FROM CRISIS TO AWAKENING: AN EXPLORATION OF MIDLIFE

EXPERIENCES FROM A POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE

by

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Declaration

I declare that:

"From crisis to awakening: An exploration of midlife experiences from a Positive Psychology perspective" is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

Signature

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to gain a richer understanding of midlife experiences. Midlife is stereotypically viewed as a crisis and is one of the least studied, most ill-defined stages in life, yet it's one of the most significant stages. The epistemological framework for this study is post modernism, which allows for this study to document the transitions from crisis at midlife, as seen through the lens of Positive Psychology.

This study was exploratory in nature and applied a qualitative ethnographic methodology. Six participants were interviewed from an ethnographic perspective, in an endeavour to allow each participant accordant ontological breadth and flexibility within their respective social and ideological contexts. The researcher's own social context also adding nuance to the interpretation of data. This interpretation allows for the inclusion of hope, wisdom, creativity, future mindedness, courage, spirituality, responsibility and perseverance.

Thematic analysis of these participants' narratives supports the psychological research which suggests that challenges are associated with midlife. Thematic analysis revealed challenges associated with midlife such as feelings of disillusionment, regret and dissatisfaction; feelings of loneliness, rejection and isolation as well as confusion about the way forward; seeking a meaningful existence and connection as well as achievement. Some participants, however, are in denial of the existence or their experience of midlife and associated challenges, whereas others describe midlife as a transition phase — a crossroads, a wake-up call and time for reassessment

Although midlife can be a difficult transitional period, Positive Psychology can help individuals identify and build the necessary resources and coping strategies to prevent a transition turning into a crisis. It was shown that most participants in this research displayed a mindset and attitude open to a Positive Psychology paradigm to accumulate the necessary resources and coping strategies to prevent a midlife transition from becoming a midlife crisis.

Key Words

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1.1 Introduction

This chapter will outline the context for this study and describe why it is important in furthering the understanding and knowledge of midlife. It will include a personal account as I have experienced midlife both from the perspective of transition as well as crisis.

I started my practice as a registered counsellor in 2007 to assist individuals who experienced trauma. Over the years I have evolved into becoming a psychotherapist for individuals. As a psychotherapist, I have spent a vast amount of time with clients, coaching and mentoring them through their experiences of midlife.

This chapter will discuss midlife, the idea of midlife as a crisis and midlife as a transition phase to position it for the remainder of this dissertation and in relation to the aim of this research — exploring characteristics of midlife.

1.2 Context

1.2.1 Midlife

Lachman (2004) defines midlife as "the part of life between youth and old age" (p. 310). When midlife begins and ends appear opaque, and unclearly demarcated. Some believe that midlife spans a wide age range and it is commonly perceived that midlife begins at 40 and ends at 60 or 65, when old age supposedly begins (American Board of Family Practice, 1990). However, these parameters are variable (Lachman, Lewkowicz, Marcus & Peng, 1994). With 40 as the start and 60 as the end year, the degree of variability in the expected timing of midlife is vast (Lachman, Bandura & Weaver, 1995) and according to Lachman (2001) there is about a range of 10 years either end of the spectrum.

As an illustration, the National Council on Aging (2000) conducted research into midlife and discovered that nearly half of respondents ages 65 to 69 deemed themselves middle-aged.

As the population increases in longevity and remains healthier for a greater proportion of the lifespan, it is feasible to expect the upper range of midlife to be further expanded. It's pertinent to note that middle-age does not necessarily signal the middle of the lifespan, for example, it is unrealistic to expect a 60-year old to live to 120. The upper range of the middle-age period is therefore seen as a truer demarcation of old age. The beginning of old age is associated with a decline in physical health (Lutsky, 1980). Consequently, those who remain fit, well-functioning and healthy in their seventies may still consider themselves middle-aged.

The markers of midlife are punctuated by significant life events that include teenagers leaving home (empty nest syndrome), becoming a grandparent, reaching career goals, or experiencing menopause. Social and socio-economic factors also play a role in the midlife continuum. Earlier entry and exit years for midlife is noted amongst lower socio-economic groups (Kuper & Marmot, 2003) which could be attributed to health being affected by social class differences (Marmot, Ryff, Bumpass & Shipley, 1997) earlier transitions into different life roles such as grandparenting (Putney & Bengtson, 2001) or even retirement (Kim & Moen, 2001). Health factors also play a risk in determining the parameters of middle-age. For example, in a longitudinal study done by Kuper and Marmot (2003) those participants who defined middle-age as earlier than 60 years of age correlated with higher risk for illnesses such as heart disease compared to those participants who expected middle-age to end after 70 years of age.

Using chronological age as a determinant of midlife is not seen as an accurate marker, this is because age norms are less stringent for midlife than for earlier periods of life such as school entry or graduation and later (e.g., retirement). Even if individuals are in the same chronological age their life phases in terms of social, family, career or responsibilities may be different. Some individuals may experience parenthood at 40, whilst their contemporaries may have grown children and grandchildren, and some no children. Therefore, consideration of social or family events will place people of the same age in very different contexts (Lachman, 2004).

A significant impact on one's self-conception and experiences during midlife is influenced by the perception of being either early or late for an event or life transition, or approaching a developmental deadline (e.g., biological clock), according to Heckhausen (2001) and Neugarten (1968).

It is relevant to note that there are definite commonalities in the experiences of middle-aged adults, despite the actual content and methodologies for dealing with them being different. Baltes (1987) states that midlife experiences tend to have generalized themes encompassing both gains and losses. As such there are multiple development paths which interplay across areas that are important (Moen &Wethington, 1999). However, there are also individual differences caused by factors such as health status, gender, cohort, socioeconomic and employment status, race, ethnicity, culture, region of the country, personality, as well as parental and marital status causes variation in the experiences during midlife.

Pertinent issues form a fulcrum around the areas of generativity, caring, and concern for others in the work and family spheres as proposed by McAdams (2001). This is seen in the context of changes associated with aging in physical and psychological resources.

A significant variable is that of middle-aged adults being intrinsically linked to the welfare of others — including children, parents, co-workers, other family members, and friends. This generativity is simultaneously linked to addressing their own needs for meaningful work (paid or unpaid), health, and well-being.

Chronic illness or disease become evident at midlife, so do physical ailments such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, or arthritis. The manifestation of these physical ailments, which have the potential to be treated via medication or dietary changes, can induce distress because they signal aging (Lachman, 2004).

Paradoxically, psychological and social changes experienced in midlife are generally associated with positive changes. Positive changes relate to a strong sense of personal and life mastery (Lachman & Bertrand, 2001), better emotional regulation (Magai & Halpern, 2001) as well as greater wisdom and practical intelligence (Baltes, Staudinger & Lindenberger, 1999).

The deftness of balancing a multitude of roles and of managing conflicts, is a unique characteristic of middle-age, irrespective of lifestyle or circumstances. Research has made progress over the past decade since Brim (1992) defined the middle years as the "last uncharted territory in human development" (p. 171). However, even with an increase in research on midlife, less is known about this chapter of life than about other age periods such as infancy, childhood, adolescence, or old age (Lachman, 2004).

Lachman and James (1997) posit that this period may have been neglected or understudied for so long because of assumptions that midlife is a relatively quiet period with little change. Or that the complexity and diversity of this period has too little consistency to accurately measure the midlife experience.

It is poignant to note that Dalton and Thompson (1986) as well as Greller and Simpson (1999) have highlighted the relevance of the influence of midlife on career stages and the barriers to employee development among midlife and older workers. London (1998), Simpson, Greller, and Stroh (2002) as well as Sterns and Doverspike (1988) imply that age-related changes in motivational variables as opposed to chronological age or cognitive abilities, are fundamental in determining successful work outcomes for middle-aged and older workers.

Boerlijst, Munnichs and Van der Heijden (1998) as well as Raynor and Entin (1982) and Warr (2001) in turn have documented the paucity of attention given to understanding how aging influences adult development on work motivation. Considering that there is an increase in organizational interest of how best to manage and motivate an older workforce, the scarcity of research related to this phenomenon shows a gap in knowledge.

Hence, midlife necessitates research from a multivariate of perspectives, taking into account, age, lifespan, career implications and impact as well as family and personal relationships and significant life markers such as illness and ageing.

1.2.1.1   Midlife in South Africa

To gain a more specific understanding of midlife in South Africa, it is relevant to examine data relating to the population. In 2017, Statistics South Africa (2017) estimated the mid-year population at 56,52 million (Figure 1.1).
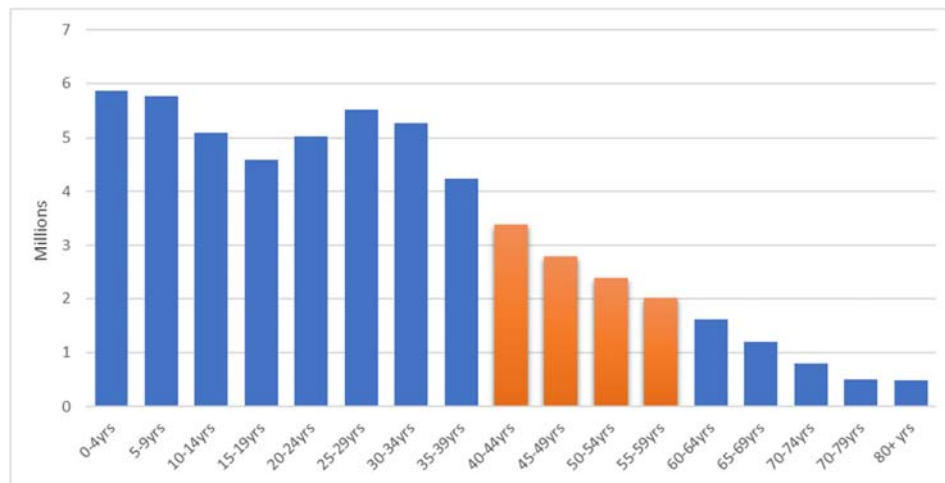
Figure 1.1: The South African population's age distribution. Adapted from Statistics South Africa (2017).

In Figure 1.1 it is shown that out of the total population, and assuming an age range of 40-60 years, there is a total of more than ten-and-a half million midlife citizens. According to Lourens and Alpasian (2002) South Africa has shown a steady increase in life expectancy, but HIV/AIDS is likely to change this and it is therefore necessary to contextualise this study of midlife in a South African context. It should also be acknowledged that South Africa has a unique cultural, political and socio-economic background which I believe, similar to Palk (2015), influence how midlife is experienced and transitioned.

1.2.2 Factors affecting individuals in midlife

Looking at the development of a new resilience scale for midlife (deemed as approximately 35 to 60 years) and viewed as one of the longest stages in the lifespan, midlife is a time of pivotal change for both men and women (Dziegielewski, Heymann, Green & Gichia, 2002; Lachman, 2004). Ryff, Singer, Love and Essex (1998) motivate further research into midlife and particularly resilience at midlife as this is a time when individuals encounter potentially stressful changes and turning points.

In addition, individuals face changes in health and well-being. Psychologically, midlife induces a plethora of unique challenges and issues to be navigated. These encompass separation, divorce, marriage/remarriage, raising children/stepchildren, new work conditions, career transitions, re-entry into the workforce, additional studies, financial changes, caring for ageing parents or relatives, retirement, deteriorating health, potential illness, and an empty nest syndrome (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2004; Lachman, 2004).

An area which is becoming increasingly highlighted is the emphasis on youth and the negative view of aging in Western societies, in particular for women (Berger, 2005).

The midlife period is compounded by a faceted interplay of multiple roles and responsibilities. There is an increasing amount of time given to managing these roles and achieving the correct balance between work, family and personal needs (Dziegielewski et al., 2002; Lachman, 2004). Individuals are trying to meet the adversarial demands of two generations — their children and their aging parents (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2004).

According to Kail and Cavanaugh (2004) the middle-aged demographic presents the highest levels of stress, in relation to how much control people perceive to have over their lives. Stress affects people of all ages but during midlife, these effects appear more prominently. During midlife, every issue that individuals face has the potential to become a

stressor. The stressor being that it transcends into an event that damages a person's physical or psychological well-being (Berger, 2005). Given the trajectory of midlife, as individuals progress through their lives, they are inevitably confronted with deaths of close friends and relatives, with parental loss being most prevalent during this stage (Bonanno, 2004; Lachman, 2004). As such Berger (2005) as well as Kail and Cavanaugh (2004) believe that the literature on lifespan indicates that everybody has at least one trauma during midlife.

Midlife lends itself to heightened re-evaluation and re-orientation. Lachman (2004) and Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson and McKee (1978) deem the age of approximately 40 years as a time of midlife crisis for some. Others refer to this as a time of midlife transition. The emphasis centred on individuals confronting the challenges of resolving issues endemic to this stage of the lifespan (Lachman, 2004). The focus on transition versus crisis at midlife, is pertinent and relevant in the work that I undertake with midlifers in my psychotherapy practice. Transitioning those clients at midlife through this period is key in averting a crisis. It is even more poignant when clients are facing the trials and tribulations at midlife, that they are able to successfully navigate the transition without salvaging too much that could sabotage their future.

Midlife is defined by the extant variability of gains and losses during this period (Dziegielewski et al., 2002). The sources of these losses have been described as major life events such as illness, divorce, or job loss, which are turning points during midlife. These turning points are significant markers in the trajectory of life, that result in a reinterpretation of the past (Lachman, 2004). Individuals in midlife assess their lives in relation to how far they've come and how long they have left to achieve their ambitions and desires. These are in relation to life markers, which form catalysts. The introspection and questioning of personal goals, relationships, career, family, the future, and the meaning of life is distressing for many

people and researchers report that fear, anxiety and depression are issues of concern at this time (Dziegielewski et al., 2002).

In my practice I see this illumination of the self as a variable that causes great consternation and is a crucial point at midlife. This is the angst that requires understanding and transformation at midlife, in order to transition and avert a crisis.

Midlife is a juncture where life stresses accumulate, and individuals face several major changes. Ryan (2009) posits that whether midlife transition is experienced as a challenge, an opportunity for positive change, or as a stressful and trying time, it is contingent on the personal resources of an individual. Individuals who are equipped with personal resources (protective factors), are deemed more resilient and more likely to cope with and adapt to these stresses and changes.

Those individuals lacking in the protective factors that contribute to resilience can be aided by interventions designed to build resilience. These are interventions such as my Midlife Mastery courses, which equip individuals with the necessary insights and tools to navigate this fraught period.

Ryan (2009) proposes the need for a valid measure of resilience in midlife as well-validated measures of resilience for use with adult populations are lacking, and more importantly there is no scale to measure resilience in the midlife population.

Baltes (1987) as well as Neugarten and Datan (1974) further substantiate that the midlife experience includes both gains and losses. They designate the most unfavourable aspects of midlife as changes in physical conditions, health, and mental functioning, as well as the act of getting older. According to research conducted by The American Board of Family Practice (1990) respondents expressed concerns about increases in chronic illness and being overweight. The positive aspects to midlife were reported as feelings of more personal

control and freedom. Included in this is a sense of being settled, cumulative life experience, financial security, freedom and independence from children. Inherent in midlife is the possibility of improving relationships with family and friends, the ability to care for frail and aging parents and helping children. Additionally, saving for retirement is an important goal. (American Board of Family Practice, 1990).

Paradoxically, the loss of fertility at menopause is experienced by some as a gain in sexual freedom (Rossi, 1994). Relinquishing parental roles, such as when children leave home, allows for exploration and an increase in marital satisfaction. It also provides the opportunity to pursue new interests and facilitates an increase in personal growth and fulfilment.

Diverse patterns of growth and decline in intelligence and cognitive functioning have been noted by some researchers (Dixon, De Frias & Maitland, 2001; Miller & Lachman, 2000, Sternberg, Grigorenko & Oh, 2001; Willis & Schaie, 1999). Traditionally, research into cognitive aging has measured older adults against their younger cohorts based on the assumption that midlife cognitive performance fits in somewhere between young and old.

When approaching research from a multidimensional perspective, these results are negligible. Those in middle-age perform similarly to younger cohorts, whereas on other dimensions, those in midlife closely mirror their older contemporaries. Key longitudinal studies indicate some aspects of cognitive functioning are maintained or even improve in midlife (Eichorn, Hunt, & Honzik, 1981; Hultsch, Hertzog & Dixon, 1998; Schaie, 1996). These results pertain to the pragmatic aspects of functioning, such as tacit knowledge that are contingent on experience (Baltes et al., 1999; Sternberg et al., 2001). Conversely, aspects pertaining to the mechanics of cognition, including speed of processing and working memory, start showing significant declines in midlife (Baltes et al., 1999). Cognitive changes

in midlife appear gradually and are not directly correlated with disability or functional impairment (Willis & Schaie, 1999). There may be some aspects of cognitive functioning that present as a decline, however a middle-aged adult is resourceful and experienced to compensate for these (Miller & Lachman, 2000).

Those in midlife are equipped to draw on higher order skills to compensate for delays in responding. In addition, there also are positive generational trends, such as higher levels of education, which creates the perception that some declines may be less obvious or significant in younger cohorts (Willis & Schaie, 1999).

A common complaint in midlife is the onset of cognitive decline, particularly pertaining to memory (Lachman, 1991). This is contradictory to research on objective change that does not substantiate widespread declines in memory until later in life. Verbal memory appears to peak in midlife, as does vocabulary, inductive reasoning, and spatial orientation (Willis & Schaie, 1999). Furthermore, wisdom appears inherent in middle-aged adults, however these seem linked to personality traits versus cognitive abilities (Staudinger, Maciel, Smith & Baltes, 1998). Overall Lachman views midlife as a rich period of life allowing for the opportunity to make valuable intellectual contributions to the family, workplace, and society in general. Sources of happiness and well-being vary by social class but there is converging evidence that midlife is a time of increased well-being (Markus, Ryff, Curhan & Palmersheim, 2004).

Midlife is not without its stressors. Similar to other research (Chiriboga, 1997) showing that stress is highest in young adulthood and midlife, Almeida and Horn (2004) monitored daily diaries over a one-week period to determine whether midlife is more stressful than other age periods. It was found that both young and those in midlife experienced more stressor days and more days with multiple stresses than older adults. In

comparison with older adults, younger and midlife adults experienced more frequent overload stressors, especially related to children and financial risk.

Work-related stressors were more prevalent in younger adults whereas older adults experienced more spouse-related stressors. Midlife adults reported that they experienced fewer stressors over which they felt no control.

As is noted in Clark-Plaskie and Lachman (1999) as well as Lachman and Weaver (1998a) an important part of health and well-being is a sense of control. Some aspects of control are associated with an increase in age, whereas in other areas, control diminishes. A common finding is that middle-aged adults experience a greater sense of control over their finances than younger adults (Lachman &Weaver, 1998b). Yet, those in middle-age report less control than younger adults over their children.

Aldwin and Levenson (2001) says there is a connection between stress and health. Good coping skills during midlife is essential according to Aldwin and Levenson (2001), as adults encounter stressors in numerous areas of life, such as the death of parents or declining health. Yet, with the necessary coping skills and resources, midlife adults can grow even in the face of stressors. There is some evidence to suggest that middle-aged adults cope via assimilation (primary control) and accommodation (secondary control) according to Brandstadter and Renner (1990), Heckhausen (2001) as well as Whitbourne and Connolly (1999). Assimilative strategies are most likely to be used in those circumstances where adults can meet their goals, where they voluntarily choose to make desired changes to a situation or environment. When there are insurmountable obstacles to goals, they make use of accommodative skills, thereby adjusting aspects of the self to resolve discrepancies.

Those in midlife have the ability to draw on previous life experiences and are thereby able to make use of adaptive coping skills (Aldwin & Levenson, 2001).

The literature is divided as to whether or not midlife is a time in which challenges are more prevalent compared with other periods. However, middle-aged adults appear better equipped than other age groups to deal with them, this is attributable to the development of skills to moderate difficulties (Aldwin & Levenson, 2001). Moen and Wethington (1999) describe midlife adults as having interconnected roles. According to McAdams (2001) both within the realm of family and work domains, middle-aged adults relay their experience and values to the younger generation. Middle-age encompasses connecting with the lives of young and old. This may be evidenced as duality both in the launching of children into the world and the experiencing of an empty nest. Midlifers may experience conflicting roles in adjusting to grown children returning home (boomerang kids), becoming grandparents, giving or receiving financial assistance or taking care of a widowed or sick parent. Putney and Bengtson (2001) also suggest that there is a period of adjustment for someone at midlife who needs to adapt to the new role of being the oldest generation in the family after both parents have passed away.

The evolution of career paths during midlife is diverse due to the psychological and social dynamic. Some individuals are defined by stable careers, with little flux, while others fluctuate, experiencing redundancy, layoffs and unemployment (Barnett, 1997). Furthermore, the lability of employment is dependent on the age of the individual, the economic climate and the context of the job market. Adults at middle-age may encounter age discrimination in some working contexts. Finding a job in midlife could be challenging given that the remuneration expected by older employees is higher than that of the younger workforce or technological advances may render the older employee's skills as outdated or obsolete.

Another factor to consider in the work cycle of midlife is the transition to retirement (Kim & Moen, 2001). Avolio and Sosik (1999) denote a preretirement phase that can occur at different junctures in time, and is influenced by historical variations, timing, planning, adjustment, and resources. These variables influence retirement decisions. Retirement can be a welcome event for some individuals, and the planning therein can facilitate a better transition. Others may need to postpone retirement due economic constraints or an unexpected change in circumstances. Retirement may even be mandatory for some, who are not quite ready nor willing to embrace this.

A common finding amongst middle-aged adults is the lack of leisure time (American Association of Retired Persons, 2002). Therefore, retirement may provide a welcome change, providing the opportunity to explore interests and spend more time with family and friends (Eichorn et al., 1981).

For women, midlife has often been characterised by physical changes, in particular, changes related to reproduction such as menopause. The median age of the last menstrual period is typically 50-52 years, however there is wide variation in the menopause experience (Avis, 1999; Rossi, 1994). Interestingly, Avis (1999) did not find any evidence to support the idea that distress is experienced by all women during menopause and Lachman (2004) does not attribute symptoms such as depression, irritability, weight gain, insomnia, and memory loss to menopause.

1.2.3   Midlife crisis

The general perception of midlife as defined by a population at large, will be accompanied by the word "crisis". This is endemic of a widespread, cultural stereotype about midlife. It is an inaccurate portrayal for Wethington, Kessler and Pixley (2004) who report that only a small percentage of the populace seems to experience a midlife crisis, while according to Lachman et al. (1994) positive descriptors such as competency, responsibility, knowledge, and power are associated with middle-age. Eichorn et al. (1981) show empirical support for both these views — that those experiencing midlife are subject to both turmoil and success. Turmoil or crisis is experienced during midlife (Levinson et al., 1978; Sheehy, 1976) yet it is also a period of peak functioning and responsibility (Neugarten, 1968). Neugarten and Datan (1974) noted that researchers and clinicians' differing views are what led to the view of midlife as either a crisis or a plateau.

Further highlighting oppositional research, many researchers believe that nothing much happens in midlife — it is a period of stability. However, there are those, in particular clinicians, who hold the view that the problems and crises in mental health are brought on by physical changes and social upheavals during midlife (Lachman, 2004).

Midlife is often cited as a period of crisis and unrest (Farrell & Rosenberg, 1981; Jaques 1965; Oldham & Liebert, 1989) and can be attributed to the fact that it was conceptualised from clinical accounts of middle-class, middle-aged clients' problems (Hunter & Sundel, 1989). Fortunately, further research by Baruch and Brooks-Gunn (1984), Eichorn et al. (1981), Giele (1982), Lachman and James (1997), Rossi (1994), as well as Willis and Reid (1999) contributed to providing a more balanced view of midlife.

Survey-based research on the other hand have defined those in middle-age as being on top of their game as proposed by Neugarten and Datan (1974). In order to assimilate these

disparate views, the experiences of midlife must be considered within a multidisciplinary, contextual perspective on lifespan (Baltes et al., 1999). It is vital to take into consideration, the vast and diverse range of possibilities for gains and losses, the timing of life events, gender, culture, race, ethnicity, and social class.

