

**STORIES OF WOMEN'S MIDLIFE EXPERIENCE**

by

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**DECLARATION OF OWN WORK**

“I declare that **STORIES OF WOMEN’S MIDLIFE EXPERIENCE**, 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.”

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**Ms D Hargrave**

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**Date**

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of how women experience midlife. Social constructionism, which fits within the postmodern tradition, was the epistemological framework informing this study. Participants were asked to provide their life stories in text form. Texts were interpreted using the hermeneutic method of analysis. The researcher attempted to understand the midlife experience from the perspective of each participant whose meaning, attitudes and ideas have developed within a social context, keeping in mind that the researcher's own social context, ideas and values affected the interpretation of the texts. The research results add a new perspective to the 'grand narrative' of midlife as a 'crisis'. The new 'voice' speaks of the possibility of positive development – of overcoming adversity; taking control; re-assessing life; breaking old patterns; discovering peace; putting down roots; confronting reality; gaining independence and finding new meaning.

**Key terms:** Midlife; Development; Midlife crisis; Postmodernism; Qualitative research; Social constructionism; Social context; Grand Narratives; Hermeneutics; Emerging themes.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

**When I had journeyed half of life's way, I found myself within  
a shadowed forest, for I had lost the path that does not stray.  
Ah, it is hard to speak of what it was, that savage forest, dense  
and difficult, which even in recall renews my fear: so bitter –  
death is hardly more severe!**

*Dante*

*(from The divine comedy of Dante Alighieri: inferno, 1308)*

**(cited in Kruger, 2004)**

It appears, from Dante's description of midlife, that as far back as 1308, people experienced midlife as a time of 'crisis'. This view has been upheld by developmental theorists, such as the adult stage theorists, who put forth the notion that midlife is a time of crisis in development for all individuals alike. However, other theorists studying adult development, began to dispute this notion. Life-span theorists, for example, disagreed with the notion that all adults would experience midlife in the same manner, regardless of their circumstances. They stressed the importance of the individual's interaction with the environment, as well as other influencing factors such as biological, cultural and historical influences, in determining how individuals experience midlife. Postmodernists rejected the notion of a singular objective reality, believing that many interpretations of reality, such as midlife, are possible, depending on the subjective interpretations of the observer. In line with the postmodern view, social constructionists focused on how an individual's reality, attitudes and ideas are socially constructed through social interaction, language, and cultural narratives. An individual's context, according to social constructionism, should be the focus of attention in attempting to understand each person's unique subjective reality.

Midlife, therefore, would not necessarily be experienced as a time of 'crisis' by all individuals. While some individuals, influenced, for example, by the Western cultural narrative that puts forth the idea that midlife is a time of 'crisis', may experience midlife in this way, others may not, depending on the influencing factors in their own context. In this study, midlife is explored from a social constructionist perspective.

Gergen (1990) drew attention to the fact that few studies have been done regarding how women experience midlife. The psychological theories that are available, appear to focus mainly on the biological role of women, as opposed to studying women's life narratives and the importance of context in determining their experience of midlife. Women's experience of midlife will, therefore, be the focus of attention in this study.

#### Definition of Terms

A definition of the terms **midlife, development,** and **social constructionism** will follow, as these terms are relevant to this study.

#### Midlife

According to The South African Pocket Oxford Dictionary (2001), midlife, or middle age, is defined as "the part of life between youth and old age." The boundaries for midlife have no clear demarcation and subjective views of midlife show a wide age range (Lachman, 2001).

In this study, the midlife developmental stage of the lifespan will be explored from a social constructionist stance, which locates meaning in an understanding of how attitudes and ideas are developed within a social, community context, over time (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996).

### Development

Gerdes (1988, p. 9) defines development as “an ongoing process of change in the structure and function of an organism that continues throughout life.” Colarusso and Nemiroff (1981, p. 63) explain:

“The exchanges between organism and environment occur from birth to death, producing a continuous effect on psychic development. The adult is not a finished product insulated from the environment, but, like the child, is in a state of dynamic tension which continually affects and changes him.”

In this study, the midlife period of development is researched in order to reach a deeper understanding of this particular time of life. The study focuses on women and explores any changes that may take place at midlife, as well as meaning derived from their midlife experience.

### Social constructionism

Social constructionist ideas are discussed as they relate to the construct of a midlife ‘crisis’, as well as locating the participants’ stories within their unique contexts. Gergen (1985, p. 266) explains social constructionism in the following way – “Social constructionism views discourse about the world not as a reflection or map of the world but as an artifact of communal interchange. Both as an orientation to knowledge and to the character of psychological constructs, constructionism forms a significant challenge to conventional understandings.” Hoffman (1990, p. 2), says “Basically, social construction theory holds that our beliefs about the world are social inventions....as we move through the world, we build up our ideas about it in conversation with other people...social construction theory sees the development of knowledge as a social phenomenon and holds that perception can only evolve within a cradle of communication...social construction theory posits an evolving set of meanings that emerge unendingly from the interaction between people. These meanings are not skull-bound and may not exist inside what we think of as an individual “mind.”

They are part of a general flow of constantly changing narratives. Thus, the theory bypasses the fixity of the model of biologically based cognition, claiming instead that the development of concepts is a fluid process, socially derived.” Dickerson and Zimmerman (1996, p. 80) explain the importance of cultural narratives and meaning systems in influencing how individuals construct their reality, saying “A constructionist viewpoint also considers the development of certain cultural narratives or “discourses” that are formed by, and in turn influence, people and that take on normative views against which people measure themselves....meaning systems are what influence persons to see only certain ways of being as possible.”

This study, viewing midlife from a social constructionist perspective, attempts to reach a deeper understanding of how women experience midlife. The researcher takes a subjective stance, in line with social constructionism, respecting each participant’s unique social context, personal history, and the subjective manner in which they have constructed their own reality. Both women participating in the study are South African, Caucasian, middle class women. Therefore, Western cultural narratives and meaning systems (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996) are explored in order to gain an understanding of how these women’s midlife experience may have been influenced by these factors, within a social, community context.

### **Aim and rationale of the study**

Until recently, midlife was an almost unstudied area of human development. This unexplored part of the life span had received little attention from students of human development, who had concentrated on childhood, adolescence and old age. One of the reasons midlife may have been understudied is an apparent lack of societal and psychological reasons to do so. From a societal point of view, it was thought that by midlife, individuals should have been socialized into roles and contributing to society (Lachman, 2001). However, according to Lachman (2001), focusing on understanding basic developmental processes and ways to support successful development reveals midlife as an area rich in exploration. Because major research institutes were devoted to other periods in the life course and not the middle years, there is much ignorance and myth about midlife (Lachman, 2001).

Lachman (2001) believes that what people think occurs in the midlife period has been based on imperfect knowledge and many shared cultural beliefs are likely to be wrong. Furthermore, misperceptions, regarding our cultural legacy of thought about what happens in middle age, are transmitted from one generation to the next. Lachman (2001) feels that it is important, therefore, to rid ourselves of obsolete ideas about middle age and replace them with new knowledge based on research. Midlife needs to be understood in terms of who succeeds and who fails in sustaining personal health and happiness. An understanding of the contributing factors regarding those who increase in growth and mastery, those who keep going or quit trying, and those who started from a poor beginning and still achieve exceptionally across the many roles of midlife, will be beneficial to any study of midlife development (Lachman, 2001). Another reason for research on the midlife developmental period, according to Gerdes (1988), relates to the changing age distribution of the population. In earlier centuries, life expectancy was between 30 and 40 years, making the period of adulthood an infinitely shorter developmental period to study. Because life expectancy has increased, and there is a notable increase in the number of persons over the age of 60, there is naturally a greater interest in the midlife developmental period. Life expectancy in South Africa has shown a steady increase during the course of this century. However, this may change as a result of the HIV/AIDS pandemic (Lourens & Alpasian, 2002).

