WOMEN AT MIDDLE AGE: THE CHILDLESS PERSPECTIVE

By

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This qualitative study investigates the experience of ten middle-aged women without children. These women who were between the ages of 44 and 50 were invited to explore how they establish their identities and make meaning in their lives. All were posed open-ended questions that asked them to examine the implications of the fact that they are middle-aged women without children. Their responses delineated a process which many, though not all, traversed to arrive at a place of "grace" or acceptance of themselves. The states they described, middle age awakening, awareness of loss, taking stock, and acceptance, were not always experienced in successive order nor were all experienced by each participant, yet they appear to capture the nature of these women's lived experience.

The women is this study appeared to negotiate the developmental tasks presented by middle age with varying levels of competency depending on their paths to childlessness as well as their acceptance of an identity as 'other' i.e. as different. Those who from a young age understood they were different and received support for who they were appeared able to navigate the stigma of childlessness with more ease and less heartache than those who had never before found themselves on "the margins of social arrangements." Those women who had chosen to remain without children (five of them) seemed to achieve a level of acceptance of themselves in middle age that those who had

'forgotten to have kids' (the remaining five) had not yet achieved. This seemed related to the latter's internalization of the cultural mandate to reproduce against which their lives were experienced as a "failure." The study also addresses the implications for clinical and counseling psychology research and practice when working with middle-aged women without children.

In loving memory of my friend, Sheila Fortin Brown
December 27th, 1946 - March 1st, 2005

Blessed is the influence of one true, loving soul on another.
George Eliot

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Little has been written about the experience of being a middle-aged woman today, and even less about those of us who do not have or have not raised children. When described, we are variously referred to as barren, sterile, infertile, or childless, and are considered the product of an abnormal developmental path. "Maternity is still considered the equivalent of normal adult development for women. There is no normative female identity for the woman who is not a mother" (Ireland, 1993, p. 104). Even our vocabulary lacks a neutral term for the state of being simply a middle-aged woman who does not have a connection to mothering children. The term child-free suggests a woman is free from the constraints of motherhood while childless implies a woman is less than or lacking for not having children. The absence of a neutral, inclusive term points to the privileged position motherhood occupies in our culture, "… in the interstices of language lie powerful secrets of the culture" (Rich, 1976, p. 249). A colleague referred to motherhood as the 'staple' of our society and culture. Hird and Abshoff observed, "…childless women are an oxymoron, defined by something they are not" (2000, p. 348). To signal my awareness of these dominant constructions, I have chosen to use the terms women without children or women who do not have children[1] in referring to this group of women.

It was not until I reached the age of forty that I seriously considered having a child. By then it was too late for me; when I arrived at an infertility specialist's office a couple of years later, I was told, based on various tests, that I was "too old". In middle-

[1] When referencing the literature, I will use the terms used in that literature.

age, the choice to bear a biological child is withdrawn from most women. I mourned the loss of the possibility of having a child, the child that would carry on my partner's and my genetic inheritance. Since then, I have contemplated becoming a mother through adoption. As I think about what it would mean for me to mother and whether I want to mother, I have become increasingly aware of how central this question is for me and probably for most women. Yet, I struggle to identify what I desire within a context that assumes women want to mother and should mother. Others' inquiries about whether I have children have alerted me to how prevalent the assumption is that women will mother. It has led me to want to know about the experience of middle age for those women who do not have or have not raised children.

I have developed a project that sets out to explore how middle-aged, American women at the turn of the 21st century who do not have or have not raised children establish their identities. The literature review sets out a framework within which these women's narratives may be heard and listened to. It is a framework that is informed by a feminist perspective. I define *feminist* using Nancy Miller's words as the wish "to articulate a self-consciousness about women's identity both as inherited cultural fact and as a process of social construction" and to "protest against the available fiction of female becoming" (Miller, 1988).

The first step in creating this framework is to understand what may constitute 'inherited cultural fact' and the 'process of social construction' for middle-aged women at the turn of the 21st century in the United States. "Women and men are born into gender systems that have conscious and unconscious prescriptions and definitions of roles" (Brewster, 2000, p. 4). Society has labeled "masculine" as aggressive and

ambitious strivings, pragmatic and analytic problem solving and the capacity to set aside personal relationships in the interest of the task at hand. Alternatively, "society has viewed 'feminine' in terms of enhancing the growth of others, intuition and empathy, and investing in relationships in the interest of serving the group as a whole" (Brewster, 2000, p. 5). This study examines the principal psychoanalytic and psychosocial theories on women's development as a way of exploring what may constitute 'inherited cultural fact' for these women.

The women in my study do not fit society's view of the "feminine" as they have deviated from the prescribed developmental pathway of reproduction and fertility. This alternate path may present unique challenges for them as they confront the developmental tasks of middle adulthood. Therefore, a second important piece of the framework for understanding how middle-aged women without children may negotiate their identities is to examine the psychoanalytic and psychosocial theories on adult development at mid-life to see how they illuminate these women's narratives. The next section outlines four domains that are relevant to this study: literature on adult development, on mid-life, on women's development and on women who do not have children.

CHAPTER 2

The Literature

Overview

Adult developmentalists of both genders have acknowledged an urgent need for additional research on the development and life stages of women's lives. In 1982, Carol Gilligan called for research on women's adult development saying: "Among the most pressing items on the agenda for research on adult development is the need to delineate *in women's own terms* [sic] the experience of their adult life" (p. 173). The life-cycle theorist Daniel Levinson, in his book *The Seasons of a Woman's Life* (1996), also expresses the need for further study of the life stages of women. In this study, I hope to contribute to a growing body of literature that focuses on women's development by exploring the experience of middle-aged women who do not have children and how they negotiate their identities during middle age.

The literature that is relevant for this exploration largely falls in four main areas: adult development over the entire life-cycle, adult development at mid-life, theory regarding women's development, and the nascent body of literature on women who do not have children. The remainder of this Overview briefly surveys these four intellectual domains prior to a more in-depth review of each.

Adult Development and the Life Cycle

Over the last thirty years, there have been noteworthy efforts to formulate a theory of adult development. The basic premise of adult developmental theory is that development does not terminate with adolescence but continues throughout the life span as an on-going, dynamic process (Erikson, 1959; Levinson, 1978; Colarusso and

Nemiroff, 1979). Colarusso and Nemiroff (1979) propose that adult experience and environmental influences are important determinants of adult development. They suggest that the developmental issues of childhood, such as separation-individuation and the oedipal complex, continue as central aspects of adult life but in altered form. A more complete review of these theories follows this overview.

Adult Development at Mid-Life

Of special interest in this study, is the period known as Mid-life. It has typically been identified as ranging from the mid-thirties to the onset of old age (Modell, 1989). Mid-life has been identified as a period during which there is a heightened sense of vulnerability and a growing awareness of loss --- as visible and irreversible signs of the aging body first appear. "Middle age is a time for coming to terms with the limitations of one's self, of one's loved ones, and finally of reality" (Modell, 1989, p. 20). Levinson (1978, 1996) describes the mid-life transition as a time of moderate to severe crisis. In particular, it is a time of reappraisal and exploration of the possibilities for change in self and one's choices.

Psychoanalytic theorists examine the ways in which the developmental process is stimulated by the increased awareness of time limitation in mid-life. Both the psychosocial theorists (Erikson, 1959, Levinson, 1978, 1996) as well as the psychoanalytic theorists outline developmental tasks that they consider normative for the mid-life period. This investigation may illuminate whether and how these theories and the tasks they describe apply to middle-aged women who do not have children.

Women's Development

Beginning with Freud, there has been a dominant view of female development over the last century. It is an essentialist understanding that conceptualizes femininity in biologically reproductive terms (Alchek, 1995), in other words, a woman is not considered an adult female unless she bears a child. This dominant perspective has come under increasing scrutiny over the last thirty years by theorists who have focused on female development. Major contributors in this area include Miller (1976), Chodorow (1978), Gilligan (1982), Butler (1990), Benjamin (1988), and Goldner (1991). The scrutiny of these psychologists and others has largely focused on including women as objects of knowledge within the traditional theories, critiquing the foundations on which the prevailing knowledge is based, and challenging the values implicit in traditional masculine-oriented psychological paradigms that equilibrate motherhood, femininity, and normal female development (Paterson & Trathen, 1994).

Women who do not have children

Finally, there are a number of empirical studies that have focused solely on women who do not have children and their experiences of childlessness. These studies categorize women based on their path to childlessness and differentiate their emotional adjustment accordingly. Nonetheless, the claim is that no matter the path to childlessness, women who do not have children traverse "predictable stages of emotional adjustment" (Vissing, 2002, p. 130). As the women's narratives in this study unfold, it will be interesting to listen for this 'emotional adjustment' and, if present, how and whether it relates to the presses of the mid-life development process.

Cohort Effect

Before taking a more in-depth look at the relevant literature, it is important to state that the middle-aged women in this study are part of what is referred to as the "baby boom" generation (born between 1945 and 1961). They are part of a cohort which "as used in demography, refers to individuals born within a certain time span, usually a specified period…and subject as a result, to specific social and historical pressures and events that may be unique'' (Block, Davidson & Grambs, 1981, p. 1). The baby boom generation's formative years coincided with several social movements including: the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War protests, the women's movement, and the gay rights movement. The women's and the civil rights' movements may have particular relevance to the women in this study as these movements led to dramatic changes in women's and people of color's access to employment and education.

Stewart and Healy (1989) suggest in their developmental theory that history may differentially affect different stages of individual development and thus create psychologically distinct cohorts. According to their model, the social historical events that occur in a person's childhood shape the individual's background assumptions about life and the world, while those that occur in late adolescence shape the individual's conscious identity. Events that take place in adulthood, on the other hand, affect the opportunities open to individuals, but perhaps not their identities or values.

Stewart and Ostrove (1998), for instance, suggest that middle age may be gendered differently for different generations. As an example, they cite the finding that women who were in early adulthood during the time of the feminine mystique report lower levels of psychological well-being when their children left home than the women

who were young adults and worked in factories during World War II (Antonucci and Akiyama, 1997). The social movements mentioned earlier occurred during the adolescent years of this study's participants, a period when individuals' identities are formed. Developmental theories posit these identities to be quite stable over time, and hence these movements may be expected to have lifelong influences on the values and identities of these women. If history does affect different stages of individual development differentially, it is worth listening for psychological cohort effects in these women's narratives.

Theories of Development across the Life-span

Life-span psychologists are interested in individual development over the life cycle. They focus on psychological qualities such as ego strength, time perspective, achievement, and rigidity of defenses over time (Rossi, 1980). They assume an inherent ground plan to all human development made-up of a patterned, linear sequence of stages, each with appropriate physical, emotional, and cognitive tasks to be accomplished. Stress along the lifeline is inherent in the developmental transitions in these theories, and crises are incorporated into the life cycle as a normal part of human development. Therefore, Erikson's theory of the life cycle and Levinson's theory of development across the life-span may be classified as normative-crisis models of development.

Women's lives may undergo a mid-course correction rather than a crisis as proposed by theorists (Erikson, 1950; Jacques, 1965) and researchers (Levinson, 1978, Vaillant, 1977). Stewart and Ostrove (1998) suggest that "it may be useful to rethink the concept [of a mid-life crisis] a bit, recognizing that mid-life may often be a period of

change or transition but one that is neither universal nor necessarily as dramatic as 'crisis' suggests" (p. 1188).

Most psychoanalytic theorists are primarily concerned with personality development over the life-span. They have written about developmental processes in the areas of ego functioning and object relations across the lifespan without tying these processes to specific age-related crises. The psychoanalytic theorists who have written about adult personality development might be construed to fall under the "timing-of-events" model of development.

The key idea of the timing-of-events model is that adult development is not paced by crisis, but by a sense of the average expectable life cycle and individual expectations of where one should be at different ages in one's life. Neugarten (1968), a prominent social psychologist and leading proponent of the timing-of-events model, suggests that the phasing and shifts in self-definition are structured largely by age norms rooted in culture and society, not in biology. She says that a psychology of the life cycle is not a psychology of crisis but rather a psychology of timing. She proposes that people in middle age do not undergo a crisis but rather a normal, gradual change in their time perspective. This shift is accompanied by heightened introspection, stock taking, and interiority.

According to this model, stress along the lifeline is not inherent in developmental transitions, as in the normative-crisis model. Rather it is a manifestation of realizations about asynchrony in terms of the timing of life events (Rossi, 1980). As Rossi (1980) points out, it is the unanticipated event or "non-event" which is likely to be experienced as traumatic. Thus it will be interesting to note how the women in this study react to their

status as women without children and/or without partners as their expectations of appropriate timing may have been violated.

Psychosocial or Normative Crisis Models of Development

In the 1950's, Erikson introduced the idea that psychological development does not end with childhood, but rather proceeds throughout life. He extended Freud's developmental theory to include an invariant sequence of eight ego stages, each predominating and appropriate for a specific segment of the life cycle. Although his theory gives the latter two thirds of life less attention than the first third, his conception of development throughout the life span "lighted the way for contemporary theorists of adult development" (Roberts & Newton, 1987).

His model of life stages is loosely associated with age ranges. For example, Stage VII, Adulthood, begins at age forty and extends to sixty. Erikson, like Freud, defined each stage in terms of a primary ego developmental task which has consequences for development in the stages that follow; "…each stage is dominated both by a syntonic and dystonic quality…constituting together a 'crisis' only in the sense that the syntonic should systematically outweigh or at least balance (but never dismiss) the dystonic" (Erikson, 1984, p. 157). Thus, Erikson charted development through crisis which he believed were opportunities for growth. Erikson identified these crises in terms of polarities. In the case of Adulthood, the crisis centers on achieving generativity versus stagnation or isolation. Thus Adulthood involves resolving, integrating, and reconciling this central conflict or crisis. Failure to achieve generativity, the expansion of ego-interests and libidinal investment in the next generation, leads to a pervading sense of stagnation and personal impoverishment.

Though Erikson's model provides a valuable outline for the overall adult developmental progression, it does not provide measurable criteria for a given developmental achievement (Settlage, 1992). Erikson asserts that healthy adult development is distinguished by a stage of generativity, "the interest in establishing and guiding the next generation" (Erikson, 1959, p. 103), yet does not clearly define what constitutes generativity. He says that having children is not a sufficient criteria for either sex to achieve generativity or transcend one's narcissism; "The mere fact of having or even wanting children does not itself attest to generativity" (Ibid.). He also notes that neither "creativity" or "productivity" are adequate substitutes for generativity despite recognizing that there are people who do not parent and may achieve generativity in other ways, "From misfortune or because of special and genuine gifts in other directions, [people] do not apply this drive to offspring but to other forms of altruistic concern and of creativity, which may absorb their parental responsibility" (Ibid.). Thus he asserts that generativity involves guiding the next generation; it is interpersonal, intergenerational, and nurturing, yet it remains unclear how it is achieved.

Many psychologists, such as Colarusso and Nemiroff (1979) and Gilligan (1982), have elaborated Erikson's notion of "generativity". Gilligan (1982) interprets Erikson as taking the productivity and creativity of parenthood "in its literal and symbolic realization to be a metaphor for an adulthood centered on relationships and devoted to the activity of care" (p. 153). Though the question still remains as to what Erikson's criteria for fulfilling "parental responsibility" vis a vis the "next generation" may be, he views the development of caring for others as an important barometer of adult development, and

nurturing as a higher level of identity development during middle age than single-minded professional pursuits.

Levinson (1978, 1996), like Erikson, defines stages of development in terms of developmental tasks, yet he also focuses on the life structure. The life structure comprises the underlying design of a person's life at a given time. By focusing on the engagement of the self with the external world, Levinson explains that the life structure "mediates the relationship between the individual and the environment. It is in part the cause, the vehicle, and the effect of that relationship" (1986, p. 7). The primary components of the life structure are the person's relationships "with various others in the external world. The other may be a person, a group, institution or culture, or a particular object or place" (Ibid., p. 6). From his research on men and women (1978, 1996), Levinson identifies two "central components," family/marriage and work, which occupy a central place in an individual's structure; these are reminiscent of Freud's "'Lieben und arbeiten' (to love and to work)" (Erikson, 1950, p. 229). In his research, Levinson found that the individual invested the greatest amount of time and energy in these two areas.

Levinson also refers to "unfulfilled components," such as a person's wanting a meaningful occupation, marriage or family; these also may occupy a central part in a person's life structure. The concept of "unfulfilled components" may be relevant to this particular group of women because they have not fulfilled the culturally normative role of becoming mothers; some of them also have not married or partnered. The questions pertinent to this study are whether the absence of the role of mother is important to them

and if so, how are they managing the loss of this "possible self,"[2] and how does this absence relate to other relationships in which they have invested.

Levinson asserts that the life structure evolves through a universal sequence of alternating stable and transitional (usually unstable) periods. Between the ages of seventeen and sixty-five, a person traverses two eras, early and middle adulthood, each of which begin and end with a Cross-era Transition. There are three periods within each era, an Entry Life Structure period, a Transition period, and a Culminating Life Structure period. Each of these begins and ends at a well-defined average age, with a variance of two years. As the women in this study range in age from 44 to 50, middle adulthood is the relevant era. Middle adulthood, which begins at age 40 according to Levinson, includes the Mid-Life Transition which runs from age 40 to 45, the Entry Life Structure for Middle Adulthood from 45 to 50, and the Age 50 Transition from 50 to 55. As his empirical research involved a sample of forty men and forty-five women ranging in age from 35 to 45 years (Levinson, 1978, 1996), the formulation of the developmental periods from 45 to 65 is based only on his exploratory studies of women and men. Nevertheless, Levinson outlines developmental tasks and life issues that are specific to these periods and that give them their distinctive character and quality.

Levinson defined the eras and periods in terms of developmental tasks rather than what he describes as "marker events" such as marriage, divorce, retirement or illness. The central task of the Mid-Life Transition is to terminate the existing structure, individuate, and initiate a new structure. He characterizes this period as a time of "moderate to severe crisis, a time of intense questioning and emotional upheaval that is developmentally normal and appropriate" (1996, p. 26). He claims that to the extent that

[2] Markus, H. & Nurius, P. (1986). Possible selves. *American Psychologist, 41*, 9, 954-969.

we can begin this individuation process, "we can become more compassionate, more reflective and judicious, less tyrannized by inner conflicts and external demands, and more genuinely loving of ourselves and others. Without it, our lives become increasingly trivial and stagnant" (Ibid.).

The task of individuation involves a developmental effort towards the resolution of four polarities: young/old, destruction/creation, masculine/feminine, and engagement/separateness. He believes that each transition period challenges the individual to rework and reintegrate these polarities. In the case of the Mid-Life Transition, he describes how our experience of our mortality is heightened and leads to a fuller awareness of our capacity for destructiveness as well as of how others have been destructive towards us. This leads to a desire to create in ways that have value for us and others.

The task of the Entry Life Structure for Middle Adulthood is to create an initial structure for the launching of Middle Adulthood. This means that the choices we make mark the beginning of the next structure building period. Levinson says that often, though the components may stay the same, there are differences in the relationships that form the central components. Finally, the Age 50 Transition provides an opportunity for reappraising the choices made. Levinson says of this period, "developmental crises are common in this period, especially for persons who have made few significant life changes, or inappropriate changes, in the previous ten to fifteen years" (Ibid.).

One unpublished doctoral dissertation that uses Levinson's developmental theory to study middle-aged women (Droege, 1982) lends support to the notion that for women, transitional periods represent a movement toward increased individuation. In the case of

Droege's sample, women whose ages ranged from 44 to 53, middle-aged individuation is characterized as being from the family of procreation. As this study involves women who do not have "families of procreation", it will be interesting to note whether there is evidence of increased "individuation" at middle age and/or a move towards more mature interdependence, the missing component in adult development theories according to Gilligan (1982).

In Droege's sample of twelve women (75% were married at some time, 41% were parents, 91% were employed for pay, 100% were college educated and 0% were non-White), she identified a continued instability in their life structures into the period of Building an Entry Life Structure for Middle Adulthood. In contrast, Levinson characterized this as a period of increased stability. Droege accounted for the continued instability in her sample by the fact that at age 40, subjects were not yet in a position to reflect on and evaluate their professional achievements and thus to settle into a life structure of choice.

Droege also found that age, more than any other single factor, accounted for qualitative changes in the lives of her women at mid-life. She described the changes as occurring in their marital and other significant relationships and in the nature of their work in terms of commitment as well as type. Another insight into mid-life development, based on her work, concerns the psychological work that is necessary for a positive transition to mid-life. Droege found that those women who formulated a new or an importantly revised dream for the second half of their lives or risked making some real changes in their work or family life, felt better about themselves than did those who declined or failed to build an Entry Structure for middle age. It will be interesting to note

whether the feelings of the women in this study about being middle-aged relate to any changes they may have made in their work or personal lives as they move through middle age.

Psychoanalytic Theories of Adult Development

Unlike the age-stage theorists, psychoanalysis has not developed a theory of adult development as adulthood is usually characterized as a "lengthy, stable phase of life in which developmental processes play a relatively minor role" (Colarusso & Nemiroff, 1979, p. 59). Colarusso and Nemiroff (Ibid.) propose that the theory on adult development is sparse in part because the developmental framework has not been applied fully to the study of the adult. They propose several hypotheses as possible underlying assumptions for psychoanalytic theorizing of adult development.

One of their hypotheses is that the adult, like the child, is dependent on the environment in the achievement of new and phase-specific developmental tasks of adulthood. As an example, they point out that "normal adult functioning postulates mature sexual activity and the capacity for intimacy which are impossible without a loved and loving partner of the opposite sex" (Ibid., p. 61). Another example they cite is "generativity", which they say is "meaningless without an environment that provides children and young adults to guide and inspire" (Ibid.). Their emphasis is on the presence of certain necessary, normative, environmental conditions such that developmental tasks may be achieved.

As the women is this study do not fall within the norm, some are lesbian, many do not have partners, and all do not have children, their environments do not provide the necessary conditions as defined here for achieving the developmental tasks of adulthood.

It will be important in terms of this study to listen for and be open to the possibility that women may achieve the developmental tasks of adulthood without the presence of the "normative" environmental conditions, ie. heterosexual partners and children. If the emphasis remains on examining the environment and what it provides in terms of developmental challenges, Colarusso and Nemiroff provide an important contribution to thinking about adult development.

Related to the above is Colarusso's and Nemiroff's proposition that developmental processes in adult life are influenced by the "adult" past as well as the "childhood" past. This extends the notion of what constitutes genetic influences to include new experiences that occur at each developmental phase throughout life. They point out that more recent events may be related to or influenced by childhood events but may not be fully explained by them. Murphy (1992) supports this position contending that adult development refers to,

> changes in psychic structure occasioned by engagement with uniquely adult phenomena such as intimate relationships, reproductive choices, work experiences, the impact and death of one's parents and friends, and the awareness of one's mortality. Changes in psychic structure encompass alteration in self and object representations, defensive strategies, and adaptive capabilities (p. 61).

Turning specifically to mid-life development, Murphy characterizes the major task of middle age as a dialectic of continuing as the child of our parents while emerging as an adult in our own right. Two theorists, Jacques (1965) and Loewald (1979) describe the psychological tasks involved in this dialectic.

Adult Development at Mid-life

The "mid-life crisis" is a term which the British Kleinian analyst, Eliot Jacques (1965), first used to describe a process whereby he accounts for the changes he observed

in the quality, mode and content of creative work from youth to middle adulthood. In his paper, *Death and the Mid-life Crisis* (1965), he attributes this observable shift in creative output to a person's capacity to recognize and live with the inevitability of "eventual death and the existence of hate and destructive impulses inside each person" (p. 45). He proposes that the recognition at mid-life of death's personal nature leads to a reworking of the depressive position as described by Melanie Klein (1935). The depressive position, according to Klein, is achieved when the infant is able to synthesize the "good" mother and the "bad" mother into one. In this way, the ego becomes more integrated, and there is hope for the reestablishment of the good object. As the infant assumes the depressive position, dependence on the defenses of splitting and projective identification is attenuated. Though the infant may rage against the mother for frustrations she may cause, the infant no longer fears retaliation from the outside, rather he or she feels guilt and anxiety for the damage done to internal objects of fantasy.

Jacques (1965) proposes that the mid-life crisis involves a reworking of the Kleinian depressive position during which the individual confronts his or her own destructive impulses in the face of the certainty of his or her death. The attainment of the depressive position, as in infancy, is viewed as a developmental achievement in mid-life. Jacques believes that out of the working through of the depressive position, there is a strengthening of the capacity to accept and tolerate ambiguity and conflict within the self. A person is able to reclaim disavowed parts of the self that were split-off and projected in his or her earlier years. Through this process, Jacques proposes that, "we unconsciously retain the primitive sense of wholeness—of the goodness of ourselves and of our

objects—a goodness which is sufficient but not idealized, not subject to hollow perfection" (p. 61).

Jacques (1965) acknowledges that this process is not easy, rather he likens it to a period of purgatory, characterized by anguish and depression. The task of mid-life becomes accepting the "tragedy of personal death with the sense of grief appropriate to it" (p. 61). What follows is a recognition that,

> new starts are coming to an end…. This sense of there being no more changing is anticipated in the mid-life crisis. What is begun has to be finished. Important things that the individual would have liked to achieve, would have desired to become, would have longed to have, will not be realized (p. 62).

Jacques believes that with this recognition comes a "quality of resignation," a balance of confidence with acknowledged imperfections.

Loewald, in his paper, *The Waning of the Oedipus Complex* (1979) discusses a similar process during mid-life. He portrays the Oedipus complex as never destroyed throughout life either by repression, defenses or temporary resolution, though the "forms and levels of [its] mastery" vary according to the individual's experience and maturity. He considers the "appropriation of parental authority" as the goal of mid-life development. This is achieved through "parricide," the "emancipation murder" of the parents.

> It is no exaggeration to say that the assumption of responsibility for one's own life and its conduct is in psychic reality tantamount to the murder of the parents, to the crime of parricide, and involves dealing with the guilt incurred thereby (p. 757).

He describes the reward for separating from our parents as the achievement of personal autonomy, the cost as the relinquishment of incestuous fantasies and illusions of yearned for intimacy which may never have existed (Murphy, 1992). The affects that accompany

this developmental task include sadness, resignation, and guilt as well as reconciliation, confidence, and liberation.

Modell (1989) characterizes the middle years as a confrontation with the limitations of one's self and the reality of one's death. To help mitigate the fear of actual death during the middle years, he states that the individual's task is to achieve "psychic aliveness." This involves the capacity to use imagination to transform the experience of the world. He refers to Winnicott's theory (1971) of the transitional object saying that it is essentially a theory of the creative use of illusion. He believes that like the child's use of the "good enough mother" to reinforce a positive relation to the world outside the self, the adult may use this capacity to transform the painful reality of his or her death. He states that the presence in adults' lives of "sustaining objects" (Ibid., p. 18) who will help maintain their illusion of safety in the world is a necessary condition for a sense of "psychic aliveness."