The opposing views held by researchers and clinicians on the subject of midlife, serves as impetus for research into reconciling the disparate views on midlife. It is paradoxical that midlife be characterized simultaneously as being at one's peak and as full of turmoil and crisis. I would like to position midlife as a transition versus a crisis.

Lachman (2004) posits that these positions represent two extremes along a continuum, and relatively few people function at either of these endpoints. The majority of the populace fall within the median, managing adequately, experiencing neither a peak nor a crisis.

Another way of characterizing midlife is that midlife does not describe the same cohort but could represent individual differences. Midlife is a time of crisis for some, but for others it may be the peak of their lives — some individuals perform well while others do not. A third possibility lends itself to a sequential relationship between crisis and peak.

As Erikson (1963) postulated, it may be necessary or functionally adaptive to experience a crisis or turmoil, in order for growth and development to occur (Avis 1999).

It is possible that when a person experience a crisis, insights, awareness and growth result which makes it positive development and a peak in performance which is akin to the changes noted by Marcia (1980) during the transition to adolescence. When a person experiences a crisis before the resolution of ego identity, there is long-term adjustment. It is however true that ndividuals display differential outcomes in various domains of life (Marcia, 1980). Therefore, according to Baltes et al. (1999) it may appear that things are in a state of flux in one area of life while events in another domain may be uneventful or lived with

competence and success. If multiple domains of life are accounted for, it follows that the highs and lows, gains and losses, will be evident.

The possibility of four alternative perceptions of midlife, allows for midlife to be considered as a time of upheaval and of mastery (Lachman, 2004). Some individuals at midlife may show a pattern of crisis, whereas others present as capable and successful, or there may a combination of crisis and competence exhibited (Lachman, 2004). According to Eichorn et al. (1981) a common expectation of midlife is that there is an inevitable crisis, however, the research does not support this. This raises the pertinent question of whether a crisis is unique to midlife (Wethington et al., 2004) or whether it is cohort specific (Rosenberg, Rosenberg & Farrell, 1999).

Jaques (1965) believed a midlife crisis was fuelled by a fear of impending death. More contemporary researchers show that major life events such as illness or divorce are sources creating crisis, but these are not necessarily only attributable to midlife (Lachman et al., 1994; Wethington et al., 2004). Lachman and Bertrand (2001) and Wethington et al. (2004) report that one third of the time what appears as a midlife crisis is triggered by events such as job loss, financial problems, or illness, which can occur at any time in adulthood

Personality has been identified as a pivotal factor, leading some to be more predisposed to experience crises at transition points throughout their life trajectory, such as people who are predisposed to neuroticism (Costa & McCrae, 1980; Lachman & Bertrand, 2001; Whitbourne & Connolly, 1999). The turning points in life are those significant changes in the lifespan, an experience or insight that provokes an individual to question or reinterpret the past, similar to a midlife crisis (Clausen, 1998, Rosenberg et al., 1999).

Wethington et al. (2004) researched those areas of life where turning points occurred and whether these turning points intersected at midlife. The most common turning points

related to the work domain are generally precipitated by a change in job or career. These changes occurred generally at midlife for men but earlier for women (Clausen, 1997; Moen & Wethington, 1999). The fluctuations endemic to midlife are not unique. Wethington et al. (2004) report that entry into the thirties may be more disruptive than turning 40, and this is confirmed by Levinson et al.'s (1978) view on the transition that happen at age 30. This is congruous with the notion of a "quarter-life crisis" experienced by those in their mid-twenties and early thirties as they attempt to find meaning and satisfaction in work and fulfilling relationships (Robbins & Wilner, 2001).

1.2.4   Midlife as transition

The middle of life has been described as a mid-term or mid-semester at school, akin to being in the middle of the summer, in the middle of a trip or vacation, or even in the middle of a novel (Lachman & James, 1997). In a middle state, it is inevitable that there will be retrospection to assess what has come before or to evaluate previous accomplishments, also to look to the future, to determine or anticipate what comes next or remains to be done. One has already invested significant effort, into life at midlife, therefore a level of circumspection is involved in considering future plans. Lachman and James (1997) define this future as the threshold away from the beginning and toward the end.

This introspection and reflection are not applicable to all at midlife, some, inevitably will not consider their past and future in midlife. However, for those who are goal-oriented, midlife is deemed a time for reflection, but is different to the life review that occurs in later life (Erikson, 1963) a period when time left is presumably shorter and emotional goals are more salient than informational ones (Carstensen, Isaacowitz & Charles, 1999; Fredrickson & Carstensen, 1990).

Erikson (1963) differentiates later life, as achieving ego integrity and involves accepting life for what it has been. Therefore, the emphasis in midlife may be on what still remains to be done. Those who have reached midlife, are cognisant of the advancement of time but tend to assume there is still a substantial, but not infinite, amount of time left — presumably, just as much time left as has gone by. It is impossible to estimate individual lifespan and one is unaware of an endpoint, so the timing of the middle is an estimate.

Believing that midlife signifies life is half over or that half still remains, could determine varied outcomes, as Isaacowitz, Charles and Carstensen's (2000) research on optimism suggests. The dilemma of midlife could serve as a catalyst for change but not necessarily the impetus for a crisis. In midlife, as in any other period of life, an individual must make personal choices, discern how to invest time and resources, and delineate what areas to change (Baltes & Baltes,1990).

This discernment and delineation are poignant and determining factors in averting a crisis and facilitating a transition into midlife. Accepting that one has some control over outcomes, also means taking responsibility or blame when things do not go well (Lachman & Firth, 2004).

Facing a serious accident, loss, or illness in midlife or knowing someone with chronic illness or who died in middle-age often leads to a major restructuring of time and a reassessment of priorities in life (Aldwin & Levenson, 2001) and serves as a "wake-up call."

Leisure time is often not prioritised at midlife, with more emphasis placed on managing a multitude of roles and achieving work/life balance intersected with family, personal interests and health needs (Lachman, 2004).

O'Connor's research purports that midlife transition is a crucial time that holds possibilities for growth and development in the lives of many adults (Erikson, 1950; Gould,

1978; Havighurst, 1979; Jaques, 1965; Jung, 1971; Levinson et al., 1978; Neugarten, 1968; Vaillant, 1977; Wolfe & Kolb, 1980). O'Connor acknowledges that these theorists have helped illuminate the forces that propel transitions in midlife and further identified general possibilities and directions for growth inherent in the midlife transition (e.g. integration of the male-female opposites). However, O'Connor remains sceptical as to whether personal growth and increased maturity will accrue and under what conditions. O'Connor proposes an exploratory study which seeks to better understand those factors that enable personal growth via a personal paradigm shift during the most significant transition in adulthood, the midlife transition.

O'Connor and Wolfe (2007) provide a succinct synthesis of midlife. Midlife is a period of inevitable changes. These changes are both internal and external and challenge the adaptive capacity of established and familiar paradigms. External factors serve to transmogrify what might be a simple anomaly into a source of acute crisis.

When the structures of the old paradigm begin to crumble, the rules, methodologies, and norms that served as the status quo, regulating one's life, now become foci of attention and concern. These ingrained norms and beliefs are often taken for granted. What follows is a questioning of beliefs, values, and assumptions. Often there is a quest for new paradigms or formulae in the context of past failures. The formulation of a new paradigm is sometimes on the cusp of fundamental, underlying changes in a person's structure of beliefs, values, feelings and knowledge. To allow for a paradigm shift, requires the re-configuration of basic premises that constitute one's sphere of action and being. A new perspective is formed by adding different and alternative pieces to the paradigm and the creative re-arrangement of parts of the old. One's constructions of reality are fundamentally different.

It is unrealistic to expect a new paradigm to be fully fledged and mature. The paradigm needs to metamorphize and cohere. O'Connor and Wolfe (2007) recognize this and state that the early versions of a new paradigm are usually crude and clumsy and require time and experience to refine, despite the "claim" of a new paradigm to solve the problems that led the old one into crisis. Transitioning to a higher level of organization requires the navigation of an extensive passage through uncertainty, similar to the process of re-engineering the proverbial plane in flight.

The theorists that have collated and researched adult development are known as phase theorists. These phase theorists (Erikson, 1950; Havighurst, 1979; Levinson et al., 1978; Schein, 1978) are predisposed to view the course of life as seasonal in nature.

They have focused on demarcating sets of issues and/or tasks characteristic of each age-linked adult period. O'Connor and Wolfe (2007) highlight that these theorists have traditionally been less concerned with building hierarchical models that identify qualitatively different and increasingly inclusive paradigms, this despite having clear ideas on what represented good resolutions to each challenge.

Conversely, stage theorists have given less impetus to judging specifically when the later stages in their models occur during life. When examining the question of growth at midlife, the Transition Sequence Model (O'Connor & Wolfe, 1987) could denote either a cycle or a spiral of development. These authors posit that whilst phase-like transitions are inevitable, stage-like growth and development are not an inevitable guarantee.

At midlife, new issues will be brought to the fore and these issues inevitably approached and managed in the same old and familiar ways. These processes are perceived as essentially cyclic in nature by O'Connor and Wolfe (2007). Although the content may be different, the modus operandi in terms of coping and making meaning thereof remain static.

Changes are seen as a spiral of development and transpire when life issues are dealt with in a qualitatively new way. In the context of a spiral of development however, a transition sequence is viewed as a pertinent opportunity for paradigm shifts to take place.

Midlife presents as a phase of rising discontent and an individual becomes dissatisfied or disillusioned with his or her current life arrangements (O'Connor & Wolfe, 1986). Often this is symbiotic with some form of crisis, peaking negative emotions and incorporating some scope of real-world changes. Or this can present as an organizational event (merger, re-structuring, transfer) the incorporation of which, thrusts the individual into a midlife crisis. In Lewin's terms, this is seen as an unfreezing. The post crisis phases necessitate re-integration into the individual.

A pertinent question is to ask at what stage or under what conditions will personal growth take place during and after these steps of transition. These authors' research propose that the extent to which basic re-examination or paradigm shifts occur is as a result of the cycle of spiral of development. They emphasise that each phase of life elicits critical issues and tasks which mandate timely resolution. The opportunity inherent in facing up to and working through these issues provides the fertile ground for paradigm shift.

Midlife transition is fundamentally a fertile garden in which to re-evaluate, question and re-examine the self. Research into midlife requires introspection into what specifically triggers and facilitates paradigm shifts. It is valid to evaluate the consequences for the individual who do undertake changes. It is common for people to question, doubt and discard their current beliefs and life choices in times of crisis. This is particularly acute when assimilating changes that are incongruent or oppositional to their current paradigm.

Incorporating changes means discarding old tenets, re-constructing and ingesting new belief systems, insights and values which are more accommodating of contemporaneous

career, life commitments and involvements. For some, the anxiety and stress provoked by change is fraught and they revert to familiar and entrenched paradigms. Not all transitions give birth to monumental changes in paradigm, nor can we view every change as significant or enhancing.

Case studies as reported by O'Connor and Wolfe (2007) illustrate the diversity and extent of incorporating new paradigms and provide insight into changes and transitions experienced by both genders.

O'Connor and Wolfe (2007) write that Dan S, an engineer, recounted, "For my first 30+ years, I equipped myself with an elaborate array of facades. I worked hard and excelled, but I found that I wasn't satisfied." While working towards an MBA and after moving into sales, he was asked to attend a human relations lab at work. "For the first time, I was associated with people who accepted me as being me. This freed me up to do a lot of changing." Dan S was able to assess personal growth as per the following dichotomies: "highly structured to flexible, closed to open, insensitive to sensitive, aloof to self-disclosing, quick with put-downs to less judgmental, and from smart ass to being more tolerant of others."

Personal growth is frequently accompanied by unforeseen changes, interpersonally, Dan realised his social life consisted of acquaintances and not true friends. His relationships were superficial, with few relationships existing below cocktail level. Post these paradigmatic shifts, Dan reported his working relationships as "much closer, no bullshit relationships." Reflection post these changes meant that Dan could identify with acceptance of self, pursue learning about himself with vigour, embrace an enhanced acceptance of being ok with the ensuing sense of confidence, as well as the ability to develop closer friendships with deeper intimacy, and an accrual in professional competence. This case study supports the research

into paradigm shifts at midlife and supports an increase in excitement, a gathering of momentum and an expansiveness that encompasses future trajectories and a deeper sense of purpose and self.

The second case study by O'Connor and Wolfe (2007) is about Jane T. Jane T experienced an increased sense of self-responsibility with a gain in autonomy and self-directedness. She segued from rigidity to flexibility, or, in Rogers' terms, organic flow took place according to O'Connor and Wolfe (2007). Jane T began to express increased interest in and appreciation for spontaneous interpersonal relationships, contrary to her predilection for tightly role bounded interactions. This culminated in attempts to incorporate career and other vital aspects of life into one framework, to circumvent disparateness and enhance balance. The resultant individuation fostered an anchoring in identity less on career or family and the placement of more emphasis on the authentic self.

Given that there are some fundamental tenets to changing paradigms for both genders, key differences were noted. Many women in O'Connor and Wolfe's (2007) sample had devoted a significant part of their early adulthood to bearing and raising children. At midlife they embarked on starting (or re-starting) careers, this change providing considerable impetus for the development of a new paradigm less focussed on family and more on organizational life.

Many women displayed a shift from a relational orientation to more proactive agency, conversely, men were shifting in the opposite direction — less focused on achievements and more of an emphasis on connectedness and meaningful relationships. Both genders presented an increase in self direction and balance, but from polar continuums (O'Connor & Wolfe, 2007).

Research into midlife has far reaching implications for the organisational culture of working life. As national and global environments increase in complexity and dynamics, theorists espouse more organic, humanistic organizations, with the capacity for flexibility, innovation and adaptability. These models, however, have tended to be precocious in their design as they outpace the theoretical growth attributed to those individuals tasked with such organizational visions.

A criticism of these theories of organization is that they tend to lose focus on the individual, in the same way that theories of individuals tend to obfuscate the larger open system background variables.

Torbert (1987) researched a path to facilitating change. It is a framework rooted in structural (stage) development theories that encompass both individual and organizational development. Torbert determines that only those individuals who have themselves progressed to later stages of development can successfully champion their organizations to the correspondent higher stages of potential development. Understanding the critical processes of adult development and how the organization can influence them is vital to development interpersonally and organizationally.

The process of shifting paradigms during the midlife transition is a phenomenon that requires both internal and external change. O'Connor and Wolfe (2007) view progress as a transitional sequence involving some actual scope of external changes (along with the related disruptions and emotionality). These changes are as integral to the process of shifting paradigms as the discovery and subsequent expression of one's inner self. Definitive paradigmatic shifts cannot be attributed solely as a result of changes in the environment. An inner drive propels the process for some and for others, these changes are precipitated by an external event prompting the questioning of the current operating paradigm.

These authors noted that the governing principle for all, seems to be that the process itself perpetuates into an ongoing interaction between the inner and outer worlds. A minimum level of competence and ego strength is mandatory in finding and expressing one's inner self, as well as managing some scope of real-world change. There also needs to be an investment in one's ongoing learning, both formal and experiential. These efforts, in combination with the riskiness of essentially constructing a new self and a new reality seem to bear fruit. Those individuals who had made the most progress in shifting paradigms, were also the most zestful and positive emotionally. They presented as the most enthusiastic about their careers, with a higher degree of anticipation and preparedness for the future.

A truer orientation to self and the subsequent events resulting from the paradigm shifts translates into novel and adaptive ways of acting and managing life events and the self, more effectively. Progression to each higher stage transcends the issues that tie up energy at the previous level shown as archetypes:

- The outer directed conformist learns to set his or her own goals and works hard to achieve them.
- The competitive achiever learns to join others in win/win collaboration towards joint goals.

Therefore, it follows that an increased awareness of self and the world perpetuates wider choices and increases a realistic confidence on a broader range of issues.

These changes are evident in the following scenarios: In working interdependently, in redefining one's work in wider perspectives, in joining others in collaborative rather than coercive relations, and in more openly dealing with authority and handling conflict (O'Connor & Wolfe, 2007).

The process of change is dynamic and a self-creative process, therefore allowing tolerance for change and mistakes is important (as it would be in any innovative endeavour). Clumsy and imperfect initial attempts at self-directedness are to be expected. Accepting imperfections is a small price to pay when contextualised with the alternative of not developing (O'Connor & Wolfe, 1987).

Those who are working at shifting paradigms, have the ability to compensate. This is evidenced by their ability to act autonomously (and require less supervision) as a result of increasing power derived from new inner drives and needs. These individuals typically work better to integrate career, family, and self, consequently the likelihood of experiencing unaccounted for energy drains due to the inevitable conflicts and dynamics between these variables is mitigated (O'Connor & Wolfe, 2007).

Shepard (1975) views career and life planning, for example, as a means of self-confrontation for creating a life worth living or the possibility of changes can be incorporated in a more mechanical, bottom line way. Corporations invest a great deal in skills training and management development. However, investing in both self-study and collaborative inquiry encourages individuals to develop to higher levels (Torbert, 1987). This personal growth becomes entrenched as a catalyst for skill acquisition.

Focussing on self-growth is as important as skills acquisition in the corporate arena. Wolfe (1980) promulgates that organizations need to be more attentive to promoting developmental processes in the various stages of adulthood and that these institutions need to focus on the overall development of the whole person in their programmes.

Neilsen (1987) reports that competent managers are expected to cope with increasingly frequent demands for quick answers to emergent problems, with scant time for reflective thinking. These demands have a spill over into family lives, resulting in increased

stress levels. Adult competency and learning in the form of programmes such as an Executive Masters in Business Administration (EMBA) increase the possibilities for expressive activity and moving away from rigid roles and responsibilities. Seen in this context, the EMBA can be a rare opportunity: 1) to deal holistically with others who share the same problems as normal adults at midlife, 2) to mount a personal revival, using classroom to question, ponder, explore, and engage in learning for its own sake without the pressure of having to come up with actionable answers at every turn, 3) to explore one's life situation (career, family, and friends) and one's own socio-emotional growth without the ordinary requirements for modelling confidence, competence, and commitment (Neilsen, 1987).

There is a certain paradox inherent in encouraging dependent employees to be more autonomous and self-directing. Those who have assimilated, grown and seek ways to create organizational settings to support their new levels of functioning may overlook the need for others to experience the same process of change. Yet, changes in the field of Psychology, such as the growth in the field of adult development cause companies to feel compelled to take advantage of these changed capabilities in individuals (O'Connor & Wolfe, 2007).

Parsons (2016) has been instrumental in furthering research into utilizing Positive Psychology as a methodology for coaching as it could provide parameters for practice while also serving to define a system of interventions and measurements for coaches to use. Furthermore, the discipline of Positive Psychology is rooted in scientific evidence and has the potential to facilitate improvements in coach training, accreditation, and credentialing guidelines (Parsons (2016).

From the literature it is clear that Positive Psychology coaching differs from other coaching in its emphasis on strengths and this type of coaching can be used as its own model of coaching or in collaboration with other forms of coaching.

1.3   Rationale for this study

The rationale for this study was motivated by the growing evidence that midlife should not be treated as a crisis. From a psychiatric perspective, Chandra (2011) believes that midlife crisis is preventable and should be treated as a transitional phase — this phase provides new opportunities and opportunity for growth. Mental preparation may reduce overwhelming feelings that lead to crisis, therefore there may be benefits to accepting aging early on. In general midlife is seen as a negative, but in reality, many describe the experience as somewhat positive. Midlife can be greatly beneficial and rewarding if viewed as a time of personal growth.

Thus, by treating midlife as a transitional phase, with the initial experience being difficult and confusing but as time passes, it can evolve into an experience of self-growth and self-realization (Chandra, 2011).

Furthermore, there is a need for further research into midlife, in particular research in South Africa with its various cultural, political and socio-economic influences. According to The MacArthur Foundation, midlife is perhaps the least studied and most ill-defined of any period in life (MacArthur Foundation, 2018). Hayslip and Panek (2002) share a similar perspective in that despite portraits of midlife emphasizing such events as the empty nest syndrome, menopause, or the midlife crisis, "little is known about these events and other key experiences in midlife" (p.111).

The exclusive focus on pathology that has dominated so much of the study of psychology, has given rise to a model of the human being, lacking in the positives, such as hope, wisdom, creativity, future mindedness, courage, spirituality, responsibility and perseverance, that make life worth living. This emphasis on pathology obviates the notion of a fulfilled individual and the concept of a thriving community.

The primary aim of Positive Psychology is to initiate catalytic change in psychology, to move away from preoccupation with repairing the worst things in life and to create and build positive qualities. At a subjective level, Positive Psychology focusses on valued subjective experiences which are in the past (well-being, contentment, satisfaction), future oriented (hope and optimism) and in the present (flow and happiness). On a societal or group level the emphasis is on civic virtues, better citizenship, responsibility, nurture, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance and work ethics, whereas on an individual level, the focus is on positive individual traits of courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future mindedness, spirituality, talent, wisdom and the capacity for love and vocation (Seligman, 2010).

Positive Psychology gives relevance to the concept of well-being. The elements of well-being are termed PERMA: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (Seligman, 2010). Eliminating the disabling conditions of life is laudable, but it is not the same undertaking as building the enabling conditions of-life.

This is because the skill set in building better relationships, having more meaning in life, more engagement, and more positive emotion is almost entirely different from building the skills of fighting depression, anxiety, and anger. Positive Psychology therefore moves away from developing and using interventions to decrease suffering and misery, but rather aims to develop interventions that facilitate the enabling conditions of life.

With increasing emphasis on the search for evidence-based framework in coaching, Positive Psychology has been elevated as a natural ally for coaching (Biswas-Diener, 2010). There is an increasing body of research supporting the opinion that applying a Positive Psychology framework to coaching provides an empirical grounding for coaching. This approach is instrumental in supporting professional coaches from slipping into the domains of

pseudo-science, pop psychology, or self-help (Grant & Cavanagh, 2007). Positive Psychology, as introduced by Martin Seligman during his term as president of the American Psychological Association (APA), has been pivotal in enhancing people skills and improving functioning during therapeutic, coaching, and training programmes (Sheldon, Kashdan, & Steger, 2011). There is, however, a lack of empirical data, in the field of Positive Psychology coaching with executives, as per a review of the executive coaching literature by Kauffman and Scouler (2004).

1.4   Aim of the study

I have personal experience of a midlife crisis and have managed to navigate this to a transition. In addition, I work with senior executives to assist them in transitioning midlife, both personally and within the context of their careers. Therefore, this study is of particular interest and importance to me. The context and rationale of this study are rooted in a new epistemological perspective which will contribute to the growing body of knowledge on midlife. Moreover, this new perspective is valid and relevant because research into midlife thus far, has focused on crisis versus transition or awakening. As such I believe that the arrival of Positive Psychology enables me (and future researchers) to explore, understand the triggers and treat the symptoms of midlife from a perspective of addressing strengths rather than trying to fix weaknesses, from a perspective of midlife as a transition period — an awakening rather than a crisis.

By adopting a positive stance towards midlife as an awakening instead of the negative crisis, as it is too often termed, this study's overall aim is to explore midlife amongst my contemporaries, both male and female, to give voice to their individual experiences of midlife to ultimately provide a guideline for each of them to guide them in this transition phase. Having access to the participants through my work with them, the aim of this study can be

fulfilled through a qualitative ethnographic methodology. Data collection will be in the form of observations, field notes, recordings of coaching sessions and formal interviews.

1.5   Chapter outline

Chapter 1 is a brief introduction to this research on midlife, why it is important and relevant as well as what I aim to achieve by using a qualitative ethnographic methodology. Chapter 2 will elaborate on the concept of midlife as well as the various theories and perspectives that can be used to investigate midlife.

I will also position this research within the post-modern epistemology and how Positive Psychology is relevant to the study of midlife.

Chapter 3 discusses the research design and methodology. This chapter discusses the application of a qualitative methodology, the participant selection process, how data will be collected in the field as well as the analysis of the results to give voice to the participants' experiences. Confirmability, transferability, dependability as quality measures will be elaborated on together with the ethical considerations given in this study.

The participants' narratives will be presented in Chapter 4. The structure of the results will be such that the overall aim of the research is clearly addressed. The conclusions and recommendations that stem from this research will be discussed in Chapter 5, as well as some elaboration on potential future research and the limitation of this study.