This study, therefore, seems necessary in obtaining a deeper understanding of this relatively unexplored area of development. A review of the literature on midlife revealed that not only has little research been done on the midlife developmental period, but that those studies conducted on midlife have focused mainly on men. According to Waskel and Phelps (1995), the majority of studies of the middle years of the life span have been devoted to the study of men, with the major emphasis on crisis events. Gergen (1990) questions the reasons for the 'silences and gaping holes' in the developmental stories of women. What functions, she asks, might be served in the narrow definitions of the lifespans of women?

With reference to existing theories and research specific to midlife development in women, Gergen (1990) draws three major conclusions.

First, the theoretical understanding of the development of women during midlife is impoverished. Developmental theories relating specifically to the maturing woman are lacking. There are clear-cut differences in theories of men and women at midlife. For men, issues such as financial success, career involvement, job satisfaction and outstanding accomplishments, are considered central to adult development. However, despite the fact that women are involved in all areas of cultural development and may attach great significance to these roles as sources for self-identification, these issues are scarcely mentioned in theoretical works.

The second conclusion Gergen (1990) draws, is that in those spheres where women's midlife development does receive attention, the main focus appears to be biological, where women's lives are described according to chronological age and their position in the marital-reproductive cycle.

The third major conclusion concerns the narrative form taken by developmental theorists, generally conceptualized as progressive during childhood and adolescence, constant through adulthood and regressive in middle to old age. The high points of women's narratives are the early years of adulthood, when marriage and childbearing are the major events. The traditional story progresses from an early high to a moderate stability narrative, and then a slow fall, marked by negative events such as the departure of children and widowhood. A woman's life, according to this narrative form, is basically downhill from 40 onwards. This narrative form exacerbates the plight of the mature woman, faced with no clear alternatives, and invites anxiety and depression. One-dimensional accounts of women's lifespan development, according to Gergen (1990) support the prevailing ideology of power. The link between the biological biasing of women's lifespan accounts and the maintenance of a patriarchal structure of power appears evident (Brittan, 1989; Lipson-Blumen, 1984). This form of analysis suggests, not only that the existing literature is regressive in its social effects on women, but operates to solidify constraints against enrichment of women's roles in society. Women are given little opportunity to develop life narratives that are not centred on biologically related episodes (Gergen, 1990). Gergen (1990) suggests that future research should, avoiding sexual biases, surpass the limitations of a strictly biological orientation, and consider other aspects of women's functioning.

Richer theoretical frameworks for studying women's lives should be developed, emphasizing political, moral, economic and aesthetic forms.

From the above, it appears that there is a need to give women a voice regarding the many different aspects of their midlife experience, not simply focusing on their biological role in society. This particular study, therefore, will focus on women, and seems necessary in order to increase research on women's experience of midlife. It will explore women's life narratives, from a social constructionist perspective, in order to gain a deeper understanding of all aspects of how women experience midlife. It is hoped to attain an understanding of the life events and social interactions that influenced how these women experienced midlife. It will be interesting to note whether these women experienced the 'crisis' events stressed by the developmental theorists, and if so, whether it was more of a socially constructed experience, supported by cultural attention, and reinforced by 'science' and 'media attention' (Dannefer, 1984). Other factors mentioned in the literature, such as the effect of social cohorts (Waskel, 1995), and biological determinants (Gergen, 1990) will also be of interest in understanding how these women gave meaning to their midlife experience. Becoming more aware of women's potential should provide a kind of freedom to women experiencing their midlife years as a time of re-establishing roles and norms of behaviour most productive for themselves (Waskel & Phelps, 1995).

The *aim* of this study, therefore, is to *explore the midlife experience of women, in order to gain an understanding of how individual women experience midlife*. Exploring these women's life narratives, provided in the form of a text, and using social constructionist ideas, will hopefully make a valuable contribution to research on the midlife developmental period, and, particularly, how women experience this time of life.

### **Design of the study**

This study moves away from the positivistic stance that objective knowledge is possible, and takes the postmodern view, which rejects the idea of a singular reality, stressing that not all realities have equal validity, and that many alternative meanings are possible (Doan, 1997).

In line with postmodernism, this study explores differences, rather than similarities, and specific contextualized details, rather than grand generalizations (Freedman & Combs, 1997). Social constructionist ideas inform this study which uses research methods that are qualitative and interpretive (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

For this reason, it seemed appropriate to use a qualitative research inquiry for this study. As opposed to attempting to understand how women experience midlife through objective measurement, prediction and control, this study aims to understand the meaning women derive from midlife from the point of view of the participants themselves. According to Moon, Dillon and Sprenkle (1990), qualitative researchers try to understand phenomena in a holistic way, studying a small number of cases intensively. In this study the life stories of two participants will be examined intensively in order to gain deeper understanding of how they are experiencing midlife. In an attempt to reach a deeper understanding of the midlife experience, the participant's life stories will be interpreted, in an effort to understand how influences such as context, social interaction, language, cultural narratives, and meaning systems have played a role in determining each participant's subjective understanding of their midlife experience. The study examines participants' lived experience, and explores meaning derived from these experiences.

The participants' texts will be interpreted using the hermeneutic method of analysis, keeping in mind that the researcher's own social context and subjective views will affect the interpretation of the texts. The researcher is a woman experiencing midlife herself, and her subjective understanding of this developmental period should lend credibility to the study. However, she needs to ensure that her own experiences do not cloud the way she 'listens' to the stories of the participants. Interpreting the texts often leads to personal growth and deeper understanding for both researcher and participants, as new meaning is co-constructed between the researcher and the participants. Hopefully, this co-construction of new meaning will be beneficial in providing a deeper understanding of how women experience midlife.



### Sampling and selection

In this study, sampling will be purposive. Convenience sampling will be used to select research participants. Two women who have experienced the midlife developmental period will be selected on the basis of their agreeing to participate in the study.

### Information Collection

The information collection technique used in this study will be a personal document study. Participants will be asked to write down their 'life stories', and to explain their subjective experience of midlife. From a social constructionist viewpoint, it is important to understand the participant's context, and how influences such as social interaction and cultural narratives have influenced the participant throughout life. For this reason participants will be asked to provide their entire 'life story', not only events occurring during midlife.

### Information analysis

The participants' texts will be interpreted using the hermeneutic method of analysis, which emphasizes interpretation and understanding, in order to discover meaning. The researcher will interpret the texts of the participants using thematic analysis, which involves identifying the common themes from the information and using excerpts from the information to substantiate those themes (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). A comparative analysis, between themes identified in this study, and previous literature on the midlife developmental period, will then be undertaken.

### **Format of the study**

*Chapter 2* will provide general information regarding midlife. Views on midlife and age boundaries of midlife will be discussed. This will be followed by factors affecting individuals in midlife, including physical changes, menopause, cognitive and emotional changes, and social roles in midlife.