Each of these psychoanalytic theorists describes a process during mid-life by which individuals, confronted with their mortality, arrive at an accommodation or acceptance of their ultimate death or absence. In talking about her experience of being middle-aged, one of this study's participants said:

> I think some of being at mid-life is that it's unmistakable that half your life is over. I find myself sometimes trying to keep balanced about looking back and looking forward, and then also living in the moment, and trying to figure out how to make room for all three of those things because I think they all inform each other.

The narratives of the women in this study may shed light on how individuals integrate an understanding of their mortality in middle age.

Female Identity Development

Despite the growing numbers of middle-aged childless women in this country[3], the non-maternal female experience is surprisingly absent from our cultural consciousness and from psychological theory. In fact, classical psychoanalytic literature describing feminine identity development prescribes pregnancy and motherhood as necessary and natural milestones for healthy identity formation (Deutsch, 1924 [1975]; Freud, 1925; Horney, 1926). As Dimen (1997) observes, the nearest thing Western intellectuals have to a shared cultural mythology is the story of how we become sexual creatures, and this cultural myth is the "Freudian psychosexual narrative" (p. 528). She points out that one truth that this myth omitted or "better mistook was women's" (Ibid.). The following discussion will briefly outline Freud's theory of female development, its feminist revisions, and the postmodern view of gender and sexuality.

Classical Psychoanalytic Theory of Female Development

As a man embedded in the intellectual community of his time, Freud's writings, particularly his early writings, rest on the Darwinian concepts of inclusive and reproductive fitness (Schafer, 1974). Darwin's influence on Freud is particularly apparent in Freud's assumption that genital sexuality reflects psychological health and maturity precisely because it is reproductive (Schafer, 1974; Fast, 1990; Goldner, 1991; Chodorow, 1978, 1994, 2000; Alchek, 1995; Dimen, 1997). As Freud says, "the final

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[3] According to the U.S. Census Bureau's Population Survey of June, 1998, 19% of women between the ages of 40 and 44 years old are childless (Table 2. Internet release date, October 24, 2000). There is no Census data on the fertility of women beyond the age of 44 years old. The percent of women who are childless between the ages of 45 and 50 years old who are the subjects of this investigation is likely to be only slightly lower than 19% as the percent of women who are childless in all marital classes decreases with age and levels off considerably as women approach the age of 40. (For 15-19 years old, the percent who are childless is 90.1%; for 20 to 24 years old, 64%; for 25 to 29 years old, 43.5%; for 30 to 34 years old, 27.4%; for 35 to 39 years old, 19.8%; for 40 to 44 years old, 19%.) The 19% compares to 10% of women being childless at the beginning of the 20th century (Tolnay and Guest, 1982, as cited in Ireland, 1993, p.7).

outcome of sexual development lies in what is known as the normal sexual life of the adult, in which the pursuit of pleasure comes under the sway of the reproductive function…" (Freud, 1905 [1962], p. 63). Freud asserts that the genital zone "takes over the function of combining the separate sexual activities for the purposes of reproduction" and a "weakness" in this zone results in "perverse fixations" on pre-genital pleasures (Ibid., p.103).

Psychoanalytic theories are varied in the extent to which they conceptualize femininity in biologically reproductive terms. Freud (1905, 1925, 1931) and Deutsch (1924) assert that the apex of female development is the wish for a baby as it marks the successful transformation of a woman's penis envy[4]. Otherwise, women develop a "masculinity complex" (Freud, 1925, p. 253) as a reaction formation to their envy of the penis.[5] What is remarkable here is that Freud and Deutsch not only propose that the maternal impulse defines psychological health for women, but even more remarkably they propose that this impulse is rooted in envy of male anatomy (Schafer, 1974; Fast, 1990; Goldner, 1991; Chodorow, 1978, 1994, 2000; Dimen, 1997). In other words, femininity defined as maternal is derived not from female biology, but in relation to masculine biology, that is in terms of the absence of a phallus[6].

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[4] According to Freud (1925a, 1931), when a girl discovers she does not have a penis, she blames her mother. Her disappointment with her mother is sufficient cause for her to switch her allegiance from her mother to her father. This marks the onset of the Oedipus complex in the girl, who develops a wish for a child by her father to compensate for her lack of a penis.

[5] The masculinity complex is marked by such attributes as ambition, aggressiveness and competition according to Freud. These attributes when found in women are often referred to as "phallic." Freud believed that the masculinity complex "can also result in a manifest homosexual choice of object" (1931, p. 230).

[6] This analysis owes much to Alchek's (1995) conceptualization of the subject.

Not all psychoanalytic theory is this phallocentric. Many psychoanalysts have attempted to shift the focus to "primary femininity"—the meaning and libido located in female biology, the primary sense of femaleness before the little girl allegedly discovers that she has been "castrated" (Horney, 1926, 1932; Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1964, 1975). There are also psychoanalysts, such as Therese Benedek (1959, 1960) and Judith Kestenberg (1968, 1980) who assert that normal femininity derives from women's "primary reproductive drive" and a "maternal instinct" respectively. Nancy Chodorow (1978, 2000) posits that what may feel like a drive or biological urge to become a mother is "itself partially shaped through unconscious fantasy and affect that cast what becoming pregnant or being a mother means in the context of a daughter's internal relation to her mother" (2000, p. 339). Feminist critiques (Bassin, 1996; Benjamin, 1996; Butler, 1999; Chodorow, 1994, 2000; Dimen, 1997; Fast, 1990; Goldner, 1991, 2000) of Freud's theory of feminine identity development focus on his "derogation of femininity, the normative dominance of heterosexuality, and the dichotomous, complementary division of gender" (Goldner, 1991, p. 252).

Contemporary Psychoanalytic Views of Female Development

In the mid-70's, when second-wave feminism reencountered Freud's psychoanalysis, psychoanalytic feminism resulted. The Anglo-American object relations (Chodorow, 1978; Benjamin, 1988) varietal of psychoanalytic feminism became influential in clinically grounded gender theory (Goldner, 2000). Chodorow and Benjamin were writing at a time when classical psychological and psychoanalytic theories privileged separateness and autonomy over intersubjectivity, connection and empathy, and the mother-daughter relationship was overshadowed by the classical

oedipal father's role in female as well as male development. By the late 80's, psychoanalytic feminism was providing the grounding for a feminist, critical perspective within psychoanalysis itself (Goldner, 2000). In the 90's, postmodernism emerged as a third voice in the conversation, and the categories of gender and sexuality came under scrutiny (Butler, 1990; Goldner, 1991, Chodorow, 1995).

The purpose in briefly reviewing the evolution of theory on female gender identity formation is to provide alternatives to the cultural hegemony that derogates the female, privileges the normative dominance of heterosexuality, and invokes motherhood as synonymous with adult female maturity. This is particularly important in relation to this study as all of the subjects are women who do not fit the "normative" role of mother and several identify as lesbian. Therefore, they may not be considered normal adult females unless the view of female development is broadened.

In her compelling book*, The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978), Chodorow provides an intra-psychic and sociocultural analysis of women's mothering premised not on biology or "primary femininity" but rather on "the developmental situation in which they [girls] grow up, and in which women have mothered them" (1978, p. 39). She makes the claim that the mother is very important in the daughter's psyche and sense of self, such that core psychological and interpersonal experiences for women can be understood in terms of this internal "mother-daughter lineage" (Chodorow, 2000). She offers an object-relational account of the development of maternal intra-psychic femininity to explain why women want to mother.

> The capacities and orientations I describe must be built into personality; they are not behavioral acquisitions. Women's capacities for mothering and abilities to get gratification from it are strongly internalized and psychologically enforced, and are built developmentally into the feminine psychic structure (1978, p. 39).

Chodorow (1978) proposes that it is the family structure that is responsible for the development of a feminine ego structure which is heavily invested in interpersonal relations. The fact that women are the primary care-givers produces in them a stronger identification and symbiosis with their infant daughters than with their infant sons. This identification fosters the development of a "relational" ego in the daughter—an ego that is defined by its relationships with others. She describes the conscious outcomes of this identification process as,

> the ways in which many women feel intuitively connected to others, able to empathize, and embedded in or dependent on relationships, on one side, and on the other, the counterphobically asserted independence and anxiety of many men about intimacy if it signals dependence (2000, p. 339).

Chodorow believes that the feminine ego structure is maternal in the sense that it seeks and is defined by its relationships.

She argues that particular feminine and masculine identities are the product of women's mothering. She further provides an explanation of how intra-psychic gender maintains the sexual division of labor such that women mother. She does not, however, adequately account for cultural, economic or social forces that may encourage or discourage women to mother; she attributes women's mothering entirely to an embedded maternal intra-psychic feminine identity. Therefore, it seems that all women will "choose" consciously or unconsciously to be mothers no matter the extant socio-cultural and economic pressures or alternatives available to them.[7] She does not articulate how children's development might change if men, for example, were the primary caregivers,

[7] See Sylvia Ann Hewlett's (2002) Creating a Life: Professional Women and the Quest for Children for an analysis of how the organization of the workplace and gender roles preclude many women from both mothering and becoming successful career women.

though she acknowledges the possibility of different family configurations (Hird and Abshoff, 2000).

The extent to which women's mothering leads to a female gender identity which is characterized by relational or maternal capacities and a male gender identity which excludes them remains an open question. Certainly, there have been examples throughout history of women whose identities were not overtly characterized by these capacities. A few such women are Queen Elizabeth I of England, Joan of Arc, Georgia O'Keefe, Virginia Woolf, the Amazons, and the Old Testament's intellectual and virginal Leah (Lisle, 1996). There are also examples as far back as Biblical times of women who were disinclined to mother and abandoned their children (Boswell, 1990 in Alchek, 1995). These women challenge one of Chodorow's primary assumptions, that the mother parents in a caring and loving way.

All women who do not have children challenge the essentialist association between femininity and sexual reproduction (Hird and Abshoff, 2000). Freud would postulate that such women developed a "masculinity complex, hoping someday to obtain a penis and thus become a man" (1925, p. 253); therefore, their feminine development had gone awry. Chodorow's reasoning assumes that women's mothering fosters a feminine identity heavily invested in motherhood and the relational capacities associated with motherhood. She provides an elegant account of the development of "feminine" object relations by focusing on the mother-daughter relationship despite her essentialist reasoning. She responds to the critique of her claims to universality by pointing out that she has identified a pattern not "an essential story" by investigating the mother-daughter relationship and its importance in female development and the dynamics of the female

psyche (2000). The women in this study may shed light on Chodorow's claim of the importance of the mother-daughter relationship in female development as they talk about their mothers and the meanings they attach to being women without children.

Chodorow's theory of gender identity views gender as a relational process of integrating identification and separation issues centered on the mother-daughter relationship. Other contemporary psychoanalysts (Tyson and Tyson, 1990; Fast, 1990) focus on the role of the mother in the gender development of girls and boys as well as on the importance of the father. They focus their attention on the pre-oedipal period, discussing the girl's powerful tie to her mother and the problems the girl may encounter moving beyond it.

Fast (1984, 1990) hypothesizes that children recognize sex difference between the ages of 18 and 24 months in the context of their over-inclusive ideas of their sex and gender possibilities. Within this framework, the emphasis is on limits as children wish for unlimited sex and gender possibilities during this period. The girl must give up the penis and what it symbolizes for her, the possibilities of maleness. Fast says that, "the clinical problem is not to induce the woman to accept the fact of her inferiority to males or her castrated state, but to help her give up her narcissistic illusions of unlimited potential" (1990, p. 111). During the oedipal period or differentiation period, Fast's term, she points out that girls must work out separation-individuation issues with their mothers and recognize their sexual differences from their fathers. The challenge for girls during this period is to form female gender identifications with their mothers, the very persons from whom they have been establishing their separate identities. "The danger, then, is not that by merging with her mother a girl might lose her identity as female. Rather, by

such a merger she may fail to establish herself as an independent female" (Ibid., p. 115). The father, according to Fast, is crucial to the process of separation as he provides a "needed separation from the mother as the girl elaborates identifications and same-sex relations with her" (Ibid., p. 114).

Tyson and Tyson's (1990) basic thesis is that during the pre-oedipal period both girls and boys need to resolve their ambivalence to the idealized object of the same sex in the service of gender identity formation. This is of particular importance in superego development and accounts for gender differences in superego development. For the girl, this task arises at a time when cognitive skills are immature. Therefore, there is a greater likelihood that harsh, severe, and unrelenting introjects will be internalized. This may jeopardize a pleasurable, narcissistic investment in a sense of femininity and the formation of a loving, comforting superego. Tyson and Tyson premise their thesis on the recognition that the nature of the girl's powerful tie to the mother and the problem she has moving beyond it is one of the most important aspects of female development. The girl must give up her maternal attachment while at the same time identify and compete with her. This problem may interfere with the girl's "ultimate internalization of an autonomous, independently functioning superego" (Ibid., p. 244). The resolution of this problem may depend on the extent to which the father can encourage the girl to identify with her feminine and maternal ego ideal as well as with appropriate aspects of his ideals and principles.

Benjamin (1991) turns her attention to the girl's identification with the father during the pre-oedipal period noting that the girl looks to the rapprochement father for identification before the girl turns to the oedipal father as love object. Benjamin expands

the notion of identification beyond that of merely incorporating the ideal to include the notion of a relationship in which the subject recognizes herself or himself in the person who embodies the ideal. She proposes that "children use cross-sex identifications to formulate important parts of their self-representations as well as to elaborate fantasies about sexual relations" (Ibid., p. 286). She draws on Fast's theory of gender differentiation in which Fast suggests that initially children do not recognize that certain possibilities are excluded because of anatomical difference. Thus the girl's identification with the father becomes an important basis of her love of the other; it is an important precursor and ongoing constituent of that love.

Each of these contemporary psychoanalytic theorists emphasizes the mother-daughter relationship in the development of a female gender identity, whether it be in terms of a maternal feminine identity (Chodorow, 1978), superego development (Tyson and Tyson, 1990), or cross-sex identification (Fast, 1984; Benjamin, 1991). One of the participants in this study said of her relationship with her mother:

> …one of the reasons it's been so hard for me to access my professional life and to really do it well is because that's leading her [my mother]. … I still want to be with her, you know, in a psychoanalytic way.

She recognizes that her relationship to her mother is conflicted; while she longs for her mother's love, she remains stuck in her career for fear of surpassing her mother. She also talked about not having been "appropriately gendered" as she has never "really wanted to be female because my mother was the female."

These writers emphasize the importance of the mother-daughter relationship during the pre-oedipal period in the context of Freud's exclusive focus on the oedipal relationship of the girl to the father. Nonetheless, they acknowledge the importance of

the role of the father in the development of female identity. As the women in this study talk about their relationships to their mothers and their fathers, their words may lead to hypotheses about the quality of their early relationships and how these may have contributed to shaping the development of their female gender identities. Another participant in this study spoke about her mother's strength and commitment to mothering her as an infant and toddler when she had polio and later described her mother's supportive response when she learned of her abortion. "Mothering was a big part of her identity and something she took seriously and was something she could do and do well." The participant described others as perceiving her as warm, engaging and caring, qualities she said are attributed to mothers.

Postmodern Views of Gender Identity

In her article, *Toward a Critical Relational Theory of Gender*, Goldner (1991) offers a deconstructionist critique of our culture's and psychoanalysis' dominant gender-identity paradigm. She argues that gender is "fundamentally and paradoxically indeterminant, both as psychological experience and as a cultural category" (Ibid., p. 250). She critiques psychoanalytic discourse for not questioning gender as a binary system, saying that a coherent gender identity may function as a psychic defense and also as a "socially instituted normative ideal" (Ibid., p. 254). Thus, our culture which sustains the illusion of two coherent gender identities, pathologizes any "gender-incongruent act, state, impulse, or mood, as well as any 'identity structure' in which gender or sexuality is not congruent with biological sex" (Ibid., p. 254-255). Bassin (1996) references Goldner's description of gender as a problem and suggests that rigid gender identification in adulthood be understood as "a defensive character structure, an unfortunate fixed

solution to a conflict" (p. 184). She suggests that gender polarity be seen as a "stage appropriate fantasy… necessary for the development of self-identity, object relations, and social requirements but requiring transcendence later in development" (Ibid., p. 183). She posits that the symbolic use of cross-sex identifications can contribute to individuals' capacity to make imaginative elaborations and empathic identifications and thus transcend the reality of one's gender-specific identifications and over-inclusive body ego representations. This alternative leads to the possibility of a "more mobile, flexible sexuality under the control of a symbolizing ego" (p. 186).

Butler (1990) rejects the use of the biological foundations of sexuality and gender; she claims they have been used to legitimize masculine power claims. She also objects to the idea of gender identity as a coherent and seamless entity. She says in our two gender system, "persons only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility" (Ibid., p. 16). She draws attention to those gender and sexual identities that fail to conform to cultural norms as appearing only as "developmental failures" or "logical impossibilities". All three theorists suggest that gender is either a construct necessary yet dispensable for certain stages of psychic development (Bassin, 1990; Golden, 1991) or a means to maintain the patriarchal system (Butler, 1990; Goldner, 1991). Each suggests that gender polarity is not essential and that the notion of gender be expanded.

Social constructionists discuss gender identity as created and re-created out of human interaction. Individuals are born sexed but not gendered, and they have to be taught to be masculine and feminine (Lober, 1994). As Simone de Beauvoir said: "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman…; it is civilization as a whole that produces this

creature…which is described as feminine" (1952, p. 267). Lorber talks about the many components that make up gender as both social institution and as an individual status. One of the components for the individual is his or her gendered marital and procreative status defined as "the fulfillment or non-fulfillment of allowed or disallowed mating, impregnation, childbearing and kinship roles" (Ibid., p. 31).

Middle-aged women without children do not fulfill the prescribed life goal of bearing children within a culture that supports an ideology of gender that specifies women's nature as sexually reproductive (Hird and Abschoff, 2000). The narratives of the women in this study may shed light on the ways in which individuals negotiate their gender identities when they find their lives challenge the accepted gender ideology.

Research on Women who do not have Children

Much of the research that has been done on women who do not have children (Ireland, 1993; Houseknecht, 1982, 1987; Veevers, 1971, 1973, 1979; Daniluk, 1999, 2001; Lisle, 1996; Safer, 1996; Vissing, 2002) explicitly addresses the cultural context in which we live as it affects attitudes towards women who do not have children as well as their possible responses to not having children. The cultural context is described as "pronatalist,"[8] one which promotes motherhood as women's destiny and primary justification in life (Rich, 1977). A brief outline of the social and historical view of women in this country is presented to better understand this context which is integral to the research findings on women who do not have children.

[8] Pronatalism loosely means, "any attitude or policy that is 'pro-birth', that encourages reproduction, that exalts the role of parenthood" (Peck and Senderowitz, 1974).

Cultural Context

Despite the growing numbers of women without children as well as the decrease in birth rates since the 1950's[9], femininity continues to be equated with motherhood in Western society. As Lisle says, "… femininity and motherhood have been entwined since the Garden of Eden" (1996, p. 168). This link is still reinforced by most traditional religions in this country and throughout the world. The Catholic church sanctions only heterosexual marriages in which couples intend to reproduce; some Eastern religions encourage men to take on more than one wife when their first wife cannot produce a son; the traditional Jewish faith believes that producing children is women's highest achievement (Daniluk, 1999). In ancient Hebrew mythology, "children were a blessing and childlessness a curse" (Kestenberg, 1968, p. 490). Throughout the Old Testament, the theme of infertility as a blow of fate or punishment for sins recurs while the birth of a child is seen as the greatest miracle and the sign of the Lord's mercy (Remmenick, 2000). In this country, the fundamentalist Christians continue to push to restrict women's reproductive rights and freedoms by lobbying for an end to abortion, birth control, and a return of women to the home. Within most cultures, motherhood is exalted, whereas barrenness is a source of shame (Vissing, 2002).

Hird & Abshoff (2000) draw our attention to the way in which the concept of family and childhood differed in this country prior to the nineteenth century from our current Western notion. Families were made up of a variety of kin and non-kin relations.

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[9] Fertility rates had been dropping in this country since the turn of the twentieth century. The fertility rate dropped to 1.7 children per woman of childrearing age in 1976, "continuing a historical trend toward smaller families that had been briefly reversed in the 1950s" (Lisle, 1996, p. 23). The 1950s represented an anomaly as educated women were having larger families than the past few generations (3.7 children each by 1957) (Ibid.).

"The term 'family' applied to kinship relations based on blood and marriage and any assemblage of co-residents, including non-kin relations such as servants, orphans, apprentices, and other dependent persons" (Ibid., p. 349). Sexual reproduction's purpose was to increase the likelihood of a family's survival and produce suitable heirs, and had much less to do with the "modern desire to experience parenthood" (Ibid.). Childhood was not understood as an extended period of innocence that required parental nurturance. Women, therefore, were not expected to devote their energies to parenting in the way the modern "Cult of True Womanhood" (Vissing, 2002) demands.

This ideology emerged out of the industrial revolution. Families' economic survival no longer depended on women's and children's contribution. The site of production moved out of the home and into the factory. Thus, women, no longer participants in the chain of production, were to "derive total fulfillment from complete devotion to their children and husbands…. In the 19th century, fertility dropped by half, to 3.5 children per woman as women increasingly focused their identities on the quality of motherhood, not the quantity of children born" (Ibid., p.10). In 1914, the US Congress passed a joint resolution making the second Sunday in May Mother's Day proclaiming "the American mother as 'the greatest source of the country's strength and inspiration' and lauded her labor as 'doing much for the home, for moral uplift, and religion, hence much for good government and humanity'" (Ibid., p.11).

The history of motherhood in this country reflects how conditions of childbearing and economics go hand in hand. During the Great Depression, women were encouraged to stay at home whereas during World War II, gender discrimination was lifted and women were encouraged to work outside the home. Reintroduced in the 1950's, the

baby-boom era, women again stayed at home. Consumerism, materialism, and the family became the American way. "Girls learned that motherhood was natural and inevitable-until the 1960's" (Ibid., p.13). In the 1960's, the civil rights movement and women's rights movement occurred side by side. Motherhood was viewed as responsible for keeping women subservient. As it became harder for certain families to maintain their standard of living on one paycheck, motherhood no longer solely defined women's lives. In the 1980's, they entered the workforce in larger numbers than ever before. It is important to remember that reproductive choice and the choice to work are relative concepts. "The economic and personal survival of women of certain ethnic groups and socioeconomic classes is contingent upon the ability to produce children" (Daniluk, 1999, p. 80) and to find work. For these women, forgoing motherhood and/or work has serious implications for their welfare and well-being.

The idea of motherhood as a vocation has emerged as the result of the interaction between religious, economic and political trends in this country. Today, with the increasing availability of jobs open to women, opportunities for career advancement, and the costs of raising children, having children has emerged as a "choice" for women and men. Nonetheless, this "choice" is exercised against the backdrop of a pronatalist society. Also, women as daughters of mothers make this choice concerning motherhood influenced by the mother-daughter bond (Chodorow, 1978; Safer, 1996).

Research Findings

Women arrive in middle age without children because of infertility[10], delay, or a deliberate choice to remain childless. Much of the research on women without children assumes that women in each of these categories are similar to the women in other categories, and therefore does not draw distinctions between them. Some researchers (Houseknecht, 1979; Veevers, 1980; Ireland, 1993; Vissing, 2002) have chosen to divide women into categories based on their paths to childlessness. Houseknecht (1979) and Veevers (1980) divide voluntarily childless women into two categories "early articulators" and "postponers". Early articulators are women who decide to remain childless relatively early in life, before marriage and age 30, whereas postponers are women who did not decide until after they had married and developed a preferred life style that did not include children.

Vissing (2002) refers to involuntarily and voluntarily childless women and to "those who subconsciously decided not to have a child, or who let life situations dictate their choices" (p. 129). Finally, Ireland (1993) identifies women who are childless by choice as "transformative", those childless by chance or delay as "transitional" and those who are childless by infertility, she designates as "traditional" women. Houseknecht's postponers fall into Ireland's transformative category whereas Vissing's third category corresponds more closely to Ireland's transitional woman. These categories did not figure in my choice of participants as my emphasis in designing the study was on the experience of middle age of women without children. Nonetheless, these distinctions did

[10] The inability to achieve pregnancy after a year of regular sexual relations without the use of contraception, or to carry a pregnancy to live birth is the standard definition of infertility (Merck Manual, 1992). Miall (1986) believes that "the essential component in defining a person as involuntarily childless is not their biological status as fertile or infertile, but their psychological preference to procreate and their inability in present circumstances to do so" (p. 269).

inform my analysis and findings, as the study's participants' road to childlessness appears to be a factor in their experience of middle age.

The inconsistencies in the definitions of the categories of childlessness make comparison across studies more difficult. Another methodological difficulty with the research is that many of the studies are characterized by a sampling selection limited to married, highly educated, Caucasian-American women. This means that many women who do not have children and deal with the task of developing a satisfying adult female identity apart from motherhood are left out of the discourse. Ireland's (1993) and less so Vissing's (2002) studies are exceptions to this. Vissing does not present specific data on her subjects' ethnicity and marital status, though she observes that "all major racial and religious groups were represented, as well as some women who were extremely wealthy and some who were not" (Ibid., p. 242). Their ages ranged from 40 to 60. In contrast, 25% of Ireland's sample was women of color; their ages ranged from 38 to 50; forty-four percent were single, and 53% were "professional."

Despite these methodological differences, the following are some of the findings from these studies. No difference was found in terms of level of psychological disturbance between women without children and women with children. Women who have chosen not to have children have been found to value personal freedom, autonomy and are achievement-oriented (Houseknecht, 1987; Ireland, 1993; Vissing, 2002). As Houseknecht (1979) observes, achievement-oriented behavior and emotional independence are traditionally unfeminine characteristics. Ireland administered the Bem Sex Role Inventory to her subjects prior to the interview. The results for the entire sample did not support prior findings of a nontraditional sex-role orientation in women

without children. Yet, when the sample was stratified into the three groups of choice, delay and infertility, significant findings were found. The transformative women (choice) more frequently exhibited a masculine or undifferentiated sex role; those whom she categorized as transitional (delay) an androgynous orientation, and the infertile or traditional women exhibited a feminine sex role more often than did either of the other two groups. Once again, these distinctions did not inform the design of this study. Nonetheless, as the women in this study discuss their lives, particularly their feelings about children and their work, echoes of these findings can be heard.

In terms of the reasons women may choose not to become mothers, the research found that the three most frequent reasons are: more mobility and greater freedom to pursue other interests, more satisfactory marital relationship, and career considerations (Houseknecht, 1987). Also the quality of the primary relationship among voluntarily childless women appears different from married women with children. Childless couples have been found to report more couple interaction, higher marital adjustment and satisfaction, and less traditional sex-role behavior (Houseknecht, 1979; Campbell, 1983).

