or whatever. And then I met my husband and it came up that he didn’t want kids either. I was surprised and pleased.

Another participant reported that:

When we met, we spoke about it within the first date or two. And neither of us ever wanted children and it was never an issue, or something that was going to be maybe or thought about later. It was one of the reasons we were together.

For one woman the typical marriage fantasy held little attraction. “I never thought I’d have the house in the suburbs, the car, the husband, and the children. I don’t think I ever wanted that. I would have married a different person if I wanted that.”

Decision Evolved

We were both involved in our own businesses, just going along, enjoying what we were doing, very content with the way things were.
Neither one of us was pushing for it.

For a number of the women, the decision not to have children evolved within the context of a committed partnership or marriage, in ongoing discussion with their partners

or spouses, and by means of self reflection. A significant number of these women *assumed* they would have children. When they were in their teen and young adult years, many had the typical fantasy of marriage and family and referenced having children “because that’s what women do” as part of their explanation. Having children was considered a normative experience. Most had conversations with their partners or spouses regarding children prior to marriage or partnership or soon after. For these women having children was initially part of their psychological landscapes.

“I might have thought that I would have children because everyone else did. But it was in some far off horizon, somewhere.” “I think if I had married at 18 when my high school sweetheart wanted to marry me I would have had a pile of children without a thought because that’s just what you did.” And “When I was 20, I probably saw myself having a couple of kids. But it was very hazy, a hazy couple of kids.” “When I was young I think I thought I would live a traditional life. But again I was unusually passive; it wasn’t something I longed for. I didn’t think ‘I can’t wait until I have my own babies or I want a big family.’”

Over time, as these women came to know themselves, as their lives progressed, and as their relationships evolved, the decision about children took shape. In discussions with their mates the decision solidified. Yet a few women who knew before marriage that they did not want children kept the option open with their partners until a certain point in the relationship.

There was a discussion before the marriage. How do you feel about having children? I said ‘at this point in my life, I’m really not for it.’ I said ‘I don’t want children’ and he agreed. He said he did not either. The decision was revisited a couple of times in our marriage. The last time probably when I was around 40. And it was now or never for my body. He is six years younger than I am so his timeframe was just different. And at about 40 I thought ‘if you are going to do it

this is it. This will be permanent.’ So I kind of revisited it emotionally because of my biological clock. And I said ‘No. I’m okay with it. I don’t want that.’

Another couple had a “five year plan” for deciding.

We didn’t talk about this at first because we assumed we would have children. At the five year mark I said may be five more years. By this time I think he was enjoying all the attention. I waited on him because we didn’t have kids. I truly think we are really content with our lives. It is possible that I could have married someone who felt strongly that he wanted to have kids and I might have five or six kids. I just happened to have married someone and we just happened to evolve into a situation and are content as we are.

For other couples, their lives moved forward, they were satisfied, and they felt “no compelling reason” to add a child. Some never really had a final conversation with their spouses or partners. They simply “went on” with their lives and having children was not an issue. Many women stated they “were on the same page” as their partners or husbands concerning children.

My husband and I, neither one of us had a strong desire to have children. And it wasn’t really like we ever had that final conversation. It was our life kept going on and it was very full and our friends were having kids and we would spend time with them. But then we were like ‘Oh, let’s go home, this doesn’t fit our lifestyle.’ So, I think that it is just that we just evolved and we were just a really happy couple.

For another “It was sort of like as my life evolved, I worked... I always thought it was something that I would do later, but it was never a dream either.”

Some women in both the Knew Early and Decision Evolved groups offered a biological explanation for their absence of a push toward motherhood.

I felt no pressing need. There are some women who really express desire to have a child and they want to experience pregnancy and that was just missing for me. I always say that I have no biological clock. Like I have never felt this sense that my clock is ticking and I have to make a decision.

Another participant made a similar observation, offering her theory of a genetic connection. “The only way I can explain it is genetic. I never had that inclination. I would

look at a woman pushing a stroller and look at a business woman in high heels and that (high heels) is what I wanted.”

One woman characterized herself as “wishy-washy” and “unresolved.” When pressed, she replied “I feel like my life is fulfilled exactly the way it is and I don’t need anything else at this point.” Though she described herself as “wishy-washy” when she elaborated her feelings she sounded resolved. Inconsistency in articulating the reasoning behind their choices seemed most prominent in the Decision Evolved group.

Circumstances

Everyone in my family married after college, married a college sweetheart.
I just didn’t happen to find that person. I wasn’t going to settle.

In the final pathway Circumstances, settling or not settling assumed a certain prominence. The women in this group, more so than in the other groups, felt that their life circumstances led to their midlife childfree status. Several of the women felt less that they had made the choice not to have children and more that their lives had played out in a particular fashion, resulting in their childfree status. Women in the Circumstances group articulated fewer experiences of agency about their status. Most conveyed an underlying assumption that if they had settled down with just someone perhaps they would have had children.

I guess I was 33 or 34 and my family was saying, ‘Aren’t you ever going to get married?’ I have an aunt, Aunt Mimi, she is the spinster of the family, she never got married. The family was joking calling me Mimi. My father was really worried and said, ‘You need someone to take care of you.’ I said ‘I don’t need anyone to take care of me. No one has fascinated me enough to want to spend the rest of my life with them because I really believe in marriage’I don’t know if I picked bad people or I wasn’t ready or what. But it took until I was 37 when my best girlfriend and guy friend introduced me to my husband.

A different participant spoke to a very similar experience.

In my mind I had always thought I would eventually get married and have kids. When I got to be 35 and still hadn't found anybody that I was interested in marrying and I also maybe should tell you, I never wanted to get married just to get married. I had friends who married, who got married and I thought they weren't in good situations. They were settling and I wasn't willing to do that.

Yet another wondered about her fertility when in her late 30s she stopped using contraception and did not conceive. Rather than pursuing a screening for fertility, she took a "whatever happens" attitude and nothing happened. Women in the Circumstances category did not actively pursue medical intervention or adoption; several offered an "If I'd been desperate" explanation.

If I were desperate for children maybe I would have either settled or thought about adoption or in vitro, because there are number of women that you read about or that you see on TV, or whatever and talk about just having a child was the most important thing to them and they didn't feel fulfilled. I didn't feel that, I felt that having children would add a dimension to my life. But then so would have getting married.

Another participant reported, " I wouldn't have gone through a lot of hoops.... If I think it was something I was desperate for, I would have made it happen. "

Women in this group were also more likely to cite their ages -- "I thought at age 43 that it was already too old to start" -- as an additional reason for their child free status. In various places in the data, the women spoke about their own passivity or as one woman calls it the "whatever factor." The passivity about having children does not fit with other aspects of the woman's personality. In one instance a subject behaved in an uncharacteristic manner when it came to deciding about having children. "I am considered very opinionated. I would say assertive and other people would say aggressive. A person with strong opinions and when it came to kids I was like whatever. So it is odd."

In the Pathways category, passivity or ‘whatever’ factor presented as an inconsistency within the woman’s self. This discrepancy was apparent in some interviews, especially as women articulated, for the first time in a coherent manner, their thoughts and feelings about their choices. The telling sparked a reflective process that was captured in the data as an inconsistency in participants’ narratives. One woman reported in the first interview that because of circumstances she is childfree. In speaking with her husband following the interview, he reminded her that they decided together not to have children. She did not recall such a conversation. Another asserted that she felt no attraction to the role of motherhood and never wanted children. In a second interview, she wondered “I don’t think I made the choice” although she is in her mid-50s and has never taken steps toward motherhood. Another, as though in debate with herself, stated “These were my choices; and were they really my choices?” One woman in a short monologue seemed unaware of the discrepancy between declaring her ambivalence and then declaring she has no desire. “I was ambivalent about it. I have no desire for children; I feel like I don’t have a biological clock. . . . it is not like I thought I better get on this before it is too late.” One participant flat out labeled her feelings. “I never claimed to be consistent.” As the findings unfold in the following chapters, the idea of internal inconsistency may be demonstrated in different ways. At least one participant felt she needed an important reason for not having children.

Conclusion

Women in this study came to their childfree, midlife status via one of three pathways: Knew Early, Decision Evolved, or Circumstances. Rather than rigid, discrete

groups, the pathways were somewhat fluid with overlapping features. The hallmark of women in the Knew Early group was an early sense that mothering was not an ambition, though for some potentially an option. Mates were selected, in part, for their agreement on the child issue. Even though many in the Decision Evolved group initially assumed they would have children, over time and within the context of a committed relationship they came to understand themselves and their needs. They built lives that did not include children. Subjects in the Circumstances group felt that because their lives unfolded in particular ways, they did not become mothers. Nonetheless several disclosed that had they felt desperate for children, they would have pursued motherhood.

CHAPTER VI

CHILDFREE AT MIDLIFE: NOT A TYPE

I don't think it is a cohesive group. It is not a type
when I think of the women I know.

Introduction

In the category Not a Type, the women in the study are described by their various experiences, perspectives, and characteristics. The participants are mainly united by their childfree status rather than by certain common features. Based on their varied early and current experiences, views on life, and personal qualities, these women are less a homogeneous group and more a heterogeneous group. As one participant stated, childfree women are “Tough to categorize.” The five properties of the category Not a Type are Family of Origin Experiences, From a Traditional Model, Marriage/Partnership, Child Equation, and Birds of a Feather.

Family of Origin Experiences

I had a great childhood, great parents, great family.

Subjects in this study come from a range of middle-class, upper-middle class, and upper class backgrounds. Some were only children while others were one of five or six siblings. Though some subjects were from nontraditional family models, most were primarily products of traditional family constellations. Some subjects had parents who divorced while others had parents who were married for 30 years. A number experienced their parents as steady and stable while others experienced parents who struggled with mental illness and substance abuse. The family types proved as different as the individual women themselves.

A couple of participants had mothers who struggled with mental illness and fathers who struggled with substance abuse. For one such woman, the experiences with her parents and challenging, complex family life impacted her feelings about having children, but did not completely shape her decision not to have a child. For her the decision evolved within her marriage. Nevertheless, her family experiences sparked her desire for financial independence and formed her unromanticized view of family life.

I had no illusion that having a family was easy, that it was necessarily any kind of panacea to making my life happy. I remember very distinctly at like 15 thinking that I never wanted to be dependent on a man. That I always wanted to know that I could make my own living, that I could support myself.

Interestingly, this participant always suspected that her own mother would have preferred to forgo motherhood. Following our first interview, she spoke with her mother regarding her feelings toward children. Her mother confirmed the participant's suspicions stating, "Are you kidding? If I'd had a different mother I would not even have gotten married. I was pushed into marriage." She was not the only participant who wondered about her

mother's feelings toward motherhood. Others made remarks like "She didn't seem to enjoy it" or "I think she thought she'd been sold a bill of goods about having a large family." One participant reported that she was convinced her maternal grandmother never wanted children.

Another participant with a similar family experience of a mother with mental illness and a substance abusing father assumed adult-like responsibilities at a very young age, including caring for her younger siblings. While she believed she had the makings of a good parent, given her current successful relationship with a young niece, she also acknowledged that taking care of three siblings, beginning in her pre-teen years, impacted her motivation for parenting her own children.

I don't know if I just had my childhood taking care of kids already. I think that may be part of it. I had a lot of responsibility and was raising the family when I was a kid. By the time I finished college and my sisters were out of the house I just figured it was my time; that coupled with the fact that I had no attraction to child rearing in the first place. I just didn't want to start over again.

But the narratives of these two women, their battles within complicated, demanding families, and the impact those experiences had on their views of children were not representative of the family of origin narratives of most. While a few others struggled with ill parents and disturbing relationships with their mothers, many women came from stable, steady two-parent families where life was much easier. Often these participants' mothers did not work outside the home but in a few cases their mothers worked and pursued their own careers. Some women commonly related that they were from "strict, loving, caring parents" who valued family life. "I had a great childhood, great parents. It was a very traditional family, my mom stayed home and my father

worked. We had family night dinner every night.” And “My parents were really amazing parents.”

From a Traditional Model

There are some roles out there that you can fit into but maybe you don't want to. Maybe you have to write your own role.

As participants' narratives unfolded, some with stories about nontraditional childhoods and parents who themselves did not conform, but most with tales of family conformity and traditional experiences, what became apparent was that participants, generally, were reared to act and think independently. Although father as provider and mother working within the home was the model many of these women knew, they chose for themselves a different model. A common lesson explicitly taught in their families and internalized by many while growing up was that one could pursue whatever she wanted to pursue. “She (mother) was just a mom teaching her girls the same way she taught her boys – to be whatever they wanted to be.” And “There were never any limitations on girls do this and boys do that. It was always whatever you wanted to do you could do.”

I saw that to be engaged in work and respected in the work place was more fun, just seemed that my dad had more fun than my mother. To be the provider, to be out in the world. His life seemed more fun than my mother's.