The literature review which follows will consider midlife from various theoretical perspectives, in order to gain an overview of previous research on this topic. Although themes extracted from this study will be compared with this literature review, it is offered only as an example of the many different ‘voices’ regarding midlife development. Themes will not be used to support or deny any particular existing theories on midlife.

*Chapter 3* will discuss the research approach used in this study. The postmodern ontology is explained, followed by a description of social constructionism, an epistemology that coheres with postmodernism. The nature and characteristics of qualitative research will be explained. This will be followed by an explanation of sampling and information collection techniques. Finally the hermeneutic method of analysis, used in this study, will be described in detail.

*Chapters 4 and 5* will explain the researcher’s interpretations of the participants’ stories (provided in Appendix A). In these chapters, themes will be extracted from the participants’ texts.

*Chapter 6* will contain the comparative analysis between themes derived from the participants’ texts, and the literature review.

*Chapter 7* is the concluding chapter, in which the study is evaluated in terms of strengths and weaknesses, and recommendations for future research are made.

## **Conclusion**

There appears to be a shortage of research on how women experience midlife. The research which has been conducted in this area, appears to have focused mainly on the biological role of women. This view sees women in their reproductive role of wife and mother, and believes that because women experience menopause at midlife, they no longer serve a useful function in society, and go into a decline after the age of 40. Therefore, there appears to be a need to allow women to give voice to their own subjective experience of midlife, taking their context into account.

In this way a deeper understanding of women's many 'voices', roles and contributions to society at midlife, may be provided.

This study will attempt to understand women's midlife experience from a social constructionist perspective, in order to address the shortage of research in this area.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE MIDLIFE EXPERIENCE

#### General Introduction

In this chapter the meaning of the term 'midlife' will be explored. General information on factors affecting individuals experiencing midlife will also be provided. Factors such as physical, cognitive and personality development, and social roles in midlife will be discussed.

As the focus in this study is on the midlife experiences of women, various psychological theories of women at midlife are included in the discussion. The early theories placed their emphasis on the biological roles of women as wife and mother. The later postmodern theories, however, view women in a much broader context, which includes not only their biological role but also emphasizes their social and cultural roles and the contribution they make to the work environment.

#### Views of midlife

There are many different views of midlife. Often the term *midlife* conjures up negative images of bodies beginning to age, increased forgetfulness, menopause in females, children leaving home, depression and a loss of purpose and meaning (Lachman, 2001).

#### Midlife crisis

The term 'midlife crisis' is, for many individuals, a familiar description of prevalent experiences in midlife. The term describes personal turmoil and sudden changes in personal goals and lifestyle, resulting from the realization of ageing, physical decline, or entrapment in certain roles (Wethington, 2000).

The idea of midlife as a crisis has been popularized in the media and exaggerated by talk shows, magazines, and birthday cards (Lachman, 2001).

Helson and Wink (1992) prefer to avoid the term 'midlife crisis', although they appear to support the concept. Based on their longitudinal study of women between the ages of 43 and 52, they state that several lines of evidence point to uncertainty and strong affect in the early 40s that gave way to calm and stability in the early 50s. Feelings about life in the areas of turmoil and identity questioning were rated higher in the early 40s than in the early 50s.

Wethington (2000), using semistructured telephone survey techniques, studied 724 participants exploring the definitions that Americans hold of the 'midlife crisis' and analyzing self-reports of midlife crises. The results of the survey showed that over 90% of the participants could provide a definition of the midlife crisis, and that these definitions coincided with psychological and psychoanalytical theories of the midlife crisis. Qualitative analyses showed that Americans used a much wider definition of what constitutes the midlife crisis than definitions used by researchers. Women were as likely as men to report having had a midlife crisis. Crises occurring well before age 40 and after age 50 were often nominated as midlife crises. Self-reported midlife crises were attributed more to major life events that posed a severe threat and challenge during a very broadly defined period of 'midlife,' than to ageing. Twenty-six percent of respondents reported having experienced a midlife crisis.

According to Wethington (2000), it comes as a surprise to many that several major academic studies, using representative samples of the population, dispute the inevitability of the midlife crisis for people in their forties. One possible explanation for the persistence of belief in the midlife crisis is that researchers and middle-aged individuals hold different notions of what the midlife crisis means. Another complication is the fact that researchers and theorists have used different definitions of the midlife crisis. Wethington (2000, p 86), proposing a simple definition, suggests that "a midlife crisis is a difficult transition occurring at about the age of 40." Wethington (2000) notes that a transformation appears to have taken place between the midlife crisis as a theoretical concept, and the midlife crisis as a contemporary folk belief.

The folk belief tends to overestimate the risk of having a midlife crisis, and overstates the stressfulness of midlife in comparison to other periods in life (Wethington, 2000). According to McCrae and Costa (1990), epidemiological study of psychological distress does not suggest that midlife is a time of unusual distress in adulthood. Neither do the stressors normally associated in popular lore with the midlife crisis, peak in midlife. For example, career crises and marital disruption appear to be more characteristic of earlier periods of adulthood, than the middle years (Wethington, 2000).

However, many individuals have experienced midlife in positive terms, reporting feelings of more personal control and freedom, financial security, and opportunities for exploring new interests, growth and fulfillment (Lachman, 2001).

Views of midlife can range from describing a period of turmoil or crisis (Levinson, 1978; Sheehy, 1976), to the view that midlife is a time of peak functioning and responsibility (Neugarten, 1968). According to Lachman (2001), disparate views on midlife can be reconciled if the midlife experience is conceived from multiple perspectives, taking into account the vast range of variations by historical period, timing of events in the life course, gender, culture, race, ethnicity and social class.

### **Age boundaries of midlife**

Although midlife is viewed as a typical stage most people will experience, there appears to be confusion regarding when it begins and ends. Researchers tend to use chronological age boundaries for life stages. An example of this would be Levinson's (1978) midlife era from 35-40 to 60-65. Levinson maintained that the midlife era begins between the ages of 35 and 40 years, and ends between the ages of 60 and 65 years (Hunter & Sundel, 1989).

People between the ages of 40 and 60 are typically considered to be middle-aged. However, there is at least a 10 year range on either end, and some consider middle age to begin at 30 and end at 70. Research has shown that the subjective boundaries of midlife vary positively with age. The older the individual, the later they report entering and exiting middle age (Lachman et al., 1994).

Fodor and Franks (1990) believe that Western culture has a long legacy of ageism, and negative stereotypes about ageing are reflected in literature and the media, as well as in psychological literature on ageing. According to Cohen (cited in Fodor & Franks, 1990), the message of this ageist culture suggests a double standard. Men are still considered to be in their prime at middle age, while women are considered old at 40.

Kruger (1994) believes that the middle-age transition period occurs between the ages of 40 and 50, and that it is a period of biopsychosocial changes that have a great impact on the individual. Prioritizing becomes necessary as the individual recognizes that there is no longer time for everything, and choices have to be made.

Jung (1936) referred to midlife as the 'noon of life' and emphasized the psychological changes that occur around the age of 40. Individuals, at this point, have the broadest view of life, and this may give rise to a different life course and new incentives. Neugarten (1968) expressed a similar view in research findings that showed that middle-aged individuals saw themselves as a bridge between generations, identifying with both the younger and the older generation.