Chapter 2
Theoretical orientation and literature review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides further detail on the concept of midlife and the relevant theoretical perspectives that frame the topic of the research. I will extrapolate more on the epistemological stance I am taking and its relevancy to new methods of exploring midlife in the context of an interpretive paradigm and Positive Psychology.

2.2 Epistemology and theoretical orientation

Terre Blanche and Durrheim (2006) define paradigms as "all-encompassing systems of interrelated practice and thinking that define the nature of their enquiry along three dimensions: ontology, epistemology and methodology" (p. 6).

I will approach this research from a postmodern perspective as it fits my personal belief created through years of advising midlifers, that there is no one specific way of viewing and understanding midlife, that midlife requires interpretation within the context it is happening, and the experiences cannot be reduced to numbers (as in positivism). Kroeze (2012) says "postmodernism is an overarching philosophical paradigm, presupposing that realities are created (ontology), the knowledge is fluid and provisional (epistemology), that interpretive and critical methods are more suitable to study a plural society (methodology) and that no one set of values are per definition better than another (axiology)" (p. 2).

Years of growing mistrust in the religious, political and philosophical descriptions of what the world is and the cultures in it, sparked postmodernism (Doan, 1977) In other words, postmodernism, according to Parry and Doan (1994) was a reaction to the idea that there is one truth, or one single claim to the truth.

Language is significant in the modernist paradigm — it forms the link between subjective and objective worlds. Postmodernists have deviated from modernists in that their focus is now on how language is used and how people constitute their world and belief systems (Freedman & Combs, 1996). A postmodern stance requires that interpretation becomes an end in itself and so, according to Terre Blanche and Durrheim (2006) interpretive strategies of research have evolved and is based on the idea that cultures, including objects, traditions, and practices can be interpreted through interpretation of narratives.

Doan (1997) states that alternate views are important even embraced and postmodern researchers warn of the danger of believing there is one single story or one single reality. Yet postmodernism is critiqued for what seem to believe are limited ability for measuring and describing phenomenon under study in precise ways (Freedman & Combs, 1996). Overall, postmodernists tend to focus more on meaning versus the modernist concerns with facts and rules (Hargrave, 2006).

Postmodernism rejects the notion of objective knowledge, placing emphasis instead on knowledge being "an expression of the language, values and beliefs of the particular communities and contexts in which we exist" (Lynch, 1997, p. 353). According to Doan (1997) postmodernism facilitates diversity, flexibility, and the opportunity to write a narrative which fully takes into account the meanings individual place on their stories, their memories and their perceptions. It is a matter of being able to question all things, yet this will leave one where everything appears uncertain. However, Rorty (1991) believes "the repudiation of the traditional logocentric image of the human being as Knower does not seem to us to entail that we face an abyss, but merely that we face a range of choices" (p. 132), whilst Freedman and Combs (1996) are of the opinion that looking at the view from a postmodern lens requires

that more rather than less detailed attention be given to how we construct the world and our associated actions. Taking into account the structure and ontology of postmodernism, the concept of reality is a fit with this this study because cultural phenomena can be examined and interpreted via interpreting the narratives of the participants.

I have adopted a postmodern approach, known as an interpretive paradigm, for precisely the reason that I believe, similar to Doan (1997) that reality cannot be explained in one single way, and many alternative meanings may be possible.

The origins of an interpretivist paradigm had their genesis in the philosophy of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology and Wilhelm Dilthey and other German philosophers' study of interpretive understanding called hermeneutics (Mertens, 2005). Interpretivist approaches to research espouse understanding "the world of human experience" (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p.36), they imply that "reality is socially constructed" (Mertens, 2005, p.12). The interpretivist researcher focusses upon the "participants' views of the situation being studied" (Creswell, 2003, p.8) and places emphasis on the research of participants' own background and experiences. Orlikowski and Baroudi (1991) states that interpretivism focuses on reality as a human construct and it can only be understood through a subjective approach.

What follows, is a look at the different theoretical perspectives of human development and their views on midlife. Over the years, many theories have been developed, some of which might not be relevant to apply in a postmodern study, but which are nonetheless important to take into consideration as background to understanding different theories and different ways of studying midlife.

2.3 Theoretical perspectives on midlife

2.3.1 Freud

Palk (2015) determines that no study of midlife development will be complete if Sigmund Freud is not mentioned somewhere. Choosing to research midlife from a psychoanalytic perspective, requires acknowledging that individuals transit a series of stages, wherein they confront the conflict between biological drives and social expectations. How these are resolved are determinants to the individual's ability to learn, their social interactions and how they cope with anxiety. Sigmund Freud, father of the psychoanalytic movement, examined the unconscious drives of his patients. These formed the constructs of his psychosexual theory. The emphasis was on how parents manage their child's sexual and aggressive drives in the first few years. This forms the basis for healthy personality development, according to Freud. Freud's theory of psychoanalysis identifies three distinct parts of the personality — id, ego, and the superego and these become integrated over a succession of five stages.

Psychosexual development, as per Freud (1972) emerges during childhood, when sexual impulses migrate from the oral to the anal and then to the genital regions of the body. Each of these stages is perilous for parents, as they tread a fine line between permitting too much or too little gratification of their child's basic needs. Finding the right balance here, means that children will develop into well-adjusted adults with a capacity for mature sexuality and participation in family life.

Freud's libidinal stage was the start of stage-based theories of adult development according to Fine (1973). With a particular focus on women and midlife, Hargrave (2006) says that Freud maintained women must not do anything that is masculine, but only that which is feminine so that they can be rewarded. In particular, for a women's identity to grow

she needs to fulfil her role as support function within the family. Should women compete as men due to the it can be viewed as a neurosis.

Freud was the first to address the importance of a formative early parent-child relationship on development theory. However, his theory was subject to criticism, because it placed overemphasis on the influence of sexual feelings in development. It was also an exclusive theory that placed relevance on problems of the sexually repressed, well-to-do adults and paid scant regard to those cultures differing from nineteenth-century Victorian society.

2.3.2   Jung

Jung's (1933) theoretical views were strikingly different to Freud's. According to Palk (2015) Jung's conceptions of midlife transition, indeed crisis, are still poignant and they are frequently cited in postmodern literature on midlife (Helson 1997; Lachman & James, 1997; Levinson et al., 1978; McAdams, 1993; Parker & Aldwin, 1997).

Jung (1933) proposes that the goal of any individual is to develop consciousness — by the end of life, the unconscious should be fully conscious. This whole process is called individuation and is characterised by resolving and becoming fully cognisant of all underlying, repressed, traumatic and difficult memories. This whole process was proposed as enhancing and facilitating of growth. Unfortunately, not everyone can reach individuation (Jung, 1933). According to Jung's observations society places no value related to the inner-self — only those external accomplishments are worthy of praise, but people should not pay attention to a negative idea that life is pre-ordained, and that nature has ordered things (Jung, 1933).

Jung suggested that puberty is the time when the ability to navigate psychological problems begins (Hargrave, 2006). It is akin to a psychic birth where the adolescent can now

consciously distinguish the self from the parents. Unresolved identity crises from adolescence are also sometimes revisited in midlife. Moreover, it sometimes happens that when children reach adolescence it is a trigger for the parent's own midlife crisis due to unresolved issues (Palk, 2015). Jung (1933) linked depression to those presenting with rigid and inflexible personalities. Jung (1971) suggested that transition into midlife may take place in the forties, possibly the fifties. The transition process can be delayed if the parents are still still alive and, for men, the death of a father may have a much greater impact on a man or, as Jung (1933, p. 107) described it a "catastrophic ripening".

As people progress into their middle years, there might be self-doubt and internal disharmony (Jung, 1933). It might be a smooth process if a person is well prepared, but difficulties start when people hold misconceptions carried over from childhood that are not in line with the real world (Jung, 1933). The need to hold onto youth and thus remaining unconscious seems to be a problem at midlife transition (Jung, 1971). The transition to middle-age is indirect and not apparent, and seems to emerge from the unconscious (Jung, 1933). Some people might not be equipped to deal with midlife and hold on to the perceptions that the first half of life is sufficient for the rest of their lives (Palk, 2015).

The concept of death and fear thereof at midlife is abstract and remote and Jung (1933) did not consider it a significant problem during middle-age as other theorists like Dickstein (1972) and Jaques (1965) do. Rather, midlife difficulties are because of significant psychological changes and are more transformational than physical changes.

Jung (1971) believed it was vital to spend time on one's self in the second half of life — a time when the self is illuminated. Jung also suggested that the idea of an afterlife and the belief therein made transition into later years easier.

As a transition period, midlife brings gradual changes to the interests people hold as well as their characters (Jung, 1933). People will need to come to terms with several aspects of their lives, realise that some of their efforts have not been worthwhile and aspirations were not reached. However, this does not need to happen. In fact, people can create new aspirations, take different paths and look for new interests as long as they were able to accept that life does not always turn out the way we want (Jung, 1971).

Jung's (1933) theory is based on clinical observations of his patients, as per Freud's (1986) theory, and is therefore unlikely to represent the general population.

2.3.3   Neugarten

According to Lachman (2001) previous theories of midlife were based on explaining biologically versus social causes and Parlee (1984) state that biological events such as menopause, are important in understanding adult development. Baltes, Lindenberger, and Staudinger (1998) made the point that there is a vital role to be played by biological maturation but on the other hand, cultural, social and environmental challenges and opportunities has greater influence in adulthood. Or described in another way by Neugarten, Moore and Lowe (1965) whereas childhood is measured on a biological clock, adulthood is measured as a social clock. Neugarten challenges the importance of time in development — adults measure time in terms of how much is left, when past, present and future is a psychological reality and they allow themselves time for personal growth (Neugarten et al., 1965). The value in Neugarten's theory is the promotion of the concept that people can be are aware of their own life-cycle and thus compare their and others' progress according to their previous expectations (Lachman, 2001). Accordingly, Krueger, Heckhausen, and Hundertmark (1995) states that research has shown people that reach midlife hold stereotypical beliefs about what should have been accomplished.

Neugarten (cited in Lachman, 2001) says that important factors in midlife transition are the timing of major events, increasing responsibility for ageing parents and awareness of the self as a bridge between generations, and emphasizes the importance of maturity at midlife so that individuals can take important roles in society.

2.3.4   Anna Freud

The term sublimation conceptualised by Anna Freud (1946) further expanded on Sigmund Freud's idea of defence mechanisms. According to Freud (1946) the mechanism of sublimation would only surface in later life, as development progress and is a mechanism utilised to "conform to social values that presuppose the knowledge and/or acceptance of such values" (Palk, 2015, p.87). Similar defence mechanisms as seen during adolescence emerge in midlife because the id is more active than the ego during this time (Freud, 1946).

Anna Freud (1946) foresaw a development stage in later adulthood, referred to as the "climacteric" (p. 152), and describes this as a critical period in which big changes in fortune and health take place — women see the end of their reproductive capacity and completion of menopause as well as other physiological and psychic changes, whereas men may experience reduced sexual activity.

2.3.5   Vaillant

Lachman (2001), McAdams (1993) as well as McCrae and Costa (2003) make mention of the fact that Vaillant is an influential researcher. Vaillant (1971; 1977) researched defence mechanisms, or rather adaptations as significant constructs in the life trajectory of humans. Vaillant (1971) was especially interested in the crucial points in life — career, marriage and health — when certain adaptations were utilized or became redundant and how successful these adaptations were.

Valliant designed a hierarchical model with four levels of adaptation (Vaillant, 1977).

- Level 1 is the primitive defences common to childhood, including denial, distortion and delusional projection.

- Level 2 is the immature defences primarily occurring in adolescence, such as acting out.

- Level 3 entails the use of fantasy, projection, hypochondriasis, passive aggression and neuroticism. It also includes intellectualisation or rationalisation, repression, reaction formation, displacement and dissociation.

- Level 4 is mature defences common in healthy adults: sublimation, altruism, suppression, anticipation and humour.

A few key points from Vaillant's (1971; 1977) research findings should be stated here. Healthy adults also have adaptations similar to those found in abnormal populations; some people's adaptations are fixed and remain the same over time whilst others' adaptations change; level 3 and 4 mechanisms described above seemed most prominent in midlife and later years. Also, Vaillant (1977) found that the death of relatives to not change the life course; there is interaction between the choice of mechanism and those people the person interacts with. Furthermore, the hierarchy of adaptations can be predictive of mental health in adults as well as the extent to which the environment influences a person. Most importantly, the research showed that adults do evolve over time.

Vaillant (1977; 2000) identified three ways in which a person can reach equilibrium. People should seek appropriate social support, use intentional cognitive strategies to assist with navigating any challenge, and to reduce anxiety use involuntary mechanisms that alter the interpretation of internal and external reality.

2.3.6 Gould

In their twenties, people take on new roles, whereas people in their thirties appear to have too many responsibilities, and those in their forties experience a sense of urgency — a sense that life is passing too quickly (Gould, 1978). According to Gould midlife is a time of turbulence, yet when people put in effort to handle crises during midlife it leads to a healthy and happy life (Santrock, 1991). Should a person handle midlife crises by readily accepting a sense of urgency as part of this time of life, they grow or move into maturity (Gould, 1978).

2.3.7 Levinson

Levinson (1978) believes that midlife is influenced by social as well as biological influences — the ability of social and cultural influences on shaping adult life is expected. Adult life according to Levinson (cited in Crary, O'Connor & Wolfe, 1990) can be understood as alternating phases of stability versus change. It is a life structure which is the bridge between self and circumstance which relates to interpersonal relationships, physical settings, activities participated in and roles taken on. Life structure enables adaptability to surroundings and situations (Crary et al., 1990).

Levinson proposed that once a person acknowledges the path he/she has chosen, there are new perspectives and needs that arise and this often facilitates unexpected changes in the person's circumstances (Levinson,1978). Crary et al. (1990) writes that a life structure is commonly viewed as a failure if the person did not fulfil the demands of society and even when the person has not contributed to society.

On men and midlife, Levinson says early adulthood (18-45 yrs) is when men establish their adult identity —challenges such as settling into their careers, developing intimate partnerships and starting a family are prominent in this time (Lachman, 2001). On the other hand, he proposed that during middle adulthood (45-65 yrs) men should have achieved these

earlier goals, however they have not, and therefore they strive to find meaning in their lives (Levinson, 1978). As such, a midlife crisis is a result of men reviewing their lives and priorities and a reordering of their priorities — a time of reviewing achievements gained thus far and their meaning in terms of life lived and life left to live (Levinson, 1978).

A critical task during midlife is to find a balance between love and work (Levinson, 1978). Levinson (1977) believed that "transitional periods aim to terminate existing structures and to work toward the initiation of a new structure" (p. 100), which could elicit considerable uncertainty and upheaval. Alternatively, it could signify growth and maturescence, even at the expense of emotional turmoil, stress and doubt. He associated three characteristics with mid-life transition: self-appraisal which is self-evaluation in terms of shortcomings, values and achievements (Fiske, 1980). It can hurt, but the insight gained ensures future development (Fiske, 1980). Secondly, reassessment of the past and questioning values and priorities as well as achievements and contributions which may lead to conclusions that much of life has been based on assumptions and ideas that are not true (Fiske, 1980). The last characteristic is the recognition that life is finite —a point where a person faces his/her own mortality which may lead to realising time is precious and prompting a person to create new priorities, new commitments and even new values. (Fiske, 1980).

Levinson (1980) believes the change to middle adulthood to take five years. In this five year period the adult needs to address several challenges: The individual acknowledges those changes that signify the decline of physical powers. He or she may still feel young in some ways but there are areas in which he or she is beginning to age (young-old polarity). Another challenge is evaluating the role they have played in life — when a person recognizes what people have done to him/her and what they have done to people. It can be a painful process if an individual becomes aware that they have hurt someone else. As such, gaining

control over destruction and creation processes is a critical task at this stage (destruction-creation polarity).

Masculine-feminine polarity is the acceptance and integration of both masculine and feminine aspects of one's personality, whereas attachment-separateness polarity is the dichotomy between involvement with the external environment and one's own internal world — creating a new balance between external and internal involvement is essential during this time (Levinson, 1980).

As mid-life transitions to middle adulthood, it entails a commitment to new choices in light of a desired future, therefore the person will modify life structures accordingly. Levinson (1978) states that "the main tasks now are to make crucial choices, give these choices meaning and commitment, and build a structure around them" (p.279).

2.3.8   Tamir

Tamir's (1982a) was the first postmodern researcher to examine the differences amongst middle-aged men and their younger and older cohorts, because there was a lack of research of this type. Tamir (1982a) did not study women, because there was a plethora of research done on females and midlife, but moreover she believed different paths are followed by men compared to women in the course of life (Lowenthal, Thurnher & Chiriboga, 1975).

Tamir's theory was that midlife transition occurs between ages 40 to 49 years. People in middle-age is seen as a unique population —they are not yet old but not young anymore either, and they are the wealthy and powerful population which means that their contribution to maintaining the structure of society was more than others' (Tamir, 1982a). As discussed in Palk (2015) during this period, specific problems are confronted and tension experienced in a person's internal and external world, a person's work experience, and social relationships —

reassessment, career evaluation, launching children, accepting flawed bodies and facing death are all things that people in midlife need to confront.

The midlife transition period is a unique time in the adult men (Tamir, 1982b). Tamir's (1982b) exploratory study broke ground into a greater and new understanding of midlife transition specifically in terms of the quality of life, family relationships and other social relationships as well as career or work experiences. The study focused on comparing men in their midlife transition (40 to 49 years) with younger men (25 to 39 years) as well as older men (50 to 69 years). The influence of social class was controlled based on education level as it has been shown as closely linked to social class (Palk, 2015). Tamir's (1982b) research focused on job satisfaction, work commitment, perceptions of job autonomy, job performance, work relations, and motives at work to measure the relevance and status of work in men's lives. What follows is a summary of the key results discussed by Tamir (1982b).

Work:

- Results indicate that both education groups showed evidence of transition regarding job satisfaction, autonomy and social connectedness at work (Tamir's, 1982b). This is likely because men think that success peaks at middle-age and that they are not likely to advance any further.

- Men in their late forties with highest levels of education showed an increase desire for status and power when they are in their late forties compared to the less educated men in the study.

- There is higher correlation between college-educated men's motives for connectedness and job satisfaction at middle-age than other age groups.

- Similarly, the results showed that the fewer interactions there are the lower the job satisfaction.

- To observe an increase in job satisfaction, enhanced social relations require job competency.

- Job satisfaction and wellbeing in midlife were not correlated and could be because work, in the midlife transition, is seemingly less important to self-fulfilment than in earlier adulthood stages.

Family: "The children of men aged 40 to 49 years are in the process of becoming independent of their parents and wives are changing from their primary role of caretakers in the family. Accordingly, family life will transform and men in their forties need to cope with these changes" (Palk, 2015, p.69).

- Marital roles became increasingly important in middle-age for college-educated men whereas the parental role lessened. This does not mean that "midlife men were more or less happy, but rather that if the marriage was unhappy, this would constitute a greater threat than at any other age" (Palk, 2015, p.59).

- Happy marriages at this time period were seen as more capable of enhancing wellbeing for college-educated men in their forties than for other age groups (Tamir, 1982b).

Social relationships:

- There were no significant differences amongst groups related to the numbers of friends, neighbours and relatives known or interacted with, yet there was a real difference in social connectedness (Tamir, 1982b).

- There was a significant correlation between social-connectedness and self-esteem variables for non-college educated men in their late forties, suggesting that lower social connectedness leads to lower self-esteem. Middle-aged men acknowledge their need for support and will be more likely to share their problems with others (Tamir, 1982b).

2.3.9   McCrae and Costa

McCrae and Costa (2003) criticised some researchers regarding their conceptualisation and positioning of the midlife "crisis". According to Cooper (1977), Farrell and Rosenberg (1981) as well as McCrae and Costa (1986) these authors were emphatic in their response saying that they found no evidence that everyone experiences a midlife crisis, because their research showed personality traits remains stable during adulthood. These big five personality traits are extroversion versus introversion, neuroticism versus emotional stability, openness to experience versus down to earthiness, agreeableness versus disagreeableness and conscientiousness versus laziness (McCrae and Costa, 1986). McCrae and Costa's (2003) trait model of personality illustrates that the five personality traits are found in all people in varying degrees, but the stability of these traits in any given individual remaining stable after age 30 is particularly important to note.

Relevant to the study of midlife, McCrae and Costa (2003) found an increase in unhappy marriages, more suicides, mental health problems as well as more people changing jobs characteristic in midlife crisis at 40 years of age. This represent their idea that little change personality traits happen after 30 years, but other significant changes happen such as decrease in physical flexibility and strength, sensory alertness, and energy, children grow up, parents grow old and pass away, as well as jobs and roles change.

Personality traits remain stable whilst behaviour changes and the most complex component of the personality system is characteristic adapatations (McCrae and Costa, 2003). As discussed in Palk (2015) it consists of adaptations to attitudes and values, social roles as well as interpersonal relationships.

2.3.10 Folkman and Lazarus

Lachman (2001) says that stressful events such as illness or death of a parent seem to occur more often during middle adulthood and therefore Folkman and Lazarus' (1980) research into coping with stress during midlife is an important contribution in the study of midlife transition. According to Schwarzer and Schwarzer (1996), Folkman and Lazarus are acclaimed for their creation of a tool to measure how people deal with stressful experiences. According to Aldwin, Folkman, Schaefer, Coyne, and Lazarus (1980) and Folkman and Lazarus (1985) the Ways of Coping Questionnaire (WCQ) is a research instrument to study coping processes people use when dealing with or facing stressful experiences (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985).

According to Palk (2015) "a stressful experience is an arrangement in which a person and their environment are in a self-starting, complementary two-way relationship" (p.85). Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, and Gruen (1986) identify that are two processes involved in stressful experiences — cognitive appraisal and coping, and these are important moderators of tension that exist between person and environment as well as the short and long-term consequences.

Faced with a stressful situation, an individual first cognitively appraises the situation which occur on a primary and secondary level (Folkman et al., 1986). Coping encompasses cognitive and behavioural efforts that enable management or tolerance of the arrangement.

There are two types of coping strategies — those that are problem-focused and those that are emotional-focused (Carver, Scheier and Weintraub, 1989).

2.3.11 Erikson's developmental theory

Erikson (1950) used Freud's basic psychosexual framework but expanded on the development at each stage and his research on adult stage theories have contributed to the idea that midlife is a crisis in development. Erikson described the process that guides development through the life cycle as the "epigenetic principle" — "anything that grows has its blueprint, and a particular time of ascendancy" (Hargrave, 2006, p.30).

Erikson's theory is that human life happens in eight sequential stages where challenges are faced by people, and only when they have resolved these challenges can they move to the next stage. (Santrock, 1992). Each challenge requires of the person to develop certain skills and abilities and should this not take place, further development will be impaired (Gerdes, 1988). The cultural context (social influences and expectations) influences how people move through each stage.

The stages can be summarised as follows: The first stage of life is the contrast between trust and mistrust, the second stage, autonomy versus shame and doubt (Lachman, 2001). The third stage is the contrast of initiative versus guilt, and the fourth stage of industry versus inferiority (Santrock, 1992). The fifth stage of identity versus role confusion is follwoed by the sixth stage, intimacy versus isolation. In the seventh stage, the adult then experiences generativity versus stagnation, which is the time associated with middle-age (Santrock, 1992).

Erikson (1963) believed that a person needs to first get a sense of self and how he/she fits into society, then commit to marriage before considering spending time and energy on well-being of future generations. Generativity is "primarily the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation" (Erikson, 1963, p. 267). Generativity is about leaving a legacy, what adults aspire to do for future generations (Erikson, 1963) and is shown through activities such as teaching and leading that will benefit the broader society and the next generation (McAdams, de St Aubin & Logan, 1993). Parenting is an important expression of reaching generativity, but it also includes teaching and leadership or other creative activities, according to Lachman (2001).

If a person does not reach generativity, they become stagnant — feeling unable to leave a legacy and can even become self-preoccupied — focusing more on the self than on others (Erikson, 1963). Lachman (2001) says that not there might be differences in the strength of generative feelings amongst adults and Erikson (1963) advocates that adults must keep on being optimistic about the future in order to practice generativity.