A number of participants also felt their parents guided them toward independent ways of thinking and behaving which ultimately included making certain choices. “She (mother) ingrained the freedom of choices... I don't think she knew when she was teaching us that it would relate to not choosing motherhood.” Others credited their

parents with instilling independence. “She raised me to be independent, but maybe in her mind too independent” and “For whatever reason my experience (growing up) made me independent....Absolutely in my family I’m not like the others.” Some cited gaining from their parents a sense of confidence and ability to make decisions. One woman offered thoughts about what her parents communicated to her about conformity. “I was never steered toward needing to conform. I was never told not to conform, but I was never told to conform either.”

No matter the family constellation, many women emerged from their families with a sense of themselves as independent and able to make choices.

Marriage/Partnership

My friends who have kids say they got married younger because they wanted to have children. When you don’t want children you don’t have that biological clock urge or that fear, so you don’t jump on the first guy who looks like he’ll dress up okay because you want babies.

The participant quoted above pointed out two considerations of marriage for those who do not choose children: The timing and the quality of the marital relationship. Without the push to reproduce, women can feel less pressured to marry on time and can wait until they make a good match.

Participants were almost evenly divided between those who married early, in their 20s, and those who married or partnered from mid 30s to mid 40s. Some women who married or partnered at age 35 or later married men a few years younger than themselves, while some partnered or married men older. Women in both the Knew Early and Decision Evolved groups tended to marry early simply because early on they met suitable, likeminded partners. Several women in those two groups married more than

once. The clearest pattern to emerge was with those in the Circumstances group who did not want to settle with just anyone. Since for those women the journey to find the right partner proved more challenging and protracted, they married or partnered in their later 30s to mid 40s.

A sub-property of marriage is The Two of Us. For subjects, the marital relationship or partnership assumed primary importance when the union was not motivated by the desire for children. The marriage or partnership is the family. Rather than the focus being – Let’s have children – the focus becomes – The Two of Us and what do we want in our lives, in our careers, and in our leisure time. As one participant stated she and her husband married because “We wanted to be together.” The relationship itself provided satisfaction.

Many participants expressed thoughts on the quality of the relationship, including contentment with the primary family unit consisting of just two. “We didn’t need to have children to make the relationship work or to make the relationship better” and “We didn’t feel unfulfilled by not having children.” “I consider my family my husband and me and I think we each put the other one before ourselves.” Or “Now we are at a point of deep friendship and love and set in a groove and really happy. We try to meet each other’s needs if we can.” Others mentioned the ease of managing their lives when just two people are involved. “I also find that the easy part is that because it is just the two of us, if something comes up we can deal with it right away” and “It is a lot of fun. We laugh a lot together. He is fun to be around. There are no in-law problems and no money problems. There is no arguing over the kids. It is just a very easy relationship.” These women

focused on building careers, traveling, and giving their time in different ways. Many described active, busy, related, and satisfying lives.

Others acknowledged consciously protecting the couple relationship from the strain they assumed would come with children.

At that time (when they married) he really wanted to have children. I said I thought it would destroy our relationship. You work nights and I would be like a single mom. I travel a lot for work and we would never have a relationship and my relationship with him means more to me than being a parent.

Only one participant found her partnership disappointing. For everyone else in the study, each participant was predominately satisfied with the focus and quality of the relationship.

Child Equation

Society as a whole seems to believe, and I have actually run into this, that if you don't have children you must hate them.

The data in this study illustrated what may seem surprising: The participants actively and thoughtfully deliberated their choices about motherhood. In the first category, The Pathways to Becoming Childfree at Midlife, (Chapter V) subjects were grouped by their pathways to childfree status: Knew Early, Decision Evolved, or Circumstances. In that category, the participants' narratives demonstrated that these women contemplated their choices in a number of ways. In whatever way their decisions came to be, they all displayed a capacity to think about children. In this property, Child Equation, the first section provides more evidence of participants carefully, seriously thinking through the decision to have a child. The second section shows how deeply connected many women are to children.

Deliberating about having a child occurred at differing times and could continue long after a woman felt she had reached a solid decision. As described in an earlier category, some women very early thought about motherhood and made an early decision not to have children. For others the decision evolved over time and within a committed relationship.

One participant in an effort to facilitate her decision process pretended she had a baby.

We'd been married about a year and lived in a small town in and I missed my period for a couple of months. It was nothing. We said 'Let's pretend we have a baby and let's see how it would affect our lives.' When our friends called we said if we had a baby we would have to get a babysitter or if we wanted to go away someone would have to stay with the baby and it was pretty much then that I decided it would be too much of a change to the lifestyle that I really, really enjoyed.

The trying-on of the motherhood role in her imagination helped this subject actively contemplate her choice. Another more common practice was to observe a sibling in the mothering role as a way of assisting with the decision.

I thought 'wow this is not something that I could do.' Although I could see it could be very rewarding if you had the resources and if that is what you wanted to do. You could really devote your life to it and you could have a wonderful time. But that wasn't really what I wanted.

For some, contemplating led to placing the decision in a new relational context: "I chose early on to work with children in therapy rather than having my own. It just seemed like I could do more that way."

Other participants spoke about their ongoing, but occasional fleeting thoughts or wonders about parenthood. For one woman such thoughts occurred during a child's religious coming-of-age service. "I can appreciate how proud they are [the parents] and wonder what it would be like to be the parent" while another woman stated that at times she "Wondered what it would be like to be a parent" but quickly followed with "but not

enough to do anything about it.” While another reported “I mean every once in a while I see a mother and a baby and I think ‘That is really nice. Maybe I want that.’ And then I don’t do anything and move on.”

Just as some women wondered about parenthood, another woman thought about grandparenthood. “I could imagine skipping the whole children thing and being a grandparent; I would like to be a grandparent; I’m sorry not to be a grandparent.” One participant described her relationship with a young niece as mirroring a grandparent-grandchild relationship.

The women interviewed were just as varied in their relationships with children as they were in other areas. Unlike portraits of uncaring, child-hating childless women, many of the women in the study had close relationships with children. Others had limited connection to children and yet expressed no hatred of children. However as the quote below illustrates, these women don’t operate from the Likes Children, Must Have Own Children Theory.

There seems to be a simplistic connection between liking children and having children. I’ve heard a lot of people say ‘I love children therefore I’m going to have six.’ There’s this simplistic connection that a lot of society seems to make. And I don’t fit.

Many women in this study differentiated liking children and having relationships with children from wanting their own. By not having children, these women found themselves in peril of being labeled as child haters – a pejorative label that does not fit. “I’ve been a little surprised by some of society’s reactions that some people seem to lump me in a category with people who hate children because I choose not to have any.” Most made an effort to distinguish themselves and their choices from those who do express hatred of children. A common remark was “I don’t understand people who say

they hate children.” Or “I don’t hate children. It was never this ‘Oh my gosh’ I can’t imagine having one around.”

About half the women in the study maintained close and ongoing connections with children. For some the relationships were with nieces or nephews; others served as godparents to friends’ children. Some did both. Despite not producing their own, many participants were deeply engaged with and nurturing to children.

I have a very close relationship with my nieces and nephews. My goddaughter, I have been with her since she was an infant. I made a commitment to always be there for her. And my nephew, as he grew older I became friends with him. I’m not an old stuffy aunt, I’m someone he can have fun with and talk to and not be parental and I think he likes to have that mentorship.

And another reported:

My sister, who is 10 years younger than I, has a 3 year-old who is like the closest thing to a grandchild I’m going to get. I can’t see being without her in my life. I don’t want to miss her life.

Some participants specifically scheduled time with friends’ children. “I tend to seek out chunks of time to spend with friends who have children because I want to get some part of that experience, because I like the interaction with the children.”

Seriously and thoughtfully deliberating their choices about having children united many of the subjects in this study. Many maintained close, ongoing relationships with children.

Birds of a Feather

Friends with children have a different focus to their lives.

An unexpected finding in this study was in the area of friendships. More than half the participants reported that “most of my friends don’t have children.” A few actually

stated that none of their friends have children. What is interesting about that piece of data, but beyond the analysis of this study, is that many of the friends without children are long standing friends, often from college or before. Though maintaining decades' long friendships was a trend within the study, many other women more recently made friends with women without children, making manifest the human need to connect with those similar to oneself.

The explanations for the Birds of a Feather friendships differed. Common theories revolved around time, interests, and a different focus to life. Having shared interests or a context for experiences was frequently mentioned. "People without children have time to cultivate experiences – shared experiences" and "People who have children tend to talk about their children. If you do not have those experiences you are not going to be drawn to those people." Others mentioned time. "Most of my friends don't have kids. They have more time to spend with me." Or "I think there is a practical piece for me. Friends without children have time to pursue activities." While one participant touched at a deeper understanding, one of kinship with someone who understands another's experience. "I think they [women without children] have shared experiences; I think they feel a kinship that is hard to duplicate with women who have children." Several also spoke to the familiar experience of having their friends with children "drift off" as their lives took dissimilar pathways, in part because of the opposite focus to their lives. One reported that she had not made friends with any women after they had children; her friends with children were her friends prior to motherhood.

Conclusion

The category Not a Type described the variety of participants. The properties Family of Origin, From a Traditional Model, Marriage/Partnership, Child Equation, and Birds of a Feather illustrated the differences and commonalities of the women. Overall these women are bound by their childfree status at midlife. The participants came from a variety of families. Some in the study experienced significant difficulties within their families which impacted but did not completely shape their thoughts about having children. Others were from more stable families. Generally, subjects felt they were raised to think for themselves and to make independent choices. Many participants reported strongly engaging relationships with nieces, nephews, and friends' children. Even those who do not maintain close relationships with children expressed affection toward children even though they do not desire children of their own. Frequently, subjects reported having close friends who also do not have children.

In the "Member Checking" process, a couple of participants who read the results stated they were surprised to learn that childfree women were not a type. As one subject declared, "In my mind, I group us all together." Participants had expected that women who choose a childfree lifestyle would come from either nontraditional backgrounds or unstable homes. Others who read this chapter, though, were not surprised. They knew, from their own experiences with other childfree women, that a type does not exist.

CHAPTER VII

AM I NORMAL? VIEWS OF THE SELF AND VIEWS FROM OTHERS

I think society thinks it is normal to have kids. And that it is abnormal not to and no matter where I go people ask me, 'Do you have kids?' It is one of the first one or two things out of their mouths. And when I say no, they say why? And they are cautious because they think may be she couldn't...when I say I chose it they are freaked out, like why would a woman choose that? No one quite gets it except another person who chose it too.

Introduction

Frequently, women who choose not to have children feel that they are up against something. They feel they are up against cultural expectations, up against societal expectations, up against family expectations, and sometimes up against self expectations. Ultimately, they are also up against the belief that only a singular pathway constitutes normal development rather than multiple pathways can constitute normal development.

Ideas and feelings about what comprises normalcy permeates the Chapter VII Am I Normal? Beyond ideas concerning normalcy is a question about difference. Do

individuals feel unusual or outside the mainstream because, for reasons internal to themselves, they experience themselves as truly unusual? Or do individuals feel unusual and outside the mainstream in response to the negative reactions of others? Do others react negatively to a woman without children because they perceive her as not fulfilling her assumed role?

The category Am I Normal? is composed of the properties Views of the Self, Views from Others, and Unusual & Self Accepting. Embedded within Views of the Self are the sub-properties Unusual and Selfish. Embedded within Views from Others are the sub-properties Other Women, Family Views, and But You Are So Good with Kids. The chapter ends with the property Unusual and Self Accepting. To a certain extent, the separation of the data into properties is artificial, for at many points the Views of the Self and Views from Others overlap, interweave, and collide with one another. This occurred as participants expressed feelings and understandings of themselves as midlife childfree women and explored their feelings and reactions from others regarding their childfree status. Clashing were internal, external, personal, societal, and cultural assumptions about women and motherhood. At particular points questions were embedded within participants' narratives, including why are others so troubled by someone else's choice? And must one ask permission to be different?

In the first property Views of the Self, women explained their experiences as childfree women. In the second property, Views from Others, participants explored and expressed their experiences of and reactions from others, including mothers, other family members, and acquaintances.

Views of the Self

I think they just see us as being a little weird

The struggle in the interviews some women had clearly articulating their experiences comes through as a discrepancy in their thinking. For many women, the interview is the first time they have articulated, in a coherent fashion, their thoughts about their choice; some made connections in their thinking as they explained their reasons for not having children; some women contradicted themselves, first offering one reason and then an opposing reason, conveying an uncertainty about their feelings. For example, one woman reported “These were my choices; were they really my choices?” While another stated “I was ambivalent about it. I have no desire for children.” An inconsistency in reasoning comes through. Nevertheless, something more seemed at play. Many participants viewed themselves as unusual or odd, while others did not see themselves as unusual and reported never feeling odd or different. The discrepancy seemed connected to a concern about judgment. For many saying aloud, to themselves or to others, that they chose their childfree status evoked a kind of fear because they anticipated hostile, aggressive reactions. As one participant explained “You kind of dance around it [the question] because we are conditioned that is what you are supposed to have [children], that’s what you are put on this earth for.” While it may feel more comfortable to think that dancing around the childbearing question is about social and cultural expectations,

what is clear from the data is that some women “dance” to avoid hostility from others. For these women, the dance is a protective defense mechanism.