Another factor affecting how individuals define midlife is the cohort to which they belong. The term 'birth cohort' refers to individuals born at the same period in historical time. Given the changes in societal and life-course structures, a definition of midlife linked to chronological age is likely to differ between cohorts (Lachman, 2001). According to Stewart and Ostrove (1998), the timing of middle age may have changed across generations. They examined several key features of the course of adult's development in the cohort of women born during the baby boom. By comparing their experience with that of older cohorts and research on men, the authors demonstrated the need for models of ageing that take account of the intersections of gender, history, and individual development. According to Stewart and Ostrove (1998), it makes sense that generations raised with different expectations and in differing historical circumstances could age differently. Changes in life expectancy and improvements in the quality of life may have resulted in a deferral of 'old age'.

As a result of these changes, the psychological meaning of middle age may be different for different cohorts. Helson (1997, p. 23) pointed out that “middle age will have different meanings in different times and places for different individuals.”

According to Sheehy (cited in Lourens & Alpasian, 2002), a period of instability begins at about 30 years, when an individual begins to evaluate life. Between the ages of 35 to 45 the so-called ‘midlife crisis’ develops. This is a time when self-evaluation takes place and thought is given to future prospects and the direction one’s life is taking. Ageing becomes a reality and the realization that life is only temporary occurs at this time of life. However, what has previously been considered the normal human life cycle has changed during the past few decades. Although children are growing up faster, they take longer to reach emotional maturity. Couples are marrying later and delaying starting a family, and life expectancy has increased. These factors, according to Sheehy (cited in Lourens & Alpasian, 2002), have resulted in the phases of adulthood being shifted by up to ten years. However, a whole new pattern may be developing in the future, especially in African countries, as HIV/AIDS has an impact, and a lower life expectancy becomes a reality (Lourens & Alpasian, 2002). Other factors, such as social-class background, cultural influence, physical strength and appearance, health, and one’s future prospects compared to past accomplishments, influence perceptions of when one is middle aged (Clausen, 1986).

### **Factors affecting individuals in midlife**

A national survey conducted by the American Board of Family Practice regarding the most prevalent issues faced by those in midlife, showed that changes in physical condition, health, mental functioning and getting older were considered the worst aspects of midlife. Feelings of personal control, freedom, being settled and being financially secure, were reported as the best things in midlife. Important goals in midlife were improving relationships with family and friends, caring for frail parents, helping children and saving for retirement (American Board of Family Practice, 1990).



Leonard and Burns (1999) studied turning points in the lives of sixty married or previously married lower-income midlife and older women (born 1931-1936, 1941-1946 and 1951-1956), and considered the importance of age and cohort effects. Turning points were identified as involving predominantly a role transition, an adversity, or an experience of personal growth. Significant cohort differences were found in that the youngest cohort nominated significantly more adversities than the oldest cohort. Role transitions and adversity turning points were most commonly experienced between the ages of 21 and 40 years, while personal development experiences appeared to increase after midlife. The turning points described by the respondents were not necessarily those emphasized in the literature on ageing. The most frequently reported turning points were not marriage or motherhood, but personal growth experiences involving psychological 'self-work', such as changing one's lifestyle. Issues that are a frequent topic of midlife research, such as the 'empty nest' or menopause were seldom mentioned (Leonard & Burns, 1999).

### Physical changes

According to Lachman (2001), psychologists have traditionally focused on changes in personality and social functioning throughout adulthood, tending to ignore the role of physical ageing. It is important to be aware of normal age-related changes that adults experience, in order to understand the developmental period being studied.

Images of ageing in Western cultures are more negative than positive, and present a challenge both to individuals trying to adapt to the ageing process, and to psychologists. The challenge to identity presented by the recognition of physical ageing, makes it more difficult, for middle-aged adults in particular, to engage in optimal levels of compensatory activity. The challenge for these adults is to incorporate these changes into their identities, without becoming overwhelmed or depressed (Lachman, 2001).

Optimal physical ageing is the result of individuals achieving a balance, by maintaining a positive view of self over time, while adapting their behaviour to compensate for age-related losses (Lachman, 2001).

Social and cultural definitions of ageing affect the way age-related changes are interpreted. What is experienced as a loss in some cultures, may be seen as a gain in other cultures (Lachman, 2001).

According to Kirasic (2004), midlife physical changes fall into five categories. The *systemic functioning changes* are reflected in a changing metabolic rate. A decline in the ability to increase body heat production and reduce it when required, becomes evident. Sleep disturbances result in increasing reports of fatigue. It becomes increasingly difficult to lose weight during the middle years. Changes in the *musculoskeletal system* have been noted. The resulting changes in bone mineral density and the thinning of intervertebral disks are the cause of a loss in height. Decreased muscle strength becomes evident. *Sensory* changes to vision and hearing are the first age-related changes noted in middle age. A change in vision, reflected in the inability to focus on near objects, is the result of a failure in the accommodative ability of the eye lens. Hearing loss is associated with the higher frequencies first and is regarded as the hallmark of the midlife adult. The number of olfactory cells decreases significantly, and loss of taste buds begins to increase during midlife. Changes in the appearance of *skin, hair, and nails* becomes observable during midlife. Due to a loss of fat and collagen in the underlying tissue, the skin begins to sag and wrinkle. Age spots begin to appear. Due to a decline in the replacement rate of hairs and a decrease in melanin production, hair becomes thinner and begins to turn grey. *Cardiovascular* changes result in a decreasing ability to consume oxygen efficiently and the vital capacity of the lungs begins to decline. By the mid-fifties, the heart rate is detected to be slower and more irregular. The potential for an increasing rate of cardiovascular disease occurs during midlife.

Middle-aged adults spend more time worrying about their health than in early adulthood. For individuals who are 30 percent or more overweight, the likelihood of dying in middle adulthood increases by 40 percent. A youthful appearance is an important consideration in Western culture and many middle-aged adults strive to make themselves look younger. Physical changes such as greying hair, wrinkling skin and sagging bodies cause many middle-aged individuals to undergo cosmetic surgery, colour their hair and undergo intensive exercise regimes (Santrock, 1992).

Middle-aged women focus more attention on facial attractiveness than both younger and older women and are more likely to perceive signs of ageing in a negative light. In Western culture, some signs of ageing in middle adulthood are perceived as attractive in men, while seen as unattractive in women. For example, facial wrinkles and grey hair symbolize strength and maturity in men, but are usually perceived as unattractive in women (Santrock, 1992).

### Menopause

The climacteric or menopause refers to the cessation of menstruation. It marks the end of the childbearing years and occurs by age 50 in most women. A sharp drop in the production of estrogen results in changes in the structure and functioning of certain body organs. Structural changes include a decrease in the size of the uterus and cervix, and the atrophy of cells in the vaginal walls, causing the thinning of the walls. Estrogen reduction results in a thinning of the bones, known as osteoporosis. Vaginal lubrication is reduced with menopause and may result in pain and discomfort during sexual intercourse. Another unpleasant experience associated with menopause is the so-called 'hot flashes,' or sensations of extreme heat, usually in the upper part of the body, accompanied by extreme sweating. This experience usually disappears within a year or two following onset of symptoms (Aiken, 1998). Along with a drop in testosterone in approximately half of all menopausal women, the aforementioned changes may contribute to a decline in the sex drive, reported by approximately 30% of women after menopause (Sheehy, 1993). However, according to Aiken (1998), the increased assertiveness and independence experienced by many postmenopausal women, often results in a renewed interest in sex.