Chakraborty, Chatterjee and Das (2012) propose that one of midlife's challenges is that in itself it is a developmental life stage. Chakraborty et al. (2012) believe the concept of generativity as coined by Erikson, is a vital and intuitive psycho-social construct, inextricably linked with middle adulthood. It is a construct intrinsically linked to enhanced personal drives to contribute in socially constructive ways and primarily driven by a voluntary feeling of obligation to care for others. The lack of this can be viewed as one of many contributing factors to the disease inherent in the makeup of some midlife angst. Part of the malaise is that if this need is not fulfilled, and a contribution in meaningful ways is not felt intra-psychically, the individual may become self-absorbed and face stagnation (Chakraborty et al., 2012).

Erikson maintained that men and women are most likely to be concerned about wellbeing and parenting and tend to become involved in politics and social issues during the middle years of life (Chakraborty et al., 2012). This concern ultimately propels the individual into creating a positive legacy that has the potential to outlive the self.

During midlife, the primary developmental task as seen by Erikson, is to contribute to society, help and establish future generations through guidance. When an individual does make a contribution during this phase, either by raising a family or by working towards the betterment of society, then generativity is manifest. Erikson's concept of generativity remained somewhat stagnant itself, until interest by a new set of academics such as Kotre (1984), Peterson and Klohnen (1995) as well as Stewart and Vandewater (1992) who were publishing from 1975 onwards.

The idea of a midlife crisis seems can coincide with this life stage. Chakraborty et al., (2012) say that Erikson believed that it is in this stage when pressure start mounting for adults to involved in the lives of future generation, yet a person is also faced with mortality and the realisation that life can end. Stagnation is a lack of growth or a lack of psychological movement and instead of contributing towards community, the individual struggles to assist their own family and this stagnation divests the individual of the ability for self-growth or to facilitate the growth of others. Erikson's focus on generativity versus stagnation is pertinent to a midlife crisis and subsequent transition as an individual becomes conscious of impending time remaining and what they would still like to achieve. This principle forms a cornerstone of my practice, as my work entails illuminating the stagnation (crisis) and morphing this stagnation into generativity. Opening the possibilities for clients to experience meaning, purpose and an enhanced sense of self.

2.3.12 Lifespan theory of development

To date, there has not been one theory that was able to explain all aspects of human development, but it should be acknowledged that when many theories exist, there is an advancement in knowledge and enables researchers to questions, contradict and even support differing points of view. According to Kanfer and Ackerman (2004) there are three basic assumptions to life-span theory. Firstly, adult development is generally sequential and orderly, secondly, development in adulthood is not as simple as an extension of child and adolescent development, and thirdly, individual characteristics are not fixed before reaching adulthood.

According to Huttenlocher (2002) there are some theorists who agree that life-span changes can be discontinuous as well as continuous, that there are some universal features across all people as well as unique contextual features. Furthermore, the idea that heredity and environment are interwoven and work as change moderators of traits and capacities (Huttenlocher, 2002).

During the first half of the twentieth century theorists believed that development stopped at adolescence — adulthood is seen as a plateau (Berk, 2007). However, according to Lerner, Theokas, and Bobek (2005) life-span theorisits now understand development to be dynamic and ongoing, influenced by social, biological as well as psychological influences.

According to Baltes et al.(1998), Smith and Baltes (1999), and Staudinger and Lindenberger (2003) the life-span perspective is grounded in four major assumptions:

Firstly, development is lifelong and continuous. There is no age period more dominant in its impact on the life course than other periods. Events that happen during each period effects change equally, and within each period, there are cognitive, emotional/social and physical changes (Baltes et al.,1998). In addition, each age period has its own unique

schedule, with diverse demands and opportunities that may encompass similarities in development across a broad spectrum of individuals. The challenges people face and the adjustments they make are diverse both in their timing and patterns (Berk, 2007). There are some who view midlife as a period characterized as both continuous and discontinuous depending on what unique life events are encountered by individuals (Berk, 2007; Lachman, 2001).

An example of this is when middle-aged women re-enter the workforce once their children have left home and are confronted with new developmental contexts (Berk, 2007). These contextual challenges may be reflected in marked increases in a variety of intellectual domains. Other examples of discontinuous life-span contexts are widowhood, health and functional changes as a result of biological aging (Moen & Wethington, 1999).

Secondly, development is multidirectional and multidimensional. Development encompasses both growth and decline at every period (gains and losses) as suggested by Baltes et al.(1998), yet gains are more likely to be experienced earlier in life and losses more during later years. Many people's midlife experiences are influenced by negative stereotypes and associated expectations, and according to Lachman (2001) middle-aged people experience this period as crisis-stricken, boring and a period of decline and despair. However, life-span theorists contend that the life-span is multidimensional and multidirectional and it is therefore possible to challenge the idea that midlife and ageing is solely focused on decrements (Baltes, 1993; Riley & Riley, 1989; Rowe & Kahn, 1987).

According to Lachman (2001) some midlifers use their resources for growth, others invest in resources related to maintenance, repair and management of loss. An example of this is midlife women pursuing careers after being stay-at-home-mothers.

Thirdly, it is believed development is plastic, that people of all ages have the ability to improve current skills and develop new ones, including those skills that compensate for reduced functioning (Freund & Baltes, 2002), intellectual performance has the ability to remain flexible with advancing age (Lemme, 2006). Accordingly, Baltes et al.(1998) say that it inevitable for plasticity to diminish over time as capacity and opportunity diminish. Additionally, plasticity is variable across individuals, with some children and adults experiencing highly diverse life circumstances.

Plasticity of development means that there might be numerous possible development outcomes and thus means that midlife remain open to change given there are appropriate circumstances (Lachman, 2001).

Fourthly, there are multiple forces impacting development.— biological, psychological and maturational as well as the effects of external forces such as social and cultural forces, which makes development pathways diverse (Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004) or described by Berk (2007) as well as Baltes, Reese and Lipsitt (1980) as age-graded influences, history-graded influences and nonnormative influences.

Age-graded influence are the biological or societal conditions related to chronological age, such as women in menopause or retirement at a certain age. Non-normative conditions are the life circumstances of an individual, whereas historical and cultural influences are within the context of the individual's life that affect development (Baltes, 1979). Accordingly, Dannefer (1984) says that to account for differences in development paths, an understanding of biological and cultural influences are essential.

Looking at history-graded influences there is evidence that some personality changes observed in middle-aged women, who was part of broader contextual change, for example, a liberation event. These women allude to feelings of liberation reflective of limited life

choices in early adulthood due to gender stereotyping and prevailing socio-economic conditions (Stewart & Ostrove, 1998).

2.3.13 Social constructionism and midlife

Gergen (1985) is of the opinion that Social Constructionism is relevant to the redefining of a life-span psychology, particularly the life-span of women. Freedman and Combs (1996) says that in this postmodern view people, in their interactions, design their own realities. The "fabric of reality" — beliefs, social customs, laws, habits of dress and diet develop through social interaction over time. Social Constructionism finds value and meaning in how ideas and attitudes develop throughout a person's life within the social context and gives serious consideration to how cultural narratives are formed by, and in turn influence people, as well as how people measure themselves (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996).

This perspective sees the development of certain problems as a result of the context and the meaning according it by the larger culture and the individual. Accordingly, this perspective believes there are multiple selves, multiple meanings and multiple contexts — there are no fixed personality or one truth, as people are influenced by multiple contexts and meanings (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996).

2.3.14 Positive Psychology

Similar to Postmodernism, I argue that Positive Psychology is a different way of looking at the world and understanding reality of the participants. A paradigm shift took place in the field of Psychology whereby the focus is on positive aspects as opposed to fixing problems. As such, it is an adequate model or theory from which to approach this research on midlife experiences.

Martin Seligman, the father of Positive Psychology questioned our deeply entrenched and historically laden perspectives regarding the positive and negative sides of life. It

challenges the pioneers Schopenhauer and Freud's ideas that the best a person can strive or hope for is to keep suffering and misery to a minimum. There is more to life than suffering and that it is possible to have a positive future (Seligman, 2010).

Seligman's work had its genesis in learned helplessness— those individuals who experience uncontrollably bad events become passive and lose the impetus to do anything about their future (Seligman, 1975), yet it was found that over ten years, one third of people to whom inescapable events were a given, never degenerated into helplessness, and Seligman's subsequent research showed that it is the concept of optimism that made these people seem immune to helplessness. Alongside Chris Peterson and Barbara Frederickson, who worked in the field of positive aspects of life, Seligman attempted to create a field in which the salient question was, "What makes life worth living, and how can we build it?" This framework of psychology is focused equally on strengths as with weaknesses, it gives credence to the creation of what makes life worth living as well as the importance of healing pathology (Seligman, 2010, p. 232).

There appeared to be five divergent elements of well-being. First is positive emotion and second is engagement. The third is positive relationships and the fourth element is meaning, belonging to and serving something bigger than yourself, and the fifth is accomplishment (Seligman, 2010). Even if it brings no positive emotion, no engagement, no relationships and no meaning, there are people who are motivated to achieve and to have competence or mastery (Seligman, 2010).

Seligman furthermore determines a meaningful life as the application of one's strengths and virtues to attain flow by engaging in activities that are deemed worthwhile, and which connect one to a larger purpose (Seligman, 2002). Seligman terms this experience

"gratification," which he associates with activities we like to do versus positive emotions per se.

From a Positive Psychology perspective, midlife transition is a crucial time which holds growth and development potential for adults (O'Connor & Wolfe, 1987) and research confirms challenges associated with midlife (Axelrod, 2005). During midlife development, physiological, psychological, and interpersonal changes are faced as the individual re-evaluates life goals and personal values, confronts the inevitability of death, and makes plans for the second half of life.

A study conducted by Parsons (2016) found that the application of Positive Psychology coaching and interventions do not only support midlife clients' goal achievement, but also assists in other work and life challenges. Parsons (2016) state that midlife can be a difficult transitional period and Positive Psychology has the potential to help individuals accrue the necessary resources and coping strategies to prevent a transition from becoming a crisis.

As proponents of midlife as a transition, O'Connor & Wolfe (1987) proposed the use of a grounded-theory model of transitions as these transitions in adulthood are largely unexplored. This model looks at midlife transition according to the following stages: the stability phase, the rising discontent phase, the crisis phase, the re-direction phase and the re-stabilising phase. Although research on the above model revealed valuable and interesting results, to facilitate a better understanding of the nature of personal growth at midlife, a paradigm shift is needed (O'Connor & Wolfe, 1987).

These authors continue that the Transition Sequence Model could engender either a cycle or a spiral of development (O'Connor & Wolfe, 1987). The cycle of development can be described in the context of midlife raising new issues, but generally people deal with them

in the same old ways. When life issues are dealt with in new ways, a spiral of development transpires and the transition sequence is seen as a prime opportunity for paradigm shifts to take place in. A phase of rising discontent with ones' life circumstances usually precedes the transition and it is therefore typical that a crisis, in the form of peaking negative emotions with real changes, follows (O'Connor & Wolfe, 1986).

2.4 Conclusion

Interpretivist approaches to research advocate understanding and acknowledgement of humans' experiences and background. They believe that reality is socially constructed and therefore there are many realities. This chapter showed that there are various theories that can be used for studying midlife experiences, even those going as far back as the early 1900's. However, within a postmodern study, Positive Psychology presents a different way of looking at the world and understanding the realities of the participants in this research. In itself, Positive Psychology is a paradigm shift in the field of Psychology which focuses on leveraging strengths as opposed to other theories' intent to fix the problems. As such, it is an adequate model or theory from which to approach this research on midlife experiences to create understanding and meaning of the research participants' experiences of midlife, but moreover to assist them in making the transition as opposed to "fixing the crisis".

The next chapter discusses the qualitative, exploratory research design that will be applied for data collection, participant selection and analysis of the data to accurately give voice to the experiences of midlife.

Chapter 3
Research Design

3.1 Introduction

"Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that

counts can be counted" — Albert Einstein —

This chapter will outline and extrapolate the proposed design of this study. According to Bantjes (2011) there is a problematic history associated with psychology, because of the competing schools of thought have their own unique set of assumptions. It is imperative therefore, for the psychologist researcher to select a suitable research paradigm and theoretical paradigm as a means to understand the human behaviour he or she is studying.

Research is a formal process, it is the systematic study of phenomena and follows scientific principles by which the production of knowledge happens and is understood (Muchinsky, 2009). Researchers start research based on their own knowledge and experience of the problem and therefore they much use a suitable research paradigm to provide evidence the research is scientific (Gladding, 2000). Muchinsky (2009) is of the opinion that psychological research poses more problems than for example chemistry research as people are variable and cannot be considered equal or understood by a "blueprint".

3.2 Research Strategy

3.2.1 Research design and methodology

Robson (2002) describes an exploratory study as a valuable means of finding out "what is happening; to seek new insights; to ask questions and to assess phenomena in a new light" (p. 59). Adopting this methodology is particularly useful to clarify one's understanding of a problem and even more pertinent if the researcher is unsure of the exact nature of the problem.

According to Cuthill (2002) the purpose of exploratory design in research is mainly when there are few previous studies from which to understand the problem and predict an outcome. Therefore, it is mainly focused on generating new ideas and insights for further investigations and can be utilised at the beginning phase of a larger investigation.

Furthermore, Cuthill (2002) describes exploratory research goals as intended to produce the following possible insights:

- A familiarity with basic details, settings, and concerns.

- A well-grounded and formulated overview of the situation being developed.

- Generativity of new ideas and assumptions.

- Development of tentative theories or hypotheses.

- To ascertain whether further study is feasible in the future.

- Issues are refined and expounded for further systematic investigation and formulation of research questions.

- Directions for future research and techniques are enhanced.

An exploratory design is a useful approach for obtaining background information on a particular topic. It is flexible and has the breadth to address a range of research questions. It

serves to provide an opportunity to define new terms and clarify existing concepts. Exploratory research can be equated to the activities of a traveller or explorer (Adams & Schvaneveldt, 1991) and a great advantage to using this methodology is its flexibility and adaptability to change. Conducting exploratory research requires a willingness to change direction based on results of new data that appear and new insights that can occur. Therefore, applying an exploratory design to this research is relevant, because using Positive Psychology is a relatively new viewpoint for investigating midlife and so the research methodology — in this case, a qualitative methodology, requires flexibility and exploration, rather than testing existing theories or models about midlife.

Qualitative research is characterised by its focus on relatability, notably pertaining to understanding aspects of social life (Bricki & Green, 2009). The methodology is word generative as opposed to numerically generative such as data used in analysis, which is more suited to quantitative methods, which aim to measure (such as the percentage of people with a specific disease in a community, or the number of households owning a bed). In research where information is lacking, qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups are helpful in extracting further data. This data can be useful in generating hypotheses later that can then be tested by quantitative methods.

Common criticisms of qualitative research include: criticism that samples are small and therefore not representative of a broader population, making it difficult to generalise the results; that findings lack rigour and difficulty in discerning to what extent findings are biased by the researcher's own opinions. However, many research projects call for a multitude of questions that need answering, some requiring quantitative methods, and some requiring qualitative methods.

If the research is qualitatively oriented, it follows that the most appropriate and rigorous way of answering it is to use qualitative methods. Qualitative methods aim to elicit and understand the experiences and attitudes of the research population. Qualitative research also endeavours to answer questions relevant to "what", "how" or "why" of a phenomenon versus the questions such as "how many" or "how much", which are determined by quantitative methods.

I chose ethnography as a qualitative research approach to my research, because it fits with my notion, similar to Madden (2010) that human beings are far too complicated to be understood in easy and straightforward terms. Ethnography gives purpose to first person accounts that are intended as realistic descriptions, and an alternative format from other scientific descriptions. Therefore, it is the events described and not the stories created that provide the object of investigation. Language is perceived as a medium reflecting singular meanings (Mitchell & Egudo, 2003). The narrative movement and the criticisms of positivism posit that language is seen more as deeply constitutive of reality and not merely a device for establishing meaning. Stories do not reflect the external world, but are considered constructed, rhetorical, and interpretive (Riessman, 1993). Traditionally, ethnography has been used to understand different cultures and is used to guide the research process and to link the research back to project plans and activities (Tacchi, Slater & Hearn, 2003).

An ethnographic approach to research produces richer and deeper understandings and allows for more effective use of knowledge and information and consists of a variety of grounded and relevant facts, observations, understandings, perceptions and interpretations. Ethnography has been described as denoting or writing and representing a culture. Ethnography is traditionally represented as a long-term engagement in a field of study, or field site.

A key tenet is participant observation — this is the ethnographer embedded in the society or culture being studied yet retaining an analytical or observational position to allow for reflection and analysis so that the ethnographer can describe and interpret the subject of the study. The role of an ethnographer is to ascribe understanding and meaning to the relationships and patters studied. Ethnography is defined by its holistic approach to the subject of study – this is described as the ethnographer accounting for a wider social setting and encompassing all social relationships. As a holistic approach, the ethnographic researcher must describe and account for the wider social setting and must contextualise these in wider contexts (e.g., the wider economy, government policies, politics, etc) .

Ethnographers attempt to make sense of each feature or idiosyncrasy in relation to the bigger picture and not as seen in isolation — it requires a focus more on actual processes. Through immersion in the field (the project and the context of the research), an ethnographic action researcher is well placed to document research based on immersive knowledge. Ethnographic action research requires flexible and responsive use of a wide range of methods (Tacchi, Slater & Hearn, 2003). All experiences, conversations and encounters are construed as material and relevant data alongside more formal research activities such as interviews. Ethnographic research encompasses a broad scope of material and research is not viewed in isolation. Research can take the form of diverse relationships and informal conversations (Tacchi, Slater & Hearn, 2003)..

Ethnography is synergistic with action research because it requires understanding how one's community and research fit together. Ethnography is an approach to research as opposed to specific methods such as participant observation, interviews, or surveys. It is a multi-method approach, making use of a variety of methods appropriate to the research. These methods can in turn be further adapted to suit the research purposes. Ethnography also

endeavours to integrate different methods into a single holistic study. Knowledge, experiences and findings are viewed both together and in relation to each other.

Action research is the process of integrating research into the development of research and require planning research in relation to the needs of the project. According to Tacchi, Slater and Hearn (2003) action research allows for the research process to be tightly connected to the activities of a project in three possible ways:

1. Active participation: The people who stand to benefit from the research are fully involved in every step — they participate in defining the aims and direction of the research, as well as the interpretation of results and making conclusions (Tacchi, Slater & Hearn, 2003).,

2. Action-based methods: activities and experiences of participants can be used to generate knowledge alongside other formal research methods, while new projects are seen as experimental when they are reflexive and structured (Tacchi, Slater & Hearn, 2003).

3. Research is specifically aimed at generativity; ideas for new initiatives; solving problems; and targeting particular kinds of users. Action-generating research may be a combination of general, wide ranging, background research as well as very specific and focused research (Tacchi, Slater & Hearn, 2003).

Ethnographic action research involves the generation of knowledge through rigorous, well-planned, structured and self-awareness methods. All participants in a project are contributors to the research, can actively engage in the process by feeding back their thoughts and observations (Tacchi, Slater & Hearn, 2003).

3.2.2 Sampling and participant selection

Non-probability and probability samples, as per Coldwell and Herbst (2004) are the two main types of sampling techniques and basically differ in the manner in which the units of analysis are selected. I will utilize non-probability sampling, which provides a range of alternative techniques to select samples based on subjective judgement. This is because this study is a qualitative study and will focus on a small sample that is selected for a particular purpose. This sampling will provide information-rich case studies in which to explore research questions and gain theoretical insights.

For all non-probability sampling techniques, the issue of sample size is ambiguous and unlike probability sampling, there are no rules, yet it is crucial for the logical relationship between the sample selection technique and the purpose and focus of research to be considered as well as to discern what will be useful, what will have credibility and what can be done within one's available resources (Patton, 2002). This methodology is particularly relevant when the intention is to collect qualitative data using interviews. The validity, understanding and insights gained from the data will have significantly more synergy with data collection and analysis skills versus the size of the sample (Patton, 2002), however it is important to note that it is possible to offer guidance as to the sample size to ensure the researcher has conducted sufficient interviews.

Relevant to the qualitative approach, there are three non-probability sampling techniques: judgment, theoretical and convenience (haphazard) sampling. Convenience sampling is described as the least rigorous of all non-probability techniques as well as the least costly as participants are selected based on what is available to the researcher (Elmusharaf, 2012). In convenience sampling, a section of the population is drawn based on ease of accessibility and availability to the researcher (Wiid & Diggines, 2009), such as the clients I have access to through my practice.

Participants for this study will be selected from six clients who are currently consulting with me and who have expressed an interest in participating in this research.

3.2.3   Data collection

There is a plethora of data available to the qualitative, ethnographic researcher. Photographs as data has been used by Becker (1995) in visual sociology, Collier and Collier (1986) in cultural anthropology, Pink (2001) in visual ethnography as well as visual culture, visual critical theory by Fuery and Fuery (2003), consumer and marketing research (Heisley & Levy, 1991), and the social sciences in general (Banks, 2001). Photographs can be taken by the researcher or even more innovatively, by the participants themselves (Zaltman, 1996; Ziller, 1990). Self-photographs enables participants to express their viewpoints and narratives clearly and vividly than with only words (Hall, Jones, Hall, Richardson, & Hodgson, 2007).

Documents and material culture relate to written texts and cultural artefacts — evidence that in all its forms represent gendered, cultural, social, and political construction, and cannot be subjected to an interview or focus group; yet, the interpretation thereof, is pertinent to the meaning of an underlying lived cultural group or person.

This evidence, "unlike the spoken word, endures physically and thus cannot be separated across space and time from its author, producer, or user" (Hodder, 2005, p. 703).

According to Denzin & Lincoln (2005a) qualitative researchers need to be aware of methodological contestation and recommends that instead of demonizing or criticising quantitative research, qualitative researcher must use a more constructive approach to discuss the usefulness and relevance of qualitative research. Greene (2007) also says that qualitative researchers need to promote qualitative research as iterative and continuous, interactive and dynamic which keeps up-to-date with methodological innovation and technology.

A major focus among qualitative researchers is to authentically capture the lived experiences of people (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005b).

Encompassing the multitude of data collection available, I will use field notes gleaned from interviews and discussions. These will be in the form of both formal and informal conversations, such as (interactive) interviewing, which is the predominant mode of data collection and documentation in ethnographic research (Van Niekerk, 2012).

The predominant aim is to focus attention on "what individuals think, feel and do and what they have to say about it in an interview, giving us their subjective reality in a formatted discussion" (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2005, p. 52). Ellis (2004) proposed the use of interactive interviewing enabling the researcher to engage the emotional experiences of the participants and allows for a deeper, sometimes new, understandings about, for example the midlife experience.

3.2.4   Data analysis

Narrative analysis will be used to analyze the data collected. Narrative analysis is an interpretive approach where the story itself is the object of study, focusing on how individuals or groups make sense of and give meaning to events and actions in their lives (Mitchell & Egudo, 2003). Researchers capture the participant's story through ethnographic techniques such as observation and interviews (Mitchell & Egudo, 2003).

Narrative research fits within the postmodernist paradigm (Mitchell & Egudo, 2003). According to Gergen (1998) several authors argue that postmodernist thinking gave rise to the criticisms of modernist thinking and formed a basis for the application and understanding of narrative (Addleson, 2000; Craig-Lees, 2001; Gergen, 1998). Social constructionism requires a grounding of knowledge in the context of its social interaction. It further emphasises the social and cultural nature of narrative discourse (Mitchell & Egudo, 2003).

According to Boje (1991) and Faber (1998) there are case studies that provide evidence for using narrative to generate insight for organisational or cultural change, whilst storytelling, according to Ambrosini and Bowman (2001) and Linde (2001) can enable tacit knowledge transfer and act as a source of implicit communication. Additionally, narrative may provide insight into decision making as per O'Connor (1997) and the processes of knowledge transfer as per Darwent (2000). Narrative research has made major contributions to the field in the form of generating insights into how narrative constructs identity, may aid in education, its role in sensemaking and as a source of understanding (Abma, 2000; Cortazzi, 2001; Cox, 2001; Czarniawska, 1997; Gabriel, 1998).

Mitchell & Egudo (2003) say that peoples' stories are instruments to construct and communicate meaning as well as impart knowledge. When stories are relayed within their inherent cultural contexts it promotes certain values and beliefs, which in turn contribute to the construction of individual identity or concept of community.