Unusual

They think it is not usual for a woman not to have children.

An unexpected aspect of the data is how many participants wondered whether they seemed unusual or odd. Spontaneously many voiced concerns about their own sense of being different. “Do I sound like an oddball compared to other people who you have talked to who don’t have children? You know how you always wonder how you kind of measure up, if you are just like a freak.” Or others stated “I don’t feel like I am unusual but when I compare myself to other women I am very different.” And “I see myself as different, as alternative.” Yet another spoke to her struggle. “It is hard for me because I think on some level it is being out of the mainstream. I think it is hard being perceived as different.” While one woman reported, “I think people who are married and don’t have children are odd; people don’t know what to do with us. I think people want to put us in a bucket. They can’t sew us up neatly.” Questions about the self as different emerged but the questions had a malicious, critical edge. A participant’s own words expressed it best. “You think that people label you. I think there is a lot of judgment that you make of yourself and what you think other people think of you.” Self judgments over-lapped with judgments from others, begging the question which came first? Consistent with this sample of women, not all in the study felt the internal and external criticism. Several who

have limited contact with parents or who are surrounded by women friends who also do not have children did not report feeling odd or unusual.

Selfish

The underlying message can be what's wrong with you.

Probably the most commonly spoken word in all the interviews is selfish. As participants used the word, varied meanings emerged. Selfish could be thought of as excessive giving to the self, denying the self, or denying something to someone else. It could be a callous assessment of someone else or an unsympathetic assessment of one's self. Selfishness appeared most prominent when women spoke about what they tell themselves and others about their choice not to have children. When a childfree woman retells how others have spoken to her, selfishness is also prominent. No matter the context, the concept of selfishness seemed deeply attached to choosing not to have children. "I call myself selfish for not wanting to sacrifice, to make the sacrifices it takes to be a parent. So I call myself selfish. I'm not a selfish person. I'm very giving." The above participant characterized herself as *selfish* because she did not want to parent. Assessing herself as selfish, however, strangely clashed with her feelings about herself as a giving person. While the woman below spoke to feeling weird, selfish, and so odd that she was beyond a category.

We are in this weird group. No one knows how to label us; I would wonder about other couples without children – are they just like my husband and me? And do they feel they are selfish the way I sometimes feel that I am selfish?

Over the course of the interviews what is clarified is the battle some women have stating that they chose not to have children. For a few women articulating their choice is not an issue or a struggle. Yet for many an ambiguous, vague statement about how they came to be childfree at midlife is easier to make than to say they made a choice. To say one chose can set up a woman to experience harsh feelings about herself.

One woman solved the dilemma by passively assigning the choice to a partner.

I think at a younger age it was really difficult for me to say I didn't want children. To say that to myself seemed too selfish, too self-centered, not the right attitude so I ended up with men who did not want children so they could own that decision for me. I was going along with them.

The "going along with them" was a kind of passivity that appeared throughout interviews. When one is going against assumptions about womanhood, handing the decision to someone else saves one from criticism. Another participant puzzled over her reluctance to claim her choice and how out-of-character her stance felt with her understanding of herself. "Yet all through my life I think I've bucked certain traditions and certain things and have been kind of a renegade. So I don't know why saying no, I don't, I choose not to have children is so hard."

In a particularly instructive interview, one participant illuminated the conflict many women felt and offered at least a partial answer to why it is so hard for some women to say they chose.

When people ask me (if I have children) my answer is never that we've (she and her husband) chosen not to. I say, 'No I have animals.' I think it would make me sound like a devil. How could you be married and not....? even if you say that you don't care what people say we care what people think. We want them to think we are a good person. Why can we not say we've decided not to have children? I've never said that. Why is it hard for us to say this? Why is it not an acceptable answer?

Another added further elaboration. “I was afraid I would sound selfish and selfish to me is the same as the devil. To be selfish is a very bad quality.” One participant pointed out that “Any choice has a degree of selfishness to it.” Whether these subjects acknowledged their behaviors or not, they do get caught up in unkindly evaluating themselves. To express their true feelings and experiences about themselves sets them up for further scrutiny from others. Do these women judge themselves as selfish because they feel that way? Or do they judge themselves as selfish because they repeatedly experienced such evaluations? Have injuries to the self resulted in feelings of hostility and anger toward others and themselves as these women have attempted to reconcile their choices and feelings of difference?

I have actually asked people what they mean by selfish and often they cannot say. But I think they really mean unstable. I think it is a nice way of saying ‘There is something wrong with you. Must be something wrong because you don’t want a child.

Views from Others

Could we even say it to ourselves? It is so much easier to say circumstances took over or it was in the hands of God or it was ambivalence. Because to say no, I have chosen this apparently puts us in a bad light.

Just as the property Views of the Self describes participants’ feelings, thoughts, and experiences, so does the property Views from Others. This property differs in that participants elaborated their experiences with others, including how family, acquaintances, and some times random strangers have reacted to their childfree status. It also illustrates how participants have managed their own feeling states and their reactions. As the quote above points out, to say one has chosen can place one in a bad light.

The pieces of narratives creating this property demonstrate a clash between one's internal experience and hurtful external assessments. Participants reported that most judgments, criticisms, and aggressive questioning were delivered by other women. Only a few women reported that people rarely queried or criticized them about their childfree status. These women did not allow intrusive questions. "I'm not around people who have children who would criticize me. I think you surround yourself with people who are supportive and get rid of the people who are toxic" and "I don't think it would be part of a conversation I would have with someone." But the majority of women experienced reactions from others that ranged from mild surprise 'Oh you don't have any children?' to pushy, insensitive queries and then incomprehension at the answers. As one woman stated "People should not ask the question if they are not prepared for the answer." The sub-properties for Views from Others are Other Women, Views from Family, and But You Are So Good with Kids.

Other Women

What do you mean you don't have kids?

Although a number of women recounted conversations they had with their brothers or other men, overall ongoing reactions, comments, and criticisms outside of one's family of origin were delivered by other women. Acquaintances, co-workers, friends, colleagues and sometimes almost strangers felt permitted to ask women why they were not mothers. One participant who works almost entirely with men explained this phenomenon. "Nobody would ever ask a man in business whether he had children and how many children he had. But for some reason that is a fairer question for women."

A number of women reported experiences in which they had been aggressively queried about their status by other women. As a means of interpreting this experience one participant stated “Women are far more judgmental of other women and their choices than men are. I get the sense that women are always doing some kind of mental comparison.” Knowing such a judgmental comparison was taking place, some in the study reported being careful about who they told about their choice. “You pick your audience, who you say it to out loud because people definitely want you to explain yourself.”

Women frequently used the word “intrusive” to describe questioning from others, although in retelling the stories, the tone was intrusive, critical, and disapproving. “Strangers feel like they can ask, which to me is kind of personal” and “People always assume it is from infertility. Or they assume you had a child die and they’ll ask that out right – ‘Did you have a child? Did your child die?’ Some will say, ‘Can you have children?’ ‘I think they think ‘Is she infertile?’ Did she choose not to have children and therefore she’s not a warm, caring, giving person?” Others had the experience of someone saying out right “What do you mean you don’t want kids?” One woman made clear what others veiled: Whether or not she feels judged by others depends on their reactions.

What is curious and puzzling is why other people, especially women, are distressed and disapproving of an alternative choice. Given the severity of the comments it is no wonder participants felt odd, unusual or freakish, especially when they felt assessed as “not normal.” Many women constructed a variety of explanations for the reasons behind such criticisms, including “It is an affront to them” or “Some how it is a

rejection of their values.” Others stated “People are more comfortable with others who think as they do, feel as they do. They feel if you have children you are doing the same thing” and “I don’t understand the thought that everyone’s needs have to be the same as theirs; that your needs and wants have to line up with theirs.” Participants expressed the pain of being different when the expectation is felt to be conformity. “I think people find it strange and disturbing. I think they think there is something peculiar about a woman who does not have children. And they don’t necessarily convey that openly.”

Not surprisingly, the forceful, uncompromising nature of questions often resulted in hurt feelings. “When I was younger it would hurt me, embarrass me, or make me feel that there was something wrong with me. It would frighten me that someone would not value me without a child.” And “People feel very at ease in asking questions that are really none of their concern.”

For some women it is easier to allow others to think their childfree status has resulted from infertility rather than from choice. One woman when asked if she has children will often reply “Oh no” and then make a sad face, implying she could not conceive. In doing this she elicited sympathy rather than aggression. Another reported “I never said I was childfree by choice until I was in my late 30s. I would make vague statements.” Vague statements can easily be interpreted as code for infertility by the person enquiring. Such statements halt further probing. One participant referenced a friend’s management strategy. “I have a friend who tells people she is infertile because she doesn’t want to deal with the trouble. She likes the “clucking” rather than people attacking.” As several participants pointed out, infertility kindles sympathy or empathy.

There is an likeness with infertile women because at least they tried, even if, as one woman stated “they did not cross the finish line.”

One woman took a novel approach to managing intrusive questions. From time to time she “passes” as a mother especially when speaking to “People who don’t matter,” often those she will never see again. She figured it is both less bothersome and less time consuming to provide a common (Yes, I have two kids) albeit false answer than to engage in answering nosy questions. “I don’t feel like I need to explain to a cab driver my decision.” When probed about this strategy she answered “It implies that society is not ready for people who do not conform in some cases. This is how I deal with it...To me it says less about me than the person asking.”

What many women implied in their stories one woman made explicit. Previous negative reactions to this woman’s childfree status had caused her to feel wary about reactions from women with children. “I have to be careful about always anticipating a negative reaction from women with children because I have to say I usually do anticipate that.”

Views from Family

I must say, my mother never criticized my decision not to have children.

Participants also had a range of experiences within their families of origin concerning their childfree status. Some women reported their parents were supportive of the choice “They were happy that we were enjoying our lives, that we were traveling,” “My mom was supportive. She said that if you don’t want it you aren’t going to enjoy it. No reason to do it.” Some women were helped with their choice within their families by

having their feelings and choice accepted. “To say that I was on a different path, I don’t know. It didn’t feel different because my father was saying ‘This is fine.’” A few participants also had siblings who chose not to have children. Having someone in the family who made the same choice gave them “strength” as they felt understood.

Some subjects’ mothers were supportive of the choice, despite their own longings for grandmotherhood. “My mother had a closet full of baby clothes.” Other mothers were less supportive and longed for the daughter to have a child.

My mother always wanted me to have a baby. She bought me presents. I had a closet full of baby clothes. My three brothers have thirteen children. She would tell me ‘Those aren’t really my grandchildren. A daughter has to have a child for it to be a real grandchild.’

While a few women discussed their choice with family members, for many open discussions proved more difficult. “My mother has had a hard time. She has been good about not bugging me, but she has mentioned it a few times.” “My father always thought that it was bizarre that I did not have children. I think she [mother] felt mixed toward my choice. She never said anything to me about my choice; she never said ‘You have made a bad choice.’ Others who spoke more openly with their parents experienced the parents’ disappointments. “My mother was probably the most brokenhearted about it. My sister two years younger than me also chose no children. We are the oldest girls. And my mother was waiting for grandchildren.” “She took it personally like she did something wrong because she loved being a mom” and “I just don’t think she [mother] understands it [not having children] in a way she can wrap her mind around.”

Many women recalled family members assessing them as weird or defective. “My husband’s family sees us as immature and cold.”

He [her brother] thinks it is weird. But they [family] are so used to it now that it is just not part of the conversation any more. When I first got married everyone just assumed I was having children and then five years passed and people said ‘Aren’t you having children?’ No. ‘Why not?’ Just don’t want them. People said ‘Well what kind of decision is that?’ It is mine.’

Another participant reported:

We’ve talked about how our families probably view us because we don’t have children and we don’t want children. They [our families] think of us as self-centered, selfish, shallow because we don’t have this depth to us to give this great love to a child. So I think they just see us as being a little weird.

But You Are so Good with Kids

Are you sure you don’t want kids?

The final sub-property, But You Are So Good with Kids, describes experiences many participants had with parents. Friends, family members, and others complimented the women’s abilities with children or commented on their general kindness. The implied message is ‘You are not so odd. You really would be okay as a parent.’

Several women recounted specific incidences. “People would constantly look at us and say ‘You are so good with children. Are you sure you don’t want your own?’” Or “You should have children because you are warm; one thing doesn’t lead to the other in my head.” Another reported, “They would say ‘What a shame.’ I think people say that about my husband. ‘Oh it is such a shame’ because they are such a nice couple. Why didn’t they have children.” One participant observed that the “traits” other people point out (warmth, kindness) are those make for a good nurse or doctor, yet no one ever suggests that to her. Others have surprised parents with their childcare abilities. “She (the

mother) seemed shocked that I was happy and enjoyed holding the baby.” Some have learned to interpret the comments about abilities and kindness as compliments. “I realized that people kind of want to put you in a box. When friends of mine that I have known for a long time say, ‘It is too bad you don’t have children because you would be such a good mom’ I always think of it as a nice thing.”