In terms of the family backgrounds of voluntarily childless women, the most frequent finding has been of low family warmth; permissive parental authority and parental encouragement of independence and achievement are also common findings among the families of voluntarily childless women (Houseknecht, 1987). Despite the stereotype that voluntarily childless women come from "dysfunctional" families, Ireland (1993) found that only slightly less than 25% of the women she interviewed described families in which a parent was significantly impaired by emotional problems or alcoholism. She points out that there is a paradox inherent within the stereotype:

dysfunctional families produce many more adults who are parents than adults without children. Finally, Ireland notes that 40% of the women who are childless by choice (transformative) reported being the "parentified" child or caretaker in their families. She says this is a fairly common finding in research on families of voluntarily childless women. Noteworthy is Ireland's finding that 25% of the women childless by infertility (traditional) and by delay (transitional) also reported being the parental child. "Being a caretaker in her family of origin does not indicate that a woman will remain childless, although it may be a factor" (Ibid., p 168).

The research on infertile or involuntarily childless women has not focused as much on how they differ from women who are mothers perhaps because they are not as likely to be stigmatized or considered deviant (Ireland, 1993; Veevers, 1979; Safer, 1996; Miall, 1986). Rather this research has focused on the loss of female identity, grief and depression as well as the changed social interactions that have been described as sequela of the status of infertile (Daniluck, 1999; Remmenick, 2000; Olshansky, 1987; Meyers et al., 1995, Ireland, 1993).

This literature describes infertile women as going through predictable stages of loss and mourning of their absent child (Meyers et al., 1995; Remennick, 2000; Ulrich & Weatherall, 2000; Daniluk, 2001; Exley & Letherby, 2001; Gerrity, 2001; Kirkman, 2001). Not surprisingly, this process is similar to that described in the psychoanalytic literature (Frankiel, ed., 1994) on object loss even though the loss is not a visible one.

According to Engel (1961 [1994], "grief is the characteristic response to the loss of a valued object, be it a loved person, a cherished possession, … an ideal, a part of the body, etc." (p.10). The phases of grief include an initial phase of "shock and disbelief",

followed by "a stage of developing awareness of the loss" and then a "prolonged phase of restitution and recovery during which the work of mourning is carried on, the trauma of the loss is overcome, and a state of health and well-being is re-established" (Ibid., p.10-11). Vissing's (2002) description of the stages of emotional adjustment many of her subjects experienced includes a period of denial and disorganization, "the stage of grieving in which one may feel out of touch with reality" (Ibid., p.133), followed by a period characterized by "a range of volatile emotions, including depression, grief, and regret" (p.134). These stages are reminiscent of Engel's initial phases of grief and mourning. These applied to involuntarily childless women as well as some of the "deliberately childless ones" (Ibid., p.133).

Vissing (2002) observed that the women found it difficult to find a socially acceptable way to grieve their childlessness as it generally goes unrecognized by others because there is no obvious object to mourn. Perhaps because of this "disenfranchised grief"[11], the work of mourning childlessness is more difficult to conclude. Doka (1992) says that it is common for women who are childless to have occasional pangs of longing for a child. Meyers et al. (1995) suggest that this loss is an "ambiguous loss" (Burns, 1987) similar to that experienced by those families who have a member missing-in-action; the member is "psychologically" present while "physically absent" (p. 224). Resolution occurs when the woman is able to focus on the next stage of her life, either through adoption or a transition to non-parenthood (Meyers et al., 1995). This resolution involves acceptance, the final stage of grief according to Kubler-Ross (1969).

[11] When a loss is not acknowledged by others, it is known as disenfranchised grief (Doka, K., 1992, 1993).

Conclusion

In exploring middle-aged, childless women's understanding of themselves, I want to draw attention to their lived experience from their point of view. They are not the "quintessential female subject" (Bassin, Honey & Kaplan, 1994); in fact as I have already observed, their voices are particularly absent in psychoanalytic theorizing, cultural and historical discourse, and as Carolyn Heilbrun (1988) illustrates in fiction and autobiography.

Heilbrun states that it is through stories or "texts" that we come to know ourselves.

> What matters is that lives do not serve as models; only stories do that. And it is a hard thing to make up stories to live by. We can only retell and live by the stories we have read and heard. We live our lives through texts. They may be read, or chanted, or experienced electronically, or come to us, like the murmurings of our mothers, telling us what conventions demand. Whatever their form or medium, these stories have formed us all; they are what we must use to make new fictions, new narratives. (p. 37)

Lisle observes that few old wives' tales concern the female who defines herself outside of motherhood, and though she identified "intriguing and admirable women in history without children, their attitudes toward their childlessness were mostly unwritten or forgotten" (1996, p. 39). Like Heilbrun, Lisle comments that Catherine Sedgewick, a nineteenth century novelist who was single and childless, did not reflect the "reality of her life" in her last novel, "like many other narratives penned by women" (Ibid.).

> Through Freud's, Rank's, and Abraham's pioneer work on myth, we came to understand that myths, and in fact, all works of artistic creation, whether individual or societal, provide us with trial solutions to universal human dilemmas. The author or myth-maker gives us permission to make our fantasies public, without guilt or reproach (Frankiel, 1985, p. 419).

There are few if any extant stories, texts or myths about the lives of women who do not have children. Therefore, these women find themselves with the difficult task of "negotiating a serviceable autobiographical narrative" (Kirkman, 2001, p. 534) as their stories do not conform to what Bruner calls "canonical life narratives" (1987 as quoted by Kirkman, 2001).

Ireland (1993) would attribute the absence of stories, myths, fiction and autobiography about women without children to society's need to uphold complementary gender roles so as to deny the profound implications of the discontinuity of human experience. She, like Butler, Goldner, and Bassin, believes, that the gender polarity in society is an attempt to sustain an illusion of the "completely known self." Thus, the middle-aged woman who does not have children makes more visible the human challenge "of developing a more conscious adult identity by accepting, indeed, actively engaging with the absent (unconscious) parts of the self" (p. 144). Safer (1996) puts it another way, "women without children must face earlier and more directly than others the limits of their possibilities, the things left eternally undone" (p. 174).

The non-maternal feminine experience has been absent from our consciousness. This absence contributes significantly to women's struggle to affirm their choices, whether conscious or not, not to have children and impacts their sense of self and identity. Mid-life is a time that accentuates a person's identity evolution. Through the enterprise of exploring the narratives of middle-aged women without children, I hope to arrive at new possibilities (other than motherhood) for understanding female identity. Their experiences may augment our knowledge of development and the human experience. "Women who aren't mothers, absent in psychological theory but always

present in reality, lead us to expand our interpretations of female subjectivity and challenge our simplistic notions of gender and gender roles" (Ireland, 1993, p. 112).

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

"Women will starve in silence until new stories are created which confer on them the power of naming themselves." Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979)

Introduction

When I was casting about for a topic for my thesis, I received advice from various quarters. The message seemed to be that in order to get it done it was advisable to pick something narrow, to piggy back on someone else's project, to use that project's data, and above all, not to do something personal. I did not follow the advice. From the moment I chose to interview middle-aged women without children, I have wrestled with how to locate myself in this study.

Part of my ongoing process has been to acknowledge that I set out to interview these women hoping that they would help me to understand and articulate my own experience as a middle-aged woman without children. As I have been confronted with some participants' deep sadness and/or anger at not being able to conceive, lack of a partner, or death of a parent, I have had to acknowledge my own feelings of loss in middle-age. Consequently, I have come to understand that I as listener, co-constructer and interpreter of these stories, seek to determine if and how my participants share versions of the problems I have identified in myself (Krieger, 1985). I am also interested in discovering stories that vary from my experience or that reflect alternative routes yet have similar outcomes to what I have experienced. In this process, I have had to relinquish with great reluctance my wish to hear an unconflicted tale from a middle-aged woman. As Susan Krieger points out,

> The great danger of doing injustice to the reality of the 'other' does not come about through use of the self, but through lack of use of a full enough sense of self which, concomitantly, produces a stifled, artificial, limited, and unreal knowledge of others (Ibid, p. 320).

The interviews with these women and their narratives challenged me to connect with my own experience in ways I did not always anticipate.

Sampling and Recruitment of Participants

Because my intention was to conduct an investigation into how middle-aged women who do not have children organize their identities, yearnings and meanings in their lives, I chose to investigate a small sample of women. This choice was made so as to conduct lengthy, in-depth interviews and phrase by phrase analysis of the data towards building theory, rather than towards confirming existing hypotheses. In selecting the women for this study, I attempted to represent some of the heterogeneity in the population of middle-aged women who do not have children in terms of race and sexual orientation. This approach to selecting participants is referred to as purposeful sampling; it aims to represent some of the important dissimilar forms in the larger population (Patton, 1990; Weiss, 1994). The studies on middle-aged women and women without children have been done primarily on heterosexual, Caucasian women (Stewart & Ostrove, 1998; Rubin, 1979; Neugarten et al., 1968; Ireland, 1993). The trade-off between this approach and selecting a more homogeneous sample is that I have less data about any particular "type" of middle-aged woman without children and will not be able to say as much in depth about a "typical" middle-aged woman without children. Yet, it will maximize opportunities for comparative analysis as well as learning about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research (Patton, 1990). Though middle-aged women fall into various groupings based on their path to childlessness, I did not chose

interviewees based on this criterion as my interest lay in how women without children negotiate their identities in middle age.

Ten middle-class women ranging in age from 44 to 50 were asked to participate in the study. They were recruited through a personal and professional network using a snowball sampling technique. This form of recruitment uses referrals; a potential subject is asked for others like her or not, and they in turn are asked for referrals. The snowball sampling generated a pool of prospective participants. Each prospective participant's ethnicity and sexual identity had been identified by the woman who referred her. Each had also been contacted by the person making the referral to ascertain whether she might be interested in being interviewed. I selected a referral based on the demographic criteria I wanted at that point in the study. Then I contacted the potential participant by phone or email and asked whether she was interested in participating in the study. During the conversation, her age and her status in terms of children were ascertained. If the participant agreed to participate, a time for the interview was arranged at the convenience of the prospective participant. All were given the choice of setting for the interview. This decision was made to respect the wishes and convenience of the participants, as there was no financial incentive for participating in the interview. Five chose to be interviewed in my home, three at their homes, and two in a third location.

Description of Participants

At the end of this chapter, Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the participants in this study. Their ages range from 44 to 50 years old. Three of the women self-identified as Black women, one as Indian, and six as Caucasian. In terms of their sexual identities, seven of the ten women self-identified as heterosexual, although two of

these women did so with caveats. One of them said that she does not endorse the categories of lesbian and straight as she believes sexual identity is fluid. Therefore, she suggested that I ask participants with whom they are currently involved or were last involved. She volunteered that she is currently involved with a woman. The other woman who identified herself as heterosexual on the demographic form put a question mark after the word. During the interview, she spoke about having been involved with women as lovers when she was in her thirties. Currently she said she is "newly involved" with a man. Three of the women self-identified as lesbian. All of the women are college educated, and seven have advanced degrees.

At the time of the interviews, all were working as professionals in a variety of fields, health services, academia, business, the arts, government and not-for-profits. They identified themselves as middle-class, though a number of them had questions or comments about this category (socio-economic class). One woman, who is an academic and grew up in an upper class family, spoke about the complexity of the question as she considers herself culturally upper class because of her educational status and upbringing, yet from an economic point of view, she is lower middle class because academia pays so poorly. Several expressed uncertainty about what this classification system meant. In these cases, I asked them whether they thought of themselves as upper, middle or working class. Two identified themselves as being partnered, six identified as single, one as "newly involved" saying that she has just started dating a man whom she is excited about, and one identified herself as "pining" saying she has been involved for only a month. Though only two of the participants are currently in partnered relationships, five others described being in long-term committed relationships sometime in their twenties,

thirties and/or forties. Only three of the women said that they had been uninterested in or unable to sustain an intimate relationship with a partner over time.

Each woman when asked about her status vis a vis children said that she had neither had, adopted or raised a child. Three of the ten women had had abortions; one other had a miscarriage. When the women were asked about their reasons for remaining "childfree" up to this point, all of them asked me what was meant by the question. I explained that I was interested in whether it was for biological reasons, such as infertility or age, whether it was by choice, or whether there were other considerations such as not having a partner, for example. Five of the women could be classified as voluntarily childless, as having made a deliberate choice not to have children, and two of these might be considered "early articulators" (Houseknecht, 1979; Veevers, 1980). The remaining five could be classified as transitional women (Ireland, 1993) or as having made a subconscious choice to remain childless, though two of them might be classified as involuntarily childless according to Ireland (1993) and Vissing's (2002) definitions. These classifications as they apply to the women in this study will be analyzed in greater detail in the Discussion

Materials

The information on socio-economic class, relationship status, occupation, educational status, age and childbearing history was provided on a demographic questionnaire which I asked each participant to fill out prior to beginning the interview (see Appendix A for a copy of the Biodemographic Questionnaire). I also asked each participant to read and sign an informed consent (see Appendix B for a copy of the Participant Consent Form) prior to the interview. One woman, a journalist, added an

addendum in writing to the Consent Form indicating that her story is to be used only for "scholarly purposes" not for any "fictional purpose."

Finally, I developed a semi-structured interview (see Appendix C) specifically for this study. The interview is referred to as semi-structured because the interviewer can prompt for elaboration of important thematic material, as well as restate the question in different ways (Patton, 1990). The interview protocol consisted of a few general questions about the woman's perspective on herself at this time in her life, how this perspective may have changed over time, her thoughts about being middle-aged and without children, and how she experiences how others see her. Although each interview included a standard set of initial questions, follow-up questions were open-ended in order to capture the women's ways of describing their lives. I chose this format as I wanted to invite my co-participant to share in shaping and directing the interview. In this way, my hope was to create a space for narratives that did not force my subjects into traditional forms but rather reflected the complexity and unpredictable nature of their stories (Gergen, 1990). Gergen has challenged the narrative forms of developmental theory that have a "tendency to be linear, progressive, and sequential" (Ibid., p. 486) and believes that traditional forms of research have limited the nature of what has been heard.

When deciding what questions I wanted to ask the women whom I interviewed for this study, I struggled with when and how to raise the issue of childlessness. As I was and am interested in the way these women establish their identities at middle age, I did not want to convey an assumption about how important being without children might be to them in the way I asked my questions. As it turned out, I need not have been so concerned, as the way the women talked about their lives answered the question of what

role their not having children plays in their sense of themselves. For a few, it was front and center, for most it was not.

Interview Procedure

Each interview was tape recorded. To ensure confidentiality, each participant was assigned a number and that number was placed on the audiotape and on the written copy of the transcript. I transcribed five of the interviews and hired a transcriber to transcribe the other five. I felt it was important to be as faithful as possible in transcribing all that was actually said, including the "you know", "like", "um…well, so", indicating where there were pauses as well as interruptions and speaking that occurs at the same time. I believe these are all linguistically important clues to what is being said and not said. I gave the transcriber an instruction sheet on how to represent these types of verbal occurrences such that there would be consistency across the transcriptions. Patton (2002) recommends that the researcher transcribe some or all of her interviews to immerse herself in the data and consequently generate emergent insights. I listened at least once to the interviews I did not transcribe following along with the transcript. At times there were words that the transcriber was not able to make out (particularly mine) which I filled in or places that I edited based on my listening. Each woman was given the opportunity to listen to her interview on tape and indicate any portion she did not want included in the study. None of the women availed themselves of this offer.

Prior to the first meeting, I made arrangements with the prospective participant via telephone or internet about when and where to meet. As stated previously, the majority of the women preferred to meet in my home or their home. One woman requested we meet in a private office and another requested we meet in a café. After

these requests were granted, the prospective participant and I negotiated a time, and the prospective participant was informed that the interview would be audiotaped and was given the approximate duration of the interview.

The interviews lasted approximately 65 to 120 minutes with an average of about 95 minutes. There was a range because some of the women were much clearer in their answers, while others had some difficulty constructing a narrative about their lives. All but two fell within the 90-110 minute range. Of the two outliers, the shortest interview, which was 65 minutes long, was with a woman with whom I felt I had a difficult time connecting. She gave very concise, short answers and rarely elaborated on what she said. Interestingly, her interview includes a reasonable amount of information on topic. The other outlier, a woman who gave a very long interview, was long-winded and digressed at length on virtually every question. As a result, the interview does not yield as much cogent information about the topics discussed.

This leads to a related point. When coding the transcripts (which is discussed later in this chapter), my friend and I found that at times we were required to code long passages as participants were either not articulate and/or to the point. As a result, there are codes and categories that include fairly long passages of text. Generally, when choosing quotes for this study, I asked two questions, 1) does it succinctly illustrate the point, and 2) does it add or expand on the concept under discussion. If two or more women made the same basic point, I chose the more articulate and succinct quote. For example, five women talked about how not having children had given them the freedom to pursue their careers and other interests. Though I quoted only three of them, I included

all five when counting how many participants in the study mentioned "freedom" as an advantage to not having children.

At the start of the interview, the participant's confidentiality was emphasized, and she was asked to review the informed consent while I described its purpose. During the review, I reiterated the purpose of the study and reminded the participant that the interview would be audiotaped (with the tape stored securely and later destroyed) and that she could choose to discontinue her participation at any time during the process. If the woman gave her consent to participate, she signed the consent form and was given a copy. Following that, she completed the biodemographic questionnaire. After several minutes of "small talk" to develop rapport, I started with questions from the semi-structured interview. At the close of the interview, all the women were asked to debrief by providing feedback and thoughts regarding the interview process. None of them decided to withdraw from the study at any time during this process. One woman asked me to turn off the tape-recorder briefly during the interview as she wanted to discuss something "off the record."

Data Analysis

In order to make sense of the ten interviews, I sought help from other qualitative researchers. "While there is some consistency in the ways in which qualitative researchers collect interview data, there is little consistency in the ways in which they analyze it" (Way, 1998). As my goal is to provide what Clifford Geertz (1976) calls "thick description" conveying a sense of contextual information while permitting comparative assessment of experience, I decided to apply a categorizing strategy based on grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory

is a discovery-oriented methodology. It allows for the development of theory that is "grounded" in the interviews and researcher's memos, and guides the researcher to focus on the ways in which people make sense of and locate themselves in their own experiences. This method helped me to sort, categorize, thematize, and understand how the interviewees see and present themselves. It is a method unique among qualitative approaches in permitting themes and concepts to emerge from the data without imposing a pre-constructed framework (Patton, 2002).

The main objective of this strategy is to "fracture" (Strauss, 1987, p. 29) the data, in this case the women's narratives, and rearrange it into categories that facilitate the comparison of data within and between these categories. The primary categorizing strategy is coding. Strauss and Corbin (1998) describe coding as a process in which the data are broken down into discrete parts and concepts are identified. The concepts are given labels by the researcher which may be drawn from the words of the participants ("emic" or "in vivo" codes) thus representing their understanding of their world or may be developed inductively by the researcher informed by her experience of the phenomena being studied ("etic" or "open codes").

As coding proceeds, categories begin to emerge which capture how various codes may be related. This occurs through an empirical process of looking for similarities and differences among the codes as they are developed. Strauss and Corbin (1998) describe this as a process of constant comparison. For example, the codes of "mortality," "reality check," "surprise," and "shock" are conceptually similar as they refer to an awakening to a sense of time passing. Therefore these might be categorized under the heading of "time sense" (Mann, 1973). Coding and sorting by code creates a similarity-based ordering of

data that fractures the data. It replaces the original contiguity based order, in this case, the natural order of the interview (Maxwell, 1996). Coding categories may be drawn from existing theory, others are developed inductively by the researcher during the analysis, and still others are taken from the conceptual structure of the people studied (Maxwell, 1996). These categories represent phenomena, which Strauss and Corbin (1998) define as "repeated patterns of happenings, events or actions/interactions that represent what people do or say, alone or together, in response to the problems and situations in which they find themselves" (p. 130). In the above example, "time sense" which became "felt time-sense" (after further analysis of the ways the codes were related) is a phenomenon associated with a middle-aged state of mind.

Once categories of data have been created that symbolize the ways in which the codes are related, these categories may be linked through "relational statements" (Ibid, p. 145). These relational statements do not simply consist of a listing of themes but rather categories are organized around a central explanatory concept. To continue with the previous example, "felt time-sense" became one of two categories, the other being "changes in their bodies," which captured the way these women became aware of being middle-aged. This "awakening" is one of the states described by these women as part of being middle-aged. This process of integration and conceptualization is referred to as refining theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This method of analysis helped me describe and interpret what the women in my study had said, how they had said it and thus served to build theory, the central goal of this study.

Coding Process

One of my committee members suggested that coding the data with another person would enhance the reliability of the findings and therefore in all likelihood its validity as well. One of my friends, who received her Ph.D. in clinical psychology in June of 2004, agreed to work with me that spring. We had worked as co-investigators on a qualitative research project in 1995 as part of a requirement for a class. During that project, we became quite familiar with each other's working style as well as values in terms of qualitative research. In this instance, she would be a coder, not a co-investigator with me.

She knew generally about my study and had been very enthusiastic about the subject when she first learned of it a few years before. She is a 43 year old, straight, single, Caucasian woman without children and was extremely interested in having the opportunity to read the transcripts of these women's interviews. I spent our initial meeting describing the process I had gone through in finding the participants, interviewing them and transcribing the interviews. I gave her a transcript to read and suggested that when she was finished, we begin coding.

Before we started coding, I told her what I knew about the participant beyond what she may have learned from the interview, as well as about my experience and sense of her from the interview process. I was able to refresh my memory about most of the interviews as I had written memos of varying lengths about my impressions shortly after most of them. I also outlined for her some of the initial ways that I was thinking about these interviews based on my rough analysis of the data during the fall of 2003.

We spent approximately fifteen hours coding the first interview. She wrote the codes on her hard copy as I entered them on the computer using the Atlas.ti program (a software program that allows the user to code large bodies of textual data). We alternated reading a section out loud and then discussed what parts were worth coding and what codes to give them. This process involved constant negotiation between us of what was important, what about it was important, and how to capture succinctly the essence of that in as few words as possible.

Part of our process involved learning from each other about our different ways of hearing the material. She had been immersed in attachment theory because of the research she conducted for her dissertation. Therefore, she invariably was drawn to conjecturing about each participant's attachment style based on what the woman said about her relationship with her mother and the defenses she employed. These discussions were lively and added to the mutual picture we developed of each woman. I emphasized the participants' family system and socio-cultural context and focused on the participants' relationships with their caregivers in terms of the participants' gender identities.

Our differences surfaced at times during our analysis and interpretation of the data. In one instance, one of us insisted that the last sentence of a passage, "Who I am right now is a forty-seven year old woman without anyone and a video-maker," be left out as she felt it was harsh and judgmental. The other felt the woman was working hard to face and accept the reality of her life as it is. We agreed to leave it in after much discussion and examination of the assumptions underlying our points of view.

As this example illustrates, our relative differences strengthened the coding process as we were forced to examine our preconceptions, both personal and theoretical, and to explain ourselves to the other. We then had to bridge our differences to arrive at a consensus in terms of the codes and categories we chose. Though coding the data with my friend took far longer than it would have had I done it alone, it enriched my thinking about these women's lives and the analysis of the data. The process of two people thinking separately about the same material and coming to a consensus on its meaning leads to greater reliability of the data. I remain grateful for my friend's willingness to engage in this process with me.

Methodological Soundness

As with any qualitative research design, there are threats to the validity of the descriptive data, the interpretation of the data, the theory, and its generalizability to those in the study. Because I taped every interview and either transcribed my interviews or carefully reviewed those transcribed for me, there is little threat to descriptive validity in this study.

Two important threats to the validity of qualitative conclusions are the selection of data that fit the researcher's existing theory or preconceptions and the selection of data that stand out to the researcher (Maxwell, 1996). This is referred to as "researcher bias." As it is impossible to control for the values and expectations that I brought to this study, I tried to make my assumptions as explicit as possible. As my friend and I did all of the coding and much of the interpretation together, we formed a research community of two. As already addressed, our differences (age, sexual orientation, class, ethnicity) and similarities (both psychology Ph.D. candidates at the time and women without children)

facilitated our identification of the assumptions we brought to the study and forced us to constantly check ongoing interpretations with each other. I also worked within a dissertation support group before I began the coding process with my friend. This group of four clinical psychology graduate students and a faculty member provided feedback on my ongoing conceptualization of the study and on segments of the interviews which they listened to with me. Though none of these guarantee the validity of the interpretations presented in the following chapters, they helped make my assumptions explicit, which I believe leads to greater reliability and validity of the results.

The most serious threat to theoretical validity is not paying attention to discrepant data or not considering alternative explanations or understandings of the phenomena studied (Maxwell, 1996). The literature review as well as the diversity of the participants in the study made it virtually impossible for me to ignore discrepant data or alternative explanations to those I may have had before starting the study. Discussions with others, including my dissertation support group, my friend and the members of my Committee also helped broaden my perspective on the phenomena under investigation. Finally, though some of my findings can be generalized to the group of women, there were exceptions to these even among just ten women. These I have noted in the following two chapters as I discuss my findings.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics
(order: by interview date)

Women	Age	Race	Ethnicity Culture	Educ.	Profession	Partner Status	Sexual Orient.
Gabriela	44	Indian	Hindu Large City	Ph.D.	Professor	Partner	Lesbian
Rachel	50	Caucasian	Irish-Catholic NE City	M.A.	Manager Health Services	Partner	Lesbian
Beatriz	49	Caucasian	South Small town	B.A.	Actress	Single/ Divorce	Straight
Janice	47	Caucasian	N. Europe Lutheran Mid-West	M.A.	Screen writer Video/Film Freelance	Single/ Divorce	Straight
Laura	47	Caucasian	WASP NE Suburb	B.F.A.	Producer Corporate	Single	Straight
Briana	48	African American	South Small town	M.Ed.	Counselor Government	Single	Straight
Alicia	47	Caucasian	WASP NY Suburb	M.A.	Writer-HR Corporate	Single	Straight
Deirdre*	48	African American	Mid-West Small City	Ph.D.	Professor	Single/ Widow	Lesbian Straight
Lee	50	Caucasian	Mid-West Town	B.F.A.	Art Director Non-Profit	Single	Lesbian
Lisa*	50	African American	Mid-West City	Ph.D.	Professor Consultant	Single Dating	Straight Hx.: Bi

*Deirdre expressed dissatisfaction with having to categorize her sexuality. She wrote that she is straight but that she is currently seeing a woman. She said one ought to be categorized based on whom one is currently seeing. Lisa wrote "Straight (?)" as she has been involved with women and men but is currently dating a man.