The story itself is the focus of research and how individuals or groups make sense of events and actions in their lives through examining the story, and its linguistic and structural properties is important (Riessman, 1993). As inherently multidisciplinary, narrative analysis is an extension of the interpretive research approaches and is especially relevant to qualitative research (Mitchell & Egudo, 2003).

3.2.5   Ethical considerations

A prerequisite before starting to conduct any stated research is that a clearance certificate from UNISA Ethics Committee be obtained upon approval of this specific study.

Silverman (2010) advises using an information sheet to ensure participants are adequately informed (Appendix A). This information sheet will be explained to participants when first contact is made with them, and again before the interview commences.

It will contain information on: purpose of the study, the rights of participants taking part in the study, informing them of audio and visual recordings for analysis purposes, their anonymity and confidentiality as well as the rights of the researcher to share data with other academics for purposes of the research, and a non-coercive disclaimer. Participants must understand that their participation is completely voluntary and that they can withdraw from the process at any time without prejudice or penalty (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché, & Delport, 2011). Participants will be requested to sign a formal consent form indicating that they agree to participate and understand their rights (Appendix B).

To ensure anonymity pseudonyms will be used during analysis and presentation of data. Neuman (1997) points out that researchers protect privacy by not disclosing a subject's identity after information is gathered.

3.2.6   Credibility and trustworthiness

According to Maxwell (1992) and Trochim (2006), qualitative researchers do not prescribe to the traditional quantitative validity and reliability measures as it does not fit the paradigm of qualitative research. As such, there are four criteria designed for qualitative researchers to assess the validity of their research: credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability (Trochim, 2006).

The credibility criterium relates believability — establishing that the results of qualitative research are believable from the perspective of the participants as the participants are the only ones who can legitimately judge the credibility of the results (Trochim, 2006; Winter, 2000).

The degree to which the results of qualitative research can be generalised or transferred to other contexts or settings, is known as transferability (Walsh, 2003). According to Trochim (2006), transferability is primarily the responsibility of the one doing

the generalising, that is, the researcher, yet qualitative researchers are not really concerned about generalising their results as quantitative researchers are. Transferability in this research will be enhanced by eloquently describing the research context, the participants as well as any assumptions that were central to the study.

The concept of reliability in quantitative research refers to whether the research can be replicated or repeated, and still delivers the same results (Neuman, 1997). In qualitative research this is referred to as dependability. It should be noted that in a postmodern qualitative study the assumption that the social world is ever changing, replication is not a standard strived for (Lal, 2001). According to Trochim (2006), dependability emphasises the need for the researcher to account for the dynamic context within which research occurs. Lal (2001) concurs and says that the attempts made by qualitative researchers to account for any changes render dependable data and is a natural part of research.

The degree to which the results could be confirmed or corroborated by others is known as confirmability (Trochim, 2006). Confirmability will be ensured through peer review. A consulting Research Psychologist has agreed to review and critically question my results and interpretations.

3.2.7 Bias

Onwuegbuzie, Leech & Collins (2010) write extensively about bias and say that in qualitative research, the researcher is the main data collection instrument which means it is important to acknowledge bias as part of any research study. According to Rajendran (2001) there are not set rules for managing bias in a qualitative study, but according to Onwuegbuzie et al. (2010) bias can be addressed by highlighting and discussing the subjectivity and fallibility of the researcher, in particular the effects of the researcher on participants and vice versa.

According to Rajendran (2001), "there is no paradigm solution to eliminate error and bias" (p. 5), yet reflexivity is a way of addressing potential bias (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010). An external Research Psychologist will be used for debriefings, discussions, analysis and interpretations of data (Onwuegbuzie, Leech & Collins, 2008) in order to facilitate "the process of inspection of potential sources of bias and their control [and] critically inspecting the entire research process" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 260).

The following aspects have been identified as potential bias influencers:

1. Despite the close nature of the client/practitioner, there could be a halo-effect that takes place. That is, some participants might attempt to minimise their experiences and their feelings.

2. I also acknowledge that at the beginning of the interview, some participants might be slightly uncomfortable with being recorded and this could potentially influence their initial responses.

The emphasis on "objective" data has been replaced with focusing on the advantages of subjective aspects of the research process (Adler, 1990) and being an insider is not without its potential problems. In Adler and Adler's (1987, p. 73) they say that complete member researcher is the "ultimate existential dual role", researchers are warned against role conflict if they find themselves caught between "loyalty tugs" and "behavioral claims" (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007, p. 70). A dual role can lead to role confusion and it can occur in any study, but with a higher likelihood when the researcher is familiar with the participants and the setting in a capacity other than being a researcher. This the dual role can lead to role confusion when the researcher responds to the participants or analyses the data from a perspective other than that of researcher (Asselin, 2003).

3.3 Conclusion

This chapter provides an explanation of the methodology used in this research study. It outlines the principles of qualitative research and the methods of ethnographic action research. It also details sampling methodology, entailing non-probability convenience sampling methods. Furthermore, this chapter chronicles the flexibility and variability of data collection and places the data analysis as rooted in narrative analysis.

Chapter 4
Experiencing midlife

4.1 Introduction

These are my findings from interviews with six participants on the subject of midlife. Three females and three males were interviewed. The interviews were loosely structured around the topic of midlife. I asked questions of midlife that followed the trajectory of the cohort's answers to their perceptions of midlife. The interviews were all conducted in informal settings chosen by the participants and recorded on a mobile phone with the interviewee's permission.

Pseudonyms are used to identify participants to protect their privacy and anonymity. Some background information on the participant will be followed by the emerging themes, identified by me during the analysis of the interview material. Thus, in this chapter and for each participant specifically, themes (grouping similar instances together under the same theme and using excerpts from the stories to substantiate those themes) about their perceptions of midlife functioning and experiences are identified and discussed. It needs to be acknowledged that the identification of these themes is informed by my personal context as a midlifer, as well as my perceptions and experience as a psychotherapist. Thus, the themes identified are a reflection of me and the way I perceive the world, and so, it is true that different themes may have been identified by different readers, who, in turn are influenced by their own personal context and ways of perceiving the world.

Furthermore, the themes are not mutually exclusive, and at times it might seem that themes overlap. Themes were identified by analysis of transcript material and referral back to the audio recordings. The process of identifying themes took several "runs" through the transcripts to ensure themes are meaningful and a true reflection of the participants' stories and experiences of midlife.

In this chapter I will also relate my findings from literature as reviewed in my research. These interviews have been collated with the following premise in mind:

Gergen (1985) is of the opinion that Social Constructionism is relevant to the redefining of a life-span psychology, particularly the life-span of women. Freedman and Combs (1996) says that in this postmodern view people, in their interactions, design their own realities. The "fabric of reality" — beliefs, social customs, laws, habits of dress and diet develop through social interaction over time. Social Constructionism finds value and meaning in how ideas and attitudes develop throughout a person's life within the social context and gives serious consideration to how cultural narratives are formed by, and in turn influence people, as well as how people measure themselves (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996).

This perspective sees the development of certain problems as a result of the context and the meaning according it by the larger culture and the individual. Accordingly, this perspective believes there are multiple selves, multiple meanings and multiple contexts — there are no fixed personality or one truth, as people are influenced by multiple contexts and meanings (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996). Therefore, I have interpreted my interviews with a focus on how problems are facilitated by certain systems of meaning constructed within the larger culture. The meaning participants attribute to systems, determines limited views of certain ways of being as possibilities.

Additionally, I will be interpreting this data from the perspective of Positive Psychology. Martin Seligman, the father of Positive Psychology questioned our deeply entrenched and historically laden perspectives regarding the positive and negative sides of life. It challenges the pioneers Schopenhauer and Freud's ideas that the best a person can strive or hope for is to keep suffering and misery to a minimum. There is more to life than suffering and that it is possible to have a positive future (Seligman, 2010).

Alongside Chris Peterson and Barbara Frederickson, who worked in the field of positive aspects of life, Seligman attempted to create a field in which the salient question was, "What makes life worth living, and how can we build it?" This framework of psychology is focused equally on strengths as with weaknesses, it gives credence to the creation of what makes life worth living as well as the importance of healing pathology (Seligman, 2010, p. 232). Similar to Postmodernism, Positive Psychology reflects a different way of looking at the world and understanding the reality of the participants. The paradigm shift took place in the field of Psychology whereby the focus is on positive aspects as opposed to fixing problems. As such, it is a relevant perspective to understand midlife experiences.

4.2 Interview 1: Rhona

4.2.1   Rhona's biographical information

This interview took place on a beach in rural KwaZulu-Natal. The subject is a single female, aged 42 with no children. Rhona presented as somewhat enigmatic, she enjoyed cultivating an aura of mysticism, interspersed with philosophical postulations. Rhona is employed in a part-time administrative position in a medical practice and shares a home with an ex-lover and three dogs. Rhona was a difficult individual to interview. She was my first interview and I may have been expecting the interview to have a different flow. Rhona was guarded in her answers and had a tendency to be mysterious and abstract. Interviewing her required effort to get her to be engaged and specific. After the interview, I realised that I was asking questions of Rhona that may have been uncomfortable and required further thought than she had previously given to some of these concepts.

4.2.2   Emerging themes

There are 3 major themes that were elicited in this interview. The first relates to her feelings of disillusionment, regret and dissatisfaction. The second theme looks at her seeking a meaningful existence and connection and the third is her perceptions and experiences of midlife as a wake-up call and reassessment.

Theme 1: Feelings of disillusionment, regret and dissatisfaction

The first theme of her feelings of disillusionment, regret and dissatisfaction presented strongly during the discussion on midlife and where she currently found herself at midlife.

She described her current situation as a culmination of several years of dissatisfaction — she believed she had big dreams when she was young, but later in life, realised that it didn't entirely work out as she had dreamed of. Her dissatisfaction and levels of disillusionment about her life peaked at around 32 years of age when she asked herself. *"There is a question of there must be more to life, otherwise what the hell am I living for?"*

She goes on to describe things that she used to derive pleasure from, namely her music and dancing, but these things do not provide her with the same level of pleasure any longer. She says: *"It's still relevant but it's not the same anymore. I mean I still love music but it's different. I used to think that music was the answer to the question of life."*

Although she perceives her life to be different to convention and therefore different to most people, she still has many regrets mostly related to not following her dreams. She says: *"Fundamentally because I did not follow my dreams ... but what can you do about regrets, if you stay in it, you won't move on and that's the problem. Sometimes you spend twenty years regretting your childhood, I don't want to spend the next twenty years regretting my youth."*

Jung's (1933) theory of midlife transition is pertinent when analysing Rhona's narrative. Self-doubt and internal disharmony have surfaced with progression into her middle

years. Jung proposes that if an individual is sufficiently well prepared, midlife transition will be smooth. The difficulties arise when individuals hold misconceptions that are incongruous with the real world. This is clearly evidenced with Rhona.

The genesis of these difficulties, according to Jung, are often historically incorrect assumptions carried from childhood into adult life. In addition, there may be inner psychological trouble.

Rhona describes her current situation as a culmination of several years of dissatisfaction — she describes having "big dreams" when she was younger, but later in life, realised that it doesn't work like that. She held misconceptions that are incongruous with her real world. Rhona's dissatisfaction and levels of disillusionment of life peak at approximately 32 years of age when she asked the question: *"There is a question of there must be more to life, otherwise what the hell am I living for?"*

Jung (1933) attributes the contribution of problems at midlife transition to the need to hold on to youth and in so doing remaining unconscious. For Jung, the psychic realm of midlife, rather than the physical, shows more transformation. There are individuals who will be ill-equipped for the second half of life, holding onto the truths and ideals that the first half of their lives will be sufficient for the remainder of their lifespan. Rhona is reviewing her truths and ideals as *"I did not follow my dreams … but what can you do about regrets, if you stay in it, you won't move on and that's the problem. Sometimes you spend twenty years regretting your childhood, I don't want to spend the next twenty years regretting my youth."*

Jung (1933) theorized that the midlife transition period brings with it gradual changes in the character and interests of individuals, which are for the most part, unconscious to them. The individual may need to come to terms with the reality that the creation of some of his or her initial life systems were not as a result of rational objectives. Some valued endeavours

may not have been worthwhile, and aspirations were not actualised as s/he had imagined they would be. Music, dancing and dreams do not hold the same intrinsic value they once did for Rhona, and she needs to assess what these now will be.

However, this period does not impede the creation of new dreams, different life paths, the formation of new interests, new friendships and the pursuit of new relationships for Rhona. Jung foresaw problems presenting for individuals who were unable to integrate or accept that life does not always turn out as we had conceived or desired.

Jung's appraisal of midlife, his focus on new dreams, different life paths and the pursuit of new relationships and interests is somewhat aligned with the theoretical approach of Positive Psychology. Positive Psychology questions our deeply entrenched and historically laden perspectives regarding the positive and negative sides of life and proposes that there is more to life than minimizing suffering. Positive Psychology is about helping human beings to have a positive future, how to flourish, how to focus on the positive side of life and how these might be achieved (Seligman, 2010). Rhona instinctively knows that she does not want to spend the next twenty years of her life the same way she spent the first twenty. She has hopes and dreams and waxes lyrical about the possibility of a different life. She wants to do more than merely minimize her suffering, she is looking for deeper meaning and connection, which for her, denote positivity.

Theme 2: Seeking a meaningful existence and connection

The theme of meaningful existence was evidenced by Rhona's yearning for this in her dreams and desires. She had difficulty in defining what a meaningful existence is and appeared ambivalent and somewhat defensive. She explained it by saying: *"It's what I am trying to discover. But I would say that meaning of life for me is the point at which I feel like my life has meaning."*

It was at times uncomfortable for her to delve deeper into what a meaningful existence meant for her. She yearns for connectivity and laments the misguided dreams and aspirations of her twenties and thirties.

Ascribing them to extrinsic motivations, whereas at midlife, they are now guided by intrinsic motivations. Meaningful existence has a quality of wholeness to it, a feeling of being "home", having her nieces and nephews around. It also highlights the lack of her own family and the ramifications of not having children. Currently she feels "homeless" and is on a path to pursue and identify her lost dreams and to find a sense of placement in her world. She said: *"Yes, my life feels meaningful when I am kitchen dancing, with someone that I actually want to dance with. It's meaningful when I have my nieces and nephews run up to me and are happy to see me. Then I realize I should have had kids, or at least adopted. It's meaningful when I have a sense of calm, concerning my mortality."*

People also reassess their achievements in terms of their dreams and this could motivate an ensuing desire to foment significant changes in core aspects of day-to-day life or situations, such as in career, work-life balance, marriage, romantic relationships, large expenditures, or physical appearance. However, those theorists who adopt a more optimistic view recognise plasticity as allowing change to be a possibility and likely if new experiences support it (Greenspan & Shanker, 2004; Masten & Reed, 2002; Nelson, 2005; Werner & Smith, 2001). Rhona indicates that she is very open and receptive to forment changes, after viewing her life retrospectively, she professes an inherent yearning to make a change in career, romantic relationships, circumstances and life experiences. She is adamant that she will no longer ascribe to the value systems and opinions of others, in order to lead a more fulfilled life.

It is pertinent to view Rhona's midlife development within a dynamic systems approach known as the lifespan perspective. Four major assumptions make up this broader view: that development is (1) lifelong, (2) multidimensional and multidirectional, (3) highly plastic, and (4) affected by multiple interacting forces (Baltes et al., 1998; Smith & Baltes, 1999; Staudinger & Lindenberger, 2003). As discussed in the literature, development is viewed as lifelong, and there is no specific period which is more dominant than another but events that take place in each period effect future change equally. In each period a person undergoes physical, cognitive and social changes. Furthermore, the challenges people face and adapt to are diverse in their timing and pattern.

According to Erikson (1963) in the seventh development stage, the adult experiences generativity versus stagnation, the era associated with the middle years. Erikson viewed generativity as "primarily the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation" (Erikson, 1963, p. 267). The inability to reach generativity can be viewed as one of many contributing factors to the disease related to midlife angst. Should this need for generativity not be fulfilled, and there is a lack of meaningful contribution, it is likely that the person may become self-absorbed and face stagnation. (Chakraborty et al., 2012; Erikson, 1963). Rhona keenly feels the lack of this generativity, lamenting her lack of children and connection to a significant other, to "kitchen dance with."

Theme 3: Midlife as a wake-up call and reassessment

Midlife is a time of reassessment for Rhona, looking back on the last 4 decades and then deciding which direction to follow. *"It's when you pause for a moment and reassess the direction you have been going for the past 40 years and then the one you want to go in for the next 40."*

The concept of a midlife crisis does not fit Rhona's vernacular. She sees midlife as a wake- up call. The benefits of being at midlife are that she is more certain of what she does not want and describes people at midlife as being less arrogant. Her wake-up call has been to realize how she has taken heed of others' advice and convictions and negated her own inner voice and compass. This, she believes has led her off her own trajectory and made her evaluate the importance of time and how she needs to utilize her remaining time wisely. She posits that most people at midlife are dissatisfied — they question the decisions they have made, where their lives currently are. *"A handful are truly happy people, a handful followed their innate or they never had a voice to start with and they couldn't care less. Most people I encounter at midlife are experiencing a questioning of what they know as life."*

Rhona describes herself as a typical spinster, no children, no partner, with no real career path, *"I didn't follow the traditional path, I didn't have a family, I didn't have children, a husband or any of that. I did not even pursue a vocation, not that I didn't have a desire to, I just didn't. I guess I look like the average spinster",* yet despite this perceived outlier status, she does not believe she has escaped the doldrums or malaise of midlife. She describes midlife as a time of uncertainty.

This uncertainty was apparent in Rhona's answers. *"Yes, but it's assessing what they are now, because they are not what they were, they are not as clear. When you are young, you are so certain of what you want and what you are going to do, when you are older you are not as certain. I imagine the older you get the less certain you become."* Her midlife aspirations and desires were vague and amorphous. The more I probed her for clarity, the less she was able to give.

People at middle-age are confronted with new developmental contexts such as unemployment (Moen & Wethington, 1999) or widowhood, health and functional changes arising as a consequence of biological ageing. Rhona has clearly experienced new developmental contexts and her uncertainty and inability to define her midlife aspirations and desires are analogous with discontinuity within a life-span context.

The opportunity for growth, development and change is supported by a number of theorists. O'Connor and Wolfe (1987) determine midlife transition as a crucial time holding possibilities for growth and development in the lives of many adults (Erikson, 1950; Gould, 1978; Havighurst, 1979; Jaques, 1965; Jung, 1971; Levinson et al., 1978; Neugarten, 1968; Vaillant, 1977; Wolfe and Kolb, 1980).

Rhona is acutely aware of the gains and losses, highs and lows of her life trajectory thus far. In attempting to explain the change in the gain-loss ratio as individuals move through life, Baltes (1997) argues that it is both the age-related decline in levels of biological functioning, and the age-related increase in the need for a complex infrastructure of cultural support that need to be considered.

Rhona is lacking in this cultural support: she defines herself as a typical spinster and highlights the gratification she gets from her nieces and nephews, which further illuminates the starkness of her lack of meaningful connections. Rhona is very aware of wanting to forge new and different connections — she faces her shortcomings and regrets with directness and wants to create a different reality, despite not knowing what this reality is.

Positive Psychology is the empirical study of optimal human functioning (Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2006), and this functioning applies at a number of different levels. On a subjective level, the "positive" takes into account valued experiences such as well-being and contentment. On an individual level, positive traits such as perseverance and

courage are deemed important and at a group level, Positive Psychology is concerned with institutions and how they promote civic virtues such as civility and altruism (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). It is worthwhile noting that Positive Psychology is not merely a psychology of positive emotions, as some oversimplifying critiques suggest (Fernández-Ríos & Vilariño, 2016). Rhona is grappling with poignant disappointments and regrets in her life, yet she is pursuing well-being and contentment. She is doing this through positive traits such as perseverance and courage. She is determined to establish what her unique dreams and aspirations are and to redress regrets of the past. This is despite not following her dreams and she appears determined not to stay mired in regret.

Psychology has traditionally focussed on dysfunction and the remediation of pathology among distressed individuals, whereas Positive Psychology focuses on those average and exceptional individuals, who seek to address questions such as, "what works, what is right, what is improving and what is the nature of the effectively functioning human being?" (Sheldon & King, 2001, p. 216). In essence this is what Rhona is seeking —the meaning of life as she described it.

4.2.3   Summary of Rhona's midlife experience

Rhona's midlife experience is nuanced by her regret and disillusionment at having taken heed of the advice of others. She believes that by not following her dreams and aspirations resulted in her leading an unfulfilled life. It is with sadness and regret that she realizes the implications of these decisions and the residue it has left her with. Her dreams no longer embody the same magic for her, and they seem tainted by their lack of manifestation. She laments that music does not carry the same meaning anymore, neither does it hold the answers to life's questions as it used to.

One gets the sense with Rhona, that her ambiguity and philosophical musings are pertinent to her journey to discover herself and live her life her way. She wants the second

half of her life to be more fulfilled, more authentic and with deeper connections. It is through her lack of connection, unfulfilled dreams and aspirations, that she is hoping to find the key to open the door to the next chapter of her life.

4.3 Interview 2: Sitha

4.3.1   Sitha's biographical information

The interview was conducted in a meeting room of a large media company. Sitha is an attractive, curious and creative Zulu woman in a long-term relationship with a man who is significantly older than her and from a different cultural background and country. Sitha was poised, articulate and very candid in her answers, she had an innate ability to self-reflect and immerse herself in the interview. Sitha was an easier subject to interview. She was curious about my research and believed the subject of midlife to be highly pertinent. Sitha has no children and has an established a career in a creative industry. She grappled with the idea of losing her value, vitality and relevance both personally and career wise. It transpired that she was concerned about the onset of old age, her sense of purpose and her relevance as an older woman both in a work and social context.

4.3.2   Emerging themes

The prevailing themes for Sitha were: feelings of loneliness, rejection and isolation, followed by confusion and uncertainty about the way forward — a new start and her perception of midlife as a crossroads.

Theme 1: Feelings of loneliness, rejection and isolation

The themes of loneliness, rejection and isolation were poignant in Sitha' disparity between youth and old age. Young people were seen as "vibey and alive" and older people as mundane and suburban. People at midlife, according to Sitha, did not hold value, become invisible and no one cares about them. Sitha states clearly: "*You are at a point where no one*

really cares about you. Let's be honest, when young you are nice and funky and vibey, you get into relationships, you start building your own home, then you get to a point where you don't really matter. If you have children, then the children leave home, go to university, there you are sitting by yourself, you hit midlife and it's a scary thought and I don't know how people cope with it actually."

To counter this, people at midlife do archetypal midlife things, men buy an expensive motorbike and attempt to dress younger, both men and women attempt to dress younger. Sitha equates this to having a teenage rebellion and views this with derision. Youth is venerated and is evidenced for Sitha by the pursuit of younger women by older men. Sitha sees people at midlife as being out of touch with modern trends, particularly technology. This further isolates them.

"Yes, especially for men, one must be young again, they get the Harley Davidson, they are trying to get the mojo they used to have. At this point in time, no one really cares about you. You are no longer the good-looking hunk, you are no relevant, you don't even know what the trends are like technology and so on. Even in media, you are now pushed into a different category, you feel like you are in a deferent world altogether. People's hairstyles are even different, men with pink hair and leather jackets. People are like; 'Are you going through a midlife crisis, are you trying to hold onto your youth?"

It's depressing for Sitha, as she struggles to remain relevant and sees this period as frightening and confusing. *"It's the thing that could lead to depression for me. It's like you are too old to be crying about these things but at the same time you are still trying to hold onto whether you are still relevant, is there still life for me. Where do I fit in, where do I go from here, how do I start new relationships? It's like a new start."*

She notes that she's no longer included in the banter and conversations and conversations of her younger colleagues at work. She is aggrieved by the fact that she shouldn't be upset by these observations and experiences at her age.