Unusual and Self Accepting

Not having the same experience as everyone else doesn’t mean my life is empty. I think that society would view me as having an emptiness.

In this final property, Unusual and Self Accepting, some of the participants explored their feelings of understanding and self acceptance as they have integrated their choice about children with a perception of themselves as unusual. These women have come to terms or have come to embrace their difference. “I’m unusual in two ways. I’m obsessed with God and I have no children” and “I think I’ve just come to a place of understanding that I am unusual. I’m so unusual in so many ways I’m just sort of used to people’s responses and I try my best not to be judgmental and get angry about it.” Some have adopted a philosophical stance to resolve feelings of difference brought on by the onslaught of criticisms. “Life is too short to worry about what other people think. My closest friends understand and the rest are irrelevant.” Or others said “I have reached that point in my life where I don’t care what people think about me; I have accepted myself.” One woman confessed that at times she felt accepting of her difference. Yet at others times injured, hurt feelings over comments made to her emerged. “I try not to be angry, but sometimes I’m pissed.” Others have figured out that life is better lived when one knows, embraces, and acknowledges one’s self. “It took me until I was an adult to realize

that okay, it is kind of cool and you know I can't be somebody else. I might as well just be me and embrace it." "It was a journey to get to the point for me to say it to myself [that she didn't want children]. I wouldn't say it was difficult so much as to recognize that it didn't just have to do with the man I was with." Or "If I had a kid I would not be me; I would not be who I am. I like who I am." And "At times, I accept who I am."

Perhaps not surprisingly, a woman's age seemed to influence the ease with which she could more openly articulate her choice. Once women had moved beyond the typical child bearing years and edged closer to age 50, they reported feeling more comfortable saying "It wasn't right for our lifestyle" or "We chose not to." One woman stated "It is probably not such a definitive thing to say in one's 30s because you never know what will happen. Now it is a stronger statement." As another participant stated, "I've always been clear as to my wants. Now I just don't care if someone doesn't like it. If people say something, I'm just bemused." This reconciliation and integration process is ongoing. However older childfree women also do not receive the volume of negative commentary or questions about their status that younger childfree women do. When one is no longer receiving, in an ongoing manner, severe assessments from others, self acceptance may be an easier state to reach.

Conclusion

The category, Am I Normal?, described and illustrated the views and feelings midlife, childfree women have of themselves and illustrated the experiences, reactions, and feelings many have encountered in their relationships with others. Central to the chapter is the idea of acceptability of an alternative choice, especially when the choice

involves going against an assumption about what is considered usual for a woman. The chapter demonstrated, by way of the women's narratives, the hurtful, disparaging, and intrusive manner in which many women have been questioned about their childfree status. Since many come to anticipate negative reactions, they have learned an array of protective mechanisms, including providing vague answers and shifting the topic, to guard against injury. Those who were helped with their feelings and accepted in their families of origin seemed less impacted and injured by remarks from others. For some a sibling who made the same choice provided a cushion against feeling different within the family, while others were labeled weird or different by their families. In what appeared to be an ongoing, integrative process, many have achieved a level of self acceptance concerning their choice and difference. As one subject stated "The best thing about being childfree is the ability now to be childfree."

Member Checking

The six participants who read and responded to the five chapters of results had the strongest reactions to Chapter VII. Several stated that they had experienced the same kinds of reactions from others and identified with the hostile, negative questioning. Several stated they felt "better" knowing others had experiences and feelings similar to their own.

CHAPTER VIII

MENOPAUSE: CATALYST TO REGRET?

I have to say that I think it is an erroneous assumption that women at midlife are regretful.

Introduction

Feeling regret is a natural aspect of the human experience. On any given day, an individual may experience small regrets such as remorse about eating a second brownie or larger regrets over a job not taken, a relationship not pursued, or special words not spoken. In this study, regret is defined as a painful feeling state of grief, longing, or disappointment, especially as those feelings might relate to the decision not to have children.

The category Menopause: Catalyst to Regret? is comprised of the three properties Perimenopause and Menopause, Points of Re-Examination, and Who Will Care for Me? In the first property, Perimenopause and Menopause, participants explored their feelings

and thoughts concerning nearing or reaching this physical and psychological milestone. Only a couple of participants had not at least reached perimenopause. Those women predicted what their reactions might be once they reached the marker. In the next property, Points of Re-Examination, several participants discussed events which caused them to revisit their decisions regarding children. The category ends with the property, Who Will Care for Me? In this property, participants explored their worries and concerns about their own physical and emotional care once they reach very old age. Interestingly, the anxiety and worry about care when one is very old was expressed by participants and had been expressed *to* some participants by others as a reason one might have children.

Perimenopause and Menopause

I don't think of it as sad or regretful. I think of women who have made that decision as having more interesting lives.

Menopause, a natural product of aging, can seem weighted with various meanings. For women at midlife, the topic of perimenopause and menopause can evoke a range of feelings and thoughts, especially when a discussion centers on symptoms and discomforts. Perimenopause “announces” that a woman’s natural capacity for child bearing is drawing to a close and at menopause that capacity concludes. An assumption of this study was that reaching menopause might awaken feelings, including regret, in childfree women. In fact, only two women were regretful regarding their choice not to have children. This finding surprised one of the subjects who participated in “member checking.” She thought more participants would feel regretful. However, most had long since integrated their choice into their sense of themselves. Nevertheless, questions about menopause did trigger other concerns. Menopause heralds a new phase in a woman’s life

and is a symbol of aging. During the research interviews, questions about regret and menopause prompted participants to express anxieties about aging, loneliness, and old age. While this researcher asked about menopause with the hope of fettering out feelings and thoughts about children and regret, participants more accurately interpreted menopause in its broader context as it relates to aging and an array of changes. While the final chapter explores participants' thoughts and feelings concerning midlife, including aging, this property explores anxieties prompted by menopause itself, including any painful feelings such as grief, loss, disappointment or regret.

One participant, who married a man more than a decade older than she, did clearly express regret over not having children. She explained her wish that she had children was "for selfish reasons." As an only child, she was without both siblings and extended family and she assumed she will out live her husband. She does not "beat herself up" over the decision, yet reported "I wish I had. It is not one of those, like that cartoon, 'Oops, I forgot to have children.' It is not that. It is just, you can't control everything and that's life." Although she ended the statement with an optimistic "I am happy the way I am" her point was made that she wanted a family. Another participant when asked about regret projected herself into the future and wondered how she might feel decades from now. "My only thinking is that I could be regretful when I'm 60 or 70 and I don't have children to come visit me." In part, what seemed expressed by both women were predictable worries about loneliness, old age, and hope for ongoing connection.

Women in the study greeted, in various ways, the actual demise of their biological capacity to produce children. "I did think there was always the option (to have children).

That there is always the option. I had options and now I don't" was one reaction. One subject stated, "Menopause closes the door." While another reported "I didn't feel a need or compulsion that I was missing out or that my life was going to be ruined or that it was something that I should have done. I didn't feel any of that." One woman was happy that menopause was finished. "I'm just happy not to have a period any more. I think it is fantastic. I don't think I had a moment of 'Oh my God I can't have babies' because I dealt with that on a psychological level in my 40s." Several cited their happiness with having finished with "annoying symptoms" while others looked forward to relief. "I hope menopause will come and get over with and done and give a little relief from all the symptoms and the periods and all that stuff." "No, I haven't had any of those (feelings of regret). I mean I will just be glad when my period stops. I have had enough of it." Many spoke with a level of firmness regarding the absence of regret. "Everybody says 'Oh, you will be sorry when you are 45 or 50 that you don't have children.' I am like so certain that I made the right decision. I never felt sorry that I didn't have children." Others were almost practical in their responses. "No, I didn't get all emotional and say 'Now I am not going to have children.'" Or "Any regrets? Not really. I can't think of any." And finally, "Do I have any regrets now? I still don't think I do." One subject voiced surprise that she does not feel regret. "I thought I would be regretful, but I'm not."

For the few participants who have yet to reach menopause, their responses indicated an awareness that they may need to cope with regret in the future.

"I am okay with the fact that if at some point in the future I have any regrets at all I will deal with that when it happens." Another stated "I suppose sometimes I wonder if in 10

years will I feel regret. I suppose it is possible I will. I don't know." While another reported:

I am really not concerned about it because I feel really comfortable with my decision not to have children. I don't feel like I missed anything because I don't have children or should I take that last ditch effort to have children when I am 45. So maybe I will feel differently when menopause hits but so far I feel like if somebody told me tomorrow I couldn't have children, it wouldn't bother me.

Overall, a couple of participants expressed a little sorrow or longing. Others, however, reported no sadness as they moved through or completed menopause or as they pondered their future menopause. Instead they voiced a certainty about their decisions. Most verbalized relief that the physical symptoms of menopause were completed while others articulated an awareness that dealing with sadness, grief, or longing might be an aspect of their futures. What emerged, however, for some was an underlying concern about old age and being alone.

Points of Re-Examination

In 20 years I might be saying 'What the hell did I do?'

Several women in the study recounted points, events that led them to re-examine their feelings about living childfree. In these cases, external events prompted an internal, psychological reconsideration of what previously felt like a settled decision. For one woman, such a point occurred when a slightly older co-worker announced that she was pregnant. The participant was at the time in her early 40s. She reported that she experienced a period of feeling that she had made the wrong decision. The following piece of her narrative provides a sense of her internal dialogue as she re-examined the issue.

It wasn't too late for me. Now women are having babies later but it would have been sort of cutting edge. I felt like I was missing something. I mean I really think that I had that feeling. But it wasn't one that was an overriding feeling, that I couldn't say 'Well your life would change. A lot of things would be different. Do you really want it to change that much?'

This woman did not act upon her feelings, the feelings subsided, and she resumed her life. When questioned about regret, she stated that she does not feel regret over her decision.

Another participant re-examined her decision when her remaining parent, her mother, died. At this time, the participant was in her late 30s. While this young woman was caring for her mother, who was dying of cancer, she had but fleeting thoughts about children. But a period of full re-examination occurred following her mother's death. "It was my first experience of not being connected to the level above me. Now I am at the first level. I thought maybe we made a mistake by not establishing our own family." She ultimately resolved the re-examination by placing it within a context. "My remaining parent died, my family house was sold. We used to make trips there to spend lots of time. The idea had popped into my head about children for a reason that was not related to wanting children but the idea of wanting a family, replacing a family." What seems telling from these narratives is that issues, not having children as just one of them, are revisited and reworked psychologically at several times throughout life. What is also revealing, for some women, is a deep sense of wanting to feel connected to others through a family. The final and most common point of re-examination is around age. For women who experienced a biological clock, checking in with themselves around a certain age was common. "I kind of revisited it emotionally because of my biological clock. And I said, 'No. I'm okay with it. I don't want that.'"

While decisions, such as whether or not to have children, can be worked and reworked psychologically through out the life cycle, some in this study reported specific points of re-examination. These points included following the death of a parent, the pregnancy of a woman similar in age, and the fading ticking of a biological clock. In the member checking process, several subjects reported they were not surprised that women revisited their decisions regarding children. One subject said, “After all it [a child] is what is expected of women.”

Who Will Care for Me?

I do need to make sure that I can plan to have a care giver if I need one.
That we have the financial resources to take care of ourselves.
I am assuming that is how it is going to be.

While thoughts of menopause and aging might seem unrelated, in the minds of participants the two were closely connected. In the interviews, menopause, a symbol of physical aging, prompted thoughts and feelings about old age and care giving. Anxieties and worries concerning care toward the end of life were expressed by some participants as they pondered who would look after them in old age. Conversely, such anxieties were also voiced to participants by those who questioned their childfree status. The ‘Who will care for you.....?’ argument seemed pliable enough to be used in a variety of ways. Some women considered the ‘Who will care for you’ argument when debating their choice to live childfree.

I trotted out the old things like ‘You are going to be alone when you are old.’ Nobody is going to be around to take care of you.’ But I didn’t feel any of that was valid or scary enough to make me want to reproduce. So I just passed and that was it.

Another participant thought along those same lines when resolving her own feelings about having children.

All my reasons had to do with I was afraid not to. I wasn't positively embracing it in any way. I was afraid I would be 60 or 70 and who would take care of me? Who will take care of me the way I have taken care of my mother the last 20 years?

In part, the experience of caring for an ill parent prompted anxieties in women about their own future care. "It concerns me as I get older. When my mother was ill, I did everything for her. I don't have someone to take care of me and it concerns me. I don't know what to do about it." For some the concern is delivered in a joking manner. "I always say to my niece and nephew pay back is that you have to take care of me when I'm old."

Many women turned the passive worry into action by making plans for their own care as they age. Several reported "planning well" for retirement and "Insuring that we have the funds to take care of us, that we have a decent retirement strategy and that we do take care of ourselves."

A couple of subjects stated that family, friends, and acquaintances had pointedly asked about end-of-life care giving. One participant reported the 'Who will take care of you?' question is the most common response she hears from people when they learn she is childfree. Her usual reply to the question is

That is not a reason to have children, to take care of you when you are old. If I had five children I would not expect them to take care of me. That's why you have lawyers so they can set up the plan for when you are old.