CHAPTER 4

Results

The two primary areas explored in this study were the ways participants experienced their being middle-aged and their being women without children. The results presented are based on the ways these women spoke about themselves, the meanings they attached to their lives and their feelings about where they had arrived.

I have given each woman a pseudonym to facilitate the reader's making connections across categories by participant. To clarify which participants fall into which categories, I periodically have included summary tables to indicate which women have been counted in each category. As explained in the previous chapter, not every woman is quoted in each section even if she is included in the quantitative count for a particular category.

How Participants Conceptualize and Make Meaning of Being Middle-Aged

First, I will address these women's experience of middle age. After careful analysis of the narratives, I divided the ways in which participants spoke about the experience of being middle-aged into four major categories: 1) middle age awakening, 2) awareness of loss, 3) taking stock, and 4) acceptance. The first category, middle age awakening, encompasses the ways participants experienced a shift in their felt understanding of time, whether it was through a change in their bodies and/or recognizing the reality of time passing. The second category, awareness of loss, addresses the ways in which the women acknowledged actual loss or upcoming losses in their lives, such as the death of their parents or the idea of the loss of "infinite possibilities." The third category, taking stock, focuses on the ways participants assessed their lives by making

meaning of their pasts, talking about what they had learned, their relationships and their choices. The fourth category, acceptance, encompasses the ways the women conveyed their comfort and confidence or lack thereof in where they had arrived at this time in their lives.

It became clear early in the study that these categories are not mutually exclusive and the boundaries that divide them should be thought of as fluid. At times they overlap and/or weave in and out of each other. These categories were not necessarily experienced in linear fashion by all participants nor were they all evident in each participant's narrative. Parsing the text into categories, though, led to an understanding of how these ten women without children experience and make meaning of being middle-aged.

Middle Age Awakening

Two themes surfaced in the ways the participants spoke about themselves at this time in their lives. One theme involves their recognition of the reality of time, I call this 'felt time-sense.' The other includes statements in which the participants notice changes in their bodies or their body image. These two themes share a sense of awakening to middle age. For some of the women, the awakening is accompanied by a sense of surprise, even shock, for others despair. Though the affective valence varies, there is the shared recognition of a shift in their sense of themselves resulting from this awakening.

Recognition of the reality of time: Felt time-sense.

A recurrent theme in the participants' narratives was the sense that time had taken on a new dimension in their lives; it became central to the way they thought of and felt about themselves. Previously, it may not have played a defining role as they had been

less aware of its passing and of its impact on their lives. Time became a reality that these women were aware of and felt. Rachel explained it in this way:

> …something started to happen as I was approaching my forty-fifth birthday. I became more and more aware that I was not twenty-five or thirty or thirty-five, and in fact I was going to be forty-five, and there was something about turning that age, like just was shocking to me, because I hadn't somehow kept up with the fact that each year I was adding on another year to my life.

Realizing that she was not "young anymore" led Deirdre to experience time as if it were a commodity with a definite shelf life:

> So, I feel young, and I look in the mirror, and I say, "Oh, I'm not young anymore!" And I don't know …when I didn't get to be young anymore…. How, I wonder, when that happened? So I feel, like, I don't have time to be confused and waste time and mess around and just … it's enough already. So I feel very much a sense of urgency that it's, that it's not, I don't have long.[12]

Gabriela described her life at this time as one of "different kinds of transitions." The transition she emphasized was the recognition of her parents' mortality and by implication, her own:

> I think about this with all the family members who really give you a sense that there's something beyond you, between you and death in the world. And you can hate them, you cannot get on with them, you can despise them, you can love them, but there's still some sort of buffer between you and the world.… And when that generation begins to die off, it's like this real void. You're not safe in the same way you were anymore and so you have to negotiate being somebody else's version of that.

Gabriela communicates a deeply felt sense of the passage of time which she said marked the shift for her from being young to being middle-aged.

Janice, who had imagined she would be married and have children by the time of the interview, described how time had crept up on her. As in Deirdre's case, she conveys a sense of a foreshortened future:

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[12] The syntax has been altered by removing repetitive phrases such as 'you know'. This type of minor editing has been made in some of the quotes that follow in the interest of conciseness and readability.

> Because there's something about waking up on your forty-sixth birthday and going, wow, I really didn't get this the way I thought I was going to get it. And I don't think it happens on your forty-second. When you wake up on your forty-second birthday, it's like you're, OK, I've really got to get cracking here, or I'm not going to get it.

Alicia's awareness of the passage of time also related to her stated desire to have a child, something she feels she faced too late:

> And I think I was either 43 or 44, and I just said, "OK, that's it." I'm just not meant to be in a relationship. I can't keep expecting this to happen, and I just have to try and get pregnant on my own. And a smart woman would have had that understanding years, ten years, ten years ago.

Both Alicia and Janice left the matter of getting pregnant till later in their lives. Janice, divorced twice, is forty-seven and still wishes ardently to have a child with a partner. Alicia decided to try to get pregnant as a single woman with the help of medical intervention; it did not work. Their inability to conceive in their mid-forties signaled the necessity for a reevaluation of the direction of their lives. Though the affect attached to the meaning of the passage of time for these two women is more despairing than for the others, each participant engaged in a retrospective evaluation of her life related to awakening to the reality of time passing.

Changes in their bodies.

Another theme in the narratives was these women's shifting experience of themselves because of changes in their bodies. Whether precipitated by physical changes noticed by them and/or by others, age was the catalyst that led to a change in their self-image. Rachel spoke about noticing subtle changes in her body which signaled middle age to her:

> I went to bed at eleven, not because I was exhausted but because I had to get up the next morning. Then all of a sudden, I'd have a day when I felt tired, or I'd

> notice I had an ache, a pain, or my eyes.… Just more subtle things started to show up, but they were physical….

Similarly, Beatriz described acknowledging she needed reading glasses, a change for which she was not prepared nor one she embraced:

> Middle age, I'm not middle age. That's a joke. I have to say, recently, I've had to get those reading glasses so I could read that small tiny print…. And how many times have we gotten that check at the restaurant, and we were like this [stretches out her arms as if reading something at arms length]…. It trips you up where you don't even expect it.

When she first noticed the changes in her body that indicated she was perimenopausal, Lisa described it as a "bad second thought time," this despite her being someone who chose at various times in her life not to have children:

> Well, I think you know your first real hot flash, and your first sort of late, weird period where you realize your body is changing, and your options are closing.

Gabriela also spoke of being perimenopausal. She described how her mother began renegotiating their relationship when it became clear that Gabriela might not bear a child. As the only daughter, Gabriela was told to return the family jewelry and silver her mother had given her over the years or to promise to give it to her nieces when Gabriela dies. Gabriela explained that she comes from a culture where maternal wealth is passed down through the matrilineal line. As she has not yet reproduced, her standing as a worthy daughter is tenuous.

Laura talked about becoming aware of a change in her suitability for employment. She attributed her difficulty finding a job to her age, which she indirectly tied to a perceived change in her appearance:

> So they're not going … to invest in me now because I am too old…. So, if you were talking to a lawyer or someone in real estate, or finance, this would not be an issue. I am just in a very difficult field that is somewhat glamour oriented, and this is something I did not think about ten years ago.

She linked aging and physical appearance to a perceived diminution in her market-value.

The link between aging, physical appearance and value was made spontaneously by a few of the other participants as well. Alicia spoke explicitly about feeling and therefore being less attractive as she ages:

> I've totally lost my image of myself as an attractive person. I mean, I always relied on that when I was younger. And so I've lost that whole identity.

Deidre referred to being heavier than she has ever been and relates this disparagingly to being an older female:

> And I'm fat now, and I don't want to be this way because it looks too female. It looks too, like a chubby little lady, you know what I mean?

Beatriz explained that though she believes she is very attractive, she is no longer perceived as such because she is not fertile; she is "perimenopausal." She links a biological change due to aging to a loss of her ability to attract the opposite sex, which she ultimately equates with a loss of "voice."

> I can still stand on a street corner, and feel like a thin head [unattractive] when the egg bearing girl [younger, pre-menopausal] is standing next to me, and they [men] just gloss right over you. We are no longer egg bearing, we are dancing the dance out of attraction. Our voice doesn't count.

Beatriz's description of her internal experience echoes some of the other participants' references to middle age as a time when one's perceived value diminishes because of an aging body. This change in perceived value may lead to self-doubt as demonstrated by what Beatriz said next:

> Then you go home, look in the mirror, and you go, do I need a face lift, do I need to have my eyes done, do I need a … you're questioning everything about yourself.

Table 2
Middle Age Awakening

Felt time-sense	**Body changes**
Alicia	Alicia
Beatriz*	Beatriz
Deirdre	Deirdre
Gabriela	Gabriela
Janice	Janice*
	Laura
Lee*	Lee*
Lisa*	Lisa
Rachel	Rachel
8	**9**

*Indicates those women not quoted. (This notation is used in all summary tables in this chapter.)

Participants' Awareness of Loss

Another recurrent theme in the narratives was loss, which many of the participants referred to as central to a shift in their understanding of themselves. The experience of loss, whether of a parent or spouse, of a "dream" or "fantasy," or of their sense of immortality, led these women to consider the meaning of their lives within the context of these losses.

Death of loved ones.

Many of the women spoke of the death of family members as shifting their sense of themselves in relation to other generations and in relation to themselves. Gabriela spoke about the necessity of feeling the grief of her uncle's and grandmother's deaths ("two of my parents" who "died a long time ago") for moving on with her life:

> For me to really accept that I was really going into a different phase in my life, I needed to really feel the grief fully of their death. It's sort of close to feeling, allowing the grief that my parents are going to die to seep into me, and that's brutal grief.

Beatriz talked about the death of her father as signaling the end of being a "little girl" and the beginning of having to take care of herself:

> And that's a really pivotal point, …, I can't even say the word, of me having me take care of myself, was after he died…. Oh yes, sort of like a curtain hanging in the background. It was there, finally taken down and thrown away.

The deaths of her immediate family members led Rachel to feel present in her life in a way she previously had not:

> I've been at the deathbed of really the people who gave me life and shaped my life…. So you know there's no question that having lost people and being part of the dying process was very shaping for me about thinking about life, not just about death, but about how you live your life.

Like Rachel, Deirdre had lost most of her immediate family and her husband within the last ten years. These deaths presented an opportunity for her to assess the direction of her life as they released her from her care-taking role within her family:

> So for six years in the nineties, everybody died. So I just, you know, probably it was only until about 1999 that I can say, OK, well now I'm well enough to think about my life and what I am going to do… because I hadn't felt that I was ever free to do that.

Janice spoke of achieving a different understanding of her life in relation to her mother's suicide:

> And I haven't actually had a grown-up relation to her as someone who committed suicide till I've gotten a lot closer to the age that she was…. I feel like I have finally distanced myself from her suicide as the past, the reverberations, like a gong, I feel like the gong has come to rest.

Loss of "infinite possibilities."

The majority of the participants spoke of facing the reality that their lives were not as they had expected them to be. As three of the women acknowledged their loss of their dreams, they expressed pain, sadness, and at times despair. Alicia described the loss of her dreams:

> I put all my fertile years, all my sexual energy, my imagination, everything into writing and not pursuing real world relationships. And I just felt like, not that writing had betrayed me, but I've betrayed myself by… pursuing this dream that didn't work out. And then, I don't have this … I don't have a child or husband either. So I have nothing…. In the last couple of years … all my dreams have vanished. So I've been trying to gather myself.

Laura spoke similarly about realizing she had not achieved her dreams:

> Well, when you are an adolescent, you have great dreams of what you are going to do. I did not reach my dreams, I mean I might, you never know (laughs), but I did not get to where I was supposed to be…. I was supposed to be married, I was supposed to have a great job, and everything was supposed to be perfect.

Janice described what she wants as a fantasy, implying she was aware that the reality of her life is quite different. Her ambivalence about having children and being a mother was evident throughout the interview, and her pain was palpable as she cried when saying:

> Well, I still want to have children. I want to be a wife and a mother and an artist and support it with my screenwriting; I mean that's still my fantasy.

Rachel spoke about giving up the life she imagined having, a life that would have involved being smarter, traveling, and contributing to her community in a significant way. Unlike the former participants quoted, she transformed her loss into a new appreciation of what she has:

> I had an image that somehow I would be able to sidestep having an ordinary life, and being just kind of average or ordinary. Some of the integration, I think, is about really enjoying who I am and what I do have. And feeling… there's still something extraordinary to be found in what seems to be ordinary or average….

Gabriela described middle age, which she welcomes, as a narrowing of the opportunity set:

> I think I was balking, about several things, about actually having a relationship that I could say would take me into a future, about owning a house that would feel like a place where one could stay … about having assets which the house becomes…. Being okay about that is very much something for me that marks being young from being, sort of a shift into a kind of sense of middle age, which is fine.

Deirdre spoke generally about the meaning of being middle-aged as a loss of "infinite possibilities." She expressed in a conceptual way what each participant had described with specifics, that the passage of time augurs a loss of "possible selves:"

> …when you get to the point where you realize you're not, as one of my friends said the other day … "I always wanted to do a jackknife dive, and now I know that I'm not going to do one 'cause I'm too old, I can't do that." So when you realize that, there are not infinite possibilities anymore….

Table 3
Awareness of Loss

Death of loved-ones	**Loss of infinite possibilities**
Alicia*	Alicia
Beatriz	
Briana*	
Deirdre	Deirdre
Gabriela	Gabriela
Janice	Janice
	Laura
Lee*	Lisa*
Rachel	Rachel
8	**7**

Participants' Assessment of the Present: Taking Stock

As each participant engaged in evaluating her past, she spoke about what she had learned that related to being middle-aged. The majority felt that middle age gave them more clarity about themselves. Many spoke of feeling responsible for the choices they had made, a few did so explicitly. Noteworthy in their assessment of themselves was the strength many derived from significant relationships, whether with a parent, a therapist, friends or God.

Making meaning of the past.

As a way to explain their current understanding of themselves, the majority of the participants referred to aspects of their pasts. Most did so spontaneously; Deirdre was one of them. She situated herself within her family of origin and used an interpretive framework to explain the trajectory of her life:

> I had a father who was an alcoholic…. And I had a mother who was kind of emotionally distant from all of this, and two brothers that are much older ... and I … am the baby…. And when I was born, I was kind of born into this insanity, this craziness. They were already in the drama when I was born. So much of my life was spent running away from home, just plotting how to leave and how to get out of there.

Briana spontaneously referred to "that house I was raised in" (she grew up in a "poor" family with an alcoholic father, a mother who was unavailable, and siblings who picked on her for having lighter skin than they) as the crucible that forged the strength she draws on when she faces difficulties. She uses her faith to help her "understand why" her life is the way it is:

> Again my faith is that my life is exactly the way it's supposed to be, but I didn't understand why it was.… There was something in realizing that everything that happened from that house I was raised in had made me stronger. … even though it was painful … it was the only [thing] that could happen.

Lisa focused on how the women in her family had led lives that did not conform to the expectations of women of their time. One aunt was a working woman and lesbian, one was an independent widow. She understands part of her capacity to lead a non-conforming life to their presence in her life:

> I guess it's fair to say that I had these amazing women in my family. So that for all the pressure to conform and to do it a certain way. And then there's my grandmother who married at 12.… I mean my family background provided a kind of counter weight to all of this pressure to do it one way; there were lots of women doing it other ways.

Lee invoked the image of Nancy Drew, the "independent" woman, as informing who she is today, a single woman who supports herself doing work that she enjoys and where she is the boss:

> … just being independent, on my own, having a place of my own, I've loved that. I can remember as a teenager reading Nancy Drew (laughs), and I loved those books,…. She has her own clothes, she has her own place, she's out there…. I didn't have incredible aspirations, but that was the image that I wanted to be, someone who is independent. It must have been pretty ingrained ….

In response to one of my questions, Alicia used a cost-benefit analysis as a way of evaluating her choices and linked them to her mother's choices:

> Well, it [not having children] gives me more free time, of course, to indulge my imagination.… I paid quite a huge price for my freedom. But it seems that's something that I have needed because I saw how burdened my mother was.

Janice used her understanding of her mother's suicide as the "original rejection" to interpret her behavior in relationships and at work:

> …it was in that class that this teacher pointed out to me the rejection of my mother. …this isn't even that important, but in terms of the psychological, that I had been creating situations of rejection rather than acknowledging that that was the original rejection. …like Hollywood did not technically reject me, I had to slam the door on that…, the same with men.

Though Laura resisted my questions about her past, giving short, general answers, pausing for many seconds before answering, and often asking me to clarify what I meant, she conveyed her belief that her parents did an inadequate job of parenting her and her brother. She briefly alluded to her parents' inadequacies as an explanation for her not being married:

> It's just, I didn't get the skills, the interpersonal skills from my parents…. I'm not very good at it [relationship with another person]. So it has affected my whole life with men. I'm trying to improve on that.

She also spoke about her theory that "we [women of her generation] were supposed to go out and be equal with men:"

> …it [cohort effect] got us into trouble because women were encouraged to conquer the world. I think it had huge repercussions on me …. I was always creative, that was my thing, that was my claim to fame. So I decided to go with that full force, and it was fine, but I don't feel that I've been able to integrate that in my life correctly…. I don't know what to say, it is a combination of historical issues and of my own personal issues; that is what it is, really.

Lessons learned: Positive outcomes of middle age.

As part of reviewing their pasts, the majority of the participants talked, unprompted, about what they had learned in their lives, framing these lessons as positive outcomes of being middle-aged. They articulated a sense of achieving greater clarity about who they are. Rachel expressed it in this way:

> I think it's also forced me to really get more honest with myself and care about my needs. I think… that I was probably apt to pay as much or more attention to what the other person needed or wanted and usually much less for myself. And I feel there's probably more balance about that now.

Like Rachel, Gabriela spoke about a process of learning to respect and feel comfortable with what her needs are, an important one being her need to feel "safe":

> I think some of it is … really slowly learning to be more comfortable with my needs, and just, comfortable with my skin, and comfortable with what I require to feel safe which seems at odds with people dying.

Alicia talked about having to acknowledge that her dreams may not come true; giving up her dreams is the cost of seeing her life more clearly:

> I guess you always fantasize you're gonna meet some guy no matter how old you are. I guess, I don't know, there's just less you kid yourself about as you get older.

Beatriz spoke about how her many experiences have taught her not to feel afraid of life:

> You find yourself at a certain point in your life, I've done this, I've been there, I've been hurt by this, or I've been burned by this, or I've been uplifted by this, but it's all of a sudden, nothing has fear in it anymore.

Laura echoed this sentiment only her emphasis was on how her experiences have helped her in relationships and at work:

> In a nutshell …, I am no different than I was in my twenties and thirties physically, but I am a lot wiser and a lot clearer. I've figured out many more things so I am much better off than I was in my twenties and thirties.

The following statement made by Briana is similar to Laura's, and she addresses the issue of regret:

> When you talk about, the who I am [*sic*] today, I see myself changing all the time. … And I don't regret that I used my youth to learn about myself, and learn about life, and learn about me and relationships.

Deirdre spoke at length of her experience of the last years of her husband's life:

> What kind of experience in this life could really measure up to that and the incredible lessons that I learned from that and the fact that I had to be my best self? … It's wonderful to be in a situation where you have to be at the height of your prowess so you can see, well, this is who I am. And also I understand what it means to love someone now that I never would have understood if he hadn't been sick.

Lisa's comment about having arrived at this stage in her life conveys excitement about the possibilities for the future:

> I haven't done it in any of the sort of developmentally normal ways. And my respect and appreciation for that is increasing. … And now that I've given up the idea of trying to do it right, I have a lot more excitement and freedom about that.

Responsibility for choices made.

As the participants talked about how they thought their lives might have been different and considered who they have become, their statements about themselves in the present reflect a sense of how they may have contributed to whatever their life

circumstances are. Some, though, struggled with acknowledging and accepting the part they may have contributed. Alicia carefully considered whether she may be responsible for her being single:

> Maybe deep down, I don't want to be with anybody, and this is just accepting. I don't know. Because I mean, your average person is married. It's very normal to be married. It's less normal not to be married. It's almost like you have to work at it not to be married. I mean, I think it's a choice.

Janice who also wants to be married and have children is trying to accept responsibility for where she is in her life by meditating on the following:

> Sitting down and saying, this is who I am …, just accepting that this is where I am, this is who I am, that I have my relationship with, you know, people, with God, with my work, anything might still happen…. Who I am right now is a forty-seven year old woman without anyone and a video-maker.

Laura implied that the reason for her not being married is that she did not learn "the interpersonal skills" in her family needed for intimate relationships:

> … I am not single because I want to be single. I am single because I am. I have not had a very good track record with men, and I rejected men early on, and now I can't meet any men…. So being single is not by choice unfortunately, it's by experience.

Deirdre, who is in the midst of adjusting to being alone (her husband has died), is confronting for the first time the sense that her life is truly hers to live. She realizes that she is now only responsible for herself:

> So keeping this job is a lot about taking care … of myself. So I can't say, oh fuck it … I'm just gonna leave a tenured track, tenured job and go off and decide if I want to be a massage therapist. I don't think so.

Internalized strength.

The majority of these women mentioned the impact of significant others, whether of a parent, friend, therapist, or God, as giving them strength to move forward in their lives. In Briana's case, a relationship with God provided support during difficult times:

> When there are painful things that happen, my faith in the God of the universe who I know created me, this was intentionally, says, come on now, think about what you're made of, think about the things you've been through, and all of them have been to prepare you. And when I think of it that way, it makes the toughest stuff not so tough any more.

Lee referred to an optimism she has about life which she says is an "ingrained thing."

She associates this optimism with her dead father:

> I just feel like a little angel or something that looks over me. I really feel my father around every once in awhile, and he very much looked out for me.

Like Lee, Lisa talked about the love she has in her life, from her mother, friends and

partner as important in terms of sustaining her:

> …and I'm ah, I'm much loved. I have an amazing mother and amazing friends, and now this great man in my life.

Rachel referred to her therapist as the person who helped guide her back to herself

and discover that she is a source of strength:

> I think that I'd been searching all that time and searching outside myself for myself, and eventually, I think for a lot of reasons, you know, because I've had a great therapist for fifteen years, who I don't see anymore, who really helped guide me back to searching inside as much as outside.

Beatriz spoke about how she draws strength from her relationships with friends who have

died:

> What you do for another human being, for someone you love so much, and then they're gone, but they're not gone. There's [*sic*] at least five of my friends that are with me all the time. And every time I perform, I always dedicate my performance to them, and I know they are with me.

Gabriela talked about how her partner provides stability and a feeling of safety which

offsets the loss of the feeling of safety her parents and grandparents had provided.

Deirdre spoke of her special relationship with her father whom she felt close to

"emotionally" until she went to school and who then taught her what she needed to know to take care of herself in the world:

> And so my father, all the things that are wonderful about me, he did for me. He was wonderful till I was five years old. … I am a wonderfully generous and uh probably sexually very good because he knew I would be little so he made sure he was always very gentle with me, and that I wouldn't be afraid of men. He taught me to speak up and to have a sense of integrity. … He left me emotionally when I was five years old, he didn't ever leave me kind of intellectually….

Table 4
Taking Stock

Making meaning of past	**Lessons learned**	**Responsibility for choices-A struggle**	**Internalized strength**
Alicia	Alicia	Alicia	
Beatriz*	Beatriz		Beatriz
Briana	Briana		Briana
Deirdre	Deirdre	Deirdre	Deirdre
Gabriela*	Gabriela		Gabriela*
Janice		Janice	
Laura	Laura	Laura	
Lee	Lisa		Lee
Lisa			Lisa
Rachel*	Rachel		Rachel
10	**8**	**4**	**7**

Acceptance and Grace

Many of the participants expressed a sense of acceptance with whom they are and where they had arrived in their lives. Rachel, when talking about who she is, expressed a feeling of hope:

> When I say I feel good about myself, I feel good about where I am at fifty, and I'm also just conscious of the things that haven't happened for me. …I think it's just the way it is. I don't feel judgmental about it; I don't feel there's a good side or a bad side. I just feel like, you know, this is who I am at this point in my life.

Gabriela described her process which requires giving herself "grace," a prerequisite for learning about herself, which then leads to acceptance:

> It's absolutely about acceptance, but it's about learning and acceptance both, because the thing is, if you're not willing to accept, you can't learn in some ways. I think, OK, a lot of people think, you learn about yourself, and you accept what you learn. And I think actually, you don't learn about yourself unless you have some sense of almost grace to give yourself, and then you learn at the same time at which you're giving yourself that.

Lisa talked about letting go of judging her life against certain expectations:

> ...I was living my life, and my life didn't look like a template. And I wasn't really a credit to the race, and the key was to live, and to live fully, even though I wasn't on a predictable path.

Part of Lisa's acceptance involved the belief that though she is "the round peg" that does not fit into "the square hole," she has learned to appreciate who she is:

> I haven't done it in any sort of developmentally normal ways. And my respect and appreciation for that is increasing. I'm an odd duck, and I always have been. And now that I've given up this idea of trying to do it right, I have a lot more excitement and freedom about that.

Lee's acceptance of herself was communicated in a simple and straightforward way:

> I'm a late bloomer (laughs), but I think I'm, you know, I feel good where I am right now, and I feel I'm exactly where I am, I don't feel uncomfortable, I feel I'm where I'm supposed to be.

Interestingly, as Lisa had done, she spontaneously offered that she viewed herself and was viewed as different from an early age on; she uses the term "singular" at one point to describe herself and said that her family viewed her as "different:"

> They all look at me as… something different. I was brought up equally with my brothers… and then I guess I was just a little different. I was not ever pressured to do girly things.

Beatriz described herself as experiencing a "rebirth in the last year" and as having "confidence" she has not had for a long time. She conveyed a sense of contentment about where she is in her life:

> I think that you reach a certain point in relationships and things, where you see what you will allow and not allow anymore, and you grow up…. You just feel a peace inside yourself. You feel like you can control things.

She spontaneously referred to herself as a "different child," which she defined as "strong" in comparison to her three older siblings:

> …I always had different morals and a different sensibility [from her siblings]. I was a different child. And I had to hide a lot of that growing up.

In Briana's acceptance of herself at this time in her life, she conveyed excitement about having made it this far:

> Mostly I'm glad that I lived this long. I'm glad the things that were so important to me in my twenties and thirties and early forties that I have more perspective about. I feel excited too, to think that I may live to be 60 or 70 or 80 and be healthy because I feel I'm working with my life energy. …it's exciting to think about what it might be like to be older, even.

Briana too spontaneously described how she was different from her siblings, in that she was not as dark as they. They never let her forget it, calling her "yellow dog" and excluding her from their games. She said of them, "they sure didn't need me, and I learned not to need them."

Deirdre brought up her being the only Black person in all her classes through high school and of feeling "different" within the northeast Black community because she grew up in the Midwest. Briana and Deirdre spontaneously mentioned feeling different within their current communities. Briana is living and working in a small town in North Carolina, and Deirdre is teaching at a small, liberal arts college in a small, working class

city in the Northeast. Their capacity to live and work in these communities speaks to their personal strength as well as their tolerance for being different.