Midlife is associated with negative stereotypic expectations for many, meaning that middle-aged people are crisis-stricken, bored and that midlife is a period of decline and despair (Lachman, 2001). This is how Sitha has internalized the midlife period and it is what she is fearful of becoming. However, the life-span view counters this somewhat simplistic view of development and positions development across the life-span as multidimensional and multidirectional. According to life-span theory, development is a constant process in which a person has to interact with changing contexts, including historical transformations of society. It may be that Sitha is currently being transformed and shaped by her work and social contexts. She perceives them to reflect her lack of verve, "funkiness" and relevance.

Life-span development is viewed as a continuous or discontinuous process (Lachman, 2011). Friendship, family and often the work context provides continuity, but the ageing process forces a person to confront internal and external developmental contexts that cause discontinuity. Midlife can therefore be characterized as both continuous and discontinuous depending on what unique life events are encountered by individuals.

Sitha confronts her diminishing social circle and her perceived lack of relevance in her workplace — these factors are attributable to her ageing process. In turn, these internal and external developmental contexts cause discontinuity in Sitha's life and she experiences this discontinuity as part of her midlife trajectory.

Theme 2: Confusion and uncertainty about the way forward — a new start

Sitha' confusion and uncertainty regarding a new start in midlife is echoed by her acknowledgement of going through a personal crossroads but unsure of what remains to be done thereafter. Sitha is acutely aware that she is less desirable socially as invitations to parties and social gatherings diminish for her. She cites retirees and pensioners, people who had wished all their lives for more free time and when they finally have it, they don't know what to do. This decision as to what direction to take in midlife, forms the crux of the crisis for Sitha. She seems wistful and sad about the loss of her vibrancy, relevancy and youth. This is possibly exaggerated for her, as she works in a very youthful creative industry. *"I have started to experience that I am no longer part of the conversation, even with my work colleagues, different generations, it's like is there an island where middle-aged people are banished."*

Gould (cited in Santrock, 1992) equates midlife to be as turbulent a developmental period as adolescence however, the will to handle crises during middle adulthood inevitably results in a happier and healthier life. He theorised that handling midlife crisis by realizing that a sense of urgency is a natural reaction to this stage of life, promotes people on the path to adult maturity. This urgency in itself is a positive characteristic, as it motivates growth and developmental transformations. Sitha is fuelled by the impetus of this urgency as she faces the crux of her crisis — what direction to take in midlife.

Jung's (1933) theory of midlife transition further supports midlife as a developmental stage, theorizing that this state materializes when self-doubt and internal disharmony surface with progression into the middle years. Assuming an individual is sufficiently well prepared, midlife transition will be smooth. The difficulties arise when individuals hold misconceptions that are incongruous with the real world. The genesis of these difficulties, according to Jung,

are often historically incorrect assumptions carried from childhood into adult life, in addition there may be inner psychological trouble.

Sitha holds assumptions that may or may not have their origins in childhood but could be incongruous with the real world when she referred to retirees and pensioners who always wished for more time and when they have it, they don't know what to do. She also perceives herself to be less relevant and interesting as a middle-aged woman.

Theme 3: Midlife as a crossroads

For Sitha, midlife is a crossroads, a point where one faces the crossroads of no longer being young and facing old age. "When I think of midlife per se, I think of a time in one's life where you reach a crossroads, where you are no longer young, and you are looking at old age." One is no longer as confident and outspoken; the older adult has experienced challenges and has had to adapt and adjust to these. The older adult may have had to adopt a different mindset — the challenge is to reconcile this mindset with their world. For Sitha, this is deeply worrying and intimidating, and she describes it as living in an alien world. "My question to you then is, how do you equip people like that to cope with the midlife crisis. Everyone will tell you how to cope being menopausal. No one tells you how to cope with midlife. I mean I know when you calm down, it's just what do you do at that juncture?"

She has a dismal view of people at middle-age, describing them as slowly and inevitably becoming irrelevant. Sitha seemed to be dreading the onset of middle and advanced age. She wanted to know what resources there were available, citing resources and information available on coping with menopause but none relating to midlife. *"Then you try a few things out, then you have to have a new mindset. You have to adjust, find yourself, you have to come to terms with who you are. It's like you are in an alien world. I think lots of people struggle with that."*

The interview ended on a positive note, with Sitha describing the way forward as averting fear and deciding what to do with dreams. She expressed a desire for spiritual nurture and a life less preoccupied with material pursuits and pressures. She also noted that at midlife she is wiser and has more available resources that she can enjoy. It was poignant to see that Sitha acknowledged her emotional maturity and her ability to better deal with emotions.

Jung (1933) asserts that an individual's life goal is to develop their consciousness to such an extent that the entire unconscious becomes conscious by the end of life. In this way the individuation process is completed. Inherent in this, is that all underlying, repressed or suppressed traumatic or difficult memories have become transparent, implying that the individual is fully cognisant of them, has worked through and resolved them. Not everyone is able to achieve this state. Jung observed that society does not value deeds pertaining to the inner self but praises outer accomplishments instead. Jung (1933) theorised that individuals should not give focus to defeatist beliefs that life is pre-ordained, and that nature has ordered things. Working through problems that are faced results in an increase in consciousness. In fact, Jung proposed that individuals be thankful for the existence of problems as they enhance and facilitate growth. Jung appears to pre-empt some of the tenets of Positive Psychology.

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) state that despite our personal origins or convictions, the time is pertinent for a more Positive Psychology. That the field of psychology is not only the study of pathology, weakness and damage, it includes the study of virtue and strength. Treatment lies in not only fixing what is broken but nurturing what is valuable. Psychology is not only a branch of medicine preoccupied with illness or health, it is much broader than that. It encompasses education, work, insights, love, growth and play.

Sitha would do well to draw from her strengths of optimism and resilience in order to transcend her concerns about relevancy and loneliness.

Spiritual yearning for Sitha, is echoic of life stage of generativity versus stagnation. This also coincides with the idea of a midlife crisis. Erikson (1963) believed in this stage of life, a person feels the pressure of committing to improving the lives of future generations — a person has to confront the idea of mortality and the virtue of this stage is the opportunity to create a better world for future generations. Stagnation happens when there is too little or no psychological movement or growth — the person struggles to assist their own family which decreases the ability to grow and facilitate growth in others. During this stage a person becomes conscious of time that is left and what they would still like to achieve (Erikson, 1963). Sitha is acutely aware of wanting to do more with the remainder of her life.

Measures associated with psychological well-being, those of vitality, creativity, authenticity and congruence may denote a more stable, long-term form of well-being, compared to a relatively short-term, fleeting experience of positive affective states or hedonic happiness (Ryff & Singer, 1998). Sitha is searching for more lasting well-being, this might be an alternative form of validation to youthful vibrancy, which seems transient, impermanent and elusive to Sitha.

Sitha's pursuit of more intrinsic and deeper meaning in spiritual nurture lends itself to stabilizing her well-being. As Linley and Joseph (2004) believe that psychological well-being is an ongoing process rather than a fixed state, whereas subjective well-being relates to the extent of the pleasure experienced or derived at any passing moment.

Seligman (2002) describes a meaningful life as involving the application of one's strengths and virtues to attain flow by engaging in activities that are deemed worthwhile, and

which connect one to a larger purpose Seligman terms this experience "gratification," which he associates with activities we like to do rather than positive emotions per se.

Sitha expresses a desire for spiritual nurture by seeking sustenance from things other than the material. When absorbed in such activities, Seligman claims that emotions are "blocked" and not experienced at all in the moment, but only in retrospect (e.g., "that was fun"). Part of the value of these gratifying experiences is the loss of the sense of self, and the feeling of connection with something larger.

4.3.3 Summary of Sitha's midlife experience

Sitha perceives midlife to be a frightening time. She is keenly aware that she is on the cusp of midlife and for her, all the associations and stereotypes that accompany midlife are deeply confusing and equally frightening. She is most afraid of becoming irrelevant and unseen, and experiences feelings of loneliness, rejection and isolation. She remains convinced that ageing means no-one cares about her. Youth for Sitha is enhanced by its edginess and ageing is dulled by its accompanying responsibilities. This scares Sitha and she expresses fears at managing this. Sitha poignantly describes how her youthful vibrancy is replaced by the responsibilities of middle adulthood, with its focusses on relationships, career and children. The results show the existence of loneliness, rejection, isolation and a gloomy sense of irrelevancy. This leaves Sitha feeling afraid and lacking in the resources necessary to navigate her fears and discontent.

Sitha welcomed the possibility of further research into midlife, she believes there to be a paucity of research in this area and would personally benefit from some guidance as she experiences confusion and uncertainty about the way forward. Sitha intuitively veers towards spiritual pursuits as a route to navigating her way through her midlife maelstrom.

4.4 Interview 3: Veronique

4.4.1 Veronique's background information

The interview with Veronique was held in a suburban home. Veronique is a single, attractive woman in her mid-forties, with no children. She is in the midst of establishing herself professionally and discovering her identity post-divorce. She was forthcoming in her replies, but it was apparent that she was grappling with sadness, loss and revising her place in the world. There was a fragility to her, despite her attempts to appear strong and confident. She seemed to be having to readjust herself in terms of identity and role. Veronique is well-groomed and it is clear that she has taken good care of herself physically, but it is apparent that she has been impacted by her divorce, her negative interactions dating post-divorce as well as a change in her financial circumstances.

Her demeanour is that of someone who has been worn down by her experiences of life and is trying to maintain a strong façade. She is trying to be brave, given her circumstances but her sadness and the energy given to trying to reinvent herself seeps through. Veronique was a poignant interviewee. She was honest, and her painful experiences were often raw. Her reflections and observations about society and career at midlife were astute and I found myself empathising as to why life was difficult for her.

4.4.2 Emerging themes

Three overarching themes were identified in Veronique's interview material. The first relates to divorce as a trigger for midlife crisis, with the second theme highlighting challenges experienced in midlife facilitating re-evaluation and reinvention. The third theme that has been extrapolated from Veronique's interview is that of achievement at midlife.

Theme 1: Divorce as a trigger for midlife crisis

Divorce was Veronique's catalyst for a midlife crisis. Her entire status quo was upended and changed, her status changed, both financially and socially. Everything fell apart for Veronique: her identity, her relationships, her sense of security and familiarity disrupted. Divorce took Veronique by surprise — she was habituated to a stale or boring relationship and did not think the marriage was bad enough to warrant a divorce. Her husband initiated the divorce and it devastated her. This new state of singledom comes as a shock to her: *"You are suddenly on your own, out there in the world, the last time you were single was in your twenties."*

She laments the support and comfort of being in a marriage, describing marriage as the sharing of responsibilities, decisions, hopes and fears. Being single requires Veronique to deal with difficulties alone. *"Living as a married couple is so much easier, you share responsibilities, decisions, hopes, fears. Being single is so much more stressful, you shoulder all the difficult things on your own."*

Veronique theorizes that divorced people change at midlife, because of their failed relationship experiences: *"So many people are bruised and battered at midlife, possibly because so many people have been through similar ugly divorces. The whole experience of divorce leaves you in shreds."*

The concept of reinvention is a pertinent theme for Veronique — she repeats that she has had to reinvent herself at midlife and it is clear that the dissolution of the old and familiar and the grappling for the emergence of a new identity is wobbly and opaque.

Again Jung's (1933) theory of midlife transition holds true. He posits that the gradual changes in the character and interests of individuals, remain largely unconscious to the individual. Veronique is unaware of the subtler shifts in herself that were apparent to the

researcher. There may come a point where Veronique will need to come to terms with the reality that the creation of some of her initial life systems were not as a result of rational objectives. Some valued endeavours may not have been worthwhile, such as her marriage and aspirations like being married forever, were not actualised as she had imagined they would be. Veronique has ascertained that she needs to create a new reality for herself. She attempts dating and forging a career. She tries to create new dreams, different life paths, new interests, new friendships and new relationships. Jung posited problems would present for those individuals who were unable to integrate or accept that life does not always turn out as we had conceived or desired. Veronique will need to integrate her unwelcome and unexpected outcomes in order to individuate into this next developmental stage.

Theme 2: Challenges experienced in midlife facilitating re-evaluation and reinvention

Veronique's perspective on midlife is not retrospective — she identifies with midlife as a challenging period, but these challenges are only evident when one is immersed in the difficulties. Her explanation of this is that one has preconceived notions of midlife, as seen through a youthful mindset, they include stereotypical ideas such as: *"People are old and set in their ways and life is not as exciting and dynamic as when you are young."*

It is only when Veronique is immersed in the entropy of midlife, does she grasp that it is challenging: *"When you yourself reach midlife, you understand that you are living through the issues at midlife."*

The challenges that Veronique is faced with midlife are a re-evaluation of her life, getting divorced, reinventing herself career-wise, confronting her status as a single person in her mid-forties. In addition, she is cognisant that she is experiencing her worst idea of midlife — she attributes this to getting divorced, which is when everything changed. It is apparent that Veronique's world has changed dramatically, everything that she considered familiar and

safe is no longer recognisable. I ask her if these experiences can be ascribed to midlife. She acknowledges that life changing events can happen at any age but notes that many of her friends have undergone similar experiences and are of similar age.

Veronique's observations and experiences of middle-age are that she perceives herself to be less attractive, that her self-confidence has diminished and that her social circle is smaller. She is acutely aware of her age, both from the perspective of career and personal attractiveness. The younger generation are viewed as competition and therefore it is important for Veronique to be technically competent. She stresses the need to maintain a youthful appearance and take care of one's physical appearance, saying: *"You don't want to look your age and be dismissed as old."*

Veronique is experiencing what many middle-aged women do when they re-enter the workforce once their children have left home and are then confronted with new developmental contexts. Except Veronique has never been fully immersed in the workforce – this is an entirely new developmental context for her. This is a discontinuous influence on development and reflects other examples of discontinuity in life-span such as unemployment or widowhood, health and functional changes arising as a consequence of biological ageing (Moen & Wethington, 1999).

Although not immediately apparent to Veronique, her development is implicit in growth, or gains, as well as decrements, or losses. Baltes (1997) argues that it is both the age-related decline in levels of biological functioning, and the age-related increase in the need for a complex infrastructure of cultural support that need to be considered. Veronique's lack of networked infrastructure of cultural support is keenly highlighted by her difficulties adapting to her midlife developmental construct.

Lachman (2001) says that stressful events such as illness or death of a parent seem to occur more often during middle adulthood. Veronique has experienced a different loss to the death of a parent or a serious illness. She has faced the demise of her marriage; however, her experiences are no less intense. According to Palk (2015) "a stressful experience is an arrangement in which a person and their environment are in a self-starting, complementary two-way relationship" (p.85). Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, and Gruen (1986) identify that are two processes involved in stressful experiences — cognitive appraisal and coping, and these are important moderators of tension that exist between person and environment as well as the short and long-term consequences.

Faced with a stressful situation, an individual first cognitively appraises the situation which occur on a primary and secondary level (Folkman et al., 1986). Coping encompasses cognitive and behavioural efforts that enable management or tolerance of the arrangement. There are two types of coping strategies — those that are problem-focused and those that are emotional-focused (Carver, Scheier and Weintraub, 1989).

Veronique appears to have a firm cognitive grasp of what she is facing and is attempting to cope and make plans to navigate her way through this experience.

Levinson (1980), perceives the change to middle adulthood as five years in duration. In this time the adult needs to confront amongst others, the young-old polarity. Veronique is conscious of maintaining a youthful appearance as this is perceived by her as vital to career and romantic prospects. Levinson (1980) theorizes that the individual acknowledges those changes that signify the decline of physical powers. He or she may still feel young in some respect but there are areas in which he or she is beginning to age.

Veronique does not want to remain single and tries dating for the first time as a mature adult. She highlights her lack of experience in this field because she has been in one

relationship for most of her adult life. Her observations of the dating world are that one encounters *"many people who are wounded, who have trust issues, baggage and on top of that, there are a lot of men who prefer dating younger women."*

She is saddened by how her social circle has changed, citing friends who choose sides. In addition, there is the added complication of being a single woman, who could be perceived as: *"a threat socially to other wives because you might be the only single woman at a social gathering."* It is poignant to note that not only is divorce unsettling and challenging but her foray into singledom, is equally fraught. *"So just recovering from divorce is bad enough, let alone trying to date."*

This is further compounded by Veronique's attempts to forge a career for herself. She is deeply frustrated by how difficult it is to enter the workforce at her age. Her challenges are exacerbated by her age. *"Everyone else has an established career by now and I am just trying to launch myself into a career with a salary that should be commensurate with my age but with very little experience to show for it. It's tough."*

These authors continue that the Transition Sequence Model could engender either a cycle or a spiral of development (O'Connor & Wolfe, 1987). The cycle of development can be described in the context of midlife raising new issues, but generally people deal with them in the same old ways. When life issues are dealt with in new ways, a spiral of development transpire and the transition sequence is seen as a prime opportunity for paradigm shifts to take place in. A phase of rising discontent with ones' life circumstances usually precedes the transition and it is therefore typical that a crisis, in the form of peaking negative emotions with real changes, follows (O'Connor & Wolfe, 1986).

Veronique's experiences can be viewed as a phase-like transition. How she navigates her way out of it, will determine whether this phase is a cycle or a spiral of development.

Midlife may bring new issues to the fore, but generally they are approached and managed in the same old ways. This process is essentially cyclic in nature, viewed as the content being different, but the dual processes of coping and meaning remaining the same. A spiral of development transpires when the issues of life are dealt with in a qualitatively new way. In the context of a spiral of development, the transition sequence is seen as a prime opportunity for paradigm shifts to take place in. It is usually precipitated by a phase of rising discontent wherein the individual has become dissatisfied with his or her current life arrangements (O'Connor & Wolfe, 1986). It is typical for a crisis to follow, in the form of the peaking of negative emotions with some scope of real-world changes. Veronique has to enter the work-force which is an entirely new development context for her and while the context is different, the way in which she deals with it and gives meaning to it seems to remain the same as all other contexts.

Theme 3: Achievement at midlife

The third theme that has been extrapolated from Veronique's interview is that of achievement at midlife. She would like to meet a suitable partner and to establish a viable career. Possibly once these primary needs have been met, Veronique aspires to add meaning to her life through philanthropic or spiritual pursuits. *"Maybe it's a spiritual thing, I don't know but it's important to leave a good mark or at least do some good."*

Erikson (1963) believed that a person needs to first get a sense of self and how he/she fits into society, then commit to marriage before considering spending time and energy on well-being of future generations. Generativity is "primarily the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation" (Erikson, 1963, p. 267). Generativity is about leaving a legacy, what adults aspire to do for future generations (Erikson, 1963) and is shown through

activities such as teaching and leading that will benefit the broader society and the next generation (McAdams, de St Aubin & Logan, 1993). Parenting is an important expression of reaching generativity, but it also includes teaching and leadership or other creative activities, according to Lachman (2001).

Hence, Veronique's seeking generativity through spiritual aspirations bodes well for a positive transition through midlife. Similarly, Veronique yearns to add a further dimension of actualisation to her life and that is through the pursuit of philanthropic or spiritual dimensions, after taking care of her primary needs.

Veronique is following a healthy trajectory of midlife development: despite her difficulties she aspires to contribute of herself in a deeper, lasting and more meaningful way to society at large and can thus be seen to be moving towards generativity as suggested by Chakraborty et al (2012).

The Transition Sequence Model (O'Connor & Wolfe, 1987) is contiguous with Positive Psychology. Positive Psychology advocates positive individual traits and positive institutions, to improve the quality of life and prevent pathologies when life appears barren and empty.

Hope, wisdom, creativity, future mindedness, courage, spirituality, responsibility and perseverance are characteristic for transforming negative impulses (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Veronique is demonstrating the potential for a positive subjective experience, through her attempts to establish herself in a meaningful career, her desire to have a significant relationship and her aspirations related to generativity. This despite her life at present, appearing empty and barren from a career, relationship and social perspective.

Veronique has experienced volatility and turmoil at midlife: she has run a gamut of emotions from heartbreak and despair to hope and courage. This reflects an idea posed in

current literature that Positive Psychology requires further knowledge of how positive and negative characteristics combine to promote a good life. Understanding human strengths and their amalgamation is challenging when there are distinctions made between positive and negative qualities (Tennen & Affleck, 2003) and according to Wood and Tarrier (2010) it is actually impossible to separate positive and negative functioning. Veronique has shown great strength in amalgamating and assimilating her experiences.

4.4.3   Summary of Veronique's midlife experience

Veronique has experienced a challenging midlife trajectory. It has encompassed the loss of her marriage and subsequent divorce. The challenges she experiences in midlife are facilitating a re-evaluation and reinvention of herself and her life. She has experienced sadness and loss, faced financial crises, the loss of her identity and status as a married woman and an adjustment to her vastly different circumstances and world as a single divorcee. In addition, she had to forge a career path, where there was none before and to summon the courage to make new friends. Despite her negative observations of dating post-divorce, Veronique remains optimistic about the possibilities of a new relationship.

4.5 Interview 4: William

4.5.1   William's background information

The interview with William, a 56-year-old male, was conducted in a restaurant, situated in a suburban bookstore. William is an attractive, genial man with an easy smile and an open demeanour. He is divorced, with two young adult children and currently in a relationship with a woman of similar age. He is struggling to establish appropriate boundaries between his children and his new relationship. His divorce was acrimonious, with his ex-wife subsequently admitting to substance abuse. His adult children have been profoundly affected by this revelation and the accumulated psychological impacts. They want to remain close to

their father and are reluctant to individuate by moving out of his home and establishing financial and emotional independence.

William is self-employed in a fledgling consulting capacity. His life has taken a tumultuous path and his financial status has changed for the worse: William lost his management position due to an internal conflict in his company and has been forced to pursue an entrepreneurial path. His employment is not a steady form of income. Post his divorce, he has been thrust into a more demanding parenting role, despite his children being young adults. His adult children seem demanding, clingy and unindividuated.

There is only one main theme extrapolated from William's interview — the existence of midlife crisis and midlife triggers.

William professes midlife to be somewhat of an enigma. He claims not to have given much thought to midlife. However, as the interview progresses, it is evident that he has spent time contemplating midlife, to the point where he expounds upon his theory of midlife based on gender. His assessment of midlife is that it used to be in one's forties and fifties and has now moved to one's sixties.

William describes midlife as being a halfway point and as with other research participants sees midlife as a turning point. William does not believe he has gone through a midlife crisis but leaves the possibility thereof as open. He affirms that midlife is a very tangible phenomenon that happens to people.

His narrative about midlife centres around a theory that men *"suddenly start buying a soft top motor car and behave badly."* William has a very clear, stereotypical perception of midlife. He perceives midlife to be mostly influenced by changes that happen to the power relationship between men and women, in particular those who are married, have children and the children then grow up and leave. His perceptions are centred around the idea that men are

hunters and women are nurturers, but when women want power (to be hunters) that is when things start going wrong: *"Their kids are out of home and now they [women] want to achieve and there's almost like a role reversal because the men haven't had a chance to be nurturers and now they want to be nurturers and the women want to be significant. I think that's what's causing a lot of divorces and damage in relationships because it becomes a power struggle."*

His theory appears to be extrapolated from his experiences with his ex-wife. He describes his ex-wife as domineering and nasty and berates himself for his lack of assertiveness, the lack of which could have expedited the divorce process. The marriage is described by William as a power struggle: his ex-wife wanted to be powerful, she never had the opportunity to assert her power, presumably because she had a mothering role to fulfil, and was thwarted by motherhood in her career according to William's view.

Males, according to William, have a midlife crisis because of this role reversal — men need to prove themselves again, he ascribes this as a crisis because men have missed out on the more playful sides to life because they have been so preoccupied with work.

"Now suddenly they want to play, have affairs, do all the things they couldn't in their earlier lives because they were so busy working. The midlife crisis comes about because men need to prove themselves."

Kail and Cavanaugh (2004) and Lachman (2004) report that during midlife, individuals face changes in health and well-being and a plethora of unique challenges and issues to be navigated. These encompass separation, divorce, marriage/remarriage, raising children/stepchildren, new work conditions, career transitions, re-entry into the workforce, additional studies, financial changes, caring for ageing parents or relatives, retirement, deteriorating health, potential illness, and an empty nest syndrome. William has experienced

his fair share of midlife challenges: he was separated prior to his divorce and has encountered new working conditions that entailed a career change.