Most participants embraced a realistic view of "Children are no guarantee of care" as they planned for their own care. "I don't necessarily think that children are any

guarantee of a legacy any more than they are a guarantee of a nursing home place to live when you are old.” Another reported “You don’t have children so that you hope somebody will take care of you when you are old.” One subject whose own mother spent time in a nursing home offered her first-hand observations. “Having children may not mean you are being taken care of because there are other people in nursing homes who have children and their children are no where in sight.”

In the category, Menopause: Catalyst to Regret? women described their experiences, reactions, and feelings concerning menopause. The properties for this category are Perimenopause and Menopause, Points of Re-Examination, and Who Will Care for Me? While two women experienced regret around their choice not to have children, most in the study felt at ease with their decisions. Rather than menopause sparking regret, most were happy when this physical phase had passed and they were freed from symptoms. Several women discussed times when they re-examined their choice about children, including when a parent died, when someone else became pregnant, and as they aged. Exploring thoughts about menopause during the interviews prompted concerns about aging and old age, including anxieties concerning care. Mostly participants were actively planning for their own elder care.

CHAPTER IX

THE MIDLIFE SELF

I think that's why people get Alzheimer's. They are bored. I don't want to be bored. I want to contribute until my last breath.

Introduction

In this final category of findings, The Midlife Self, participants described features of their experiences in midlife as childfree women. Consistent with other facets of the results, the participants' perspectives on the details of their lives varied as did their psychological outlooks, plans for the future, designs for themselves, and levels of self acceptance.

The properties in the category The Midlife Self reflect both external concerns such as diminishing physical attractiveness and mobility as well as internal, psychological concerns such as a renewed search for meaning in various areas of life. For the women in this study, life overall has worked out fairly well. These women are employed and employable, they are in committed relationships, they have friends and

active, busy lives. The three properties for this category are Transitions, Aging, and Attitude.

Transitions

I don't consider it a crashing up against a wall. I consider it a continuation. Hopefully there will be some wonderful, rich experiences as I go forward.

Similar to many individuals at midlife, the women in the study were on the move as they contemplated new careers, completed graduate degrees, looked forward to different lifestyles, pursued fresh career challenges, reflected on previous choices, and sought to find more meaning in their lives. They were in transition, and transitions are characteristic of midlife.

In this first property, Transitions, subjects described their in-the-moment experiences of figuring out or finding their places in midlife. Many found themselves reshaping some aspect of their work lives. For one participant who ran a food service business, the catalyst to change began when she grew "jaded" in her work, tiring of "food as amusement instead of food as sustenance or nurturance." She found her way to a training program for chefs, then to teaching chefs-in-training, and then on to a manager/chef position overseeing a program training food service workers. At an age when some are slowing down, this participant felt she was "at the peak of my career. It almost feels like a new career because it is a different aspect of the industry." In her new position, she found herself "fully engaged" and using "every skill I have accumulated along the way." She likened her excitement about her current work to the feeling she had years ago when she built her business but, with a twist for she built the original business with a partner. "This is for me. I'm here representing myself. It has been a tremendous

confidence booster for me.” The assertion, “This is for me” was one commonly stated by participants, sometimes explicitly and at other times implicitly.

Another subject, a family therapist, who had taken time out from her career to pursue a second career in writing, was seeking a place back in the work force. “What I am struggling with right now is the need to succeed. When I stopped the job, I was a career woman. So for 20 years I had an identity.” Beyond her need to enhance her identity by returning to her own work, she felt a greater drive. “I feel my gift is in waste. My gift is being wasted. I’ve just been stirring, stirring with impatience and I need to do something.” For others, the “stirring,” the urge to contribute through meaningful work has a more unsettled, yet to be fully processed feel. One woman reported feeling “more negative” and “not settled” as she pondered making a change to something more “personally fulfilling.” “Am I going to make a midlife career change? I think a lot more about whether I’ve made good decisions and about time and what it holds.” Another participant cited similar struggles as she debated a career change while feeling concerned about the risks involved. “It is not a matter of having it bad; it is just a matter of being ready for something, a new challenge.” Both these women feel a certain urgency and connection to time – and the idea that life is finite.

If I wait until I am 55 and then what if I don’t live a long time and then I will say ‘But I was really responsible and I stayed in my job until I was 55. And now I am sick and can’t do anything? Sometimes you just have to pull the plug and make the plunge.

Some found midlife a generally challenging phase of life in the areas of career, relationships, and finances. “I don’t know what I expected life to be but it is certainly much more difficult than I thought it was going to be.” For this woman both finding a partner and finding meaningful employment proved more challenging than she had

hoped. Also like others in the study, she expressed a common “Hope I have enough money to retire” concern.

Several women looked forward to rewarding transitions of another sort. They were making plans for retirement, changing their lifestyles, and concentrating on new pursuits. “I want to retire in four or five years and spend time on hobbies, other interests.” “Retiring out in the West and taking up more of my photography.”

For participants, midlife was proving a time of transitions – to new work challenges, to anticipating career changes, and to pursuing pleasurable interests. Despite embracing future-focused visions for their lives, subjects acknowledged this as a challenging time and one distinguished by a psychological pondering of life.

Aging

I guess I’m surprised. I would have thought I would look better.

Few adults enjoy the physical changes that accompany growing older. The women in this study were no different. Given our societal standards of physical perfection, where youth and flawless beauty are worshipped, the aging midlife woman can feel out-of- place. Mainly, participants did not enjoy aging but managed to cope with changes in their physical selves. Some ranted against aging, some were slightly more philosophical about aging, and some more accepting. Many researchers consider midlife as the phase from age 40 to age 60. One participant, when told that she was at the end of midlife bristled with indignation that this researcher was placing her within a specific age category. “I personally don’t believe it. It is not the way I choose to live. That is fine for a textbook or something but maybe I am starting midlife. So I think that is one way that I

deal with it.” While protesting the application to oneself of sociological constructs concerning aging could be a means of keeping the self invigorated, for this woman the protest, in part, seemed connected to not feeling her age. “Okay, I am 60, but I don’t feel like I am at the age or end of middle age. And I don’t think that I will.”

Others embraced a slightly more measured response to aging. “I’m actually looking forward to turning 50. I hated turning 40 for whatever reason.” And “I’ve never had trouble with age. I’ve never minded being a certain age. I’ve never felt that an age really defined anything about me.” And “I thought I would feel older. I thought I would be more upset about not looking young. I don’t feel old. It is not as bad as I thought it would be.” And “It is just the age that I am.” Others felt decidedly less upbeat about aging. “I think getting older sucks. I see nothing redeeming about it. Nothing. People say would you want to be stupid again and 20? In a heartbeat.

One expressed the common midlife feeling of time passing too quickly.

Fifty is just around the corner and I don’t know. I guess for most people it is such a milestone. It will probably be good to get it over with. You think ‘Oh my God. How did I get so old and I used to be a kid.’

In addition to their reactions to aging, many women expressed feelings regarding the loss of physical vigor and attractiveness. A few cited their midlife activity levels as evidence of their vigor. “I guess I always thought of older people as being slower than we are, as far as not biking as much as we do.” And “I have learned to adapt with exercise. I love Pilates, biking, hiking, walking. More low impact while before I used to run five miles a day.” Other acknowledged physical limitations and changes. “I’m very grateful and I’m aware that I am 44 because I can’t do that kick the way I used to,” “My body is not cooperating,” and “I have arthritis; it pisses me off.” But at least one subject did not

relate to worries about appearance as she stated, “My identity has never been wrapped up in my appearance.”

Besides grappling with aging and changes in physical vitality, a number of participants acknowledged feelings about transformations in their attractiveness. In a society that values youth and perfection, the midlife woman is face-to-face with her assessments of her own beauty as well as the assessments and expectations of others.

This year I’m kind of shocked by how I look. I guess I wasn’t looking in the mirror before. It is not so sudden, but I can’t recognize myself. I just didn’t think about it one way or the other before.

Or from a different perspective, “I don’t care as much what I look like anymore. I can go out and garden and not worry about ‘Should I have matching hat and gloves?’ It is just not as important to me as it used to be.” However, another subject reported that even though she is in her early 50s she still feels sexy. Her comment was not the norm.

Some spoke to a deeper sense of themselves as having moved to a new physical stage, especially as they are viewed by others. One subject made the simple acknowledgement “I do feel invisible to men” while another captured a sense of loss, which presumably other women felt.

The loss of sexual power, not among loved ones. Not with someone I’ve been intimate with for a long time because someone you’ve been intimate with sees you the same way. But on the street. Not that I was ever a babe, ever. But an awareness that I am not seen as a sexual woman. That kind of wattage. While I feel admired by younger colleagues and that’s fun. They don’t perceive me as sexy.

While only two participants explicitly acknowledged the noticeable decline in their “wattage” as women, others noted the change in their attractiveness as well as in their physical vitality.

Attitude

I expected to be more midlife, and I don't feel like I really am -- more serious and somber. And I'm really not. I thought I might giggle less and ponder the philosophers or something.

This final property, Attitude, encompasses aspects of how women in this study were successfully living in midlife. Many of these women embraced a certain attitude toward life which included seeking meaning, feeling wise, gaining self acceptance, and giving back. If physical aging is the down side to midlife, then striving to reach a certain psychological place is an upside.

Generally speaking, the psychological upside to moving through midlife was that subjects understood themselves better than they did in their younger years. "I know myself better and I am more even keeled emotionally, not all over the place like I was when I was younger. That's better."

Or as one woman described:

a sincerity that I did not have when I was younger. No need for guises. More pleasure in direct communication whether with people or ingredients. The other style was just veil upon veil, layer upon layer. Unnecessarily complicated. I just don't have time for that now.

For these women some important learning about themselves and learning about life took place. While the idea of growing wiser and more self accepting as one ages might seem like a cliché, for many of these women, the cliché felt true. "I just love the wisdom age has brought. Even just how to deal with people, how to deal with my husband, how to deal with co-workers. I love it. For me this has come in midlife." "I feel grateful. No wish to be younger. Happy to be here now. No wish to be older. This has been the most in the

moment time of my life.” “I’m at a deeper level of understanding so to me 50 is a good thing. I wish I had known at 20 what I know now.”

I’m also enjoying looking at things differently. I also like being sassy at 45. I enjoy the feeling that I’m going to speak my mind and it is okay. I’m here to enjoy life and experience whatever I’m here to experience. I’m not going to let that get in the way of other people and other things. If people want to join me in that, it’s great and if they don’t that’s great too.

Several learned to apply their wisdom to interpersonal relationships.” I’m happy to offer a shoulder to cry on maybe once a quarter now to someone who has a lot to cry about. But I’m not willing to get sucked in. When I was younger, I was much more empathic and would get sucked in.” One participant articulated her newly arrived at self acceptance. “Self acceptance wasn’t something I was working on or even realized that I hadn’t arrived. I didn’t realize I was struggling with it. But the relief of being here is so great that it must have been a subterranean issue for some time.” Others spoke about knowing themselves better. “I’m more mature. I know who I am and what I want and how to get it and I do it.” “I try not to let things bother me as much when I really get stressed or something I stop and I say to myself ‘You know this is not life or death. . . . I think I deal with people better and situations better. I am a little more tolerant.” “I do think you have to stay fluid and flexible because otherwise you would be very unhappy because things don’t always work out the way that you want them to.” One participant recalled:

I think I learned more about myself through all of those losses and how important life is and how important it is that you are happy. And that you do what you need to do for yourself because then it will reflect on other people.

Gaining wisdom and mastery emerged as the greatest benefits to midlife.

I figure this is a great age to be because I figure I have been through just about anything one can go through so I figure if it happens again that's not so terrible because I've already been through it before and I know I can make it.

Regarding relationships, a number of subjects reported having a wide range of friends, many younger than themselves and some older. Participants believed these relationships added to their general outlook on life. "We say our outlook is younger than other people our ages; most of our friends are younger than we are because we don't have lots of the same interests as people our ages." "I have friends in a wide range of ages because I view myself at times as young" and "I have friends who are 30 and I have friends who are 60 and I have friends in-between. It makes me feel good to hang out with the 30 year-olds."

While some women in the study switched careers or were contemplating changes, others were seeking opportunities to give to others. One subject had been looking for a volunteer opportunity where she could use her talents but had yet to find her place.

I think I need something that is going to make a difference. I think I want to do something that will make a difference in someone's life. Sometimes I think I'm wasting a part of my life because I have been given this opportunity to do something and I haven't quite figured out what to do with this opportunity.

Another subject, a business executive, planned to start a cultural outreach program for inner-city children. "For me that is a passion of giving back to society, a legacy that will continue and continue."

Conclusion

The category The Midlife Self demonstrated that this life phase is one filled with external transitions and psychological adjustments for the women in this study. Many subjects were contemplating second careers, taking on challenging positions, completing

graduate training, and investigating ways of bringing more meaning into their lives. Some were planning for retirement and thinking ahead to more leisure. Generally, they were all grappling with changes in their physical selves, including evolving ideas about attractiveness. The midlife woman lives in a society that values fresh, young beauty. She not only faces her own internal appraisal of her appearance but the appraisals of external others. However, many had integrated these concerns into their sense of themselves. A number found wisdom and self-knowledge payoffs to aging.