Unlike the previous women, Alicia and Janice still were struggling with how to come to terms with where they are in their lives. Janice was quite harsh about herself:

> I feel like I'm a failure. I feel like I got an F in adulthood, yeah, I got an F in relationships. I feel like I'm floating out there, … , this is not my phrase, but it's a great one, I'm out there, it's called dating on the burn ward.… We're all like burn victims…. We're all these walking scars and wounds….

Alicia, though recognizing that she should accept who she is, struggled to do so:

> I've avoided seeing people 'cause I don't want people who used to know me to see me like this. And then, after a while, you can't not see anybody. It's like you have to say, "OK, this is me, this is where I am." You know, the people who love you, of course love you anyway, but it's not really fun.

Table 5
Acceptance and Grace

Acceptance and grace	**Difference**
Alicia [not]	
Beatriz	Beatriz
Briana	Briana
Deirdre*	Deirdre
Gabriela	Gabriela*
Janice [not]	
Laura [not]*	
Lee	Lee
Lisa	Lisa
Rachel	
7	**6**

How Participants Describe and Understand Their Being Women without Children

The other area explored in this study was how participants describe and understand their being middle-aged women without children. For two of the women, Alicia and Janice, their not having children dominated their narratives. Janice brought a

pile of pictures of children to the interview and began the interview by introducing me to these children:

> So the thing I was going to say is that I didn't know if it would discount me, when I first got your message, I thought, well, I don't not have children, I just don't have my children with me. I'm like, I still have the hope and the dream that I can still have children even though I just turned forty-seven years old.

In answering the first interview question, Alicia spoke about what she did not have that she had wanted; she referred first to not being able to get pregnant.

For the remaining participants, not having children remained in the background during our discussions of being middle-aged. Six of the women only addressed the issue when I asked them about it directly. Two of them, Lee and Deirdre, brought it up spontaneously while talking about some aspect of being middle-aged. Deirdre in talking about her sense of urgency about time, started talking about the reasons she never wanted children; Lee in talking about her vision of the future said, "I wouldn't mind having a child around."

After a careful analysis of the narratives, I divided the ways the participants described and understood their experience as women without children into four major categories: 1) stated preference, 2) dynamics of the family of origin, 3) expressed feelings about children, and 4) stigma of childlessness. The first category, stated preference, categorizes the women according to their statements of why they do not have children at middle age.

The second category, dynamics of the family of origin, addresses the different ways in which the participants referred to their family of origin when speaking about not having had children. One of those ways is these women's identification with their mothers' disavowed self. A majority of the women also referred to the ways in which

they either took care of themselves, their siblings and/or their parents because their parents had been inadequate as care-takers. Three of the women spoke about being raised as if they were sons despite each of them having male siblings.

The third category refers to the ways in which these women spoke about the children in their lives. It also encompasses the drawbacks they perceived for having children and the reasons they believed others or they might have for wanting to have them. The fourth category, the stigma of childlessness, addresses the ways they spoke about how they were perceived as women without children.

Stated Preference

I classified the ten women in this study into two categories based on their statements about whether or not they wanted to have or raise children and their histories as they related to their stated preference. The first category, "childless by choice" (Ireland, 1993, p. 162), includes those women who actively have chosen not to have children over the course of their adulthoods and continue to choose not to. The other category, "I forgot to have kids" (in vivo code), includes the women who find themselves without children despite their stated desire to have them.

Childless by choice.

Five of the ten women in the study fall into this category. They assert that they chose not to have children multiple times during their adult lives. Three of the five had pregnancies which terminated, two had abortions in early adulthood, and one had a miscarriage. Four of the five women had been in or continue in long-term relationships.

Rachel said that in the past she and her partner had considered whether they wanted to adopt a child. At the time, however, she was diagnosed with cancer, and this

had diverted their attention. She said they again spoke about it recently as two of their close friends were considering adoption. They decided against it:

> I think not having children, it's not a really sad part of my life, but I recognize it as a missing part of my life, but it's not something I was ever driven to do. If it had happened and um, you know, if I had fallen upon it in some way, that would have been fine, but I don't feel like it was something that I felt really needed to happen for my life to feel fuller and completer.

Lisa brought up what she called "a second thought bad time" (entering peri-menopause) and how this made her rethink and reconsider her decision to remain childless. Like Rachel, she decided not to pursue having children:

> I wasn't interested in single parenting. And all around me, friends were making that decision. It wasn't of interest to me. It just felt, this is an interesting word, it felt desperate to me. It didn't feel creative, it didn't feel generative, the way my friends would describe it, in their experience, right. It didn't feel that way for me.

Lisa had had an abortion when she was in her early thirties:

> I had this long discussion with myself, and I decided that if this were the only child I would ever have, I wouldn't have it. That was the deal I cut with God.
>
> I was not willing to make the changes in my life that I would have to make. So I had an abortion. And I've never regretted not having that child.

Further along in the interview, she spoke about how her unconscious played a part in her decision not to have children. She said that in her late thirties, early forties, when she was interested in "family life," she had an affair with a married man which she knew would not go anywhere:

> But that was sort of my statement, I think, that I'm really not down for this [having a family] because there were other single, attractive, ardent, [men] and I didn't move in that direction.

As Lisa's experience illustrates, the decision not to have children is one a woman makes throughout her childbearing years, and even, at times, beyond.

Deirdre spoke about how her husband decided late in their relationship he wanted to have a child, but she did not; she said her "biological narcissism" was not great enough. She believed she would have convinced him to "get one from the store" if they had not learned he had AIDS; he died six years later:

> If I say, I have these fleeting moments where I feel like I'm missing some great emotional moment, you know, I probably wouldn't have any [children] if I were to do it again. Because the notion of having something that you have to take care of and clean up after and worry with, it's just not, I had too much of that. I just didn't want to do that.

Beatriz said she wanted children early on in her life but lost a child through a miscarriage and chose not to adopt. She was married three times:

> But I lost a child in my first marriage, and I never had children after that. And my older sister could never have children after she lost her first child. They have two adopted children. But I don't have any desire. I don't look back on that and mourn it or feel incomplete. Actually I'm sort of relieved.

She went on to say,

> I don't discount having children in my life in some way, shape or form, but I don't have a strong, passionate desire to have a child. That's past. That's really past.

Gabriela, who is involved in a long-term relationship, was clear from a young age on that she did not want children:

> So I was about five, and I realized that my parents were kind of hellish parents, I mean I knew that. And well, I don't know how I figured this out, whether somebody talked to me about it, or what it was, but I also understood that if you had hellish parents, you might be a hellish parent, and so at five, I remember coming down this winding staircase, …and thinking to myself, saying to myself actually, and saying it as a promise to myself that I would never have children because I didn't want to pass what my parents had done to me, and continue to do to me, along.

Despite her clarity, she talked about how her mother recently had been pressuring her to have a child. This led her to talk about how she felt about being perimenopausal:

> I really haven't done the psychological work fully to figure out whether I'm happy that it tells me it's the end of my childbearing or whether I'm sad it's the end of my childbearing. I mean I actually wouldn't have a problem, I think, adopting a child if I really wanted a child.

The circumstances under which these women made and are making their decisions not to have children are varied and occur at different and multiple times during their adult lives. During their interviews, they expressed little or no regret in retrospect about their decisions not to have children.

I forgot to have kids.

Five of the women in this study remain without children at middle age despite a stated desire to have or raise children. For some, being without children may be due to life circumstances, such as not having found a partner and not wanting to raise children as a single parent. For others, it may represent, as Lee put it, "a decision that was not a decision," or it may be some combination of the two, life circumstances and a subconscious or unconscious decision not to pursue having children. Of the five women, two, Janice and Lee, had been in long-term relationships where having children had been contemplated. All were single at the time of their interviews.

Laura, who had invested enormous energy in her second career, said she was "conflicted" when talking about whether she wanted or wants a child. Ambivalence and conflict are the hallmarks of this category. Her difficulty answering my questions about whether she continued to want children exemplifies her conflict:

> I think if I got pregnant now by mistake, I am so interested in that whole process of having a child, I probably would have it, but that's the only way I would have it, unless I was married with a very supportive guy, and there was a decent income. That's because I just really want it, it's not because it is the intelligent thing to do.

Janice who had always known she wanted children recognized she unconsciously had contributed to her being single and without children:

> And I think I sabotaged it, you know, I left plenty of guys I could have married in L.A. I could have married in my thirties. I married late, I married a man that I knew put his work ahead of our having children.

She conveyed a deep-seated conflict about having children:

> One of the things I did was spend a long time being with men who really didn't want to have children…. I mean I was terrified, I wanted it, I longed for it, and I was terrified, and it was very much a fantasy that I longed for….

She alluded to one of the reasons for her terror, her mother's suicide, which led her to view motherhood as potentially deadly:

> But there was a great deal of fear, and I've actually had to look at my fears about, my fear of, that I can't do it, that I'll just be destroyed.

Though she spoke about how friends of hers, "really talented women," have "disappeared into motherhood" and become "a parenthesis in the biographies of their husbands," her conflict between motherhood and her work was apparent:

> I just feel like I have a creative task that I am supposed to do that I couldn't do if I had children. It seems insane to me, you know…. All of this feels to me like it's deep, that I'm living this other version of my life that is not what I wanted to lead.

Like Janice, Alicia poured all of her energy into her life's work, writing and trying to have a novel published. In her early forties, when a novel she submitted for publication was rejected, she decided to try to get pregnant on her own. She went through one in-vitro fertilization when she was forty-three. It was unsuccessful. Her doctors discouraged her from pursuing any more fertility treatments because of her age and the financial burden it would represent:

> I always felt I would have kids. I always wanted to. You know, that to me was more important than the relationship. I mean I would advise my girlfriends about stuff like that, once I found out how hard it was to get pregnant….

Yet for Alicia, like Janice, there was evidence of her being conflicted about marriage and having a family which related to her view of her mother's life.

Briana was very clear she did not want to be a single parent though she would have had children had she met a man whom "I believed that I loved and believed that loved me:"

> I never thought, I never want to have children. I never, ever thought that 'cause I love children, and I always have. But I was very clear that I didn't want to have children by myself. I mean I respect children too much to be trying to figure life out and be a parent.

Lee, the last participant in this category, talked about how she and her partner considered having a child when she was in her early thirties. She said her partner was not interested, and Lee said she had other things she wanted to do at the time. She pointed out that she wanted a child but did not want to go through getting pregnant and the pregnancy:

> I mean not making a decision is a decision. So shelving… having a kid in my life, that's a decision that wasn't a decision. …I feel that it's OK, and something will work out, something, maybe there will be a kid in my life in some way or form.

For Janice and Alicia, the issue of not having children is still one with which they struggle. Both wept during the parts of the interview where they spoke of their desire to have children. Each of them appeared to be wrestling with how to understand their being women without children when they feel so strongly they want a family made up of at least a child. Briana, though she stated that she would not have a child without being in a good marriage, said that she did not feel capable of marriage until recently. She admitted that she was very good at running away from men by not staying with them.

Like Briana, Laura recognized she did not know how to be in a "healthy" relationship and had rejected men earlier in her life. Thus, she indirectly acknowledged

her part in not having a child. Her way of dealing with her sadness was to deny it existed; she invoked her mother's mantra, "don't focus on it," when talking about what she could not or did not have in her life.

Lee came closest to recognizing and expressing the powerful pulls in women's lives that may lead to "a decision that was not a decision" about children. For some of these women, this decision that was not a decision may turn into a decision to adopt or to be involved with a person with children. At the time of these interviews, though, these women's ambivalence remained.

Table 6
Stated Preference

Childless by choice	**I forgot to have kids**
	Alicia
Beatriz	
	Briana
Deirdre	
Gabriela	
	Janice
	Laura
	Lee
Lisa	
Rachel	
5	**5**

Dynamics of the Family of Origin

In discussing their families of origin, several recurrent themes surfaced. The first, identification with the mother's disavowed self, includes the ways in which participants spoke of their mothers' encouraging them to have a different life from theirs. The second, the parentified child, refers to participants' talking about themselves as caretakers of their parents, siblings, or of themselves as one or both of their parents were inadequate

as parents. The third, raised like a son, refers to three women who are clear about having been raised more like sons than daughters within their families.

Identification with mother's disavowed self.

As these women spoke about their family experience, the majority spoke, of their own accord, about their mothers' having given up actual careers or the wish for a career as part of having had a family. The participants mentioned their mothers' communicating to them either explicitly or implicitly that they should have a life other than that of being a mother, the lives their mothers gave up in having them.

Deirdre talked about how her mother gave up going back to school to study because of having her, "you know she wanted to teach kindergarten or wanted some kind of job, wanted to be someplace in the world." Deirdre, the youngest of three siblings and the only girl, said her mother "never socialized" her to have children:

> …because she didn't want me to be her. So she did an incredible thing by pushing me away from her. …she could not say consciously, don't have my life because this is not a life to have. But by pushing me away, unconsciously what she was saying is that, "don't have my life." You know what I mean? "Don't have children."

Deirdre became a college professor.

Janice talked about how she was her mother's "star" child, "I was her life for her and that didn't include having my own husband and children." Her mother wanted her to be a writer, and she became a successful script writer in Hollywood:

> I was, of the five kids, and of the four girls, I was very much given the mandate as the child by my mother that I was not supposed to just get married and have kids, that I was supposed to get straight A's. I was supposed to be high achieving. She really said, don't do what I did basically, don't get married right out of college and have babies, have a career, have your life.

Lee, whose mother worked outside the home, said she remembered her mother saying to her on different occasions that she, Lee, should not do what she had done:

> I do remember her saying to me, she would turn to me when I was a little girl, this must have been like deep 'cause she would say to me, "Don't get married!"… I didn't remember that until later on, you know, but she'd right in the middle of something, you know, and it was like a joke or laugh to her. But, you know, I heard her. In other words, she was saying, do what you want to do first, and do it later.

Alicia spoke about how her mother gave up having a career in the Foreign Service to marry her father. When she asked her mother why she had had six kids, her mother answered:

> Well, I was competing with your father. He was so busy getting degrees; I had to keep up with him. What else could I do?

Alicia's mother did not say, 'don't be like me,' nor, as was the case with the first two participants quoted, did she say that her mother's behavior "whispered this out loud." Rather, Alicia spoke about not being able to picture herself having a husband and kids "because to me that means servitude 'cause that's what my mother's life was like." She attributed her and most of her siblings' not having had children to her mother's example:

> I saw how burdened my mother was. My mother had six children and a domineering husband and consequently she has one grandchild out of all those kids. It's a family full of grown people who are not married with no kids. So there was some kind of message in our family that marriage is tough, and the responsibility of it, it just didn't look like anything any of us wanted to repeat.

Lisa in talking about her decision not to have children in her twenties referred to not wanting the life her mother had:

> This perfectly lovely man asked me to marry him. And inside, I think I saw my life yawn before me, living in a small house on the south side of Chicago, living essentially the life my mother had lived. And I just did, this is in retrospect, I think I panicked. I think some part of me said, I haven't lived yet.

She also referred to the example of her maternal aunts, all of whom did not have children:

> I think the hard thing to think about is the relationship of your parents and your own birth to your own decisions. That's really, that's really hard and shadowy, and murky. And none of my mother's sisters had children. I was the only granddaughter of a daughter.

Parentified child.

With Lisa's caveat in mind, that is to be wary of attributing a woman's decision to have or not to have children to her parents' decisions and lives, the next category addresses the ways these women spoke about their parents as care-takers. Specifically, it refers to a recurrent theme of their not having been adequately parented, of having had to take care of themselves, and, at times, of their siblings and parents.

Deirdre talked about how as a child, she tried not to be a problem because she was aware growing up that "the system could not stand one more person acting out." Consequently, she tried very hard to take care of her parents:

> …so there's a sense of me having to take care of him [her alcoholic father] and then having to take care of my mother, and then wanting my mother's attention but of course she was...too far away. So the only thing I could do is just be good so I wouldn't stress her as much as he stressed her.

She linked her having parented her parents as a child to not wanting children, "I took care of too many people as a child."

Janice said of her years growing up, "my [older] sister and I were kind of aware that we were the ones in charge of this family, that there was just chaos at home." She is referring to having a mother who suffered from depression and a father whom she described as ineffectual. She has an older brother and two younger sisters whom the family refers to as "the little girls:"

> I only recently realized that I vicariously poured an enormous amount of maternal energy into that void [after mother's suicide], taking [one of her younger sisters] to college, and being the grandma on call. It was years before I realized that not many people are, that I'm a very, very involved aunt. … It was just like there

> were no parents. My Dad has been useless in all this time. So anyway, I just feel like there's some connection there between my not having my own children.

Briana talked about having a special relationship with her father based on their being the outcasts of the family; he was an alcoholic, and she had lighter skin than her siblings. She always took care of her father when he came home drunk. Briana felt her mother had little time for her as she was always working. She expressed feeling alone as a child within her family:

> And I remember that day thinking, I gotta fend for myself. Because there were times when I needed her [her mother], and I couldn't go to her every time anymore.

Beatriz talked about being the one to whom her mother turned for advice and caretaking:

> I think when my mother dies, it's going to be very difficult for me. She's always been like my child. She's like my child. Where she's a mother to my sisters, who I said are older than me, she always asks my advice. What do you think? What do you think? And my sisters, she'd be telling them exactly, but she was always indecisive and insecure when it came to me. And she always wanted to know what I thought, and I would always have to have the last word.

Raised like a son.

Three of the participants said they were raised like sons. Deirdre talked about how her mother "gave" her to her father when she was born. He had wanted a daughter, and her mother had not wanted another child. Deirdre spoke about how her relationship with her father shifted when she was five years old:

> He [her father] left me emotionally when I was five years old. He didn't ever leave me intellectually and kind of in that, I was his son in that way we were. It wasn't the same kind of closeness because he was teaching me how to be in the world, and what I needed to do to be in the world.

She related her being raised like a son to not having been "socialized" to have children by either of her parents. She said that having a baby "would have femaled my body:"

> I think the thought of having a child, taking care of it, was more than I ever wanted to do. There was a piece of me that did not want, because I think I never really wanted to be female because my mother was the female.

Briana spoke about having had an especially close relationship with her father which she characterized as that of a son:

> And I say that when I was born, I was his son, I was his first son. And when my brother was born, I was his favorite son. So we always had a special relationship.

Janice referred to being raised like a son because of the expectations placed on her by her mother. She was pushed to be a success whereas her siblings' mediocre performance was accepted:

> I was raised, I realized many years later, much more like a son than a daughter.

Table 7
Family Dynamics

Identification with mother's disavowed self	**Parentified child**	**Raised like a son**
Alicia		
Beatriz*	Beatriz	
Briana*	Briana	Briana
Deirdre	Deirdre	Deirdre
	Gabriela*	
Janice	Janice	Janice
Laura*	Laura*	
Lee		
Lisa		
8	**6**	**3**

Expressed Feelings about Children

As participants spoke about their not having children, five spoke about having relationships with children towards whom they felt maternal. Three of the five also referred to their maternal feelings towards their students and another participant did so in relation to her clients. Five women talked about how important their creative work has

been to them. Most of the women talked about their reasons for not wanting children or about what they thought the drawbacks are of having children. Fewer spoke about the reasons they wanted children or mentioned the drawbacks of not having children. Also included in this section are the women's comments about how others perceive them as women without children.

Generativity.

The majority of the women mentioned children in their lives, students, or clients, in whom they have invested and whom they have affected. These comments were all made spontaneously in the context of their discussion of not having children.

Lisa talked about how her closest friends' two kids have met "a lot of my need around kids." She said about them, "If I had not had kids in my life at all, I think I would be a different person." Then she talked about her students:

> But when I think of kids, I mean I think a lot of two things: a lot of my sort of maternal stuff went to them [her closest friends' children] and went to my students at [names a university]. … But I think I put a lot of investment and nurturing and emotional ability and emotional availability when I started teaching.

As Deirdre talked about watching her students graduate, she spoke about how she felt she contributes to her students' lives in ways that are similar to that of parents:

> It's wonderful to remember them as freshmen and reminisce about how they came and the things they wanted. … I, as a teacher, know that you're ready to go. …and you're taking something from me, and I remember you said you wanted, you said these things, we've had these conversations, and now you're grown up.

She also mentioned she had been very involved in raising her neighbor's child:

> I have a very good friend whose husband left her and used to live next door to me. I was instrumental in raising her child. You know, I took care of him, and had been part of his life. … I enjoyed that because there I could always send him home.

After her partner and she decided not to adopt, Rachel said, "What we really needed to do was reinvest in all of the children of friends and nieces and nephews that are in our life." She also spoke about a close relationship she and her partner have had with one set of friends' children:

> I feel that our lives are rich in that way. They're not our own children, but they might as well be for the bond that is there. Then there are the friends who are thinking of adopting, writing us emails, calling us auntie. So I feel our lives will be full that way, and that will be fine.

Janice talked about a different aspect of parenting, providing a role model for the children in her life as an independent, creative woman:

> I really want a child, but if it's going to be just me, then I'll just be a super aunt. I've got five God children, about ninety nieces and nephews; I feel like an important part of a lot of the kids' lives, particularly the more creative and sensitive kids. I'm an important person for them to know that this is an option, to be a model.

Briana, a counselor, talked about giving to her clients in ways that she believes are parental or familial:

> I am a mother in so many ways; I am a mother in my work. I'm not just a mother, I'm a mother, I'm a friend, I'm a sister, I'm a brother, I'm a daddy. It allows us to be there, to help bring out, I guess to hold up the mirror in one way for clients, … to help them to tap into what they have that's flowery and smells good and feels good.

Gabriela, a professor, spoke about contributing to the lives of her nieces, her friend's child and her students:

> … I kind of have responsibility to another generation, whether it's my students or like [names a friend's child], who really likes me and [names her partner] or my nieces….

She explained what she meant about responsibility to the next generation in the following way:

> I really love my work, I really do. My intellectual work matters a lot to me. I know that I change my students' lives. I mean that, I know that very clearly.

Five women spoke about their creative work as being an integral part of how they express themselves in the world. One of them referred to her work as "giving birth," another as a "rebirth." Each of these four women is an artist albeit in different mediums. Laura talked about how important her creativity has always been to her and how it is the strength with which she has led throughout her life. She spoke about the career shift she made in her mid-thirties from dance and dance choreography to the field of design in TV:

> So I put all my energy…huge, huge amounts of energy into it. When most of my friends were raising babies, I was in edit studios trying to understand how to…. So I was giving birth that way.

Like Laura, Lee said that the consistent thread in her life has been her identity as an artist. She has painted and drawn ever since she was a child, and her work revolves around art:

> In my job, I'm an art director, and it's creative, in the way I get to decide how things look, but that's my age really. I mean I'm the one who gets to call the shots, and that's fun.

Beatriz, an actress who stopped acting when she was twenty to marry her childhood sweetheart, talked about her acting (which she took up again in her mid-thirties):

> I think I've had a rebirth in the last year. And I just feel new. And I'm drawing new things into my life. I'm writing more, and I'm performing more, and I have confidence I haven't had in years and years and years.
>
> I've started doing a higher vibration of work with people who I probably would have been working with anyway had I stayed in the business. I'm working with these fantastic actors and actresses.

Janice has cut back on her screenwriting to explore making her own movies where she splits the screen to tell stories in different ways, "multi-channel narrative work." Though she said she identifies as a craftsperson not an artist, she talked about herself as

"creative." Alicia described how she recently pulled out one of the stories she had written and realized there was something there. She has begun working on her writing again.

Advantages to not having children.

All of the participants mentioned either their reasons for not having children or the drawbacks to having children. Their reasons as well as their thoughts about the impact of having children came up spontaneously as they discussed their not having them. Four of them (Gabriela, Laura, Janice, and Alicia) mentioned the financial burden that children would represent. Gabriela discussed it in the context of being an academic and loving her intellectual work. She said she feels she would not be able to do both, be an academic and raise a child:

> And I don't think it has anything to do with, I want to be the perfect mother. I think it's as simple as you physically cannot survive. It's just not possible because you don't earn enough as an academic to be able to pay for decent childcare, it's expensive.

She believes that being an academic and doing "a decent job, one that really means that you're connected to your work…takes everything out of you."

Laura made a similar observation, that she could not have had the career she has, had she had children:

> I couldn't have gotten into the business I am in now if I had children. It requires so much time. … I was able to devote a lot of time that I would never have been able to devote if I had had a child.

In her case, having the time to invest in her work is an important reason for not having children. Briana also mentioned time as the reason she is able to pursue volunteer work and other interests that her colleagues with children cannot.

Laura indirectly mentioned another advantage to not having children; it would not be interesting enough:

> I thought I was pregnant in the last few years, and every time I was in that state, I was very nervous because it was going to be career or child, and the career life or a child, and I always wanted to have an interesting life.

There is an underlying assumption to both Gabriela's and Laura's statements, that having an interesting career/life and having children are mutually exclusive.

Deirdre put it somewhat differently:

> … having a child was not exciting enough, not enough to do. …. I'm not interested in cooking. I'm not interested in cleaning houses. I'm not interested in furnishing houses. I'm not interested in anything that's domestic.

In these women's minds, "interesting," "exciting," or "connected to your work" does not refer to a life with children.

Related to these reasons for not having children or perhaps underlying these is Janice's statement about the idea of having children:

> I was frantically writing because I kept … expecting any minute to get pregnant, and that my head would roll from my shoulders, and my career would stop like all my thoughts.

Decapitation is a heavy price to pay for having children. Embedded in this statement is Janice's sense that she would lose an integral part of her self, her thinking self, were she to have children. Beatriz's experience with her friends who have children captured a related idea, the loss of one's self:

> I look at some of my friends that I've known for years and years, and it's all about children. And I'm like, where are you?

Another advantage mentioned by five of the women, Janice, Lee, Deirdre, Rachel and Alicia to not having children is "freedom," freedom to choose to do whatever they want with their time. Janice said:

> See I can do things like fly off to Venice and see the Biennale, rush off to anthology film archives; I mean I have total freedom to do stuff like that, and I have no financial burdens.

Lee talked about the freedom not having children affords while recognizing that there is a tradeoff:

> I'm pretty sure I thought that way at one time, that it would be restrictive; I wouldn't be able to move as much, less freedom, and that was partly a less mature way of looking at it. I saw other people having children and saw that their lives were restricted, but, you know, opened up in different ways too, certainly I could see that too.

Alicia spoke of the freedom that not having children had afforded her, something that in retrospect she understood was a priority for her.

Deirdre addressed a different issue when she spoke about how having a child would have changed the quality of her marriage:

> … that would have put something between the relationship, between us, because I loved having this kind of companionship…. We would travel, and we would go do things like go to four movies on Christmas day, and just do things that I liked to do. And I don't think I would have wanted a little child there to take care of.