In order to counteract the negative effects of estrogen loss on postmenopausal women, estrogen-replacement therapy (ERT), was introduced in the 1940s. However, it was found that the administration of estrogen could lead to an overgrowth of the uterine lining, increasing the risk of cancer and blood clots. As a result, women receiving estrogen are currently given lower doses along with progestin. This treatment is called Hormone Replacement Therapy, or HRT, and reduces the risk of cancer. Progestin causes the uterine lining to shed, triggering menstrual-like bleeding each month (Lachman, 2001).

However, when taken over a long course, this treatment can increase the risk of developing breast cancer, and cause women to suffer side effects such as headaches, bloating and depression (Lachman, 2001).

Kirasic (2004) states that reducing menopause to medical conditions such as an estrogen deficiency disease, makes it more understandable to women because they believe that a disease can be treated or controlled. Women distance themselves, in this way, from the process of menopause and lose the opportunity for better understanding of themselves. Women invest in the myths of menopause (for example, all women become depressed and neurotic, women become useless to society, women become sexually ugly, bones become brittle and dissolve, and memory loss is inevitable). Some women are so invested in these myths that they carry them out, perpetuating and validating the myths. Kirasic (2004) suggests that myths of menopause may be explained by social occurrences that underlie many menopausal complaints, such as divorce, illness, death of a spouse, physical changes, and negative societal expectations and portrayals.

According to Lachman (2001), menopause has long been associated with depression and emotionality in women, although evidence suggests that this is not the case. According to Matthews (1992), biological changes occurring during menopause do not appear to be associated with depression. However, McQuaide (1998) maintains that the cultural narrative of the menopausal woman is negative and could have a deleterious effect on the emotional functioning of women experiencing midlife, unless alternative models of well-being during menopause are made available. Kirasic (2004) believes that how a society views menopause is a direct reflection of how it views ageing women in general. Cultures that impose strict behavioural prohibitions on menstruating women see menopause in a more positive light. In Western society, where women appear to be valued for their sexual attractiveness and do not face the restrictions of other cultures, ageing is viewed negatively. The negative view of menopause appears to be found more in the society as a whole than among menopausal women.

Avis (1999) conducted a comparative analysis of Canadian women, Japanese women and women from the United States in one of the few cross-cultural investigations regarding menopausal meaning in the literature. Physiological and psychological aspects of menopause were investigated and reported by culture and point in time of menopause. The conclusion of the analysis suggested that although the cessation of reproductive capability is universally experienced by all women, the stereotypical physiological and psychological symptoms of menopause are not universally experienced (Kirasic, 2004).

Others, such as Wilbur, Miller, and Montgomery (1995) suggest that, regardless of socioeconomic status or ethnicity, women have neutral feelings towards menopause. There is evidence that for some women menopause is associated with distressing symptoms that are exacerbated by coexisting negative affective experiences, such as anxiety and depression. However, due to the absence of prospective studies, it is not possible to know whether these negative experiences predated the women's menopausal years.

Santrock (1992) believes that while menopause is no longer perceived as the negative experience it was once thought to be, the loss of fertility means that women have to make final decisions about having children. According to Blechman and Brownell (cited in Santrock, 1992), women in their late thirties who have not had children are often aware that this decision must be made, believing that they are 'up against the biological clock.'

### Cognitive and emotional changes

Schaie (1996), states that there is substantial evidence that overall intelligence remains quite stable through the middle years, but qualitative thinking and problem-solving ability change during this period. Jaques (cited in Lachman, 2001) described a shift from a driven style of creativity to a more considered, thoughtful mode in midlife. Labouvie-Vief and Hakim-Larson (1989), describe a shift, in midlife, in the way complex problems are viewed. While young adults search for certainty and a correct answer, adults experiencing midlife appreciate that many problems have no single solution and that any problem may be good or bad at the same time.

Young adults focus on controlling their emotions, while middle-aged persons are inclined to describe their feelings, and are able to differentiate the inner realm of emotional experience from the outer realm of convention; they attempt to acknowledge their inner experience, while realizing that the two realms are often in conflict (Labouvie-Vief & Hakim-Larson, 1989).

### Intelligence

According to Lachman (2001), intelligence during adulthood is characterized, on the one hand, by losses in abstract reasoning, speed of mental process, and certain specific aspects of memory. On the other hand, gains are seen in the metacognitive ability to integrate cognitive, emotional and interpersonal thinking in a synthetic understanding of the self, others, and the world.

The most commonly used theoretical framework for interpreting findings on age-related changes in intelligence is that of fluid and crystallized abilities (Horn, 1994). According to Kirasic (2004), these two types of intelligence reflect a divergence between a form of intelligence largely affected by culture, and a type of intelligence affected by physiological and genetic factors. *Crystallized intelligence* refers to the ability to apply information acquired through life experience and formal learning. The emphasis rests on the influence of culture and education. Crystallized intelligence depends on semantic memory. Semantic memory is involved in situations that require language and mathematical skills, application of social customs and learned facts, and is reflective of crystallized abilities. *Fluid intelligence* refers to the ability to process novel information with little previous experience. This type of intelligence requires the perception of complex relationships, inferences and implications. Declines in fluid abilities over the course of the life span have been noted. Midlife adults who report that they are unable to think as fast as they once did, and that taking in new information takes longer, can be said to reflect self-perceived changes in fluid abilities. Fluid abilities are said to start showing a decline in young adulthood, while crystallized abilities begin to peak at this time and improve through midlife to approximately age seventy-two.

However, according to Schaie (1996), these findings were obtained using cross-sectional methodologies, making comparisons between different groups of individuals at various ages. When the same individuals are followed using the framework of longitudinal design, findings show that with respect to fluid intelligence, decline does not usually begin until the 60's, and loss of crystallized intelligence occurs in the 70's (Schaie, 1996).

The idea that practical and academic-analytical abilities might have different developmental trajectories has been supported in a study by Cornelius and Caspi (1987). They studied adults between the ages of 20 and 78 and examined relationships between performance on tasks measuring fluid intelligence, crystallized intelligence, and everyday problem solving. Performance on the measure of fluid ability increased from ages 20 to 30, remained stable from ages 30 to 50, and then began to decline. However, the researchers found that performance on the everyday problem-solving tasks and measures of crystallized ability increased up to age 70. Regarding intelligence, midlife can be seen as an optimal period. Crystallized and practical intelligence are increasing, while in most adults, fluid intelligence has not yet begun to decline. Therefore, midlife is a period where adults have the opportunity to make their greatest intellectual contributions, both to their own lives and the lives of others (Lachman, 2001).

Holahan, Holahan and Wonacott (1999) investigated the relationship between a self-appraisal of having lived up to one's intellectual abilities at midlife, and life satisfaction and retrospective life choices, one and three decades later. They found that participants who reported living up to their intellectual abilities were higher in satisfaction regarding occupation success, satisfaction with family life, and joy in living, eleven years later. These individuals were also less likely to report that they would make different life choices in work or family three decades later.

### Personality development

Helson and Wink (1992) analyzed personality and life data from a longitudinal sample of women who graduated from a women's college in 1958 and 1960, and were studied at the ages of 21, 27, 43 and 52.