CHAPTER X

SUMMARY OF THE RESULTS

Whether women selected their childfree status early or their decisions took shape over time and within their primary relationships, most participants were distinguished by the careful, thoughtful way they came to their childfree choice. Subjects operated with self-awareness and understanding as they selected paths outside society's mainstream. Many were labeled odd, unusual, different, and selfish by critical others because of their decisions to forgo motherhood. Participants struggled with scrutinizing themselves, having internalized disparaging labels. To manage hurtful feelings of discrepancy and to generate feelings of acceptance, many women followed practical, but psychologically rooted solutions for themselves. Some participants eliminated "toxic" people from their lives, deciding not to allow others to criticize their choice. Others created for themselves a community of understanding peers, other women without children, where an alternative choice was the norm. Despite critical internal and external evaluations, many reached a place of self-acceptance in midlife.

The results of the study are organized into five categories: The Pathways to Becoming Childfree at Midlife, Childfree at Midlife: Not a Type, Am I Normal?,

Menopause: Catalyst to Regret?, and The Midlife Self. Each is briefly summarized below.

The first category, The Pathways to Becoming Childfree at Midlife, consists of three properties, each one illustrating one of three pathways participants chose to their childfree status. The pathways share some overlapping characteristics with one another, but each is also distinctive. Many subjects in the Knew Early group described knowing as teenagers that they did not want to pursue motherhood. For these women, finding a potential partner or spouse proved challenging. For women in the Decision Evolved group, their decision not to have children developed within relationships, after self-reflection, and in discussion with spouses or partners. Initially most assumed they would have children, yet as their lives unfolded and their relationships advanced, they felt satisfied with their families consisting of just two. The participants in the Circumstances group felt that their childfree status resulted from the way their lives evolved. A few stated that they were not willing to settle on just any man in order to marry and have a child. Some subjects met their spouses or partners later in life and felt their ages prohibited them from having a child.

The second category is Childfree at Midlife: Not a Type. Participants did not come from one typical family experience, but rather described their families as unstable and stable, as nontraditional and traditional, and as conforming and nonconforming. Consistently, though, many felt their families fostered in them independent ways of acting and thinking. In describing their marriages, partnerships, and experiences with children, participants illustrated their empathic and relational abilities. Included in this

category are participants' deliberations regarding motherhood and their descriptions of friendships with other childfree women.

Am I Normal? is the third category. Participants described feeling different, odd, unusual, or selfish and discussed encounters that prompted such feelings. While subjects revealed how harshly they evaluated themselves, they also described interactions with others who disapprovingly assessed them. Critics included their own family members, friends, co-workers, and acquaintances. Some, though, reported positive experiences within their families. Despite internal and external judgments, many women evolved to a place of self-acceptance in midlife.

Menopause: Catalyst to Regret? is the fourth category. While this researcher wondered if menopause might stimulate feelings of regret, that was not the case overall for the women in this study. Two women reported regret over their decisions not to have children, but others did not. What emerged, however, was that at crucial times, such as the death of a parent, aging, and the pregnancy of another woman, some subjects revisited their decisions not to have children. While the women ultimately chose to remain childfree, each psychologically reconsidered what had previously felt like a settled decision. In this section, subjects also described anxieties about their later years. Interview questions about menopause prompted thoughts about aging and elder care for many subjects. As a result, women anticipated their future needs and focused on making plans.

The Midlife Self is the final category. The midlife phase is characterized by change, transitions, and adaptation to both. Contemplating career moves, starting new jobs, and planning future leisure time occupied the thoughts of women. However, this

phase is also distinguished by physical changes and aging. Some participants hesitantly embraced their aging, while others spoke their outrage (“It sucks”). A few acknowledged the decline of their beauty and most cited their annoyance with ever transforming bodies and midlife aches and pains. Nevertheless, when participants reflected beyond their physical states and into the psychological realm they accessed positive feelings about midlife. Many subjects felt they had come to know and to understand themselves in deeper ways and had achieved much valued wisdom and self-acceptance.

CHAPTER XI

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

The results illustrate an array of findings on the subjective experiences of midlife, childfree women. In this chapter, selected findings are discussed mainly from the theoretical perspectives outlined in the literature review. Clinical implications and areas for future research conclude the chapter.

Brief Summary of the Findings

This research study is an investigation of the subjective experiences of women at midlife who are intentionally childfree yet married or partnered. The results of this study demonstrate four major related findings, which will be discussed in terms of theory. Finding #1 focuses on participants' active deliberation of their decisions regarding motherhood and on their relational capacities. Subjects demonstrated empathic modes of connecting with spouses, partners, nieces, nephews, and friends' children. Finding #2 reveals how participants were encouraged in their families to think and act independently. These abilities helped subjects weather their feelings of difference and find self-

acceptance in midlife. Finding #3 discusses participants' experiences of feeling harshly evaluated by others and unsympathetically evaluating themselves because of their choice to remain childfree. Finally, Finding #4 illustrates participants' experiences of menopause and explores their thoughts and feelings about regret and aging.

Finding #1

Participants actively deliberated their decisions concerning childbearing and revisited these decisions at various stages. Their relational capacities were expressed in engagement with nieces, nephews, and friends' children.

The data demonstrated that all the subjects in the study actively and consciously deliberated having children. While many wondered about parenting, others at certain points assumed they would parent. They displayed the ability to psychologically imagine themselves as mothers.

Benedek (1959), in her seminal article on parenthood, emphasized that humans feel a biological push toward reproduction. The physical changes and maturing that occur during adolescence set in motion "motivation for the next phase of development which is parenthood" (p. 389). Biological or physical readiness is but one aspect of the preparation for parenthood. The other facet is psychological readiness. One might think of this as the capacity to contemplate, imagine, fantasize, or deliberate parenthood.

Babies are "psychologically born" before they are biologically conceived (Galatzer-Levy & Cohler, 1993). Chodorow (2003) asserts that "motherhood is a conscious and unconscious fantasy first" (p. 1185) even if a woman does not choose to bear children. Both very young girls and boys engage in fantasies about having babies (Fast, 1984) and young children play house as a way of practicing parental roles.

Adolescents, young adults, and adults think about or imagine themselves as parents. Typically, potential parents contemplate what their future child will be like, how he or she will fulfill parental ambitions and hopes of immortality, and what actual parenting will feel like (Galatzer-Levy & Cohler). Thoughts about parenting include imagining performing better as a parent than one's own parents. Parenthood itself provides an individual a new social role and an expanded, reorganized identity. It also provides a variety of experiences including an opportunity for psychological growth. Benedek (1959) recognized that in the act of parenting, individuals revisit and often rework their own developmental issues. Parenting provides an individual with the opportunity to facilitate the child's development, to care take and give to another (Schwartz, 1984), while also providing pleasure and a sense of competence. Such emotional care giving can restructure an individual's self experience (Galatzer-Levy & Cohler).

The childfree women in this study also consciously contemplated the choice to parent and many revisited their decisions about parenthood at various turning points. In fact, for some women deliberating was a lingering process. They too had thoughts about parenting, observed others parent, and even "pretended" to have a baby in an effort to clarify their thinking about childbearing. Participants did not demonstrate an absence of thought concerning children, but rather displayed an ability to consider, to think, and to imagine themselves as mothers. What does this capacity illustrate? Perhaps the biological push toward parenthood that Benedek described is actually the commonly shared ability to deliberate parenthood. Developmental maturity could be conceived as achieving the ability or psychological capacity to consider another human and engage in relationships, with the outcomes differing between those who choose to parent and those who do not.

Elson (1984) wrote that the “transformation” of narcissism “is the developmental process of parenthood” (p. 299). “The capacity to fantasize for their child a limitless potential while performing a mirroring, affirming, and controlling function is the very hallmark of mature narcissism, of responsible parenthood” (p. 299). She continues, stating that pre-parenting experiences with nieces, nephews, friends’ children, and neighborhood children provide “broad experience” and reassurance to potential parents but are not the “vital factors” in preparing them. What is vital is “the capacity of each partner to increase modes of meeting the needs of the other” (p. 300). The increased “modes” Elson deems vital are the “deepening and broadening” of one’s ability to feel empathy for another and an expanding “tolerance of differences” and understanding of how differences are reconciled (p. 302). Elson describes the necessary elements for deep, intimate engagement with another person. She assigns, rather narrowly, these empathic modes to individuals who are preparing for parenting. However, these relational capacities can apply to anyone: Parent, pre-parent, or non-parent. The women in the study offer abundant evidence of such empathic engagement in describing their marriages or partnerships as “I consider my family my husband and me . . .and I think we each put the other one before ourselves” and “Now we are at a point of deep friendship and love and set in a groove and really happy. We try to meet each other’s needs if we can.”

Subjects in this study reported being labeled selfish by others and many called themselves selfish. By implication they are considered narcissistic for their choice to remain childfree. One might extend the reasoning, in borrowing Elson’s words, that these women were thought to be unable to meet the needs of the other. Yet in deliberating motherhood and therefore deliberating about the imagined child these women are

considering the needs of the imagined other. Must the capacity to deliberate literally equal producing one's own child?

In researching childless women Wyatt (1967, 1971) found (as cited in Galatzer-Levy & Cohler, 1993) that "Women who choose childlessness may be less nurturant and more concerned with personal and social advancement but there is little evidence that they suffer impaired mental health" (p. 273). Such research findings make evident the origins of negative assumptions about women who choose not to have children. However, the data in this study demonstrate a different profile of childfree women. The majority of the participants are deeply engaged in nurturing, maternal ongoing relationships with children. They are connected to their nieces, nephews, and friends' children in stable ways. The pejorative ways childfree women may be conceptualized as less nurturing and narcissistic were not demonstrated. Instead subjects revealed a complex ability to engage in relationships, including their partnerships or marriages and their relationships with children and friends. Kohut (1984) wrote,

Although the attainment of genitality and the capacity for unambivalent object love have been features of many, perhaps most, satisfying and significant lives, there are many other good lives, including some of the greatest and most fulfilling lives recorded in history, that were not lived by individuals whose psychosexual organization was heterosexual-genital or whose major commitment was to unambivalent object love. (p. 7)

In his own way, Kohut seemed to place difference on the menu as an option, especially when he wrote that "There are certainly great variations within the spectrum of normality or maturity" (1984, p. 203). Elson (1986) (seemingly) interpreted Kohut's ideas and applied them to parenthood when she wrote:

The question of whether there are other routes to maturity than parenthood for men and for women may be answered affirmatively. . . . the individual may still find fulfillment of the central core of the self through pursuit and attainment of

other goals. . . . [they] may also achieve maturity through vocation, profession, personal relationships, and community activities as the expression of a vigorous, harmonious, cohesive self. (p. 29)

We live in an age of choices, with some more socially sanctioned than others. But even in an age of options, at deep levels, we share certain commonalities. One interview participant stated that she was “pretty easy with her outcomes” meaning she married later, she did not have children, that her life looks different from the lives of others in her family. Yet at midlife, she has a mature, elaborated narrative self (Stern, 1985, 1989). And she shares a relational capacity with those in her family. Thus, childfree women certainly appear to have many of the same qualities and capacities as women who mother.

Finding #2

Independent ways of thinking and acting were encouraged in their families and apparently internalized by many subjects. This assisted the participants with reconciling themselves with a sense of difference and helped them move toward self-acceptance in midlife.

The participants in this study came from a range of middle-class, upper-middle class, and upper class families. Some subjects are only children and others have three, four, or more siblings. Several are from parents who divorced and many are from intact families with parents who were married for 25 years or more. A few subjects came from troubled, chaotic families and others from more steady, stable, and privileged environments. Many had mothers who did not work outside the home, at least not until later in life, although a few had mothers who held professional level jobs. Most are from homes where traditional religious ideas emphasizing procreation were taught. Thus the family settings were diverse. As described in Chapter V, The Pathways to Becoming

Childfree at Midlife, the women also chose different paths to their childfree status. In this sample, they followed one of three pathways: Knew Early, Decision Evolved, or Circumstances.

Nevertheless, despite diversity in their backgrounds, many of the participants were similar in an aspect of how they were reared. Most were guided by their parents toward thinking and acting independently. This finding was unexpected but consistent with some previous research. Over and over in interviews participants reported they were encouraged to freely select their own choices. They stated that their parents did not limit options based on gender, and they gained a sense of confidence and agency while growing up in their families.

In a previous research study on voluntarily childless women, Houseknecht (1979) compared “early articulators,” those women who stated early that they did not want children with those who “postponed” their decisions until several years into their marriages. She used a variety of measurement scales to assess subjects in the areas of autonomy, parental encouragement, and achievement. In contrasting the two groups, Houseknecht found “postponers” (similar to the category of Decision Evolved) reported their parents valued assertive autonomy in the family. These women had been “strongly encouraged throughout their childhoods to make their own decisions and consider their own opinions” (p.94). She also found that the parents of “early articulators” were likely to encourage achievement. Her findings on autonomy are consistent with the kinds of experiences reported by subjects in this study.