She felt that having a child would have interfered if not destroyed the companionship she cherished in her marriage. She also referred to having the freedom to do what she wants and the time, two of the advantages mentioned by other participants to not having children.

She and Lee talked about not wanting to go through pregnancy as one of their reasons for choosing not to have children. Deirdre said:

> So I think by having a baby, it would have femaled my body in a way that was too close to my mother.

Lee said:

> …I never wanted to have a child, maybe in my early thirties, that was when I was thinking about it. …the actual whole nine yards of conceiving and going through the pregnancy and all of that, not something that I wanted to do.

Reasons for having children.

Some of the women spoke about the reasons they thought people wanted children and the drawbacks they experienced in not having them. Beatriz talked about how not having children made it hard to maintain her friendships with women who do:

> I'm just sort of bruised sometimes when we plan evenings, and all of a sudden, so and so has to take their child to this room, and they forgot, or this one has.... So you just have to know to let them go off like little wisps to be picked up at another time. But it's hard having friends with children if you don't have children. Unless you're a blood relative, and the door is open any time, it's hard.

Two of the women, Deirdre and Lee, spoke about the role children play when people age. Deirdre talked about how children provide meaning in people's lives as they get older:

> That's what I'm trying to know, what the future is going to look like. I do have moments of this apropos of saying that I wish I had children. Not in any profound wish, but I understand now why people have children in a way that I wouldn't have understood when I was 30 years old. They have them so they will have something to do.

Deirdre also spoke about the sense of accomplishment parents may feel watching their children graduate from college:

> And the parents are there, and it must be like no other time to say, I've gotten them through. They can go into the world by themselves; I've done this job. It must be an incredible sense of accomplishment.

Lee referred to the possible companionship that grown children may offer as a person ages. She mentioned this in the context of her relationship with her mother:

> I mean it's not necessary that if you had a daughter or son that you would get to that age [her mother's age] and get along at all. It would be good to have a

> daughter or son who loves you and cares about you. Nobody wants to be that alone. There's something about family as opposed to friends that is very deep.

Janice spoke about the meaning children provide for people:

> There's no sense of a moral purpose to any of our lives, and I think that children, having children … provides that for people.

Laura talked about wishing she could have had a child in addition to her career for these reasons: it would have been a "healthy, life affirming thing" to do, "it is part of my whole personal growth" and "you need to be selfless for awhile in your life." Laura spoke of having a child as a biological mandate:

> …I have the career, I have gone through all of this, but I don't have the children. So the problem is women, there is that need to have a child, that it is biological, and that's something that women will never escape, that is the problem. … I've got my friends, my family, my niece and nephew, and I will be fine, but I will always have wanted to reproduce somehow, that's just the female thing.

She also spoke about having and raising children as a way to do it differently from her parents:

> I think it would be great to have a child so you can bring them up in the fashion that you think is correct. That is one reason that I would like to have a child, to prove all my theories.

Alicia said that having children is selfish:

> Everyone says it's so selfish to have a kid on your own. But it's selfish having kids anyway. It's just for pure enjoyment.

She also referred to narcissism as a reason for wanting her biological child:

> It [adoption] never appealed to me 'cause it was so much, I wanted it to be me, a reflection of me.

Janice offered a spontaneous interpretation of our era in talking about why people choose to have children:

> I have seen trophy babies. I mean I have seen people who have had babies because it looked good to have them, and they don't spend any time with them.

> There's definitely the status also. I'm sure you'll get this with people, real grown-ups have children. We are in an age where children are the last religion.

The stigma of childlessness.

The majority of the participants referred to ways that they believe others perceive them because they are middle-aged women without children. "Real grown-ups have children" and "children are the last religion" are comments on how those adults who do not have children are perceived; they are considered immature and their lives without purpose or meaning. Deirdre addressed the immaturity others attribute to her because she does not have children:

> Other people think that I'm so much of a child, that I never grew up enough to have a child.… So I'm too childish, poor baby, I wouldn't feed the child. … My development is so terribly arrested.

Laura's explanation for feeling that women without children are perceived as "a failure" reflects a Darwinian belief in natural selection:

> They frown on us. Maybe it's me projecting, but … there is something to be said in our society for fertility. I believe people look at couples and say, they can have a child, they're fertile, they can reproduce, they are strong. This is my current theory about married couples … survival of the fittest kind of thing. If you haven't done that, it means you are a failure in our society because we haven't participated in the reproductive system.

Beatriz spoke about a related issue, how politicians ignore women without children implying they have no value. She brought this up spontaneously at the end of our interview:

> That's why we are passed over in this society. That's why the George Bushes of the world will stand up on TV and say, you single women out there with children, you childbearing women out there with children, we're going to take care of you. Hello, knock, knock, knock. … My mouth was wide open when he said that, I wanted to call somebody, how dare they?

Lee commented that a woman who does not want children would be thought of negatively and also would think negatively of herself:

> There's something about saying that I don't want children that is so negative. I'm sure a lot of women feel that it's such a negative thing to say … and maybe a negative thing to feel.
>
> God, you don't like kitty cats, what's wrong with you? … It's that whole social thing; it's what we're [women] here for.

Lisa spoke about how people always assume she has grown children because they experience her as "warm and engaging" when she works as a facilitator at conferences:

> We've got these tremendous fantasies about mothers. …mothers are perceived as warm, and engaging, and caring, and all that stuff.
>
> So people make up stories in the absence of information. People will make up things to fit. So in some way, it's that template again. The template is kind of relentless, and absent the facts that people expect, they make up stories.

In this case, Lisa is saying that she must be a mother in other people's eyes, otherwise how could she be so warm, engaging and caring. In answer to my asking her whether there were other reasons for people's assumption that she is a mother, Lisa hypothesized that it may be because she is African-American:

> The scary possibility is [the assumption] that all Black women have children. Right? That's a scary thought.

This comment raises the issue of our culture's assumption that Black women must be both fertile and maternal (West, 1995; Wyatt, 1997). As Deirdre spoke about her brother's recent visit, she said something that has similar overtones, "This is very important. Now we have two people in a Black family with no children." She is implying that not having children is unusual within the Black community. Both she and her brother did not want children; her brother had a vasectomy soon after he married.

Briana and Deirdre commented that they believe others think they are lesbian because they do not have children. Deirdre put it this way:

> Other people think, well you're a lesbian so that's why you don't have children. That's not one that is spoken to my face.

It may only be coincidence, but Briana and Deirdre are Black. They were the only ones who mentioned that others assume they are lesbian because they do not have children.

Table 8
Expressed feelings about children

Generativity	**Advantages to not having children**	**Reasons for having children**	**Stigma of Childlessness**
Alicia	Alicia*	Alicia	Alicia*
Beatriz	Beatriz	Beatriz	Beatriz
Briana	Briana*		Briana
Deirdre	Deirdre	Deirdre	Deirdre
Gabriela	Gabriela		Gabriela*
Janice	Janice	Janice	Janice
Laura	Laura	Laura	Laura
Lee	Lee	Lee	Lee
Lisa	Lisa*		Lisa
Rachel	Rachel*		
10	**10**	**6**	**9**

CHAPTER V

Discussion

This study was designed to shed light on how middle-aged women without children establish their identities and make meaning in their lives. Thus, I investigated the ways in which ten middle-aged women without children grapple with existential concerns, such as purpose and loss, and how they understand the causes and effects of life events. I chose a small group of women without children (diverse in their ethnic, racial and sexual identities) between the ages of 44 and 50, as informants (a purposive sample) as I wanted to conduct in-depth interviews (semi-structured) to explore through narrative how they make meaning in their lives. Because the study's informants are middle-aged women who do not have children, listening to their voices may disrupt deeply held views of women and free women from the burden of being mothers.

How Participants Conceptualize and Make Meaning of being Middle-Aged

All of the participants in this study were posed questions that asked them to examine the implications of their being middle-aged women. In response, most of them described having experienced an awakening, a realization that they were middle-aged, either gradually as their bodies changed or possibilities narrowed, or more precipitously when not able to conceive or find a job. Many spoke of losses as part of their experience as middle-aged women. These losses varied, they may have been the death of loved ones, the loss of "possible selves" or of the fantasy of unlimited time.

As they spoke of being middle-aged, they also engaged in interpreting their pasts as a means of explaining their present lives. This included talking about what they had learned and what in their lives sustained them. For a few, the explanatory process

revolved around the issue of not having children, for most it did not. Whether it did or not, the majority conveyed a growing sense of responsibility for their lives and some level of acceptance of where they found themselves.

These women's experience of middle age delineated a process which many, though not all, traversed to arrive at a place of "grace" or acceptance of themselves. The states in the process they described, middle age awakening, awareness of loss, taking stock, and acceptance, were not always experienced in successive order, nor were all experienced by each participant, yet, in total, they appear to capture the nature of these women's lived experience.

Middle Age Awakening

In talking about their feelings about this time in their lives, almost all of the participants referred to a shift in their sense of time, precipitated either by physical changes they felt or noticed or by external events. Middle age has been characterized as a time of growing awareness of one's vulnerability and of one's mortality (Modell, 1989; Neugarten, 1968). These women's accounts highlight the embodied nature of this awareness, not just because of their references to specific changes in how they experienced themselves physically, but also because of a shift in their felt-sense of time. Time's advance was no longer just logged by changes in the calendar, rather it became a felt reality, "I felt like from twenty to forty-five, I lived in this la la land, where I didn't really think about age" (Rachel). It has psychic weight, it is alive, "I don't have time to be confused and waste … I don't have long" (Deirdre). Time was no longer an abstraction for these women, "I always wanted to do a jackknife dive, and now I know

I'm not going to do one" (Deirdre), or "we are dancing the dance out of attraction [as we get older, fewer men are attracted to us]" (Beatriz).

Awareness of Loss

Paradoxically, time's transformation from an inert, external entity to an internalized felt object appeared to occur because of these women's experiences of loss. Loss and its dominant overtone, mortality, breathed life into these women's sense of time. For some, the death of parents or loved-ones brought them face to face with their mortality. As Gabriela described it, "The deaths of two of my parents required me to go through the death, I guess of what Lacan would call the imaginary, the idealized, safe place…." Others talked about the loss of their "dreams" or "fantasies". Modell's (1989) description of middle age as "the loss of self-deceptive illusions and the confrontation with death" echoes these women's words. Deirdre's statement, "there are not infinite possibilities anymore," captures how acknowledging the narrowing of opportunities occurs side by side with the felt recognition of time's running out.

A capacity to endure loss appears to be a prerequisite for achieving a middle-aged state of mind. Modell (Ibid.) refers to "the renunciation of illusions and the acceptance of limitations" as that which identifies the middle-aged state of mind. Two of the study's women, Briana and Laura, did not convey a middle-aged state of mind as they did not appear to have internalized a felt-sense of time and its concurrent sense of loss. They seemed to vacillate between believing that the opportunity set remained unaltered and recognizing the possibility that it might have changed. Though Laura talked about not achieving her adolescent dream of the "perfect" life, she stated she had not changed physically and persisted in her belief that she could have a child. Perhaps the loss of the

possibility of bearing a child was too great for her to confront while searching for a job and finding that her age, for the first time, was working against her. Briana remained optimistic about meeting the man of her dreams despite continuing to live in a small community which had not embraced her because of being a single, professional Black woman without children.

Taking Stock

Bernice Neugarten (1968) described middle-aged people as experiencing a gradual change in their time perspective accompanied by heightened introspection, stock taking, and interiority. As the women in this study sought to describe themselves and their lives in the present, they turned to their pasts to convey an understanding of the events in their lives. Many did so spontaneously, offering an intelligible narrative as to how they had arrived where they are. For example, Lisa talked about the influences of her family, feminism, psychoanalysis and "exposure," and pointed to these to explicate the twists and turns her life had taken. Deirdre spoke at length about the family system from which she emerged, tracing its effect on her every decision. Briana's faith provided the framework within which she sought to understand her past, "the house I was raised in." Lee's identity as an artist and an independent woman functioned as an anchor in her life. Beatriz, Rachel and Gabriela spoke about how their families had influenced who they have become.

These seven women, to a greater or lesser degree, constructed narratives which allowed them to explicate to themselves and to me who they had become. Alicia's, Janice's and Laura's stories, however, were somewhat fragmented and required my questioning and probing to elicit their understanding of whom they had become. This

lack of clarity was most evident when they spoke about their families of origin in relation to their not having children and to the trajectory that their lives had taken. These women fell into the 'I forgot to have a child' category. Two of them, Alicia and Janice, were in the midst of mourning the loss of the possibility of their having a biological child. Laura remained conflicted about whether she would chose to have a child and as already mentioned, conveyed her belief that she could have one if she were to so decide. Her denial of the unlikelihood of conceiving at her age was remarkable[13].

One interpretation of the discontinuities in these women's narratives may be that they are in the midst of what Levinson (1996) calls "the mid-life transition," a time of crisis, intense questioning, and emotional upheaval. The "unfulfilled components" of their life structures, not being married and not having children, have taken on a central role. Each of these three women is exploring and negotiating her relationship to these current absences. Alicia appeared the furthest along. She tried IVF unsuccessfully and decided against adoption; she acknowledged her difficulty with intimacy and her avoidance of committed relationships with men, and she got her first professional job as a corporate writer to begin to pay down her debts. As she experienced the sadness of letting go of her dream of becoming a successful creative writer and a mother, she was beginning to search for a new "dream." Janice admitted that her hope of marrying and having a child was a fantasy but she was loathe to give it up. Yet she had embarked on mourning the loss of the life she wished for and was in the midst of restructuring her life. She recently had moved back to New York City from the west coast to pursue her interest in split screen film making and had cut back on her screenwriting; she was dating a new

[13] Very few women bear a fist child after age 44. Of those childless at age 45, less than 3 women out of a thousand have a first child (Morgan & Chen, 1992, p. 478).

man, and was considering adoption as a single woman. Though there continues to be considerable instability in her identity as a single woman without children, she is taking steps to move forward with her life while acknowledging the significant loss of not being a married mother.

Laura, as discussed, had only just begun to face what she does not have in her life (a husband and child) while experiencing the instability of being unemployed for the first time. These three women's experiences are consistent with Droege's (1982) finding that middle-aged women continue to experience instability into the period of Building an Entry Life Structure for Middle Adulthood. Droege attributes her finding to her sample of women not yet being in a position to evaluate their professional achievements. In this study, the attribution is based primarily on the three women's reproductive status and their stated desire for a child. Though there is some upheaval in their professional lives and identities, these three women are in a position to evaluate their work as they have been working women for over twenty years. Being a woman who 'forgot to have a child' may lead to emotional upheaval and instability in the mid-forties as this is when women are forced to recognize that they are unlikely to bear a biological child. It is important to note that the other seven women in this study conveyed a sense of increasing stability which is consistent with Levinson's findings (they will be discussed under 'Acceptance and Grace').

Another way of understanding these three women's distress is that it results from their not having met their and their culture's expectations for middle-aged women. In not having children a woman is both violating "unanimous family tradition" and resisting a clear if mostly "unvoiced consensus in society" (Clausen, 2002). These women have

internalized their (the American) culture's expectation that women are supposed to be mothers. As these women did not talk about choosing to be without a partner and children, they experience this "non-event" as traumatic (Rossi, 1980) as it violates their expectations of appropriate identity.

The ease or difficulty with which women integrate their identity as women without children may be related to whether they have chosen to be without children. It may also be related to whether or not they have ever been located at "the margins of social arrangements" (Mayo, C., 1982). Clara Mayo introduced the notion of 'positive' marginality, inviting psychologists to recognize the strength, critique, vibrancy and radical possibilities that lie and grow in the margins of social arrangements (Fine & Hall, 2003). The three women referred to above are heterosexual, Caucasian, and middle class. They, unlike the two other women classified as having 'forgotten to have children,' Briana and Lee, did not grow up with an experience of being different. They perhaps have not developed the strength nor the capacity to critique the cultural hegemony and to recognize the advantages that being on the margins may provide.

Four of the five women categorized as 'childless by choice' were also women who mentioned experiencing themselves as "different" from an early age on. Although some of these women mentioned difficulties they experienced with their identities as women without children, the "bad second thought time" for example, they each had achieved a level of acceptance and grace towards themselves and about their lives that involved taking responsibility for choices made. Each had spoken about deriving strength from their early relationships with one of their parents or a grandparent. It may be that the early internalization of a beneficent other helped them find their way through

the challenges of being other than the norm precisely because this other had supported them for who they were.

The fifth woman who is categorized as 'childless by choice,' Rachel, talked about how her therapist of fifteen years taught her to look inside herself for herself. Because of the way she spoke of the strength she derived from this relationship, she is categorized as having achieved a level of internalized strength as well. Murphy (1992) talks about treatment as a vehicle for reworking the historical as a way to help sculpt self and object representations that will better serve development in mid-life.

Alicia, Janice and Laura had difficulty accepting responsibility for the choices they had made that led them to be without children, though they recognized that their behavior may have contributed to their not being married and being without children. Alicia and Janice were actively grappling with how to think about what part they had played in the path their lives had taken; Alicia said, "you have to work at it not to be married," and Janice, "I think I sabotaged it, I left plenty of guys I could have married…." Laura recognized little contribution on her part, "So being single is not by choice unfortunately, it's by experience."

Interestingly, these women are the three who do not convey a sense of internalized strength. Internalized strength appeared only to have been achieved by those who struggled to find authentic choices for their lives, part of which involved acknowledging and mourning the losses in their lives. The capacity to do so seemed linked to having had someone early on in their lives on whom they could depend for love and emotional support. Janice's mother was depressed for much of Janice's childhood and adolescence and her father ineffectual and absent; Laura described her parents as

"unavailable" emotionally and her mother as exacting and punitive; from what Alicia says, one can infer that her mother was overwhelmed by six children and a demanding husband, who was somewhat self-involved and controlling.

Acceptance and Grace

The seven women, those not quoted in the section labeled 'Responsibility for their choices-a struggle,' have integrated a sense of having made choices that led to where they are in their lives. Modell (1989) talks about middle age as involving the acceptance of limitations. Jacques (1969) describes it as having a quality of resignation involving a balance of confidence with acknowledged imperfections. These women convey a level of acceptance which reflects the renunciation of illusions they may have had about their lives while taking on a level of responsibility for where they are. Rachel captured it in this way:

> So the joy of midlife for me is that I've already done my homework; I feel like there's been a lot of research that went into arriving at this point for me personally, and I do feel like it's paid off. I'm a happier person; I'm a more content person. I have my demons, but, you know, I'm less concerned about them or worried about them.

Perhaps these women were able to integrate the loss of illusions and embrace their lives because they carry others with them from whom they derive strength to face life's difficulties. Six of them also had integrated early on an identity as other; not having children did not locate them outside the norm for the first time.

For the ten women in this study, making meaning of their lives as middle-aged women without children revealed a developmental sequence that was generally iterative and recursive in nature. The first part of the sequence was described as an awakening to the reality of time's passing, which involved more than its intellectual recognition, time

became felt and internalized. It transformed itself from an inert, distal externality into a living, internalized and felt entity. It informed the way most of these women thought about their lives. Those who had wanted children felt time's presence when they first realized that they were no longer able to conceive. Some of those who did not want children felt time's passing when they first recognized they were perimenopausal. These are physical examples. There were also psychic ones, when some of them realized that there were no longer "infinite possibilities."

With the recognition of time's passing came a concurrent sense of loss, the loss of possible selves and the loss of a sense of immortality. These losses were precipitated by the deaths of parents and loved ones, by changes felt in their physical selves or noticed by others, by the loss of job opportunities or by the accumulation of experience. All the women in this study spoke of loss as they described their experience as middle-aged women. Some conveyed their feelings of loss and vulnerability with tears, others through the content of what was said, still others by what they did not say. "…the term *middle age* (sic) has for many of us a depressive cast, for these lost illusions need to be mourned" (Modell, 1989, p. 20). Two, as already mentioned, did not seem to have embarked on the process of mourning their losses. These losses may have precipitated the awakening, been concurrent with it or followed it.

St. Augustine called a person's present the memory of things past and the expectations of things to come (Mann, 1973, p.3). In answering my question about how they experienced themselves as middle-aged women, many of the participants spoke about their pasts as a way to explicate and to give meaning to their present lives. In most instances, their narratives referenced their families of origin without my asking about

these antecedents. Either their understanding of themselves was informed by their understanding of their place within their families of origin or their relationships with members of their families of origin were undergoing changes which they attributed to being middle-aged.

Gabriela described how the realization that her parents were going to die led her to learn to let them go:

> It's a really good thing psychically and psychologically because it meant I had to begin to actually construct a life for myself with them that didn't include them…. I put my parents in a place where they ought to have been, right, which is in a portion of my life rather than my whole life.

Though the other women may not have been as explicit about how the assumption of responsibility for their lives involved separating from their parents, all except Laura spoke of this process in some way. Janice referred to it when she spoke of understanding her mother's suicide as a rejection rather than as a call to fulfill her mother's wishes. Briana who described living in a small town in North Carolina where "racism was alive and well" indirectly talked about separating from her familial legacy as she started to explore alternatives other than living in the South.

Many of the women had worked through the mourning of lost illusions and conveyed a level of acceptance of themselves that included confidence, liberation and hope. Those who were still struggling, Janice, Alicia, Laura, and Deirdre were each at different places in the process. Laura appeared to move in and out of denial; Janice was fighting to reconcile her feelings about her mother's suicide with the fact she was not married and did not have children; Alicia was well on her way to integrating a view of herself as a competent, middle-aged woman who was alone and had to learn to provide for herself while mourning that which was not to be; Deirdre, though still in mourning for

her husband and the life that would have been had he not died, was beginning to consider what she wanted for herself going forward. Those who seemed to have successfully navigated the depressive aspects of awakening to the reality of time, the losses which come with that, and the psychic separation from their families of origin communicated a sense of energy and purpose about the future. Lisa put it this way, "I have artistic and religious sensibilities, and I'm still trying to figure out what I'm going to do with them; that's probably the next ten years. The next ten years is going to be art and God."

How Participants Describe and Understand Their being Women without Children

Each woman in this study talked about being a middle-aged woman without children. Many of them referred to not having children only when I asked them questions about it. A couple, Deirdre and Lee, brought it up seemingly unprompted though both referred to the study when they addressed it. Only two of the women, Alicia and Janice, focused their narratives almost entirely on this as a missing piece of their lives. One might hypothesize that not having children is not a central aspect of these women's identities at middle age, as eight of the ten women emphasized other aspects of the self at middle age.

It becomes important at this juncture to consider these ten women's understanding of how they arrived at middle age without children. Their understanding of the paths they traversed in arriving at middle age without children may be crucial to interpreting not only the importance of this issue in women's lives but also the part it may play in negotiating the middle years of their lives. In this study, I did not select the participants based on their stated preference for children or not as my emphasis was on their experience of middle age as women without children. Yet, the findings imply that a

woman's interpretation of her path to being without children at middle age may have a significant effect on how she traverses the developmental sequence outlined as the middle-aged process.

Stated Preference

Most women who will not have children will not know they will not have children until they are well into their childbearing years. Theoretical models that forecast rates of childlessness accept that it results from a series of decisions to postpone childbearing (Morgan & Chen, 1992). The narratives of the women in this study reflect the fact that remaining without children appears to be a decision that is made repeatedly and under different circumstances throughout these women's childbearing years. Therefore categorizing whether a woman arrives in middle age without children and remains so as either voluntary, involuntary or a matter of delay is a matter of interpretation on the part of the woman as well as the listener and interpreter of her story, the researcher in this case.

Five of the women in the study fell under the category of 'Childless by choice' and five under 'I forgot to have kids.' I did not categorize any of the women as being involuntarily childless though there are three, Alicia, Janice, and Beatriz whom researchers in the field (Ireland, 1993; Vissing, 2002) might well have classified as such.

Ireland (1993) defines women as traditional (involuntarily childless) who have tried to fulfill their identities as mother but have failed because they are "genetically" unable to conceive or because of the infertility of their mate. Each of the three women mentioned would have qualified as involuntarily childless based on this definition: Alicia was unable to get pregnant through in vitro fertilization, Janice's husband, whom she

subsequently divorced, had testicular cancer, and Beatriz had a miscarriage when she was in her early twenties. Vissing defines involuntarily childless women as those who expected to be mothers and had invested emotionally, financially and physically in making that dream come true, yet were unable to do so. Again all three might have been considered involuntarily childless under this definition, though their levels of investment in becoming mothers differed. Alicia and Janice focused on trying to conceive in their late thirties and early forties and Beatriz in her early twenties. I will address each of these three women's stories and the reasons for my alternative categorizations below.

Childless by choice.

Veevers (1979) who did research and wrote about voluntarily childless, married women in Canada states that the essential component in defining a woman as voluntarily childless is "not their biological status as fecund or sterile but their psychic preference not to procreate and their subsequent avoidance of the parenthood role" (1979, p. 4). In deciding how to categorize the women in this study, I followed Veevers' lead in looking at whether the woman had deliberately decided to forego parenthood, either biologically through procreation or socially through adoption, and had maintained a commitment to this decision as she moved through her adult years. Though Beatriz at one time had wanted a child, she had decided repeatedly, subsequent to her miscarriage, to forgo parenthood biologically or through adoption (she was married three times). Standing on the "shadowy side of 50" (a southern expression for being 49 years old), Beatriz expressed relief that she had not had a child and excitement about the level of work she was engaged in as an actress.

Beatriz did not communicate any regrets about not having had children; on the contrary, she emphasized the drawbacks of having children. She was incensed that she and others like her (women without children) are overlooked by policy makers, an observation of how our pronatalist culture marginalizes her. Her repeated decision not to have or adopt children through her childbearing years, her emphasis on the negatives of having children, and her strong identification with her actress self led me to classify her as childless by choice. Whether she might have conveyed this level of conviction and certainty if interviewed earlier in her life is an open question.

I raise this issue for a number of reasons, the first being that much of the research done exclusively on the voluntarily childless (Houseknecht, 1979; Veevers, 1980) has focused only on younger, married women[14]. The research done by Houseknecht (1979) on the voluntarily childless is based on subjects whose ages ranged from 25 to 40 years old with a mean age of 29.9 years old. As Morgan & Chen (1992) have pointed out, forecasters have discovered that women cannot accurately predict their future fertility behavior. Therefore research on the voluntarily childless done before they reach the end of their procreative years and the time when it is socially acceptable to adopt may not accurately reflect a woman's status vis a vis children nor her understanding of her path to childlessness.