The aim of the study was to examine personality change in women from the early 40s to the early 50s. On the basis of both theoretical and empirical literature, the researchers hypothesized that women between the ages of 43 and 52 would increase in emotional stability, masculinity and cognitive breadth and skill, and that there would be a decrease in femininity. Much evidence in the literature indicates that the early 50s are a time of superior functioning. The researchers also, therefore, hypothesized that the increase in stability would be constructive rather than regressive, that the increase in masculinity would mean a gain in decisiveness and confidence, and that a decrease in femininity would result in a reduction in dependence and vulnerability. These hypotheses were all supported (Helson & Wink, 1992).

Gender role identity Changes in gender-role identity, that is, in masculinity and femininity in middle-aged individuals, have been noted by various clinicians and researchers (Gerdes, 1988). Jung (1936) believed that in each sex, during the middle years, some of the most characteristic qualities of masculinity and femininity diminish to some extent and those of the opposite sex increase. The longitudinal data studied by Helson and Wink (1992), revealed that the scales measuring masculinity/femininity showed the greatest magnitude of change in women between the ages of 43 and 52. Older midlife women scored lower on femininity than younger midlife women. The women in this sample showed an increase in masculine traits such as action orientation and decisiveness, and a decrease in feminine characteristics such as vulnerability. In an earlier study, however, Helson and Mitchell (1984) found that, instead of a reversal, a balance between masculine and feminine traits was associated with quality of life for middle-aged women (Lachman, 2001).

### Social Roles

In addition to physical changes the middle years often involve a restructuring of social roles. These changes are especially relevant in the area of work and family (Lachman, 2001). Adults experiencing midlife show a wide range of circumstances involving their children, depending on their social class, children's ages and geographical propinquity (Ryff & Seltzer, 1996). Some have young children at home, some have grown children who have left home, and some have adult children who have returned to the home.



Individuals who had their children in their early twenties will often become grandparents in their middle years. Midlife adults experience changes in their relationship with their own parents, due to death or declining health. Turmoil and emotional anguish are often associated with parental loss. The midlife adult usually has multiple responsibilities at home and at work. The label, 'sandwich generation' has been given to this intergenerational, multi-role midlife squeeze (Lachman, 2001).

Marriage The quality of the marital relationship has been consistently related to well-being at midlife. Many middle-aged individuals are well established in their marriages, and being married seems to be positively related to well-being. However, unmarried individuals report higher levels of personal growth and autonomy than married individuals at midlife. Even stable marriages experience new pressures at midlife, as changes take place within other relationships or at work (Marks & Lambert, 1998). Children leaving home, or becoming grandparents for the first time are examples of changes that may influence the marital relationship (Lachman, 2001). Taking on these new roles may alter identities and serve as a catalyst for change (Szinovacz, 1998).

Changing parenting roles Many middle-aged parents have children entering adolescence, requiring new parent-child relations and roles (Gerdes, 1988). McGoldrick and Carter (1982) mention certain required changes seen from a systemic point of view. Boundaries should become more permeable, allowing adolescents more freedom to move outside family boundaries, bringing new friends and ideas into the family system. Flexible boundaries should maintain a balance between the adolescent's dependence on the family and independence from it. Adolescents establishing their own relationships with members of the extended family may require new adjustments in the family system. Psychological interaction between parents and children is likely to change with regard to authority patterns, matters of privacy, differing views and emotional realignments. The youth confront their parents with identity challenges, seeking to assert their own worth in society. Parents may, at this time, be experiencing their own identity challenges, as well as having to care for aged parents (Song, 1997).

During the post-parental period, also known as the 'empty nest stage', parents discover that they are once again a dyad (Papalia & Olds, 1986).

Parents may experience this period in their lives as good, enjoying the increased freedom from financial strains. However, parents may also experience this change as a great loss due to over-investment in the children, the fact that the children were the bond holding the marriage together, or regret having spent too little time with the children (Papalia & Olds, 1986).

Work In the work domain, middle age adults may reach their peak in terms of position and earnings, but may also be faced with multiple financial burdens including rent, mortgage, child care, college fees and bills from nursing homes. They may also decide to change careers, or be forced to change jobs, often facing age discrimination. Role expectations about work for women have changed considerably. In the 1950s and 1960s middle-class women may have worked for extra money or a feeling of accomplishment. The downward turn in the economy in the 1970s made a second income a necessity for families. Once women became accustomed to the increased financial benefits of a second income, as well as the independence and equality they personally experienced, they were reluctant to give up employment. Today, more women work outside the home than any previous time in history, bringing new role demands and expectations experienced both by men and women (Lachman, 2001).

### **Midlife development from various theoretical perspectives**

No single theory can explain all aspects of human functioning, because of the complexity of human beings, and the vast range of individual and group differences (Gerdes, 1988). However, the following review provides a synthesis of some of the prominent theories of midlife development. This review considers the way midlife has been explained and conceptualised by various researchers and theorists. Some of the theories are partially contradictory. In other instances there is a convergence between the points of view.

#### Theories that placed emphasis on the biological roles of women

The following section highlights theories that emphasized the biological roles of women as wife and mother.

This view is relevant to a study of the midlife experience, as it implies that once a woman's childbearing capacity has ceased, she no longer has an important role to play in society, and becomes redundant. This view has changed over time, and the postmodern paradigm, which underlies this study, views women in a broader context, stressing other roles important to women at midlife, such as social, cultural and work roles.

Sigmund Freud (1965) believed that women's roles could be summed up in two parts: as an adored darling in youth, and as a loved wife in mature years. Freud stressed that for a woman to achieve mature development, she must renounce masculine activity and accept her feminine nature, governed by passivity. A woman is rewarded for her acceptance of her femininity by the birth of her babies. Freud maintained that appropriate adult development resulted in a woman's sense of identity being derived from her support functions within the family. Immature development led to a woman competing as a man, with men, and this rejection of her traditional role was considered to be neurotic.

Erikson (1963, 1968) viewed a woman's capacity to reproduce and be a mother as the most important determinant of her adult identity. He believed that the design of a woman's body – a cavity, or inner space that seeks to be occupied – organizes the meaning of her life and makes her vulnerable to despair.

Object Relations Theory, remaining close to the core of psychoanalytic discourse, stresses the centrality of a woman's role as mothering agent. The concept of maternal instinct, in which innate reproductive urges are responsible for the behavioural patterns, personal preferences, and mental processes of a woman, has been recognized by feminists and sociobiologists alike (Rossi, 1977; Trivers, 1972; Wilson, 1975).

Yet according to Gergen (1990), the concept of paternal instinct has not been developed. Theories about male development do not appear to be based on a model of biological determinism (Barnett & Baruch, 1978).

Gergen (1990) states that the most comprehensive attempt to explain the female midlife trajectory has been by Helen Lopata (1971, 1979).

Prior to mature adulthood a single young woman lives a 'multidimensional life.' After marriage, her life narrows to a unidimensional life that focuses on family concerns. A woman's major responsibility as housewife and mother is the rearing of her children. She is permitted involvement in community interests at a later stage, as long as she continues to meet family demands. She then experiences the loss of her children, and in the final stage, the loss of her husband, and is left alone. Gergen (1990) claims that with the majority of women employed outside the home today, this is a mythical narrative. Yet, she believes that it is not an exaggeration to regard it as *the basic form* of life story for women, and it continues to reverberate through life stories women tell about themselves.