Self psychology offers a way of psychologically understanding how participants in this study came to operate independently in thoughts and actions. Briefly, parents and

caregivers function as selfobjects to children. Their ability to perform these functions is the key to the child developing a healthy self. A vigorous self develops within a selfobject milieu, or family, where a child feels mirrored (accepted and confirmed) and can merge with the calmness, power, wisdom and goodness of an idealizable caregiver (Siegel, 1996, Wolf, 1988). In such environments, children are helped with their feelings. It is also in a good selfobject milieu that Stern's domains of the self more fully develop. "The person who grows up in a good selfobject milieu in childhood will in later life be blessed with the possession of a core of self-confidence along with nuclear ambitions, values, and goals" (Kohut, 1984, p. 77). We can assume that some subjects left their families with at least a nascent cohesive, vital self, a core sense of confidence and agency, and more fully elaborated self domains.

We can also posit that the "good selfobject milieu" strengthened the participants' sense of self so that they could manage their experiences of difference (further elaborated in Finding # 3). Many arrived at midlife fully aware of physical aging and changes and diminishing attractiveness and yet with a sense of self acceptance and the ability to look forward. With healthy self structures in place, or from Stern's (1985) perspective with self domains increasing in complexity, and sustaining, mature relationships with partners, spouses, and friends, these women are weathering the vicissitudes of midlife.

Finding #3

Participants scrutinized themselves regarding their choice and distinctiveness and felt scrutinized by others in the environment. Friendships with other childfree women provided needed acceptance.

The typical experience for women in this study was to feel judged by others and in certain ways to judge themselves because they were not mothers. A few participants reported never having anyone critically comment upon their childfree status. Most subjects, however, readily recalled specific incidents when they were aggressively questioned and harshly evaluated by others. During a member checking interview, one subject reported that she cried when she read Chapter VII, Am I Normal? She stated she shed angry tears when reading the thoughts and feelings of subjects in the study and their stories about feeling unusual and the ways they were treated. She reported seeing herself in their narratives.

Supposedly, individuals currently live in a time of cultural and societal expansion where diversity in choices and lifestyles are available and outwardly acceptable. Abma & Martinez (2006) report an increasing tolerance in the United States concerning diverse lifestyles and paths. Hunter, Sundel, & Sundel (2002) describe midlife women as a heterogeneous group and members of the baby-boom cohort that seem “less conforming and more liberal” (Hunter, Sundel, & Sundel, p. 9). Ideas about who can be a couple have expanded beyond heterosexuals to include gays and lesbians. While heterosexual couples most often become parents, they can also choose a life without children. Couples can produce their own biological children or families can be expanded beyond the primary dyad through a variety of medical technologies and adoption. A small but growing number of individuals also choose to remain single (Hunter, Sundel, & Sundel). Choice, it seems, is on the societal table.

Choice is different from acceptance, however.

A child's self develops within a "relationship matrix" (Fosshage, 1998, p. 5) or self-selfobject milieu. Most commonly this milieu is the child's family. Within the family milieu, initially a child needs to be affirmed and responded to by parents or care givers, whom they can idealize and who, by their nurturance, facilitate the development of a healthy self (Fosshage). These conditions and experiences also promote the growth and elaboration of the emergent, core, subjective, and verbal domains (Stern, 1985). As the child ages, she/he requires the more mature selfobject need for twinship (Fosshage, Siegel, 1996) or the need to feel "essential likeness" (Kohut, 1984, p. 194). Kohut conceived of an individual needing "mirroring and acceptance," merger with "greatness, strength, and calmness" and to feel "essential likeness" from "the moment of birth to the moment of death" (p. 194). In other words, an individual has ongoing needs for selfobject experiences throughout life.

Presumably for subjects in this study, the family self-selfobject milieu assisted the development of cohesive selves as a consequence of healthy experiences in the emergent, core, subjective, and verbal domains. One might imagine that these women left their families feeling accepted and with healthy self esteem. One might also imagine that these women carried with them an emerging sense of themselves as independent thinkers and decision makers and the freedom to follow an alternate life course. For the most part, participants made their choices regarding motherhood in young adult and adulthood and many years after they had physically departed their parents' or caregivers' homes. The affirming selfobject responses and experiences changed for many (not all) subjects once their family members learned of their choice to remain childfree. Several participants reported their family members evaluated them as "weird" and "self-centered" and

“selfish” and questioned their decision. Thus, the experience of feeling different and “weird” was internalized by these participants as the failure occurred in the selfobject surround.

It is important to note that not all subjects experienced this failure in their families. Several reported that their parents and siblings accepted the decision. A handful of participants reported that they have siblings who also chose not to have children. This experience provided an “essential likeness” thus making the choice feel less different. But for most in the study, the first internalized selfobject failures occurred in their families. These women carry their experiences of injury with them and they form their expectations for future encounters.

Kohut conceived of selfobject needs shifting from the more archaic modes of childhood to the more mature modes of adulthood as an individual develops a cohesive self (1984). More mature modes include the selfobjects of adult life, including family, friends, work situations and cultural resources (Kohut, 1984). For participants, though, their choice to remain childfree can place them at odds with other adults and with mainstream, societal assumptions about women. Already primed by failures and criticisms in their families, subjects bring to their experiences with others, those internalized failures, which become internal working models. Many participants were met with harsh, inappropriate comments and evaluations from individuals, reinforcing their internal perceptions. As one subject stated “I think the person over there is harsher in her evaluation of me than she really is.” The external experience, which is a failure in the larger selfobject surround, reinforces the failures in the family which have been internalized. But there is more to the external experience.

While the subjects do not view themselves as a minority group, certainly the vocabulary they use to describe themselves as “unusual,” “odd,” “freak,” and “different” are the words attached to those outside the majority. Social researchers, who often do not have a psychodynamic orientation, frequently refer to such language as stigmatizing. Park (2002), a sociologist, explored the ways childfree women and men manage stigma and focused on social interactions. Yet the thoughts and feelings expressed by many participants spoke to internal distress. Subjects’ descriptions of the hurtful, disrespectful assaults from acquaintances or strangers in the community struck at deep levels. These are the injuries of difference. Participants’ reports of feeling scrutinized and scrutinizing themselves seemed more closely aligned with experiences, thoughts, and feelings articulated by gay men and ethnic and racial minorities (Moss, 2003, Shelby, 2000). In relating his analytic treatment with gay men, Shelby stated “Being told one does not belong is a brutal assault on the self” (p. 282). His assertion captures the experience of many childfree women in this study as they felt shame and anger as they encountered others who focused on their difference. While the good selfobject milieu in childhood builds a child’s healthy self, adults also need ongoing affirming mature selfobject experiences found in a larger community. Fosshage (1998) stated:

To feel that we share and are a part of a family, a community, a nation, the human race, are all twinship experiences that serve to support a vital sense of self. These selfobject needs and the availability of selfobject responsiveness within relationships are crucially important throughout our lifetime for developing and regulating a positive cohesive sense of self. (p. 6)

Houseknecht (1979) found that women who decide to remain childless generally do so with support from others. In her study, she called such support a “reference group support” (p. 86). One might assume that the reference group offered those in her study an

experience of “essential likeness.” Considering the ongoing need for twinship or “essential likeness,” it is not surprising that more than half the participants in this researcher’s study were recruited via messages posted to internet social and support groups for childfree individuals. Ostensibly, groups provide individuals without children relational experiences absent of external scrutiny around the issue of childbearing.

Nor is it surprising that more than half the participants in the study reported that most of their friends also do not have children. As the property “Birds of a Feather” illustrated, women without children often befriend other women who have chosen not to have children. While some explained this phenomenon by stating that other childfree individuals have more time to spend with friends, several spoke to the deeper issues of kinship and shared understanding of experience. As Kohut (1984) wrote:

There are still other people who derive the sustenance that maintains their selves mainly from feeling surrounded by alter egos. They feel strong and cohesive as members of a group of people whom they experience as being in essence like them. (p. 203)

Fosshage (1998) pointed out such experiences “support a vital sense of self” (p. 6). However, receiving support from others who are “in essence like them” and who “support a vital sense of self” is but part of the attraction of “Birds of a Feather.” Many subjects experienced failures in the self-selfobject surrounds of their families and also experience, in ongoing ways, failures in the greater self-selfobject surrounds of co-workers, acquaintances, community, and society. These failures can be felt as narcissistic injuries to the self. The experience of critical assessments or narcissistic injuries, can result in a less cohesive, injured, and even fragmented self. “Birds of a Feather” relationships can offer a different relational experience and can serve a sustaining function by providing mirroring and twinship experiences and empathic responses to

narcissistic injuries suffered in various environments. In these friendships, women can feel an “essential likeness” that is sustaining and soothing.

Childfree women feeling scrutinized and scrutinizing themselves is understandable when viewed as resulting from previous failures in their selfobject surrounds of family, coworkers, community, and society. Earlier injuries to the self can easily be reinforced if current situations are disapproving. Forming relationships with sympathetic individuals who can provide sustaining mirroring and twinship experiences can “support a vital sense of self.”

Finding # 4

Most participants at perimenopause or menopause did not experience feelings of regret regarding their choice not to have children; discussing menopause did kindle expectable feelings concerning old age and care.

The data demonstrates that for most participants menopause, the conclusion of the natural capacity for childbearing, did not set in motion feelings of regret. Only two subjects, both in the Circumstances group (property of Pathways to Becoming Childfree, Chapter V), expressed regret concerning their choice not to have children. Since subjects understood menopause as an indication of aging, questions about menopause awakened, for many of the women, expectable feelings concerning old age and elder care. While these findings are consistent with literature concerning voluntary versus involuntary childfree status, this researcher wondered if menopause might stimulate feelings of regret.

Apter (1995) in her study of women at midlife found that menopause, while an aspect of midlife, is not the cause of women’s psychological growth or development. She

reported that menopause sparks questions, increases conflicts, and often triggers concerns about aging. For women who never had children, Apter found that “menopause could ‘ring a panic button’ as it brought them face-to-face with their past decisions” (p. 212). Mintz (1989) in studying childless women at midlife “expected menopause to be the ‘trigger’ that would evoke a sense of loss” in participants. She found, however, that menopause was a factor but not a focal determinant in participants feeling loss (p. 131). Subjects mentioned feeling loss over their decisions not to have children, but reported grieving the loss at the time they made the decision (p. 131). While Mintz’ subject sample included both married and single midlife childless women, she predominantly interviewed single women. Her sample is not comparable to the sample in this research, which only includes women who are married or partnered. Others have noted (Alexander, Rubinstein, Goodman, and Luborsky, 1992 as cited in Koropecj-Cox, 2002) that older women commonly re-evaluate their childless status at different points in their lives. These researchers reported childless older women do regret their childless state. However in their study of sixty subjects, only seven were voluntarily childless and the remaining were involuntary childless women.

Koropecj-Cox (2002) found when comparing parents and childless adults that well-being in the childless women she studied was tied to whether their status was chosen or not (p. 961). Women who chose to remain childfree scored similarly to mothers with excellent parent-child relationships (p. 962) on loneliness and depression scales. Scores for women who were involuntarily childless were higher on depression and loneliness scales. These findings are consistent with Jeffries & Konnert (2002) who investigated regret and well-being among middle-aged and older voluntarily and involuntarily

childless women over the age of 45. Jeffries & Konnert found that women who consider themselves childless by choice are less likely to experience regret over their status and if they do, the feelings are “minor and transitory” (p. 103). Those who do not choose childlessness are more likely to express serious, sustained regret. Additionally all subjects were scored on a psychological well-being scale that measures autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (p. 103). A comparison group of mothers was also assessed on this well-being scale and their scores were measured against the scores of the voluntarily and involuntarily childless women. The researchers found no significant difference in well-being between mothers who maintain close relationships with their children and women who are childless by choice.

Research demonstrates and the data in this study confirms that choice is tied to feelings of well-being in midlife. A woman who chooses to live childfree engages her sense of personal agency and initiative (Siegel, 1996, Stern, 1985) about herself and her life. Whether a woman has chosen her childfree status or not, potentially impacts her reactions to menopause and her general feelings about midlife. Women who choose not to have children do not suffer feelings of disappointment concerning their desire to achieve motherhood.

While most participants did not experience feelings of regret, interview questions about menopause and discussions relating to that topic did cause many subjects to express anxieties and concerns about old age and elder care. These understandable reactions to the vicissitudes of this life phase (Goldstein, 2005) centered on the question of who might provide care for these women in their old age given they do not have

children to fulfill such a care giving role. In part, these women were envisioning their lives as much older women. Shifts such as acknowledging life as finite (Galatzer-Levy & Cohler, 1993) and conceiving time as years left to live (Neugarten, 1979) are characteristics of midlife and aging. Subjects articulated the same kind of anxieties that all aging adults feel. Many women in the study rationalized their worries about old age and nursing homes by relating that children are not a guarantee of care and actively making their own financial arrangements. Participants responded with comments such as “It concerns me as I get older. When my mother was ill, I did everything for her” or “As we are planning for our retirement we are making plans for caregivers later in life.” Others stated “You don’t have children so that you hope somebody will take care of you when you are old.” Yet embedded in the anxieties about old age are reasonable feelings about loneliness in the later years. The recognition that life is finite introduces a psychological shift in the self. Individuals, including women in this study, who stay connected to and supported by “essential others” (Galatzer-Levy & Cohler, 1993), those who provide needed mature self object experiences, will most successfully navigate midlife as well as the years beyond.