Second, a woman's interpretation of how she arrived in middle age without children may be significantly affected by her upbringing within her family as well as the cultural context in which she grew up and currently finds herself. These are issues that I will discuss later but want to raise briefly here. My reasons for classifying Beatriz as

[14] Ireland's (1993) and Vissing's (2002) work includes women who are older and whom they classify as voluntarily childless as well as women who fall into other categories.

childless by choice reflect her capacity to resist the implicit social definition of herself and her life as marginal and lacking because she does not have children: her emphasis on the drawbacks of having children, her critique of the pronatalist culture ("the egg bearing girl"), her positive identity as a strong woman who has always been "different," her investment in her acting career. All of these contribute to a picture of a woman who believes she has exercised some choice in where she finds herself at middle age and in the attitude she adopts towards herself.

They also point to her strategy for dealing with what is considered somewhat deviant. (Childlessness will always be deviant at least in the sense that it is statistically unusual.) She resists the culturally dominant script that a woman's identity is defined by the prescriptions of the "maternal instinct." She acknowledges her difference, accepts it and frames it as a positive. In so doing, she is employing a strategy similar to strategies employed by other minorities, that of maintaining "deviant belief systems which will neutralize the disapproval of others" (Veevers, 1979, p. 18). As discussed earlier, the women in the study who grew up feeling "different" had internalized an other as loving and accepting and therefore appear capable of dealing with their marginal status as women without children. Four of the five women classified as 'childless by choice' (Gabriela, Lisa, Deirdre and Rachel) are also part of other minority groups, either lesbian, women of color or both. Therefore, they have experienced marginalization before and have had to learn techniques of resistance to maintain a positive sense of self.

Of the remaining four women, Gabriela and Deirdre could be defined as "early articulators" (Houseknecht, 1979; Veevers, 1980)[15], women who decide before the age of thirty that they do not want children. Yet, one of the findings of this study is that arriving

[15] As noted before, these studies were conducted with straight, married, White women as participants.

at middle age without children is a process that involves repeated decisions to remain without children for those women childless by choice. Both Gabriela and Deirdre were clear that they did not want children early on, Gabriela in childhood and Deirdre early in her adult years. Yet each of them talked about revisiting that decision, Gabriela because of the pressure she was receiving from her mother and Deirdre because of her husband's desire for children. If Deirdre's husband had not died, they might have adopted a child. Gabriela implied that it is unlikely she will comply with her mother's desires though she is revisiting her decision to remain childless in view of this familial pressure.

Rachel and Lisa talked about making the decision multiple times to remain without children during their adult years. Neither of them said that they had decided early on they did not want children. Rachel said she was never "driven" to having children, and Lisa spoke about decision points in her life which led to her remaining without children. All of the women in this category accepted their status as being different because of being women without children and framed it either in neutral or positive terms; like Beatriz, they may be viewed as resisters of the cultural prescription to become a mother, not because they do not have children but rather because of the attitude they have adopted towards this status.

I forgot to have kids.

The women in this category vary in terms of their acceptance and/or rejection of being different. The title of this category, an "emic" used by Lee, captures the ambivalence present in these women's narratives around the issue of progeny. Briana is the clearest about having wanted children but not having found the right mate. She also appears to be the most accepting of being a woman without children despite living in a

community (a small town in the south) that has not embraced her because of her differences; she is single, without children and Black. Her acceptance seems in large part due to her faith; she believes her life is "the only way it could be." The other four women in this category, Lee, Laura, Janice and Alicia, convey ambivalence about wanting children despite their stated preference for having them.

Their ambivalence coupled with their having postponed childbearing until it is seemingly too late are the reasons for including them in this category. In listening to their narratives, their stories belie their stated desire to have a child in their life.

Lee said that in her thirties, she and her partner considered having a child but each had something "better to do." Later she said she would like a child in her life, and said of not having one, that it was "a decision that was not a decision." Perhaps she is reticent to separate completely from her mother by embracing her childlessness; another interpretation may be that as a lesbian, she feels her femininity is more questionable particularly as she has not reproduced. Another possibility is that retrospectively, she wishes she had made different choices. Whatever the reasons, Lee's narrative contained mixed feelings about her being a middle-aged woman without children.

Laura is similar to Lee in espousing the cultural mandate that women are meant to have children. She explained her arriving in middle age without children as a result of always having put her career ahead of relationships, which she attributed to the influence of feminism on her and women her age. Despite the attribution of causation to contextual factors, she continued to express ambivalence about whether she would have a child if she were to get pregnant. Though their ambivalence is present in their narratives, Briana, Laura, and Lee reject the notion that they are different from other women; they say they

wanted children but the circumstances did not or have not presented themselves to make that a viable option.

Janice and Alicia, the remaining two in this category, stated emphatically that they wanted children and described going to great lengths to try to achieve that goal. Alicia tried in vitro fertilization when she was 43 and single; Janice married at 39 with the express purpose of having a child, she married a man who "put his career ahead of their having children." She divorced him after he was diagnosed with testicular cancer hoping to become pregnant with another man. Both women are consumed with sadness by their loss, the loss of their unborn child. Though these facts might lead one to categorize them as involuntarily childless, they delayed their attempts to have a child because of their conscious and unconscious conflicts around marrying and becoming mothers. Alicia turned to pregnancy as a fallback position when she failed to achieve her lifelong goal of publishing a novel. "And I said, well now that I can't write, you know, I have to focus on trying to get pregnant." Janice talked about her fears of failing as a mother, of her ambitions as a creative person, and of motherhood as symbolizing her death. "I've actually had to look at my fears about, my fear of, that I can't do it [mother], that I'll just be destroyed."

As was true of the other three women in this category, Alicia and Janice present themselves as being like other women. They wanted children. They did not have them because of life circumstances. Unlike the other three, however, they were mourning the loss of their role as mother as well as of their unborn child while examining the part they may have played in not having them.

Dynamics of the Family of Origin

Decisions to remain without children as well as to have children are inextricably related to early familial experiences.

> Every woman gets her notion of what a mother is from her experience with her own. The mother's personality, her relationship with her daughter, her marriage, and how she lives her life become the basis for the daughter of what it means to be a woman, on an unconscious as well as conscious level (Safer, 1996, p. 94).

Identification with mother's disavowed self.

For a majority of the women in this study, their mothers' explicit or implicit message to them was to postpone marriage and children, to do what they had not done, to have a life other than that of wife and mother. Three of them, Janice, Deirdre, and Lee recognized having been chosen as the repository of their mothers' unmet aspirations. The other five in this category (refer to Table 7) detected undercurrents of dissatisfaction, such as frustration or a sense of wasted talent, in their mothers' lives (Ibid.). These women, as their mothers' daughters, do not entirely support Chodorow's thesis that women's mothering fosters a feminine identity heavily invested in motherhood. Rather these women identified more strongly with their mothers' dissatisfaction with mothering and/or were inspired by their mothers' unrealized ambitions. Those women who remain conflicted about arriving at middle age without children do lend support to Chodorow's thesis.

Parentified child.

Eight of the ten women in the study referred to themselves as care-takers within their family systems, either of siblings, of one of their parents or both, or of themselves because their parents were ineffective. They came out of difficult families where they

did not feel well cared for. The lack of care refers to a lack of nurturance and love or emotional neglect. None of these women suffered from lack of food, clothing or shelter though Briana grew up "poor." These women took on the role of care-takers within their families, addressing the unmet needs of their family members for nurturance. This coping strategy and the use of the defense of reaction formation left their needs for nurturance unmet.

One of the reasons they may have arrived in middle age without children, particularly those who thought they might have them one day, is that their energies as adults were consumed with taking care of their own emotional needs. They also may not have learned to balance their needs with those of other family members as their mothers modeled behavior which sacrificed their (the mothers') needs for those of their families. Therefore, the prospect of having children and/or a partner may have felt too overwhelming. Not having children, whether chosen consciously or unconsciously, may be interpreted as an act of self-care within this context.

Raised like a son.

Three of the women, Briana, Deirdre and Janice identified themselves as having been raised like sons. In Janice's case, she attributes this to her mother's behavior towards her, specifically her mother's insistence on Janice's being independent and achievement oriented. This is consistent with Janice's feeling that she was the repository for her mother's unrealized ambitions. Though Janice said little about her father, she did describe him as ineffectual and mostly absent. Janice also may have carried the role of the "man" of the family.

Like Janice, Deirdre and Briana had ineffectual fathers. In their cases, their fathers were alcoholics. Deirdre's father was a functional alcoholic; he worked and supported the family. Briana's father could not be counted on, so her mother worked two jobs to support the family. Nonetheless, Diana and Deirdre had close relationships with their fathers, in contrast to their relationships with their mothers which were marked by either distance or absence, respectively. Each of them spoke proudly of being like their fathers' sons. Though this involved taking care of their fathers, meeting their fathers' emotional needs as well doing tasks like preparing meals for them or helping them to bed when they arrived home drunk, they both felt special. It is possible that Briana's not finding an appropriate mate relates to her preserving her idealized relationship to her father by not replacing him. Similarly, Deidre's not having children allowed her to improve on something precious from her past, the exclusive love of a man, her husband, which she only partially attained with her father because of her mother's presence.

Each of these three women, Briana, Deirdre and Janice, were repositories of their mothers' aspirations, suffered from a lack of care-taking as children, and were chosen as their parents' sons. Yet they arrived at middle age without children having traveled dissimilar routes. Deirdre, married for over fifteen years, said that she never wanted children as she had had a surfeit of caring for her parents as a child. Yet she married a man whom she took care of; when they first met, he was an addict who was getting clean; she then supported him while he went through college and medical school, and finally she nursed him until he died of complications from AIDS. Her choice not to have children can be interpreted as a decision of self-care within this context.

Briana's life appeared to be driven by a desire to get away from the house where she was raised; she went to college, graduate school and then moved to Germany. She too, however, appears to have repeated some of her familial experience. An outsider within her family and community because of being light skinned, an outsider at school because she went to the "white" school (her choice) in their small town, she accepted a job ten years ago as a professional on a military base in a small town in South Carolina. "It was like going back in time, and it's still very segregated racially." She spoke about how difficult the last ten years have been since moving there, not just as a Black woman, but as an unmarried, professional woman who has "something to say when I go into a room." The circumstances of Briana's life led her to this small town in South Carolina; they also led to her remaining unmarried and without children despite her conviction that she would have had children had she met the "right man."

Janice, the most conflicted and unhappy of the three about her childless state, suffered from the confluence of powerful unconscious forces: her mother's frustrations as a mother and unfulfilled ambitions as a person, her psychic absences in Janice's childhood because of chronic depression and her subsequent suicide, and her father's figurative absence as a parent. Janice spoke about these aspects of her family life at different points during the interview and at times connected them to her finding herself in middle age without children. Her life circumstances led her to a place where she did not intend to go. Sadly, she woke up to this too late in terms of being able to rectify her not having children. When we spoke, she said she was thinking about adopting a child, though the application she had submitted was returned because of mistakes she had made. She wondered whether she wanted to go through with it.

Many women grow up in families that are difficult and choose to have children as a way to do it differently. Laura mentioned this as a reason she would like to have children. Those women in this study with sisters (four of them) all have nieces and/or nephews; all but one of the women who have brothers (five of them) also have nieces and/or nephews. Yet this study's participants' choice, conscious or unconscious, not to have children may be interpreted as their way of caring for themselves and doing so differently from their mothers. Rather than stigmatize childlessness and assume that women who do not have children are less well adjusted than women with children (Jamison et al., 1979; Ireland, 1993; Veevers, 1979; Vissing, 2002; Lisle, L, 1996 [1999]), the choice not to have children, whether conscious or unconscious, may be viewed as a healthy and productive one, not just for the women, but for their unborn children and for society. Society often pays the price for unwanted children or for children of parents who were ambivalent at best about having children.

Expressed Feelings about Children

This section addresses how the women in this study feel about themselves as women without children by examining the ways they talked about children, their work and their social milieu.

Generativity.

The majority (seven) of the women mentioned, unprompted, the importance of their relationships with friends' and siblings' children and/or with their students and clients. Their commitments to and feelings for these children, students, and clients belie one of the "motive antecedents" of couples' decisions to remain childless: "…a relative absence of generativity, at least in the sense of preferring learning roles to teaching roles

and of regarding education as a lifelong task" (Veevers, 1979, p. 16). Three of these women are college professors who talked about their commitment to teaching, one is a counselor, and one a former therapist; they and those who spoke about the children in their lives were clear about their interest in and commitment to the next generation as an important part of their identities.

The remaining three women, Alicia, Beatriz and Laura, along with Janice spoke about their work as generative, in the sense that they feel they are working to create something that has lasting value, whether it is a published short story, an innovative film, or an excellent performance. These four are creative artists in different mediums, and they have dedicated much of their lives to their art. Alexander et al. (1992) defined generativity for purposes of their study (regrets and childlessness in older women's lives) as "the desire to pass on personal achievements and values as a legacy" (p. 619). I would argue that these women's efforts in their respective fields qualify as generative according to this definition.

Advantages to not having children/Reasons for having children.

The three most common reasons given by women who for choosing not to have children are 1) greater freedom and mobility to pursue their interests 2) career considerations and 3) greater marital satisfaction (Ireland, 1993)[16]. These are among the reasons given by the women in this study for not having children. All of the women who fall into the 'I forgot to have kids' category mentioned either having the freedom and/or the time to chose to do what they want and to go where they want because they do not

[16] For a review of studies on voluntary childlessness, refer to Houseknecht, S. (1987). Voluntary childlessness. In Sussman, M. & Steinmetz, S. (Eds.), *Handbook of marriage and family* (pp. 369-395). New York: Plenum Press, and Veevers, J.E. (1979). Voluntary childlessness: A review of issues and evidence. *Marriage and family review, 2*, 3-26.

have childcare responsibilities. Interestingly, only two of the 'childless by choice' women, Deirdre and Rachel talked about these issues. Unlike the studies referenced above, my study looked at how women understood their arriving in middle age without children not at their reasons for remaining childless. Therefore a quantitative analysis of the findings in this category is not indicative of all of these women's reasons for remaining without children.

Yet it seems consistent that the women who were more conflicted about their status as women without children are the ones who seemed to feel the need to elevate it by explaining the advantages to not having children. They are also, not unexpectedly, the ones who make the preponderance of the comments about the drawbacks of not having children. Their inferred need to elevate their status as middle-aged women without children reflects their at times unspoken understanding of the stigma attached to childlessness. Thus, their critique may be interpreted as an important step towards acceptance, the final stage of a process identified in this study as traversed by middle-aged women without children.

Alicia, Janice and Laura were the women identified earlier as not having achieved a level of acceptance of themselves as middle-aged women without children. Their palpable struggle to understand how they arrived at middle age without children conveys the ongoing internal tension they experience as women without children who believed they would have them. Underlying their regret about not having children is an assumption which is a particularly American one: that as individuals we are responsible

for the direction of our lives. An ideology of self-determination and free will pervades our culture such that individuals retrospectively evaluate their decisions as choices[17].

In referring to American culture, I am referring to the dominant culture. These three women are part of the dominant culture as Caucasian, heterosexual women whose families have been in this country for multiple generations. The other two women in this category, Briana and Lee, identify as members of minority cultures, Black and lesbian respectively, though Lee as a Caucasian is also part of the dominant culture. Their understanding of why they do not have children and therefore their greater acceptance of who they are (compared to the other women in this category) may relate to their identities as members of these minority groups.

Briana has a strong religious orientation. Her faith in God led her to a belief that her life is "the only way it could be." Her explanation for not having children is that she has not met the right man; she did not question herself or the reason she gave for not having children.[18] Though she recognized that she has more time, freedom and mobility to pursue her interests than women with children, she presented this as a fact, not as a compelling reason not to have children. Briana's faith and religiosity are sources of strength and support to her and reflect the research on the importance of the church within the African-American community (Lincoln & Masumiya, 1990).

Like Briana, Lee is a part of a minority culture, the gay culture. Lee referred to a number of reasons for arriving at middle age without children; she and her partner had

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[17] Refer to Alexander, B., Rubinstein, R., Goodman, M., Luborsky, M. (1992). A path not taken: A cultural analysis of regrets and childlessness in the lives of older women. *The Gerontologist, 32*, 618-626. for a discussion of how the ideology of free will influences regrets.

[18] Briana mentioned how hard it has been for her to meet men whom she likes and to whom she is attracted living in a small, racially segregated community in the south. She also spoke about how she has felt worthy of being loved only in the last couple of years.

other things they wanted to do when they considered having children in their thirties, Lee never had had the desire to be pregnant, and at the time she considered having children, it was not as viable an option as it is today for lesbians. She spoke about how lesbians of her generation were very influenced by the feminist movement as well as gay culture:

> I think we've [lesbians] kind of restricted ourselves a little. I think the younger women are like much more like flexible in terms of their sexuality. When I came out, I was like, OK, I'm this way, always was this way, and I always knew it, but there was nothing in between. You have to go back to the seventies, I guess. … And I think a lot of women who are my age just stayed on that. You know, this defines me.

She went on to talk about how younger lesbians have more options today in terms of having children and having that choice be acceptable within the gay culture and culture at large. She explained that women like her, who came out in the seventies, felt the "pressure" not to take on the "traditional role" of women. Though Lee spoke about her "decision that was not a decision," she did not convey the conflict and regret that the first three women discussed did.

Stigma of childlessness.

All but one of the women in this study either alluded to or directly addressed the ways in which they are negatively perceived because they are women without children. The strength of feeling with which these comments were made and their frequency suggest that the stigma attached to childlessness is alive and well in American culture. The ways these women felt judged ("immature," "childish," "lesbian," "failed," "without value," cold, distant, and "selfish") reflect the research findings (Jamison et al., 1979; Veevers, 1980; Campbell, 1983) on the ways in which women who chose not to have children are viewed. The three Caucasian women who postponed having children, Alicia, Janice, and Laura used the term "failure" to describe themselves as middle-aged

women without children. They have internalized the dominant culture's belief that equates femininity with reproduction despite their recognizing it as such.

This strong normative prescription appears even stronger when applied to African-American women. Two of the three Black women in this study, Deirdre and Lisa, alluded to the general culture's view that Black women are supposed to reproduce and be maternal. This prejudice dates from the time of slavery when Black women were chattel, and their reproductive status was an integral part of their value; they also were the care-takers of white children and valued for their maternal qualities (West, 1995; Wyatt, 1997). The other issue raised by Deirdre and Briana is the stigma attached to being lesbian within the Black community. Deirdre talked about how being openly gay within the Black community is anathema. Calling someone Black a lesbian is pejorative and shaming, even more so than in the culture at large because of the stigma that exists within the general culture towards African-Americans and homosexuals (Greene, 1994). There is also the issue of the Black community's general religiosity, where being lesbian is seen as going against God.

According to a national survey of households, African-American and Hispanic respondents were more likely than Caucasians to agree that having a child is very important (Holmes, 1998). The U.S. Census figures (internet publication date, October 2000) bear this out. A smaller percentage of Black women than White women between the ages of 35 to 44 are childless (17.1% compared to the overall population figure of 19.4% and 19.9% for White women). Even more striking are the figures for the Northeast region, 16.3% versus 21.7% for all women, and 19.9% for White women. (Refer to Appendix D for percent childless by region, marital status and race.) Lisa's

comment that she was supposed to be "a credit to the race" by marrying and having children illustrates the pressures that Black women face to conform to the normative role of mother from within the Black community and from the culture at large. Despite these pressures, Deirdre and Lisa are articulate critics of these cultural mandates, and they embrace their difference as women without children.

This discussion of the stigma of childlessness would be incomplete without discussing Gabriela's case. She talked about how her mother in particular was in the process of essentially disinheriting her because she had no issue. She explained how important the matrilineal line is within her upper caste, Brahmin family. Her mother went so far as to approach Gabriela's partner to discuss her (Gabriela's) having children through artificial insemination offering to pay for all the medical costs if her partner were to agree to this arrangement.

The women is this study appear to negotiate the developmental tasks presented by middle age with varying levels of competency depending on their paths to childlessness as well as their acceptance of an identity as other. Those who from a young age understood they were different and received support for who they were appeared able to navigate the stigma of childlessness with more ease and less heartache than those who had never before found themselves on "the margins of social arrangements." Those women who had chosen to remain without children seemed to achieve a level of acceptance of themselves in middle age that those who had 'forgotten to have kids' had not yet achieved. This was related to the latter's internalization of the cultural mandate to reproduce against which their lives were judged to be a "failure" by them.

Limitations of the Study

The raison d'etre of this study was to explore women's feelings and thoughts about themselves as middle-aged women without children. I chose to conduct in-depth interviews with a small group of women as I considered this the best way of exploring first person phenomenology. The small sample size, however, is the study's primary limitation as one cannot know how far the experience of a few reaches into others subjectivity. Therefore, the themes presented cannot be generalized to any group of middle-aged women without children other that this study's. My intention was to broaden our understanding of women's development by drawing attention to women in middle age who do not have children and to build theory. Therefore the study must be viewed as exploratory and the theories developed from this study as speculative.

Another drawback, like the sample size, is also one of its strengths. In analyzing the narratives, a method of coding and categorizing was used to enable comparisons across interviews as well as within interviews. In coding and categorizing the data, the data is fractured into small units. These units may be as small as a phrase, "a decision that was not a decision" or a sentence such as "It would have femaled my body" and as long as a few sentences. In parsing the data in this way, the context within which the phrase, sentence or sentences occurs is essentially lost, or at best takes a back seat to the process of constant comparison and similarity based analyses that this method endorses.

In this study, the individual and unique styles and tones of the women's interviews are mostly lost as are often their storylines. The method allows for observations about these and other issues to become part of the data through the use of memos. These, however, do not become part of the results though they can and do

inform the thinking behind the results and discussion. Perhaps the drawback of any method is that which it excludes.

As these women are middle-aged women, their narratives of how they arrived at middle age without children are retrospective accounts where events and decisions may be revised in the telling and may be subject to distortion. I can only proceed on the assumption that their recall is fairly accurate and that I as the co-participant in the construction of their stories allowed them enough space to tell their story. It was never my intention to research the objective truth, rather to build theory by exploring the meanings these women without children attributed to being middle-aged.

Implications for Clinical Practice

The most important recommendation that I would make to clinicians working with women is to examine their assumptions about women's roles and their relationship to mothering. As already discussed, there is a pervasive belief within our culture that women are meant to become mothers and those who do not are perceived as less than for not having done so. As members of this culture, as daughters or sons of mothers, and in all likelihood as parents themselves, clinicians have internalized the cultural mandate of motherhood as the prerequisite for healthy, adult development for women.

Therefore, I would recommend that clinicians ask themselves how this cultural mandate may inform their work with women who do not yet have children, those deciding whether or not to have a child, and those who, like the women in this study, are middle-aged and do not have children. As purveyors of mental health, clinicians need to free women from the necessity of becoming mothers by conveying to their patients their

belief that motherhood is a choice and that the choice not to mother is a valid and healthy one.

In regards to working with middle-aged women without children, my most important recommendation is to listen for the loss that not having had a child may represent. Even those women who chose not to have children (Lisa for example) may go through times when they mourn the absence of the child they did not have. For those whose ambivalence led them to postpone having a child, the sense of loss may be greater and also needs to be mourned. This loss and others at middle age, represent roads not taken or the loss of "possible selves;" they need to be acknowledged and mourned so that the middle-aged woman without children may move towards acceptance and thus move forward in her life.

Clinicians should familiarize themselves with the literature on women and adult development at mid-life as well as the results and discussion of this study to develop a better understanding of what women without children experience in middle age. As with any other stage of development, there are psychological tasks and environmental presses particular to mid-life.

Finally, I would remind clinicians that there are cultural nuances operating on women in middle age who do not have children as a function of their race, ethnicity and sexual orientation and class. The clinician should inform herself, as she would with any client, of the cultural mandates and exigencies that exist within the various communities her client may be a part of.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study provided information about the ways in which a group of middle-aged women without children created meaning in their lives. As with most research, areas that would benefit from additional exploration surfaced throughout the study.

This study's group of women was chosen purposefully along a number of differing demographic characteristics to see whether aspects of their culturally nuanced backgrounds would be reflected in their narratives. As the results and discussion show, differences were reflected in the narratives related to these differing cultural backgrounds. Therefore an area for future research would be the study of groups of middle-aged women without children who were homogenous racially and ethnically, as well as in terms of sexual orientation. So groups of straight White, African-American, Latina women and other women of color, such as Indian, should be investigated to better understand how cultural mandates impact the mental health of middle-aged women without children. Middle-aged lesbians as a group should also be investigated as should groups of African-American lesbians, Latina lesbians, etc.

The women in this study were all professionals who had achieved an advanced level of education. As the figures in Appendix E illustrate, women without children with graduate degrees are in the minority among women without children in the age range of 35 to 44 years old. Future studies should focus on middle-aged women who have not attained an advanced level of education segmented by racial and ethnic background as the figures suggest that there may be differing pressures within different cultural communities depending on the level of education pursued and achieved.

Another area for investigation raised by this study is what impact being partnered or not may have on childless women's experience of middle age. A related issue that needs further exploration is how a women's road to childlessness, (by choice or delay and circumstances) affects how she views herself at middle age.

Appendix A

WOMEN IN THEIR MIDDLE YEARS

Biodemographic Questionnaire

Name_____ Tape ID#_____

Today's Date: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Date of Birth: _____ Current Age: _____

Relationship Status: _____
If in a relationship, how longstanding is it? _____

Sexual Orientation: _____

Education Level Attained: _____

Current Occupation: _____

How long have you had this job? _____

Briefly describe the setting of the work and what work consists of:

_____

_____

Socioeconomic Status: _____

Ethnicity / Race: _____

History of Childbearing:
Have you ever borne, adopted or reared a child? _____
Have you ever been pregnant? If yes, describe what happened.

_____

_____

Is your decision to remain childfree up to this point based on biological or other considerations? _____

Appendix B

Women's Experience of the Middle Years

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Name_____ Date_____

I understand that the purpose of this study is to explore my conception of myself as a woman in her middle years. The study will focus on my transition into my middle years, the change in my sense of self that has occurred during this time, and the sense of myself as a woman in her middle years without children.

If I choose to take part, I agree to meet with the interviewer up to two times for approximately 1.5 hours each to discuss my experience as a childfree woman in her middle years.

I understand that my responses to all of the interviewer's questions will be tape-recorded and will remain confidential. On the tapes, a participant identification number will be used to identify me. I will not be asked my name, address or phone number during the taping, but I will be asked to provide this information on a separate sheet of paper. I understand this information will be kept separate from the interview tapes and transcripts. Should I wish to review the tape after the interview is completed, I may do so and ask that certain parts of the interview not be used. By signing this form, I agree that I am willing to be contacted in the future for possible interviews though I am under no obligation to participate.

While I may find the interview interesting and learn something about myself from it, I understand that the purpose of this research is not for my immediate benefit. I may ask for a copy of my taped interview and a summary of the results when they become available.