Gergen (1990) states that even textbooks devoted specifically to the psychology of women stress that anatomy is destiny. These books are devoted to issues of sexual development, sexuality, sex differences, marriage, motherhood, widowhood and sexual crimes. Psychological theories of how women experience midlife are restricted, negative and scarce. Developmental stories of women that are available have focused on the woman as a biological creature, especially as a mother. The life cycle trajectory, according to these theorists, is one in which the woman goes into a decline after reaching the age of forty. Little attention has been paid to women's life narratives and this has strengthened the patriarchal system of power.

The *Women's Liberation Movement* initiated an enormous amount of research into the psychology of women in the 1960s. Issues relevant to human development were raised, including the origin and nature of sex differences, the significance of life events such as pregnancy in the lives of women, and how socio-cultural influences affect roles and self-actualization in women (Gerdes, 1988). The advent of the feminist movement has challenged previously held roles for women in midlife (Waskel & Phelps, 1995).

The importance of age and cohort effects needs to be stressed when examining how women are experiencing midlife. For example, many women grew up in an era where the roles of wife and mother were most valued. Women who worked did so because of financial need only (Waskel & Phelps, 1995).

### Neugarten's contribution to the theories of midlife development

Previous theories of midlife have been guided by the extent to which development in this period is biologically versus socially structured (Lachman, 2001). Biological unfolding plays a key role in early development, whereas adulthood is affected more by social, cultural and environmental constraints and opportunities (Baltes, Lindenberger, & Staudinger, 1998). However, certain biological events such as menopause, may also be important in adult development (Parlee, 1984). Childhood may be seen as running on a biological clock, while adulthood is often governed by a social clock (Neugarten et al., 1965). Neugarten questions the role of time in development by asking whether the manner in which developmental psychology has studied children, is appropriate for adult study. Neugarten argued that during midlife, the adult's sense of time and timing play a role not seen in earlier development. Life is no longer measured as time since birth, but time left to live. The blending of past, present and future becomes a psychological reality and allows individuals a sense of self across time, or a sense of their own life cycle (Neugarten et al., 1965). Middle-age adults believe themselves to have shown personal growth since their youth and anticipate further personal growth in the future. According to Neugarten's theory, awareness of one's own life cycle allows the individual to compare his or her own progress through life with the expected, or normative, societal timing of major events and transitions. This 'normal life cycle' results in individual's comparing themselves to others in terms of how they are facing the challenges of midlife (Lachman, 2001). Research has shown that individuals carry stereotypes about what should have been accomplished by midlife (Krueger, Heckhausen, & Hundertmark, 1995). Besides the timing of major events, transitions such as the increasing responsibility for ageing parents and the awareness of self as the bridge between generations are important in midlife. The midlife adult begins to view self as the socializer, instead of the socialized. Neugarten (cited in Lachman, 2001) emphasizes the maturity of the individual at midlife, with the capacity for taking on important roles.

### The adult stage theories

The adult stage theories have contributed to the idea that midlife is a crisis in development.

### Erikson's developmental theory

Erikson's theory grew out of Freud's psychoanalytic theory and relates to the entire life span from infancy to old age, as opposed to Freud's theory which focused mainly on childhood. Erikson believed that humans develop in psychosocial stages, in contrast to Freud's psychosexual stages. The 'epigenetic principle' is the term Erikson used to describe the process that guides development through the life cycle. This principle states that anything that grows has a blueprint, and a special time of ascendancy. Development unfolds in this way, until all parts have arisen to form a functioning whole (Santrock, 1992).

Erikson (cited in Santrock, 1992) conceptualised the human life course in a sequence of eight stages. The individual is challenged, at each stage, to resolve a particular crisis, and having done so, is able to move to the next stage. Each crisis demands the development of a specific capability, and if this does not occur, subsequent development will be impaired (Gerdes, 1988). Individuals move through each stage in a cultural context that provides socializing influences and holds expectations pertaining to each stage. Therefore, each stage spells out how emotional, cognitive and biological changes interact with corresponding cultural and societal factors. Each stage is defined by a central dialectic. For example, Erikson viewed the first stage of life (infancy) by contrasting *trust versus mistrust*. Important aspects of the infant's experience concern the eventual establishment of a trusting attachment to caregivers, as well as the first experiences of mistrust in the face of potential danger. The social world of the infant is set up to provide for this developmental task. For example, caregivers, according to cultural norms, know that babies require comfort and attention, and provide accordingly, to establish a trusting attachment bond. Successful negotiation of the first stage paves the way for healthy development in subsequent stages. The toddler then moves into the second stage of *autonomy versus shame and doubt*, facing new developmental challenges (Lachman 2001). The developing child must then face the third stage of *initiative versus guilt*, and the fourth stage of *industry versus inferiority*, resolving these developmental challenges before moving into adolescence (Santrock, 1992).

After moving through the fifth stage of *identity versus role confusion* (late-adolescence), and the sixth stage of *intimacy versus isolation* (young adult), the adult experiences the seventh stage of *generativity versus stagnation*, associated with the middle years. Erikson believed that the individual first gains a sense of who he or she is, and how he or she fits into society (identity) and then commits to others through marriage (intimacy), before being psychosocially ready to devote time and energy to the well-being of future generations (generativity). Erikson described generativity as “primarily the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation” (Erikson, 1963, p. 267). Generativity encompasses adults’ plans of what they hope to do to leave a legacy of themselves to the next generation. Adults express generativity through teaching, nurturing and leading the next generation, while generating outcomes that aim to benefit the social system, promoting its continuity from one generation to the next (McAdams et al. 1993). Although Erikson regarded parenting as the most important expression of generativity, he believed that adults could be generative in other ways as well, especially through productive and creative activities, and through teaching and leadership (Lachman, 2001).

Failure to achieve a sense of generativity results in a sense of stagnation, as the adult feels unable to create a satisfying legacy of the self. Self-preoccupation can also occur as a result of failing to achieve generativity, causing the adult to focus on the self rather than on others. The virtue associated with successful negotiation of the *generativity versus stagnation* stage is *care*. The expression of care is shown in the family, with the primary objects of generativity being the adult’s own children. However, generativity can also be expressed in the public arena, even to the point of caring for the whole of society. Erikson believed that generativity stemmed from both inner needs or drives and external societal forces. Erikson’s stage model perceives *generativity versus stagnation* as a normative developmental issue, although adults differ with regard to the strength of their generative feelings (Lachman, 2001). Erikson maintained that adults need to be optimistic about the future and the fate of their families and community, in order to be generative. Generative behaviour is aimed at promoting the greater good for society, and is associated with psychosocial maturity, mental health and well-being (Lachman, 2001).

### Vaillant's expansion of Erikson's stages

Vaillant (cited in Santrock, 1992) added two additional stages to Erikson's adult stages: a) Career consolidation, which occurs from approximately 23 to 35 years of age and is a period in which a person's career becomes more stable; b) Keeping the meaning versus rigidity. From approximately 45 to 55 years of age adults become more relaxed if they have met their goals and accept the fact if they have not. At this time the concern is with extracting meaning from their lives and fighting against a rigid orientation.

### Gould's developmental theory

Gould (cited in Santrock, 1992) linked stage and crisis when describing his view of developmental transformations. He believed that although midlife is as turbulent a developmental period as adolescence, striving to handle crises during middle adulthood will probably produce a happier healthier life. Gould studied 524 men and women, and described them as going through seven stages of adult life. The twenties involve the assumption of new roles, while people in their thirties begin to feel stuck with their responsibilities. People in their forties begin to feel a sense of urgency that life is speeding by. Gould stated that handling the midlife crisis and realizing that a sense of urgency is a natural reaction to this stage of life, helps to keep people on the path to adult maturity.