In summary, together the four related findings create a framework for understanding the subjective experiences at midlife of childfree women.

Clinical Implications

Data from this study of childfree women at midlife demonstrated at least four discrete, yet related findings. The findings are:

1. Participants deliberated their decisions concerning childbearing and revisited these decisions at various stages. Their relational capacities were expressed in engagement with nieces, nephews, and friends' children.
2. Independent ways of thinking and acting were encouraged in their families and apparently internalized by many subjects. This assisted the participants with reconciling themselves with a sense of difference and helped them move toward self-acceptance in midlife.
3. Participants scrutinized themselves regarding their choices and distinctiveness and felt scrutinized by others in the environment. Friendships with other childfree women provided needed acceptance.
4. Most participants at menopause did not experience feelings of regret regarding their choice not to have children; discussing menopause did kindle expectable feelings concerning old age and care. These findings form the basis for the following clinical implications.

A tenet of good clinical practice is to engage a patient in elaborative discussions concerning her personal situation rather than working from assumptions about who she is and what her life is about. When working with childfree, midlife women it is important to avoid practicing from societal assumptions about choice and difference and from personal bias. It is also important to recognize that clinical theories may be based on narrow interpretations of development or on models of development that inadequately account for different paths. These ideas underlie the following implications.

In clinical work, it is important to understand how a midlife woman came to be childfree and to explore the meaning she attaches to her decision. When considering her family history, understand that childfree women come from a variety of family systems, including healthy families or those that operated in more problematic ways. Childfree women are also no more a “type” than any other patient. Choosing to live childfree is simply another path and should be accepted as such. Nevertheless, the experience of a voluntarily childfree woman is different from the experience of an involuntarily childfree woman or a woman who chooses to mother. Moreover, the desire to live childfree does not signal the absence of relational needs and capacities, although they may be expressed in ways different from those who parent.

While choosing to live one’s life as a childfree woman is one developmental pathway, it is certainly not the more typical route, which is motherhood. Choosing this less common course places a woman outside mainstream societal norms and may also place her outside her family’s norms. Potentially, a childfree midlife woman may have suffered narcissistic injuries in her family and in other environments in the form of critical evaluations and hurtful remarks. If a woman internalized such criticisms, these narcissistic injuries could undermine her self esteem and contribute to a character structure that is sensitive to such comments. A woman may experience acute sensitivity when questioned about childbearing because she may anticipate pejorative reactions to her childfree status. Moreover, many women have learned to provide vague, unclear reasons to others regarding childbearing in order to protect themselves from criticisms. Childfree women may need assistance honestly articulating, even just to themselves, the

acceptance of their choice as valid. In treatment, a woman may require help consolidating her identity as a childfree woman.

Commonly in psychotherapy, patients revisit past choices. Often childfree women review their decisions concerning childbearing at various times in their lives. Just as many individuals consider and reconsider past actions throughout life, the decision not to have children may be rethought with the outcome ultimately remaining the same. Revisiting this choice should not be read as a desire to now conceive. It could be a sign in some women of the need to further integrate their decision and its meaning.

Approaching or reaching menopause can have a variety of meanings for individual women. A childfree woman may or may not feel regretful at menopause about her decision not to have children. Women in this study were not particularly regretful, and the literature supports that a woman who has chosen her childfree status may not experience regret over the decision. Nevertheless, other feelings could surface at menopause, including anxieties about aging and elder care and could potentially emerge in treatment.

Lastly, clinicians need to accept difference and multiple pathways. A childfree woman's life may feel complete without children. She may seek treatment for the same kinds of issues that trouble other midlife women.

Areas for Future Research

Much of the literature on childfree women has been produced by sociologists and social psychologists rather than psychodynamically informed researchers and clinicians. Scant literature exists on treatment issues. A literature search on psychotherapy or

counseling practice with voluntarily childfree women produced one source. Therefore, most areas of treatment are open for future exploration, including those that focus on issues of sameness and difference between the patient and therapist. The potential emergence of countertransference and transference reactions between a therapist who is a mother and a childfree woman could be investigated. Given that childfree women frequently have felt criticized by others and criticize themselves, it seems possible that expectations concerning acceptance could enter the treatment in a variety of ways. Another area to explore is the value of groups, either supportive or treatment, for childfree women. A group might foster feelings of acceptance among its childfree members.

A longitudinal, qualitative study of childfree women conducted at various points in subjects' lives could provide data about changes in subjects' experiences. A study tracking younger childfree women as they move through life could provide new perspectives, since (presumably) younger women will experience a society increasingly more open to a variety of lifestyle choices. Also a quantitative study designed to gather information via the internet could provide data on a large, national sample of childfree women. Some research studies exist comparing women who mother to voluntarily and involuntarily childless women. Comparing mothers at midlife with voluntarily childfree women at midlife could yield information about similarities and differences between the groups.

Researching intentionally childfree couples is another area for future study. While some studies have examined the marital satisfaction of childfree couples, little data exists on the narratives of these couples and how they create meaning in their lives and in their

marriages. Currently little research exists on how childfree couples negotiate the decision to live childfree and how together they manage the stigma attached to their choice. An exploration of the internal process for the couple as well as the external social experience would provide rich material for further study. Qualitative research focusing on childfree couples is needed to build further understanding of that relationship.

However, the area most ripe for future research is men who have chosen not to parent. It would be interesting to know their family of origin experiences, if they too fall into certain categorical groups, how they navigate finding a partner, how they perceive themselves, and how they think others perceive them. Researchers could also compare the subjective experiences of childfree men to the subjective experiences of childfree women. Overall, conducting research on the childfree population would add to a developing understanding of individuals who make different choices. As more qualitative and quantitative research accumulates on different populations, such as childfree men and women, traditional theories of development can be expanded to include richer perspectives of multiple pathways.

Final Thoughts

The purpose of this study was to generate an interpretative frame for understanding the experiences of midlife, childfree women. The research process yielded rich data that expand and deepen what is known about this population. Yet there is more to be learned. I hope the findings presented can serve as invitations for further research on childfree women or on other populations where difference is a core aspect of the

human experience. Further understanding and elaborating distinctive pathways can assist with expanding, both in complexity and flexibility, beliefs about development.

APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT

**INSTITUTE FOR CLINICAL SOCIAL WORK
INDIVIDUAL CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH**

I, _____, acting for myself, agree to take part in the research entitled: Midlife women: Experiences of intentionally childfree, perimenopausal or menopausal married or partnered women. This work will be carried out by Gail DeLyser, LCSW, principal researcher under the supervision of Dennis Shelby, Ph.D., Dissertation Chair. This research is conducted under the auspices of the Institute for Clinical Social Work, 200 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 407, Chicago, IL 60601, (312) 726-8480.

PURPOSE of this study is to explore and describe the experiences at midlife of intentionally childfree women with the purpose of expanding our understanding of midlife development and the psychological issues and challenges midlife women face. This is a qualitative research study in which 15 women will be interviewed and audio taped.

PROCEDURES USED IN THE STUDY AND THE DURATION:

For this research, the researcher will interview 15 women, at least two times each, using a semi-structured question format. The first interview, which will be audio taped, will last approximately 1 ½ hours. The follow up interview, which will be audio taped, will last approximately 1 hour. Participating in the study is voluntary and participants will not receive payment for their participation.

BENEFITS

Participants in this study do not accrue any direct benefits from participating. General benefits of the study include expanding what is known about midlife development and specifically what is known about intentionally childfree women.

COSTS

There are no monetary costs to the participants beyond the cost of driving to the interviews.

POSSIBLE RISKS/SIDE EFFECTS

It is possible that the questions asked may elicit uncomfortable feelings in participants since they will be asked for describe and reflect on their lives. As a participant, you may stop the interview process at any time and for any reason. You may also choose not to answer a specific question. At the end of each interview, whether the participant feels or appears emotionally distressed or not, the researcher will debrief each participant regarding the experience.

PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY

The researcher will make every effort to ensure the confidentiality and privacy of the study’s participants. Interviews will be conducted either in the researcher’s private office or in another agreed upon private location. Each participant will be given a unique identification number. No personal data (such as names, addresses, phone numbers) will be used. All interviews will be identified by the ID number only. After the audio tapes have been transcribed, the tapes will be destroyed. All data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and destroyed after three years.

SUBJECT ASSURANCES

By signing this consent form, I agree to take part in this study. I have not given up any of my rights or released this institution from responsibility for carelessness.

I may cancel my consent and refuse to continue in this study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. My relationship with the staff of the ICSW will not be affected in any way, now or in the future, if I refuse to take part, or if I begin the study and then withdraw.

If I have any questions about the research methods, I can contact Gail DeLyser, LCSW (principal researcher) or Dennis Shelby, Ph.D. (Dissertation Chair) at this phone number 847-922-0432 (day or evening). If I have any questions about my rights as a research subject, I may call Daniel Rosenfeld, M.A. Chair of Institutional Review Board, ICSW, 200 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 407, Chicago, IL 60601, (312) 726-8480.

SIGNATURES

All consent forms must be signed and dated. They must be explained to the participants and witnessed by the person who is explaining the procedure.

I HAVE READ THIS CONSENT FORM AND I AGREE TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY AS IT IS EXPLAINED IN THIS CONSENT FORM.

Signature of Participant

Date

I CERTIFY THAT I HAVE EXPLAINED THIS RESEARCH TO _____
(NAME OF SUBJECT) AND THE PARTICIPANT EXPLAINED IT BACK IN HER OWN
WORDS. I BELIEVE THAT SHE UNDERSTANDS THAT SHE HAS AGREED TO
PARTICIPATE FREELY. I AGREE TO ANSWER ANY ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS WHEN
THEY ARISE DURING THE RESEARCH OR AFTERWARD.

Signature of Researcher

Date

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

5. Any thoughts about not having children?
6. Any thoughts about your life in the future?
7. Tell me about your career/work life.
 - a. What are your work plans as you move forward?

List of Questions as Interviews Progressed

1. Have you ever wondered given your traditional upbringing/traditional family model why you chose to follow a less traditional pathway?
2. How do you describe your decision not to have children?
3. Do you feel regretful about your decision? (I ask about regret in less direct ways, also)
4. Has menopause sparked any feelings of regret?
5. In your family, were you encouraged to do what you wanted? (I asked this in various ways depending on the participant).
6. When you meet someone who doesn't have children what do you think about her?
7. How do you think other people view a woman without children?
8. Did you speak to your mother about your decision not to have children?
9. Did you speak to any family members about your decision?
10. Is there a discrepancy between how you see yourself and how others see you?
11. Do you see yourself as unusual? Odd?
12. Do you consider yourself not traditional?
13. Have other people ever commented on your childfree status?
14. Do you think it is difficult to say one chose not to have children? Why might that be?
15. Any thoughts on why a woman without children might be viewed as selfish? Do you think it is selfish not to have children?
16. Any thoughts on why some people with children can aggressively ask why a woman does not have children?
17. Any thoughts on what makes for a satisfying midlife?
18. Any thoughts on why some women feel better, happier at midlife?
19. Any ideas why women without children have friends who also don't have children?

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT FLYER

Participants Wanted

Doctoral student seeking participants for
dissertation research on intentionally
childfree, heterosexual midlife women.

Participation consists of one initial interview of approximately 1 1/2 hours and
a follow up interview of one hour.

To participate one must:

- Be a heterosexual woman between the ages of 40 and 60
- Be married or in a committed relationship of at least eight years.
- Be intentionally childfree

If you are interested in participating, know someone who might be
interested, or in learning more about this study, please contact Gail
DeLyser, LCSW at 847-784-5049 or gdely@aol.com.

APPENDIX D

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT E-MAIL

RECRUITMENT E-MAIL
PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

I am a doctoral student at the Institute for Clinical Social Work in Chicago, Illinois and conducting research on the experiences at midlife of intentionally childfree women who are married or partnered and heterosexual. I am looking for women who are willing to participate in my study.

Participants must be willing to meet with me for one initial interview and one follow up interview, each lasting approximately 1 ½ hours. Interviews will be conducted in a private, confidential setting (my office, another private office) and will be audio recorded. All information collected will remain confidential and any identifying information will be disguised when the findings are written.

To participate, a woman must be between the ages of 40 to 60, intentionally childfree, married or in a long term partnership of at least 8 years.

Please contact me, Gail DeLyser, at gdely@aol.com if you are interested in participating or if you know someone who might be. I can also be reached at my office: 847-784-5049.

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