I have been given the opportunity to ask any questions I have about my participation in this study. I understand my participation should not subject me to any risks beyond what I might encounter in my daily life. If, however, I feel I would like to talk to a counselor about any of the issues raised by the interview, a referral will be provided to me upon my request. Further, I have been informed of the steps for insuring my confidentiality and have no concerns on that matter.

Since my participation is voluntary, I understand that I may decline to answer any question and/or stop the interview at any time. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. If I have any questions or complaints about my rights as a subject, I may call Ethel Breheny, Institutional Review Board Administrator, at 212-650-7903 during office hours. If I have further questions about the study, I may call Forbes Singer at 212-650-6602 or Dr. Jeffrey Rosen, Professor of Psychology at the City College of the City University of New York, at 212-650-5694. I have been given a copy of this form.

I agree to participate in this study. _____
Signature

_____
Print Name and Date

Researcher: _____
Signature

_____
Print Name and Date

Appendix C

Interview Guide

As I explained, I am interested in women's sense of themselves during their forties and fifties. Therefore, I'd like to start out by asking you how you see yourself at this point in your life?

Probes:

- When you think of yourself at this age, what comes to mind?
- What images, thoughts, feelings, or impressions come to mind?
- What activities and/or endeavors are you engaged in that capture what it means to be you at this time in your life?
- You've told me about the positive/negative aspects of being your age, tell me about the less positive/more positive? Probe for (+) or (-) depending on what they first emphasize.

How do you understand how you got to where you are today?

Probes:

- What images, thoughts, feelings, or impressions come to mind?
- Tell me a story that would capture how you got to where you are now.

Thinking back to your teenage years / your twenties/ your thirties/, describe your image of the person you imagined you would be at this time in your life.

Probes:

- In what ways has that image changed over time?
- What do you believe led to the change?
- What parts have not changed? What accounts for this, do you think?

What image do you have of yourself in the future?

What are the stories you tell of your emotional involvements / relationships?

- How would you describe these?

Were children ever an issue in your long-term relationships?

Probes:

- How?
- Tell me a story about that.

Describe your experience as a woman without children.

How is it that you came not to have children? What is your story?

How has not having children supported you in your life?

How would having a child change the way you think about your life at this time?

Probes:

- Are you thinking of having a child?
- What have been your thoughts and feelings about having a child?
- How have your feelings and thoughts shifted over time?
- When you think of your future with or without children, what comes to mind?

When is the first time you can identify wanting children or you decided you did not want children?

Probes:

- How have your feelings changed over time?
- What's your best guess about whether your feelings about wanting children will change in the future?

How has entering your middle years affected how you think about wanting children?

Probes:

- What images, thoughts, feelings, or impressions come to mind?
- Why or why not has it affected your thoughts about having children?

What factors do you think have contributed to your not having children at this point in your life?

What do you think it was like for your parents to have children?

Probes:

- What was motherhood like for your mother?
- What was fatherhood like for your father?

How do you feel about the way you were parented?

Probes:

- What is your earliest memory of your mother? (Positive and negative)
- What is your earliest memory of your father? (Positive and negative)

As a woman who does not have children, how do you think others perceive you?

Probes:

- In what ways do you agree or disagree with these perceptions?
- How do you feel about others' particular perceptions (probe particular material offered; for example, how do you feel about the perception of others that you would or would not make a good mother?)

How has this interview been for you?

Any feedback?

Appendix D

List of Codes

The following is a list of codes organized under the preliminary categories created during the process of coding the data. These are further organized under the initial superordinate categories created as part of the analysis process.

Middle-Age Process

Acceptance

Contentment: "The joy of midlife is that I've done a lot of my homework… I'm a more content person."
Grace and acceptance: "… you don't learn about yourself unless you have some sense of almost grace to give yourself…"
Harsh acceptance: "accepting that this is where I am … who I am right now is a forty-seven year old woman without anyone and a video-maker."
Integration: "Some of the integration is about really enjoying who I am and what I do have" and "there's still something extraordinary to be found in what seems to be ordinary."
Measured against time and expectations: "I'm a late bloomer," and "I feel good; I'm where I'm supposed to be."
Non-judgmental: "I don't feel judgmental about it; I don't feel there's a good side or bad side. I just feel like this is who I am at this point in my life."
Satisfied: "I would have had a different life if I had had children"
Sense of void: "I need to be realistic…but I do need a dream I can have again."
Self-acceptance: choice to be single? "it's almost like you have to work at it to not be married"
Self-acceptance: "OK, this is me [overweight], this is where I am"
Single: choice that is not a choice/ "maybe deep down, I don't want to be with anyone"
Single: "you can't plan these things out"
Single: "you're not going to settle [for any man] … that's me"

Aging

Denial: "I don't feel my physical side has changed."
Depression: "fat, old, and remain unpublished" and "I don't have any splashing news"
Experience: "I'm smarter and less tortured."
Family: "Do I want to live here alone when I'm old?"
Guilt: "… and the main thing is, don't feel guilt, boy does that age people fast."
Jobs: "One of the reasons she hired me is because I was older…she knew it would be harder to find a job when you're older"
Limited options: "I did not prepare myself for the age thing"
No children: choice to live in "traditional society cause if I'm the old lady down the street" will be taken care of.

No children: “I wanna figure out what to do with myself.”
Opportunity: “I believe for everyone there is a time and a place.”
Perspective: “They [twenty year olds] are not the ones doing the hiring.”
Body: “You’re a good choice for me to age well, and gracefully.”
Process: “I’m moving through it.”
Redefine relationships: “You start to seep to your own level.”
Restructuring relationships: “my family is being resurrected in my colleagues.”
Social norms: “I am less important and viable.”
Social stigma: “She’s given up; they probably feel sorry for me.”
Time shift: keep present, past and future balanced as “they all have their own good purpose.”
Work: “They’re not going to invest in me because I am too old”
Work: “… will hire someone in their twenties who can do what I am doing”

Assessment

Being single: regret/ “I would love to get into a relationship;” “improve on those skills.”
Defective self: “I feel like a failure. I got an F in adulthood.”
“Disappointed”: “I feel stuck”
Failure: “I don’t have this [a published novel], and I don’t have a child or husband either.”
Getting honest with yourself: “what you wished for and how things worked”
Expectations of self: not where she thought she’d be, “I stopped that train a long time ago”
Evaluation of past: “I didn’t sculpt it properly.”
Evaluation of past/present: “did not reach my dreams” but “recognized for my creativity”
Past: directionless life
Integration: letting go, “we die a lot” and it’s letting go of one form to take on another form”
Integration’s effect on relationships: “my being anchored in a different way and not so concerned with the outcome…made a huge difference about how we could really be there for each other.”
“Smarter and less tortured”
Turned inward: “I’d been searching all that time and searching outside myself for myself … but to be on solid ground, I needed to come home to myself.”

Awakening

Body changes: “egg bearing girl;” “then you go home, look in the mirror, and you go, do I need a face lift, do I need to have my eyes done, do I need a …you’re just questioning everything about yourself.”
Body changes: “It’s harder at this age to lose weight.”
Body changes: “it [far-sightedness] trips you up where you don’t even expect it.”
Body changes: “that’s a real awakening about being a middle age woman, is how you are passed over.”
Body changes: “I have to try to get pregnant on my own.”

Body changes: menopause, “is this the last time I’m going to have a child”
Limited options: “When didn’t I get to be young anymore” and no longer “infinite possibilities.”
Reality check: “Waking up on your forty-sixth birthday and going, I really didn’t get this the way I thought.”
Surprise: “It kind of snuck up on me.”
Time/shock: “When didn’t I get to be young anymore?”
Time/shock: “I felt like I went from being twenty-five to being forty-five.”
Time-sense: denial/ “it never occurred to me that would ever change.”
Time-sense: denial of mortality/ “we decided not to get tested [for HIV].”
Time-sense: mortality/ “I always wanted to do a jackknife dive and now I know that I’m not going to do one cause I’m too old.”
Time-sense: present/ “real sense of urgency” and “time wasted”
Time-sense: “prior to about now, not fully present in my life because it was too painful.”
Time-sense: job market/ “I didn’t think I would have a problem with that;” “I didn’t plan for things to go wrong.”

Experience

Aging: “I’m too old for that, … I don’t put up with the same level of bullshit.”
Aging: “inner knowing” and “own wisdom.”
Familial constellation: mother’s symbolic death as “she was literally pulling herself away and abandoning me.”
Creating own zone of safety: “really slowly leaning to be more comfortable with my needs, and just, comfortable with my skin…”
Future: “I want to learn to be with another person.”
Lessons learned: casual sex/no regrets
Lessons learned: figure out who you are/”I’m fine. I can do this.”
Lessons learned: “I feel so incredibly prepared having made errors.”
Lessons learned: leaned to work with others in work and as a partner.
Lessons learned: “Psychologically more stable” and “more experienced in interpersonal relations.”
Lessons learned: “You’re not fearful anymore.”
Lessons learned: “You see what you will allow and not allow anymore and you’re grown up.”
Lessons learned: “no different physically, but a lot wiser.”
Lessons learned from death of loved one and own cancer: “I feel it helped me be less afraid of death.”
Lessons learned: Figure out who you are: “I’m fine. I can do this.”
Lessons learned: Learned to work with others in work and as a partner
Lessons learned: “my eyes are opened a little bit more to the fact that people’s lives are filled with the kind of day to day ordinariness.”
Lessons learned: “I live more in the moment” and “I have less of an expectation of a certain outcome happening.”
Lessons learned: “it’s forced me to really get more honest with myself and care about my needs.”

Men: more tolerant but not "obligated to waste my time"
Need for stability: job as a "stabilizing force"
Responsibility towards self: "so keeping this job is a lot about taking care of myself"
Self-care: "my personality and my safety issues around money and having my basic needs met, I can't play with that"
Self-care: not pursuing "fruitless" things
Self-care: "when I stopped being a little girl, letting people take advantage of me"
Transcending expectations: "I have learned a sense of how to still be me"

Losses

Death of her father: "rebirth;" "ding dong the witch is dead" and "not everyone is good for you in your life."
Death of loved ones: "I realized that's what love is all about."
Death of family member: "it's just never the same."
Death of family members: "death of the people who gave me life and shaped my life;" "being part of the dying process was shaping about thinking about life, not just about death."
Death of family members and husband: "well enough to think about what I am going to do" and "I was never free to do that."
Death of "two of my parents:" "accept that I was going into a different phase in my life, I needed to really feel the grief fully of their death."
Losing primary relationships: "death or not protection," "real void"
Loss of fantasy of immortality: "I always tell it [husband's death to AIDS] so I don't forget it."
Loss of her dream: "I put all my fertile years…into writing and not into real world relationships."
Loss of identity as an attractive person: "aside from getting older…it's like blotting out your body, and nobody wants to look at you."
Loss of loved ones: "it's made me a better person, a stronger person."
Mortality: "zone of safety" gone when parents die.
Mortality: "imaginary, idealized, safe place" is lost.
Mourning: "I could see more clearly"
Mourning: "no skin at all"
Reshuffling of family structure: "I'm going to be in this life longer than my parents will."
Reevaluation of sibling relationships: "make sure we see each other [siblings] together;" "I don't want to lose that part of me."
Separation: father's death was a "pivotal point…of me taking care of myself."
Separation from parents: "construct a life with them that didn't include them;" "I've put my parents in the place where they ought to have been."
Separation from parents: reconfiguration of relationship to India.
September 11th: "It's changed my perspective, I'm just more positive about things in general, about where I am, and what decisions I've made."
Unfinished business: "that was a hard death because I didn't really get to be there."

Perspective

Experience: “at a certain point in your life … nothing has fear in it anymore”
Identity separate from family: “I had to move far away from home to find out who I was and not be defined by growing up in a small town”
Internal locus of control: “I can pretty much remember saying, this is too far away from what I thought I was going to be doing”
Responsibility for self: “I’m not distracted by responsibility to something other than myself”
Separation from family: “I was confused a lot” and “my life was spent running from home”
Success: “I’m not successful in that way [money, security] … I have great friends, I have a great support system, that’s success”

Women without Children

Childless by choice

Abortion: “I can’t go through this again”
Abortion: “I’ve never regretted not having that child”
Abortion: “If this were the only child I would ever have, I wouldn’t have it”
Biological clock: no time imperative, “I never heard a biological clock ticking”
Care-taking: “I just didn’t want to clean up after and worry about”
No biological narcissism: “the biological narcissism on my part wasn’t great enough”
Not necessary: “it’s not something I was ever driven to do” and “it’s not something that needed to happen for my life to feel fuller and completer”
Menopause: “second thought;” “it didn’t make me change my mind”
Not necessary: “we don’t feel we need to do that [have children]”
Pregnancy: “I don’t want to have a child”
Retrospective analysis of unconscious behavior: “I had an affair with a married guy”
Role models: her aunts, “one was a lesbian, and one did not have kids”
Second choice: Having children was the “default option”
Sense of relief: “I don’t have any desire [to have had or have children]”
Single: “I thought about it, and then I let it go”
Single parenting: “it felt desperate … didn’t feel creative”

I forgot to have kids

Ambivalence: “I was terrified, and it was very much a fantasy that I longed for”
Attitude when younger: “it wasn’t my absolute favorite idea, I had other ideas, things to do”
Choice that is not a choice: “I am not single because I want to be single”
Choice that wasn’t a choice: “I mean not making a decision is a decision”
Denial of reality: “I’ll take care of that [pregnancy] later”
Desire: “I always knew I wanted children”

Externalization: of the men with whom she was involved, she said, “they do not scatter their seed”
Failed marriage: “I don’t know how it happened” and “I think I sabotaged it”
God’s will: “God just doesn’t want me to have children”
Regret: “I always wanted to have children”
Regret: “some regret, but it’s [not having children] not heavy regret, maybe just a little”
Resignation: “I walked out into the springtime and looked at the debris from the bomb”
Single parenting: “I don’t have the strength or experience to do it alone”
Single parenting: “I was very clear I didn’t want to do it by myself”
Unconscious choice: “I spent a long time with men who really didn’t want to have children”

Family system

Alcoholism: “emotionally incestuous father” and “emotionally distant mother”
Baby of four: “they devalue me in many ways, as far as I have no opinion”
Baby of the family: “hero in the alcoholic family” and “trying to construct myself”
Difference: “everybody was browner than I was”
Expectations: “not ever limited by anybody else’s telling me their expectation”
Four parents: they [uncle and grandmother] gave “the kind of love a good parent gives”
Outcast: “they sure didn’t need me and I learned not to need them”
Parental role: “I started taking care of R. and M. [younger sisters]”
Parentified child: “I was trying very hard to take care of mommy and daddy”
Parentified child: “her comrade [mother’s] appeasing the patriarch” and “his confidante”
Parenting: “very lacking in interpersonal relationships,” “we were just an afterthought”
Parents: “supportive” but “hands off”
Parents’ caretaker: “so the only thing I could do is just be good”
Parents’ relationship: competitive/”he tried to keep her down”
Parentified role: “we were the ones in charge of the family”
Resilience: “my family paved the way for me to make it through all this stuff”
Sibling order: “they made their mistakes and I got to watch”
Southern culture: “the family is very close, it’s just normal to stay near each other”

Their Fathers

Absent: “unavailable”
Absent and incompetent: “he was way out of his depth”
Abusive relationship: “I didn’t fight for what was rightfully mine … the man gets it all [about her relationship with ex-husband]”
Alcoholic: incest? “wonderfully generous and sexually very good”
Alcoholic: idealization, “I had the best daddy;”
Death: “in a symbolic sense I stopped choosing my father [referring to her choice of men] … I’m now asking for what I want”
Disturbing death: “I have twenty years of what I view of freeing myself up completely”
Father’s caretaker: “I would help him get his shoes off”
Father’s son: “I was his favorite son”

Father's son: "I was his son" and "he was teaching me how to be in the world"
Identification: "like me, he understood that he was on his own"
Lack of connection: "riddle with communication problems"
Loved: "everybody knew how much he loved me"
Internalized: "I really feel my father around every once in awhile, and he very much, you know, looked out for me"

Marriage

Caretaker role: "much of time spent helping him [her husband] get his life together"
Cultural norm: "adult" to have children
Invisibility: women friends' disappearing into the live of their husbands
Loss of self: "parenthesis in the biographies of their husbands"
Mother: "kind of subjugation"
Parents: respect/"I saw what they pulled off"
Parents: "joined by sex and desperation"
Separation: "he [my husband] made it possible for me to get away from them [parents]"

Their mothers

Abandonment: "you didn't matter to keep her alive"
Acceptance of non-traditional female role: "there was no pressure about boyfriends or getting married"
Acceptance: "you have to do what you think is best"
Bad memory: "I was terrorized by my mother"
Children: she was "burdened" by six children and "a domineering husband"
Children: "I never wanted to have any child … I never wanted to have you"
Children's role: "way of being noticed," "to compete with her husband"
Children's role: "way to stay connected" with her husband
Disavowed self: "don't do what I did basically"
Disavowed self: "don't have my life" and "don't have children"
Disavowed self: "I could never do that, so I had you"
Disavowed self: "I was her life for her"
Disavowed self: "I was my Mommy's star, going off and making it"
Disidentification: "having kids was a way of validating herself"
Disidentification: "he wasn't supportive, respectful to her, but that was part of their contract"
Disidentification: "living essentially the life my mother had lived … I panicked"
Disidentification: "she was telling me not to have her life"
Identification with mother's disavowed selves: "she would have liked to have been a movie star, an opera singer"
Identification with mother's disavowed self: ""don't get married" and "in other words do what you want to do first"
Identification with mother's disavowed self: "independent" and "gutsy" before she married
Longing for her love: "to have some Black woman … that just loved me to death"

Longing for her love: “hard for me to access my professional life”
Loss of possible self: “I would have left him when you went to college but now I can’t leave him”
Loss/conflicted about surpassing her professionally: “I want to be with her”
Parentified child: “she’s like my child” and “”she always wanted to know what I thought”
Parenting: “she just went on auto pilot”
Rejection: “creating situations of rejection”
Role-model: “She came into her own [after divorce], she became the mayor of my hometown”
Role-model as “working person:” “it’s nothing she said, it’s what she did, and she liked what she did”
Unavailable: “I gotta fend for myself”

Reasons for having children

Accomplishment: “I’ve [parent] done this job”
Biological mandate: “that’s [having children] something women will never escape”
Desire: pregnant by mistake, would have it “because I really want it; it’s not the intelligent thing to do”
Do it differently from parents: “to prove my theories,” “to bring them up in the fashion you think it will be correct”
Companion in old age: “nobody wants to be alone”
Disadvantage of being childless: “Family is important”
Enjoyment: “it’s selfish to have kids anyway; it’s for pure enjoyment”
“Life affirming thing:” “don’t need it …would be great to have it”
Meaning and mortality: “you look to these grandchildren and these kids”
Meaning: “what am I supposed to do [without children]?”
Occupation: “something to do”
To preserve friendships: “it’s hard having friends with children if you don’t have children”

Advantages to not having children

Career: “I couldn’t have gotten into the business I am in now if I had children”
Care-taking required: “I took care of too many people as a child and never had my own space”
Decapitation: “I kept expecting that my head would roll from my shoulders [if I had a child”
Domestic life: having children “not exciting enough”
Displacement of mother: “I think by having a baby, it would have femaled my body in a way that was too close to my mother”
Fear of being destroyed if had children: “I’ll just be destroyed”
Femininity and pregnancy: “I think having a baby would have femaled me more that I wanted to be female”
“Freedom” and “time”
Freedom: “allowed me to pursue my dreams”

Freedom: “I just need to pick up and go right now in my life”
Freedom: “I paid quite a huge price for my freedom” “Indulge your imagination”
Freedom: “total freedom” and “no financial burdens”
“Free spirited:” “Doing what I care about”
“Much less freedom” when you have children
Interesting life: “I always wanted to have an interesting life”
Loss of self: children consume a woman, “And I’m like, where are you?”
Loss of self: “people are very enmeshed in their children”
Motherhood is fatal: “motherhood fulfills you and it also destroys you”
Older parents: “apparently you get very tired”
Preserve companionship” “because that [having a child] would have put something between us because I love having this kind of companionship”
Restrictive: “restricted”
Second career: “if pregnant, would not have been able to continue [to work] because of the time demands”
Work and children: “I really love my work” and “I can’t do both”

Generativity

Creativity: “I just feel I have a creative task”
Invest in friends’ and family’s children: “what we needed to do was reinvest in all the children of friends and nieces and nephews”
Rebirth: “I think I’ve had a rebirth [in terms of her acting] in the last year”
Students: “I know that I change my students’ lives”

Maternal energy

Family: “very involved aunt” and “sister”
Friends’ kids: “a lot of my needs around kids got met by [two children]”
Family and friends’ children: “I feel that our lives will be full that way and that will be fine”
Professor: “I as a teacher, I know that you’re ready to go … and you’re taking something from me”
Role model: “I’m an important person for them [nieces and nephews] to know”
Second career: “I was giving birth in that way”
Students: “my maternal stuff went to my students at [names a university]”

Social norms

Age: older woman, “less important and viable”
Black community: “this is very important, now we have two people in a Black family with no children”
Children: “moral purpose”
Cultural assumption: “people assume I’m a mother …that I was in a couple”
Cultural norm: women who do it all [career and family] started early, this is the “norm”
Darwinian attitude: “it’s [having children] what we’re [women] here for”

Do you have children? "I don't help, I don't pursue, I don't explain …there's nothing simple to say"
Empathy towards the childless: "I think there are a number of people who are very sad for me …they feel that's what I need in my life"
Internalization of cultural norm: "I still feel defective incomplete and failed"
Mandate to have children: "trophy babies"
Older mothers "are not respected"
Society's view of the childless: "odd," "failure," "fertility equals strength"

Social stigma

Attitude towards the childless: "I must be gay and I must be in the closet"
Attitude toward the childless: "think well you're a lesbian" or 'just kind of odd"
Attitude towards childless Black women: "the scary possibilities that all Black women have children…that's a scary thought"
Choice to be a single mother: "everyone says it's so selfish to have to have a kid on your own"
Cultural belief about childless adults: "real grown-ups have children"
Cultural belief about childless adults: "childish" and "arrested development"
Older mothers: "if only society would let us [have children in our forties]"
Other's belief about childless: "they think there is something wrong with me"
Other's belief about childless: "other people question, uh, it's like I'm odd"
Self denigration: "there's something wrong with me;" "I didn't get appropriately socialized"
Social norm vis a vis children: "there's something so negative about saying that I don't want children"
Social norm vis a vis children: "you don't like kitty cats, what's wrong with you?"

Other Categories

Affirmative Action: "affirmative action person" and "never as smart as they are"
Credit to the race: "I wasn't a credit to the race"
Disenfranchised: "the black kids were mean to me [lighter skinned]"

Expectations: "shoulds" related to race: "children" "marriage," "the fantasy of stability"

Outside thinkers: influential/ family, psychoanalysis, feminism, and exposure
Outside thinkers: Lacan/ "the imaginary, idealized, safe place"
Outside thinkers: Chodorow/ "I don't think it [mothering] got reproduced in me"
Outside thinkers: The Improvised Woman/ "it's about women inventing this new version of themselves."

Cohort effect

Feminist movement: "you can have a baby in your forties"

Sexual revolution: “price for all that”
Women of my age: “unbridled wants”
“Women [we] were encouraged to conquer the world”

Difference

Acceptance of difference: “women [within her extended family] who didn’t do the traditional, I haven’t taken any heat for it”
African-American attitude towards homosexuality: “Instead of seeing it as some kind of terrible deviation from the norm, it can be seen as a more reasonable adjustment to life.”
Black in NYC: “I was odd, I was from the Mid-West”
Conformity: “there’s one right way to be,” “inside the circle”
Family system: “everybody was browner that I was;” despised for it, “you yellow dog”
Family system: “I was the only granddaughter of the daughters”
Freudian slip: single, “singular”
Hide difference: “I was a different child, and I had to hide a lot of that growing up.”
Inability to conform: “fitting into the square peg even if you were round”
Isolated because of being Black: only white child in her school/ “so I had to be very, very kind of distant”
Non-conforming: “do the right thing, just wasn’t me”
Norm (not): “I’m not the norm”
Odd duck: “I’m an odd duck, and I always have been”
Template: “my life didn’t look like a template”

Resilience

Faith: “I really have a trust that that will work out…I have that about a lot of things”
Faith: “that faith knocks out the fear”
Faith and God: “the next ten years is going to be about art and God”
Female role models: “amazing women in my family”
God: “I know that there’s God in me”
God: “my faith in the God of the universe”
Internalization of others’ caring: “I just think somebody’s got to be up there, you know, doing something”
Self-sufficient: “if you want to be happy, you’d better figure it out, girl”
Spiritual practice: “I really like the idea of having a community that has some kind of spiritual connection”

Appendix E

Women 35 to 44 years old--Percent childless

All Races	All Marital Classes	Women ever married	Women never married
Total-U.S.	**19.4**	**13.3**	**63.0**
Northeast	21.7	**14.0**	**64.2**
Midwest	17.6	11.6	63.1
South	17.6	12.1	**58.8**
West	22.3	16.2	68.2
White	19.9	13.5	77.9
Northeast	22.7	**14.1**	**79.4**
Midwest	17.7	11.9	79.2
South	18.0	12.6	79.6
West	22.5	16.2	73.4
Black	17.1	11.1	31.4
Northeast	16.3	**12.8**	**22.9**
Midwest	19.0	10.1	32.8
South	15.7	9.7	**33.2**
West	22.7	17.9	37.9

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Table 2. Current Population Survey: June, 1998
Internet Release Date: October 24, 2000

Appendix F

Women 35 to 44 years old--Percent childless
Educational Level Attained

All Races	All Marital Classes	Women ever married	Women never married
Total	**19.4**	**13.3**	**63.0**
Not a high school graduate	12.3	7.5	37.7
High school, 4 years	14.5	11.0	46.2
Some college, no degree	17.1	11.9	56.2
Associate degree	21.0	15.0	72.8
Bachelors degree	27.2	17.3	86.6
Graduate or professional degree	**35.6**	**23.2**	**95.7**
White	**19.9**	**13.5**	**77.9**
Not a high school graduate	12.1	7.2	48.4
High school, 4 years	14.7	11.1	65.0
Some college, no degree	17.9	12.3	74.4
Associate degree	20.9	14.8	86.8
Bachelors degree	27.8	18.1	92.7
Graduate or professional degree	**35.6**	**23.3**	**98.8**
Black	**17.1**	**11.1**	**31.4**
Not a high school graduate	11.3	7.1	19.0
High school, 4 years	13.3	8.6	23.5
Some college, no degree	13.7	9.1	26.1
Associate degree	23.2	19.0	37.7
Bachelors degree	26.2	13.5	60.5
Graduate or professional degree	**46.8**	**31.3**	**76.0**

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Table 3. Current Population Survey: June, 1998
Internet Release Date: October 24, 2000

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