In addition, his finances changed dramatically, as a result of his change in working conditions and his enforced entrepreneurial pursuits. He also had to pay maintenance for his children and divide u top his marital assets. Further compounding William's midlife challenges is the fact that his young adult children seek the stability of his home environment and wish to remain close to him. William vacillates between self-recrimination for his life choices and denial of the midlife experience. This reflects Crary et al.'s (1990) idea that if an individual fails to meet the demands of society or fails to contribute, this individual's life structure is seen as a failure.

William has followed this life trajectory, he has faced challenges in settling into his career, developing intimate partnerships and starting a family (Lachman, 2001). William's family life is an unexpected variable — he has his young adult children now wanting to live with him and he's trying to establish his relationship with his new partner within this context.

Levinson (1978) determined midlife crisis as an attempt for men to review their lives and reorder their priorities and it is this reviewing that results in a crisis (Levinson, 1978). William briefly alights on the crisis but keeps the crisis at arms-length, alluding to it as something that happens to others and that now happens to people in their sixties.

Levinson views the main task in midlife as finding a meaningful and adaptive balance between love and work (Levinson, 1978). Levinson (1977) believed that "transitional periods aim to terminate existing structures and to work toward the initiation of a new structure" (p. 100), which could elicit considerable uncertainty and upheaval. Alternatively, it could signify growth and maturescence, even at the expense of emotional turmoil, stress and doubt. This growth and maturescence is in alignment with the mores of Positive Psychology. Levinson

(1977) acknowledges the uncertainty and upheaval — the implementation of new structures can elicit but also recognises the potential for growth and maturescence.

William's experience of midlife began for him at the age at which he got divorced. He describes his relationship as one in which he was perpetually demeaned and post-divorce sought to validate his worth and attractiveness. *"So, I lost my feeling of being attractive and I then dated a lot, which I guess was a way to reassure myself, to see if women would like me. I needed to be appreciated. I never had any affairs, but I needed to explore."*

This theme of self-worth at midlife is further triggered and exacerbated from a career perspective. William keenly feels the age gap between himself and others of a younger generation: he notes how the millennial generation seem to only value experience in digital marketing and dismiss his wisdom, experience and longevity in the working arena. *"The sad thing is that, I was doing business with a woman the other day, I had an MBA before she was born but as far as she was concerned, I knew nothing. I could have added a lot to her business. I don't know if it's a millennial thing, but it seems you are only as good as what you know about digital marketing. Those people lose out on a lot of wisdom. Like men who have lived through market crises will know what to do, whereas somebody that hasn't experienced that, panics, doesn't know what to do."*

Tamir (1982b) theorised that midlife transition occurs between ages 40 to 49 years and found ever-present indications of transition at middle-age for men — they perceive that success and status are at an all-time high at middle-age with further promotion not likely. William expresses a desire for financial success and its accompanying status, this despite his lack of tertiary education. William is keenly aware of his financial obligations as well as his loss of status following his career change.

Despite attributing this to the transition to middle-age, where work appears less important to self-fulfilment than in earlier adulthood stages, Tamir (1982b) says job satisfaction does not correlate with wellbeing in midlife. William is grappling with an entrepreneurial role and the change in his financial and family circumstances, and seeks self-fulfilment in areas other than work, despite the importance of financial security, which supports Tamir's (1982b) theory.

Other triggers for midlife are endemic in people living their lives through their children. William reveals that there is a great deal of societal pressure with his contemporaries, to ensure that children attend the right schools. Once secondary and tertiary education is completed, it leaves a vacuum, even if that vacuum itself was highly pressurized and stressful. The absence created by the vacuum leads William to question his purpose after these generational milestones. *"There's a lot of pressure, with your kids and then they move on, they go to university and what have you got to live for?"*

I propose that the emptiness can be ascribed to the empty nest syndrome, symptomatic at midlife. William concurs but stipulates that his circumstances are fairly unique. I could not ascertain why William believed his circumstances were unique as they did not appear to be. To counter the bleakness left by the vacuum of children leaving home, William outlines a picture of an ideal life trajectory — one marries, has children, thereafter there is a period akin to a honeymoon again when the children leave home. This idealised as a special time for William, with many positives: *"You can travel, love each other dearly and go into the sunset."*

Tamir (1982b) used parenthood and marriage as the variables to be measured. She discovered that emphasis on the parental role lessened and sensitivity with regard to marital roles increased in middle-age for college-educated men — if the marriage was unhappy, this

would constitute a greater threat than at any other age. According to Tamir (1982b) happy marriages at this time period were seen as more capable of enhancing wellbeing for college-educated men in their forties than for other age groups. William's parental role increased at middle-age, and his unhappy marriage proved itself to be a sufficient catalyst to result in divorce. William's experience of parenting is dialectically opposite to Tamir's theory of parenting. Despite his children being young adults, William, as the father is shouldering an increased responsibility in parenting.

William did not immediately seem to identify with having experienced any type of midlife experience. However, during our interview, he seemed to vacillate between admitting to midlife experiences but still keeping the admission thereto at arms-length. William appeared to hold some traditional views on gender roles, which he believed were reversed at midlife. William did not see the demise of his marriage at midlife as necessarily a midlife phenomenon.

Midlife is a neglected area of study as Tamir (1982b) has identified. People in middle-age is seen as a unique population —they are not yet old but not young anymore either, and they are the wealthy and powerful population which means that their contribution to maintaining the structure of society was more than others' (Tamir, 1982a). William is part of this population, he is neither young, nor old, he has the capacity to influence via his prospective entrepreneurial forays and his continued involvement in the life of his young adult children. Furthermore, William does not escape the daunting obligations that midlife presents.

During this period, specific problems are confronted and tension experienced in a person's internal and external world, a person's work experience, and social relationships — reassessment, career evaluation, launching children, accepting flawed bodies and facing death

are all things that people in midlife need to confront (Tamir, 1982a). William is confronting various changes in his own life, career evaluation, an idealized yearning for an empty nest syndrome and the re-romanticizing of a significant relationship. Instead he is faced with the reality of attenuating his dreams, to accommodate added parental responsibilities, consequently denying him the opportunity to have a "second honeymoon" with his new partner.

Tamir (1982a) did not study women, because there was a plethora of research done on females and midlife, but moreover she believed different paths are followed by men compared to women in the course of life (Lowenthal, Thurnher & Chiriboga, 1975). William has described his wife's experience of midlife as vastly different to his and ventured as far as describing a gender reversal of nurturing roles at midlife. William's circumstances highlight the need for further research into male midlife transition and in turn supports Tamir's (1982b) view of the paucity of scientific literature pertaining to men.

Levinson (1980) encapsulates the themes that William describes in his interview in his outline of four major conflicts at midlife: William describes how he is perceived by younger work colleagues as out of touch, yet he is cognizant of the wisdom and skills he has accumulated. His experience of Levinson's young-old polarity is evidenced in William becoming aware of those changes that signify the decline of physical powers. Despite William still feeling young in some respects, there are indicators of areas in which he is beginning to age.

A vital developmental task is that of the destruction-creation polarity. Another challenge is evaluating the role they have played in life — when a person recognizes what people have done to him/her and what they have done to people. It can be a painful process if an individual becomes aware that they have hurt someone else. As such, gaining control over

destruction and creation processes is a critical task at this stage (destruction-creation polarity) (Levinson, 1980). William is aware of the destruction that he experienced from his "domineering" ex-wife but does not refer to any role he may have played in hurting others and could be unaware of his own personal destructive and creative processes. Therefore, obviating a fundamental developmental stage.

Levinson (1980) refers to a masculine-feminine polarity, as the acceptance and integration of both masculine and feminine aspects of one's personality. This can be seen when William refers to his lack of assertiveness that delayed his divorce process, possibly he was unable to integrate the more masculine aspects to his personality at the time of his divorce. He recognises that his nurturing, more feminine aspects are apparent in the role reversal with his ex-wife. William expresses a desire to spend more time with his children and is less pre-occupied with career aspirations. Paradoxically he now has this scenario as his adult children do not want to individuate and forge their separate lives.

Attachment-separateness polarity is described by Levinson as the dichotomy between involvement with the outside world and the introspective involvement in one's own inner world. A new balance between outer and inner involvement must be formulated. William will have to address the new configuration, that is his family and career. He has given some thought to his introspective world, but this introspection seems to be more academic and at arms-length.

As mid-life transition transits to middle adulthood, it entails a commitment to new choices in light of a desired future, therefore the individual modifies life structures accordingly. Levinson (1978) states that "the main tasks now are to make crucial choices, give these choices meaning and commitment, and build a structure around them" (p.279). William has an idealized and romanticized view of midlife. William outlines a picture of an

ideal life trajectory: one marries, has children, thereafter there is a period akin to a honeymoon again when the children leave home. This is idealised as a special time for William, with many positives, for example to travel with a loved one and have special moments.

4.5.2 Summary of William's midlife experience

William vacillates between identifying with midlife and alternately rejecting parts of midlife, instead ascribing midlife characteristics to others that he knows. William has had an acrimonious divorce, compounded with a negative change in his financial circumstances. He's also had to establish himself as an entrepreneur after the loss of his management position. His young adult children actively seek him out for additional parenting and he is unable to give his full attention to his new life and relationship. This additional parenting role is a conundrum for William, as he is aware that he has become more nurturing as he ages but is torn between the need to nurture and the yen to "*travel, love each other dearly and go into the sunset*" at midlife with his partner.

4.6 Interview 5: Richard

4.6.1 Richard's background information

Richard is a 65 year old divorced male with a teenage daughter. The interview was conducted in the golf clubhouse of an estate where Richard was building a new home. Richard was an unusual subject to interview because although he clearly referred to events that correlated with midlife experiences, he strongly and emphatically denied that he had experienced anything that could be construed as a midlife experience. I have opted to include only the relevant dialogue that was pertinent to this dissertation.

The remainder of the interview, Richard spent attempting to convince me that he is an expert in mindfulness, that he is very healthy and that despite his age, he is youthful in

countenance and physical strength. Richard also veered off the topic of midlife by elaborating on the nature of his business, in wellness and health. Richard revealed a number of sensitive details about clients and the nature and monetary value of his business transactions. It could be posited that Richard was in the very throes of a midlife transition and he was seemingly in denial of this. Richard contacted me post the interview to initiate further contact numerous times, including sending a Wikipedia link on midlife. I have decided to decline further contact as it would not contribute to my study.

4.6.2   Emerging themes

Richard's interview material delivered two main themes. The first theme relates to midlife and the existence of midlife crisis, and the second theme involves triggers of midlife crisis or challenges being faced.

Theme 1: Midlife and the existence of midlife crisis

I asked Richard whether he was familiar with the concept of midlife or a midlife crisis. As with most of the other research participants he understood midlife to be a midway point. The crux for Richard was whether people cope with this time period or not. Not coping with it, was the crisis point for Richard. Given that Richard was familiar with the concept of midlife I wanted to ascertain whether he had had any experiences that could be construed as relating to midlife. It was to be this juncture in the interview that set the tone for the remainder of the interview.

Richard was adamant that any negative experiences that could be attributed to the midlife period were not applicable to him. Richard is self-employed in a health-related field and determined that his background in this field allowed him to circumnavigate any negativity in his life including the vagaries of midlife. In addition, his adherence to the practice of mindfulness further buffeted him against perceived negativity. Richard also

professed to be up to date with most new developments in the sphere of health care and this also helped him to avoid negativity. "*So, I don't really get affected by these things.*"

I attempted to introduce the possibility of there being different stages in a life trajectory, Richard admitted that there are, *"but it's all relative."* I asked him to expand on what "relative" meant for him, to which he responded: *"Some people just handle age better."*

I felt stymied by Richard and was unable to get him to expand on midlife. He was adamant that he had the capacity and knowledge to overcome any difficulties. "*I have always handled things well in my life and I am always on top of my game. I am in the health and wellness game and so you know about these things. Mindfulness is big for me. It helps me to stay focussed.*"

I was aware that my next question would allow him to expand on this theme. I asked how he handles life. He again reiterated his experience in health and wellness and how this has given him all the necessary knowledge and insights to traverse life.

The ego is a mediator between id impulses and superego demands, and also acquires attitudes and skills so that a person can become a contributing member of society. At each stage, psychological conflicts are resolved on a continuum from positive to negative which determine whether the outcome is healthy or maladaptive (Erikson, 1950). Richard appears blunted in that he is unable to mediate between his id impulses and superego demands and he remains steadfastly resolute in his denial of any midlife experiences, which could put him at risk for a maladaptive transitioning at midlife.

Theme 2: Triggers of midlife crisis or challenges being faced

Richard has been divorced for two years and has a daughter. His daughter has decided that she would rather live with her father. Richard describes his ex-wife as *"difficult"* and

"much younger" than him. He is concerned about taking on the responsibility of his daughter as he has an unencumbered life and expressed an interest in moving in a different direction work-wise. Having the added and unexpected custodianship of his daughter is weighing heavily on him and he's aware of the changes and impact it will have on his current life. *"Yes, and I am not sure I am ready for it because I travel a lot and do my own thing. Also, I am wanting to move in a different direction workwise. So, taking responsibility now for my daughter when I hadn't factored that in is a big deal."*

I concur that he has a lot of changes happening. He agrees and draws my attention to the fact that he is solely responsible for running his own business and taking over parenting for his daughter will negatively impact him. This negative impact is evidenced by Richard being solely responsible for the operation and running of his business and that he has no support system to help with his daughter. *"Yes, it's quite big and the fact that I need to run my own business and also have to now take responsibility for my daughter, well it will be a mess then."*

At this point Richard seemed to realize that the interview had veered in a different direction and he had inadvertently revealed difficulties that he was experiencing. Richard appeared to be struggling with several impending changes in his life, with a scarcity of support and some facile internal resources. The remainder of the interview was spent extolling the benefits of mindfulness and the importance of his work. The emphasis on mindfulness, presented a diversion and Richard wanted to maintain a façade that did not include any negativity.

This is convoluted for Richard as he is unable to focus on the creation of new dreams, different life paths, the formation of new interests, new friendships and the pursuit of new relationships, because the re-emergence of a full-time parenting role hinders these new

forays. Individuals who are unable to integrate or accept that life does not always turn out as conceived or desired will experience problems (Jung, 1933).

The value in Neugarten's theory is the promotion of the concept that people can be are aware of their own life-cycle and thus compare their and others' progress according to their previous expectations (Lachman, 2001). Accordingly, Krueger, Heckhausen, and Hundertmark (1995) states that research has shown people that reach midlife hold stereotypical beliefs about what should have been accomplished. Richard is determined to reinforce his successes and his coping skills, despite his distress at having to take on the responsibility of his teenage daughter, with no familial support.

In midlife the adult becomes the socializer, instead of the socialized. Neugarten (cited in Lachman, 2001) emphasizes the maturity of the individual at midlife, who now has the capacity to take on important roles. Richard seems to lack the maturity to navigate midlife as he is in denial of some of the processes taking place at midlife.

Environmental stress is a common and relevant part of a functioning life and the interaction between which adaptive mechanism is chosen by the individual and those with who she/he interacts is vital. The hierarchy of defences can be used as predictor of adult mental health and a determinant as to what extent environmental stress will impact an individual. Richard shows himself to have strong and inflexible defences. The three classes of coping mechanisms suggested by Vaillant (1977; 2000) can be related to Richard in the following ways:

- Richard would benefit from seeking help from appropriate others. Particularly in the arena of seeking social support. Richard appears socially isolated and enlisting the help of others, particularly with his daughter would ease his parental responsibilities.

- Richard would do well to incorporate strategies other than his focus on mindfulness to navigate difficult situations. Valliant proposes that intentional and conscious cognitive strategies can help to traverse problem areas.

- Making use of involuntary mechanisms that alter the interpretation of internal and external reality can temper anxiety. Richard seems to have blind allegiance to mindfulness and as such it obviates the potential for Richard to discover new ways to alleviate his anxieties.

However, Richard is in denial about his midlife experiences and therefore is highly unlikely to consider or seek social support, neither does he possess intentional and conscious cognitive strategies to navigate difficult situations. His involuntary mechanisms that alter the interpretation of internal and external reality to abate anxiety, are those of denial and a rigid adherence to mindfulness and maintaining good physical health.

4.6.3   Summary of Richard's midlife experiences

Richard is emphatic in his denial of any midlife crisis. His midlife experience has yielded a divorce and he is currently facing the added responsibility of custodianship of his teenage daughter. This, at a time, when his business needs his focus to move in a different direction and he expresses a desire to further his personal life. Richard places emphasis on his ability to cope with negative experiences and remain healthy and mindful.

4.7 Interview 6: Clifford

4.7.1   Clifford's background information

Clifford, a 63 year old male, was interviewed in a coffee shop. Clifford is a very fit, active, positive and humorous man. He has had an interesting career both as a professional dancer and latterly as a branding specialist. He still dances professionally and teaches various genres of dance and owns his own dance studio. Clifford was open and candid about his

lifelong difficulties with adult Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and addictions. Clifford was an interesting subject to interview. He was the most open and self-disclosing of all my interviewees. The interview was fluid and easy and segued from humour to honesty. Interviewing Clifford had moments of self-deprecation, flashes of wisdom and insight and ended on a revealing and profound note.

4.7.2   Emerging themes

Two themes were extrapolated from Clifford's interview. The first theme relates to the existence of midlife and associated midlife markers, and the second is midlife as a transition phase. These themes are discussed below.

Theme 1: The existence of midlife and midlife markers

I ask Clifford to define what midlife is. He refers to his grandmother who died at 66 and compares his life to hers. He describes himself as *"feeling half the age I thought she was."* Clifford suggests that people are getting younger and attributes this to getting healthier and eating better. He proffers that midlife happens at 50, but counters this with *"I thought when I was 50, midlife would get me, but it just didn't happen."*

I press for a more detailed description of midlife from Clifford. His answers are reflective of how important physical well-being and fitness are for him. His career and life as a dancer are entwined in his world view and definitions of mental health and constructs. *"I suppose it's when you realize you are not bulletproof anymore, like we did when we were teenagers, you can't drink and drug it up anymore. Your body ages, but that happens anyway."*

I draw Clifford's attention to the fact for him, midlife is more centred around physicality.

"I think it is. Like when I went to my school reunion, the organising committee said should we wear name tags. I said, no, I will recognise people. So, the guy showed me a photo of someone and said who is this? I said I dunno. It was a guy I knew intimately at school, he had aged so much, much more than I had. I think physicality has a lot more to do with midlife."

Clifford affirms that midlife is marked for him by the constructs of ageing and physicality, directly correlated to his life and work as a dancer. He points out that when he got divorced, it was not age related, rather that they were incompatible. The divorce itself was a crisis for him. This leads me to ask whether it is possible that one reaches a juncture such as midlife and then to experience life is changing. It is at this point in the interview that Clifford acknowledged a midlife experience. He recounts giving up his job and moving to another country, describing it as the worst thing he could have done and his acute embarrassment around this decision.

An increase in unhappy marriages, more suicides, job changes and mental health problems were highlighted by McCrae and Costa (2003) as characteristic of the midlife crisis at 40 years of age. Clifford fits this theory, even though his midlife experience of a change of job was later than 40, it was still within his midlife phase. McCrae and Costa (2003) say that there are no changes to personality traits after age 30, but what does change significantly are physical flexibility and strength, sensory alertness, and energy. It is evident that Clifford is cognizant of the physical changes in his body and general appearance, and it seems that Clifford has retained his personality traits and his interpretations of life as a younger man — they appear consistent with those of his older self. Clifford remains humorous, open and curious about life, the same traits that he ascribed to his younger self and the very traits that continue to contribute to his life.

McCrae and Costa (2003) are adamant that not everyone experiences a midlife crisis. Clifford appears to have circumvented a great deal of the negatives associated with midlife. McCrae and Costa (2003) argue vehemently that personality remains stable during adulthood and this would support Clifford's avoidance of many of the negatives associated with midlife. However, they say that certain aspects of a personality might change during adulthood, such as the physical self-concept, social attitude, values and interpersonal relationships. Jaques (1965), Jung (1933) and Neugarten (1968) designate personality as an important aspect in the study and understanding of midlife.

It is clear that personality is a fundamental trait, endemic to how Clifford has navigated his life. It is rooted in the positivity his father modelled and that he is now modelling for his sons. Midlife embodies an attitude for Clifford. He refers to the fact that ageing is inevitable and describes his life stages, beginning with puberty, which he considers worse for females versus males, noting his own experience of puberty as easily navigated. Clifford makes reference to his twenties, thirties, getting married and becoming a father. Clifford does not believe he has reached midlife, despite his age of 63. He places strong emphasis on attitude as a determinant. He cites that he can out-dance men his own age, that he listens to contemporary music and that he can keep pace with his young children.

A marker of midlife for Clifford was having children. He describes how life changes after having children in terms of one's approach to life.

Some contemporary theorists say that continuous and discontinuous changes can occur, that development has both universal features and features that are unique to the individual and his or her contexts. They suggest that heredity and environment are inseparably interwoven, each variable affecting the potential of the other to modify traits and capacities (Huttenlocher, 2002). Attitude is a strong determinant for Clifford, and it is his

positive attitude to life that allows him to transcend midlife. *"My confidence is my ability to figure things out. My father brought me up like that, my sons are brought up like that. They never lack that confidence. I can be wrong yes, like my knee can get sore. But you go back, figure it out, what did I do to mess up that relationship, the ability to bounce back. It's not a crisis, it's a bump in the road."*

Theme 2: Midlife as a transition

Midlife is a coming of age for Clifford — he sees it as an "age transition time". It is a time when one has a greater sense of reality and wisdom. Clifford cites the following example*: "I mean you figure things out, like women of 21 won't look at me anymore. Well they stopped looking at me when I was 40."*

He expands on the reasons for changing jobs and moving abroad to a different job. He was looking for change. He was bored with being in the same place at the same job and wanted something different. He realized that he had moved beyond where his company was and had effectively outgrown them. His desire for change, according to Clifford, was misplaced as change was necessary but the position and country that he chose were not. Since his return he has had to reinvent himself, as he describes, he had to *"reshuffle/realign".* Clifford is candid about his decisions and his honesty is refreshing, the ability to laugh at himself and his positivity make for an easy interview.

I suggest to him that people at midlife never get a chance to reassess their dreams and aspirations. Subsequently, a crisis looms where individuals arrive at midlife and start asking questions of themselves such as: Where am I? Who am I? but Clifford takes it in his stride: *"I reassess hourly (laughter), I make mistakes hourly. You make a mistake and you bumble on, that's how I navigate life."*

I reference his positivity, humour and self -awareness, suggesting that may be a reason why he hasn't encountered anything that could be construed as a midlife event. At this point I have not disclosed to him that in my opinion, his career construes as a midlife event. Clifford reinforces his self-awareness and postulates that his career change could be such an event. He further discloses that he is currently in a relationship with a woman only a few years younger than he. He counters stereotypical views of males at midlife and declares that he is "*not interested in all these young things. It would be a horrible relationship for me, I find the thought of being in a relationship with someone so much younger than me, irrational. I think that realization has always been with me. Know who you are, know your limitations.*"

The concept of knowing one's limitations is intrinsic to Clifford — he reveals he will be dancing in a competition over the weekend and must wear a knee guard. He yearns for the body he had in his twenties but being older does not deter him from working hard to keep fit. Clifford places great value on striving to remain mentally fit and does this reading new content, listening to new music, accessing new creative content, theatre and exhibitions. Clifford does not believe in time, he reveals a philosophical aspect of himself, terming the concept of time as a human construct and deriding it as arrogant to believe we have some kind of control over our own lives. Clifford determines that these empty crises, such as midlife, are not helpful nor constructive.

Clifford embodies Seligman's (2002) hedonic well-being as an aspect of authentic happiness. Seligman's (2002) conception of the good life includes the pursuit of pleasure, or a well, engaged and meaningful life, representing a eudemonic orientation to which he assigns greater importance. The engaged life, was influenced by Csikszentmihalyi's formulation of "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The engaged life is one of optimal absorption and fit between the individual's skills and the demands of an activity. Examples of flow states include those experienced by athletes, musicians, and rock climbers, especially

when performing at a peak or optimal level, sometimes called being "in the zone" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). When absorbed in such activities, Seligman reports that emotions are blocked, and not experienced at all in the moment, only retrospectively (e.g., "that was fun"). Part of the value of these gratifying experiences is the loss of the sense of self, and the feeling of connection with something larger.

Clifford has been a professional dancer his entire adult life and continues to pursue dancing as a career. It can be said that Clifford experiences this flow continually and is what maintains his optimism. This, in addition to his own experiences of parental modelling contribute to his sense of authentic happiness.

4.7.3 Summary of Clifford's midlife experiences

Other than a dramatic and embarrassing change of career at midlife, Clifford appears to have circumvented a number of negative experiences other participants have encountered at midlife. Clifford is aware of his body ageing and his physical appearance having changed but he has assimilated this as part of his natural life trajectory and sees midlife as a transition phase. So much so, that he is comfortable to date a woman of similar age because he understands that he has more in common with a contemporary than a much younger partner. Clifford measures changes in his life according to his levels of physicality, this as opposed to lamenting lost opportunities or questioning the meaning of his life. Clifford's optimism, humour and positivity have been instilled in him by his father and he believes these traits keep him resilient and youthful. His enquiring mind and quest to remain contemporary also contribute to his zest for life.

4.8 Summary of six participants' interviews

Participants experience midlife as a confusing time. They are often caught off-guard by the changes and disruption taking place compounded by uncertainty at how to move

forward. Middle adulthood is referenced as a time of maturity and experience, yet these changes and disruptions are unfamiliar, and participants lack the emotional resources and knowledge to transition changes. Participants face the double bind of believing they should have the available resources to cope with these changes, given their age but face their inexperience at these life changes. This inexperience and lack of resources at midlife would benefit from further research.

Leaving behind their youth is a nuanced process for participants, with Sitha and Veronique keenly aware of their perceived societal devaluation both physically and career wise. Rhona is saddened by her unrequited youthful dreams and hopes that she still has an opportunity to experience a richer, more meaningful life. William's empty nest syndrome has boomeranged, and he now has increased parental responsibilities that compete with juggling a significant relationship. Richard also faces an increase in parental responsibility. This phenomenon was not uncovered in the midlife literature reviewed and further research would be valuable.

As evidenced through this research, psychologically, midlife induces a plethora of unique challenges and issues to be navigated. Confirming what Kail and Cavanaugh (2004) as well as Lachman (2004) identified: Separation, divorce, marriage/remarriage, raising children/stepchildren, new work conditions, career transitions, re-entry into the workforce, additional studies, financial changes, caring for ageing parents or relatives, retirement, deteriorating health, potential illness, and an empty nest syndrome. William keenly feels the age gap between himself and others of a younger generation: he notes how the millennial generation seem to only value experience in digital marketing and dismiss his wisdom, experience and longevity in the working arena.

Tamir (1982a) placed significance on her findings that self-confidence is the most important value chosen by subjects assessed at ages 30-49 years. Midlife is a neglected area of study as Tamir (1982b) has identified. People in middle-age is seen as a unique population —they are not yet old but not young anymore either, and they are the wealthy and powerful population which means that their contribution to maintaining the structure of society was more than others'. William is part of this population, he is neither young, nor old, he has the capacity to influence via his prospective entrepreneurial forays and his continued involvement in the life of his young adult children.

Furthermore, William does not escape the daunting obligations that midlife presents. During this period, specific problems are confronted, pertaining to reassessment, career evaluation, launching children, accepting flawed bodies and facing death (Tamir, 1982b). Tamir (1982b) highlights three domains where tension is experienced; the inner and outer world of the individual, their work experience, and their social relationships. William vacillates between identifying with midlife and alternately rejecting parts of midlife, instead ascribing midlife characteristics to others that he knows, yet understood midlife to be a midway point. The crux for Richard was whether people cope with this time period or not. Not coping with it, was the crisis point for Richard, yet Richard is emphatic in his denial of any midlife crisis. His midlife experience has yielded a divorce and he is currently facing the added responsibility of custodianship of his teenage daughter. This, at a time, when his business needs his focus to move in a different direction and he expresses a desire to further his personal life. Richard places emphasis on his ability to cope with negative experiences and remain healthy and mindful.

Certain aspects are susceptible to change during adulthood as previously discussed — physical self-concept, social attitude, values and interpersonal relationships (McCrae and Costa, 2003). Clifford seems to have come to terms with his aging body and changed

physical appearance. He measures changes in his life according to his levels of physicality, this as opposed to lamenting lost opportunities or questioning the meaning of his life.

What is very noticeable is Clifford's optimism, humour and positivity that have been instilled in him by his father and he believes these traits keep him resilient and youthful. His enquiring mind and quest to remain contemporary also contribute to his zest for life. Midlife is a coming of age for Clifford — he sees it as an "age transition time". It is a time he accords a greater sense of reality and wisdom.

4.9 Conclusion

In this chapter, the stories of six participants were presented. Themes were derived from the interview material (verbatim transcriptions and recordings) by applying thematic analysis to represent their narratives. Literature and theory were incorporated into each of the interviews and each thematic discussion ends with a summary of the most significant findings. The next chapter, Chapter 5, is the final discussion and conclusion to my research on midlife experience.

Chapter 5
Conclusion

5.1 Evaluation of the study

This study was of particular importance and interest to me because I have personal experience of a midlife crisis and have managed to navigate this to a transition as opposed to a crisis. In addition, I work with senior executives to assist them in transitioning midlife, both personally and within the context of their careers. The context and rationale of this study were rooted in a new epistemological perspective to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on midlife. Moreover, this new perspective is valid and relevant because research into midlife thus far, has focused on crisis versus transition or awakening. As such I believe that the advent of Positive Psychology has enabled me to explore, understand the triggers and potentially treat the symptoms of midlife from a perspective of addressing strengths rather than trying to fix weaknesses, from a perspective of midlife as a transition period — an awakening rather than a crisis.

By adopting a positive stance towards midlife as an awakening instead of the negative crisis, as it is too often termed, this study's overall aim was to explore midlife amongst my contemporaries, both male and female, to give voice to their individual experiences of midlife and to ultimately provide a guideline for each of them to navigate them through this transition phase. Access to the participants via my work with them, fulfilled the aim of this study, through a qualitative ethnographic methodology. Data collection was in the form of observations, recordings of coaching sessions and formal interviews.

The process of thematic analysis of six participants' narratives, identified the following themes:

- Feelings of disillusionment, regret and dissatisfaction

- Seeking a meaningful existence and connection

- Midlife as a wake-up call and reassessment

- Feelings of loneliness, rejection and isolation

- Confusion and uncertainty about the way forward — a new start

- Midlife as a crossroads

- Divorce as a trigger for midlife crisis

- Challenges experienced in midlife facilitating re-evaluation and reinvention

- Achievement at midlife

- The existence of midlife crisis and midlife triggers

- Midlife and the existence of midlife crisis

- Triggers of midlife crisis or challenges being faced

- The existence of midlife and associated midlife markers

- Midlife as a transition phase

The narratives as presented by my six participants support the psychological research that challenges are associated with midlife (Axelrod, 2005).

The universal view of all participants was that midlife is associated with negative stereotypic expectations, meaning that middle-aged people are crisis-stricken, bored and that midlife is a period of decline and despair (Lachman, 2001). Richard is in denial about his midlife experience, as is William. Sitha is afraid that this fate will befall her, as is Rhona. Veronique is currently in the throes of a negative midlife experience and Clifford seems to have escaped most of the perils associated with midlife, except for a disastrous career change.

Stage theories view development as akin to climbing a staircase, each step corresponding to more mature, differently ordered ways of functioning. All participants have experienced various life steps that have resulted in their narratives. The stage concept theorizes that there are periods of rapid transformation as people step up from one stage to the next. Observing that change is fairly sudden versus gradual and protracted. It is questionable as to whether development takes place in a neat, orderly sequential stages. The participants of this study did not experience development in a neat, ordered or sequential manner. Changes were often unexpected, chaotic and upsetting. It makes sense that this ambitious assumption has faced some definitive challenges.

According to Lachman (2001) development at all ages involves gains and losses. All participants interviewed at midlife had experienced gains and losses, even if some participants such as William and Richard were in denial about these gains and losses.

It is relevant to note that the life-span view provides an alternative to the simplistic view of development and positions development across the life-span as multidimensional and multidirectional, as well as plastic in nature. Viewing development in this light, as is seen in the narratives of the six participants, challenges previous theories of midlife development and ageing that focus exclusively on decrements (Baltes, 1993; Riley & Riley, 1989; Rowe & Kahn, 1987). Yet, it is my opinion that no single theory has been adept at explaining every aspect of human development. However, the existence of many theories helps advance knowledge as researchers continually endeavour to support, contradict, and integrate differing points of view.

My research into midlife experience has been conducted from a positive stance — understanding midlife experiences and identifying strengths to work with rather than merely weaknesses or pathology to fix. This is in contrast with modern psychology which has been

more concerned with sickness and dysfunction (Jørgensen & Nafstad, 2004) than with health and flourishing, or optimal functioning.

5.2 Midlife experiences from a positive perspective

Supporting some of the concepts of lifespan perspective, Positive Psychology proposes a different way of looking at the world and understanding the realities and paradigms of participants in this research. Positive Psychology is a paradigm shift in the field of Psychology which focuses on leveraging strengths as opposed to other theories' focus on fixing problems. As such, it was found to be an adequate perspective from which to explore midlife experiences. In this final chapter, I have borrowed from various theories that lend themselves to the developmental trajectory that I believe midlife to have and that incorporate and support the potential of a Positive Psychology approach.

During midlife, physiological, psychological, and interpersonal changes are faced as the individual re-evaluates life goals and personal values, confronts the inevitability of death, and makes plans for the second half of life. Midlife can be a difficult transitional period, peppered with opportunities for both transformation and stagnation. New perspectives and needs emerge once an individual has discovered his/her path, consequently the circumstances surrounding such an individual often change in unpredictable and unexpected ways (Crary et al., 1990). Levinson (1977) believed that "transitional periods aim to terminate existing structures and to work toward the initiation of a new structure" (p. 100), which could elicit considerable uncertainty and upheaval. Alternatively, it could signify growth and maturescence even at the expense of emotional turmoil, stress and doubt.

This unpredictability and uncertainty are common concepts in my interviews and often negatively reviewed by the participants. With the exception of Richard, and to a lesser extent, William, all participants have engaged in a process of self-appraisal. This self-

evaluation, with its evaluation of shortcomings, values and achievements can be wounding but the insight gained determines further development. Reappraisal of the past is especially poignant for Rhona. She poses challenging questions such as, *"What have I done with my life?" "What are my values and priorities?"* When these questions surface, they can lead to conclusions that life has been based on false assumptions, as they have for Rhona.

Fiske (1980) recognizes the finiteness of life. Both William and Clifford refer to facing their mortality. This confrontation may serve to commoditize time as more precious and elicit new perspectives pertaining to priorities, values and commitments.

Furthermore, the universal view of all the participants was that midlife is associated with negative stereotypic expectations, meaning that middle-aged people are crisis-stricken, bored and that midlife is a period of decline and despair. Richard is in denial about his midlife experience, as is William. Sitha is afraid that this fate will befall her, as is Rhona. Veronique is currently in the throes of a negative midlife experience and Clifford seems to have escaped most of the perils associated with midlife, except for a disastrous career change. Approaching midlife from the perspective of Positive Psychology may avert the stereotypical view of life as a failure, if the individual fails to meet society's demands, or contribute to society.

Parsons (2016) believes the employment of Positive Psychology coaching and interventions do not only support midlife clients' goal achievement, but also assists in other work and life challenges. Thus, although midlife can be a difficult transitional period, Positive Psychology can help individuals identify and build the necessary resources and coping strategies to prevent a transition turning into a crisis. It was shown that most participants in this research displayed a mindset and attitude open to a Positive Psychology

paradigm to accumulate the necessary resources and coping strategies to prevent a midlife transition from becoming a midlife crisis.

Positive Psychology must aim to understand how positive and negative experiences depend on each other and operate concomitantly (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003). Positive Psychology should provide a balanced and fully revealing perspective of positive and negative phenomena to promote the good life and demonstrate that if a person views negative affect as useful, appropriate and meaningful, psychological and physical health can be increased (Luong, Wrzus, Wagner, & Riediger (2016). The assimilation of positive perceptions of negative experiences can be significantly influential and potentially long lasting for promoting the good life.

Jørgensen and Nafstad (2004) draw upon the notion of self-actualization from humanistic psychologists. They assert that "for Positive Psychology, the concept of character thus becomes the central concept" and that "action proceeds from character" (p. 17). These are construed as presenting in two forms — the good and the bad. Similarly, Seligman (2002) takes a view of human nature that accentuates the development of peoples' innate positive potential, while remaining cognizant that the possibility exists for both good and bad. Allowing for the creation of what makes life worth living, in addition to the importance of healing pathology as suggested by Seligman (2010), I thus believe that without undergoing the difficult and challenging experiences that participants in this research experienced, there would be no opportunity for positives nor transitioning.

Seligman (2002) writes about what it is within us that we have the power to change or control and recommends qualities such as optimism, hope, gratitude, and forgiveness. For Seligman (2002) hope is linked with optimism as one of the core virtues, seen to have a direct bearing on the capacity for happiness. Like optimism, hope is closely linked with goals and

motivation, and is regarded as a potential agent of change. It has also been correlated with

positive attributes and outcomes in the areas of health, adjustment and performance (Snyder,

2000). Dispositional optimism determines that "virtually all realms of human activity can be

cast in goal terms" (Peterson, 2000, p. 47), whereas hope theory regards a goal as "anything

that an individual desires to experience, create, get, do, or become" (Lopez et al., 2004, p.

388).

Positive psychologists studying the prospects of a more permanent and increased

happiness make use of a simple formula (H=S+C+V) where one's enduring level of

happiness (H) is equal to the sum of one's set range (S), circumstances (C), and voluntary

activities (V) (Lyubomirsky, 2007; Seligman, 2002). Researchers estimate that a genetic

component accounts for half of overall happiness, whereas life circumstances contribute

roughly 10% (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). This finding results in

approximately 40% of individuals' happiness remaining open to volitional control.

Intentional activities as well as attitudinal changes are therefore considered to have a great

potential on influencing well-being. This was seen in the responses by the research

participants interviewed — all, with the exception of Richard, expressed a desire to make

volitional changes.

In addition, this volitional control pertains to an individual's optimism, a concept

related to goals and motivation, which has also been widely associated with positive thinking

and positive expectancies, according to Peterson (2000). In a survey of the research, Peterson

(2000) says that optimism is a generalized expectation that is "both motivated and

motivating" (p. 45) and is correlated with a number of positive outcomes including good

health, perseverance, and resilience.

All participants displayed optimism in some form or another and this optimism serves to determine their futures. Accordingly, my participants were goal oriented and without exception showed a desire to experience, create, get, do, or become. Furthermore, taking control of events, decisions, thoughts and behaviours will provide the participants of this research with a construct to transition midlife with resilience, with the potential to result in positive outcomes.

Fredrickson's (2001) theory investigates naturally occurring psychological resources supporting creativity, resilience, and well-being, constituting a broad theory of positive emotions. Fredrickson (2001) claims that positive emotions and their benefits can be self-perpetuating. Her theory propounds that positive emotions can "broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires, widening the array of the thoughts and actions that come to mind" (p. 220). She proposes five emotions — joy, interest, contentment, pride, and love — which foster the broadening tendencies "to play, to explore, to savour and integrate, or to envision future achievement" (p. 220). The resultant intellectual and psychological resources are theorized to provide outcomes such as enhanced flexibility, creativity, and social connections that "outlast the transient emotional states that lead to their acquisition" (p. 220).

All research participants, with the exception of Richard, showed a natural inclination towards creativity, resilience, and well-being, equipping them with the potential to amass a broad spectrum in which to build on a range of positive emotions.

There appeared to be five divergent elements of well-being. First is positive emotion and second is engagement. The third is positive relationships and the fourth element is meaning, belonging to and serving something bigger than yourself, and the fifth is accomplishment (Seligman, 2010). Even if it brings no positive emotion, no engagement, no

relationships and no meaning, there are people who are motivated to achieve and to have competence or mastery (Seligman, 2010).

Seligman determines a meaningful life as the application of one's strengths and virtues to attain flow by engaging in activities that are deemed worthwhile, and which connect one to a larger purpose (Seligman, 2002). Seligman terms this experience "gratification," which he associates with activities we like to do versus positive emotions per se.

All six participants sought these five divergent elements of well-being. There was an intrinsic yearning for all five elements, in differing contexts however, and it was apparent in their internal questioning, actions and future oriented desires. Furthermore, with the exception of Richard, all were intent on pursing more "engaged" and "meaningful" lives. None of them appear to be pursuing shallow and gratuitous lives but are all nuanced by feelings of wanting to remain relevant, to contribute positively to society and facing the onset of ageing and loss of youthfulness.

5.3 Credibility and trustworthiness of this study

There are four criteria designed for qualitative researchers to assess the validity of their research: credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability (Trochim, 2006).

The credibility criterium relates to believability — establishing that the results of qualitative research are believable from the perspective of the participants as the participants are the only ones who can legitimately judge the credibility of the results (Trochim, 2006; Winter, 2000). It was proposed that credibility of this study should be addressed by asking the participants to read through their individual results analysis and interpretations, as well as to confirm certain responses during the analysis and interpretation process. Unfortunately, none of the participants were available to review their own results during the final phase of

this research. However, an independent Research Psychologist acted as a peer reviewer and I believe that this enhanced the credibility of this research as she was able to cross-check the interview material against my analysis and interpretation thereof to ensure that participants were accurately represented. Similarly, she assisted in ensuring that higher levels of confirmability could be reached through this peer review process. According to Trochim (2006) confirmability refers to the degree to which the results could be corroborated or confirmed by others.

According to Trochim (2006), transferability is primarily the responsibility of the one doing the generalising, that is, the researcher, yet qualitative researchers are not really concerned about generalising their results as quantitative researchers are. Transferability in this research was by achieved by describing the research context, providing background information of all the participants, as well as describing any assumptions that were central to the study.

The concept of reliability in quantitative research refers to whether the research can be replicated or repeated, and still delivers the same results (Neuman, 1997). In qualitative research this is referred to as dependability. It should be noted that in a postmodern qualitative study the assumption that the social world is ever changing, replication is not a standard strived for (Lal, 2001). According to Trochim (2006), dependability emphasises the need for the researcher to account for the dynamic context within which research occurs. Lal (2001) concurs and says that the attempts made by qualitative researchers to account for any changes render dependable data and is a natural part of research. It is my opinion that should this research be replicated at this point in time it is likely that the results will be similar. However, as part of a development stage, midlife is a process, a transition as has been assumed in this research and therefore, there will necessarily be changes in each of the participants' experiences of midlife in the future.

5.4 Bias

According to Rajendran (2001), "there is no paradigm solution to eliminate error and bias" (p. 5), yet reflexivity is a way of addressing potential bias (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010). An external Research Psychologist was used for debriefings, discussions, analysis and interpretations of data (Onwuegbuzie, Leech & Collins, 2008) in order to facilitate "the process of … inspection of potential sources of bias and their control [and] critically inspecting the entire research process" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 260).

The following aspects were identified and reflected upon as potential bias influencers:

Despite the close nature of the client/practitioner, there could be a halo-effect that took place. That is, some participants might have attempt to minimise their experiences and their feelings. This seems to be true for two of the male participants, who could potentially have been influenced by their stereotypical view of males as hunters or "cowboys don't cry" type. However, the relatively unstructured nature of the interview enabled me to gather information whereby the stereotypes could be expelled, and results could reflect accurately their experience of midlife through the process of deduction on my side.

I also proposed that it is likely that some participants might be slightly uncomfortable with being recorded and this could potentially influence their initial responses. This potential bias was true for the first participant, who seemed slightly ill at ease with the process of interviewing and questioning. For subsequent interviews I changed my tactical approach at the start of the interview and this seemed to have lessened the impact of being recorded.

The emphasis on "objective" data has been replaced with focusing on the advantages of subjective aspects of the research process (Adler, 1990) and being an insider is not without its potential problems.

In Adler and Adler's (1987, p. 73) discussion of complete member researchers, they posit that in this "ultimate existential dual role", researchers might struggle with role conflict if they find themselves caught between "loyalty tugs" and "behavioral claims" (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007, p. 70). Asselin (2003) has shown that the dual role can lead to role confusion when the researcher responds to the participants or analyses the data from a perspective other than that of researcher. She confirmed that role confusion can occur in any research study but posits there is a higher risk when the researcher is familiar with the research setting or participants through a role other than that of researcher. Upon reflection and by peer review, it became clear that during the interviewing and the analysis processes, there were several times that I was acting as psychotherapist and not researcher. In some interviews, I asked leading questions (as a psychotherapist) as I would within the context of a counselling session but checked myself and was able to change my vernacular to avoid leading questions. Also, during analysis, I found myself making diagnoses, as opposed to presenting their experiences of midlife.

5.5 Limitations of this study

Dependability was not possible from participants' point of view as they were not available to confirm or question my interpretation of their experiences of midlife.

It is not possible for the researcher to jump or be outside the understanding he or she lives in (Hargrave, 2006). I am keenly aware that my own subjective understanding of the world influenced how I approached the research, identified themes in the interview material and interpreted the results. Hargrave (2006) says that as a researcher it was not possible for her to be outside the understanding she lives in.

I made clear the personal context within this research took place, yet it is possible that a different researcher or different reader can extract different themes and meanings than I did.

Another limitation of this study is that the participants all came from a middle-class background. This is a limitation in as far as differences in psychographic and demographic characteristics between classes exist and therefore could experience and give meaning to their midlife experiences differently than other classes. For example, many South Africans live in dire poverty and therefore all their experiences are likely more about physical survival than some psychological "crisis" or transition, as was described by my participants.

5.6 Recommendations for future research

A recommendation for future research would be to explore how South Africans from different cultures experience midlife. We have such a rich cultural context of differing religions, traditions and languages which makes should be of great interest to compare midlife experiences through the eyes of different cultures.

In the same light, exploring differences in women's and men's midlife experiences in the South African context would be interesting. The transformation of South Africa since 1994 brought with it major changes in both men and women' roles and responsibilities which inadvertently changed the narratives. I believe that this is particularly important in the case of male midlife experiences, as my research has shown that there are still stereotypes that exist which cause men to deny the existence of midlife crises or even transitions. From a mental health perspective, it is as important to assist men to overcome the stigma and stereotypes (buying fast cars and having affairs) attached to midlife and assist them in transitioning this phase as it is for women.

5.7 Conclusion

This study provided valuable insight into how six South Africans experience midlife. The themes extracted from the interview material provided deeper understanding into the individual experiences of midlife as crisis or transition, and what the triggers are (if any). Positive Psychology assisted in identifying the aspects of each participant that will assist them in transitioning midlife. Strengths and limitations of the study were explored, and recommendations for future research were made.

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Appendix A: Information sheet

Dear ………………………

I am in the final stages of completing my Masters' Degree at UNISA. This requires me to conduct research about a relevant topic or phenomenon. The topic I have chosen is about midlife experiences from a Positive Psychology perspective. My research aim is to explore midlife amongst my contemporaries, both male and female, to give voice to their individual experiences of midlife to ultimately provide a guideline for each of them to guide them in this transition phase.

I would like to invite you to participate in this study.   Taking part means that:
- Any, and all material (including notes, pictures, photo's, audio and video recordings and so forth) collected during the individual coaching sessions we might have will be used as data for this research.
- **The choice is yours to participate.** If you choose not to participate there will not be any repercussions or negative impact on you personally, or in the coaching sessions, i.e. coaching will continue as normal.
- **You also have the right to change your mind about participating**. If at any point during the process you decide not to participate, your responses will be excluded.
- **Your responses are anonymous.** Pseudonyms will be used during analysis and results presentation.

Should you have any questions about this please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thanking you in advance for your participation.

Regards

Louisa

Appendix B: Consent Form

I……………………………………….agree to participate in Louisa's research study.

1. The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing.
2. I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without negative consequences, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating.
3. I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data within two weeks of the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
4. I understand that anonymity will be ensured, i.e. pseudonym will be used.
5. I understand that any, and all material collected during my coaching sessions will be used as data in this research, and my data will remain confidential at all times.
6. **It is my choice to participate and I willingly do so.**

Signed……………………………………. Date……………….