### Levinson's theory

Levinson's theory focuses on male adult development. According to Lachman (2001), Levinson's theory does not describe women's experience of midlife particularly well, because of the different nature of women's responsibilities and roles in midlife. However, some of Levinson's ideas are becoming increasingly applicable to women, because of their increasing involvement in the workplace. Levinson's theory is, therefore, also discussed here.

Levinson based his stage theory of adult male development on research that studied the similarities in the patterns of men's lives throughout the adult years.



Levinson considered the extent to which the interaction of biological and social influences affect the structure of midlife. While noting that the biological view of midlife states that midlife is a plateau between the growth of youth and the decline of later life, Levinson also tried to determine if there are social patterns of development during adulthood. He believed that while biological changes result in stages of development during childhood, social and cultural changes are likely to structure the life course in a predictable manner during adulthood (Levinson, 1978).

Levinson (cited in Crary, O'Connor & Wolfe, 1990) describes the adult life course as alternating phases of stability and change of the life structure. The life structure refers to the pattern of involvement in relationships, activities, roles and physical settings. It is a bridge between the inner self and the demands of society, and is a product of both forces. It is the connection between self and circumstance. While the life structure allows one to adapt to one's surroundings, it tends to outlive its usefulness after a period of time. This is because people often make life choices without truly understanding what these choices entail (Crary et al., 1990). The process of discovering what one has chosen raises new perspectives and needs, and the circumstances surrounding the individual often change in unpredictable ways. A life structure is considered a failure if the individual cannot meet society's demands, or contribute to society (Crary et al., 1990).

Early adulthood, which according to Levinson is the period stretching from 18 to 45 years of age, is a time in which men establish an adult identity. They face the challenges of settling into their careers, developing intimate partnerships and starting a family (Lachman, 2001).

Middle adulthood, which Levinson defines as the age group from 45 to 65 years, is a time when men have achieved these earlier goals, but lack, and are striving to find meaning in their lives (Levinson, 1978). Levinson saw the midlife crisis as an attempt for men to review their lives and reorder their priorities. Looking at one's achievements gained thus far, and questioning the meaning of these achievements in terms of life lived and life left to live, results in a crisis (Levinson, 1978).

According to Levinson, a major task of midlife is to find a meaningful and adaptive balance between love and work (Levinson, 1978).

Levinson (1977, p.100) believed that “transitional periods aim to terminate existing structures and to work toward the initiation of a new structure,” which may result in considerable uncertainty and upheaval. However, it may also be indicative of growth and maturity although it involves emotional turmoil, stress and doubt. The following features are associated with the mid-life transition:

- Self Appraisal – Although evaluating one’s self, shortcomings, values and achievements may be a painful process, the insight gained paves the way for further development.
- Reappraisal of the past – Challenging questions such as, ‘What have I done with my life?’ ‘What are my values and priorities?’ arise, and the individual may realize that much of his life has been based on false assumptions.
- Recognition of the finiteness of life – The individual begins to confront his own mortality. This recognition may make time more precious and lead to new perspectives regarding priorities, values and commitments (Fiske, 1980).

According to Levinson (1980), the change to middle adulthood lasts about five years, in which time the adult has to confront four major conflicts:

- Young-old polarity – The individual becomes aware of changes which signal that his physical powers are declining. Although he or she may still feel young in some respects, in others he or she is beginning to age.
- Destruction-creation polarity – An important developmental task, according to Levinson (1980) is to understand that destruction and creation are universal processes. Understanding these processes and evaluating the part they have played in life, enables individuals to recognize what has been done to them by others and what they have done to others. This may be a painful process if they recognize that they have inflicted hurt on others. Assuming greater control over destruction and creation processes is the developmental task at this stage.

- Masculine-feminine polarity – Both masculine and feminine aspects of one’s personality must be accepted and integrated (Levinson, 1980).
- Attachment-separateness polarity – Levinson explains this as the dichotomy between being involved with the outside world and being introspectively involved with one’s own inner world. A new balance between outer-inner involvement needs to be achieved.
- Modifying the life structure – As the mid-life transition makes way for middle adulthood, there is a commitment to new choices as the desired future becomes clearer and the individual modifies life structures accordingly. Levinson (1978, p. 279) states that “the main tasks now are to make crucial choices, give these choices meaning and commitment, and build a structure around them.”

#### Conclusions about the adult stage theories

Lachman (2001) believes that while stage theories that explain how people normally progress through adulthood have merit, individual life circumstances also influence development and result in individual trajectories through midlife. Humans are influenced by the immediate environment (for example, the workplace and home), the interrelation of conflicting environments (for example, having to work while raising a child), as well as the larger external environment (for example, urban versus rural living). In addition, one’s culture and society influence choices and development. Therefore, although midlife may present individuals with similar tasks, the exact nature of those tasks and opportunity for successfully resolving them, differ from one individual to the next.

Santrock (1992) states that although the labels are different, the underlying themes of the adult developmental stage theories of Erikson, Gould, Levinson and Vaillant are remarkably similar. These developmental perspectives emphasize the importance of developmental stages in the life cycle and can be helpful in pinpointing dominant themes that characterize individuals at particular points in development. However, there are important points to keep in mind when considering these perspectives as viable models of adult development. For example, there has been a tendency to focus on the stages as crises in development.

There is also considerable variation in the manner in which individuals experience the different developmental stages (Santrock, 1992). According to Hoffman (1992) social constructionists have questioned the idea of developmental stages, believing that there is a danger in assuming that there is a universal standard against which humans can measure their functioning.

#### A view on midlife development from lifespan theory

For many people, midlife is connected to negative stereotypic expectations, believing that middle-aged people are crisis-stricken or bored and that midlife is a time of decline and despair (Lachman, 2001). The life-span view argues against such a simplistic view of development and conceptualizes development across the life-span as multidimensional and multidirectional. Conceptualizing development in this way challenges theories of midlife development and ageing that focus exclusively on decrements (Baltes, 1993; Riley & Riley, 1989; Rowe & Kahn, 1987).

Life-span theory proposes that ontogenetic development is the lifelong selective change in adaptive capacity, influenced by the interaction of biology and culture. The central feature of the developmental process is 'transactional adaptation' or 'person-environment interaction'. Development is not the unfolding of pre-wired maturational programmes or the mechanistic reaction of individuals to environmental stimuli, but a constant process of the individual's interaction with changing contexts, including historical transformations of society. The individual constantly seeks, changes and is changed by contexts. Life-span theory implies that biological models that propose that development takes place in the first half of life, and is followed by an ageing process, inadequately describe development from a psychological perspective (Lachman, 2001).

At all ages, development involves gains and losses. The study of midlife development therefore implies that the unique characteristic of midlife must be identified, as it is no longer self-evident that midlife development involves either growth or decline. Because development extends from conception until death, according to life-span theory, the particulars of any given life phase need points of comparison to be identified.

Therefore, it is not useful to study middle-age exclusively without including young and old comparison groups (Lachman, 2001). The term 'transactional adaptation' implies that it is not only psychological functioning that changes with age, but also the contexts, and the functional consequences of development. These three parameters of development are the focus of analysis whenever development is considered from a life-span perspective (Lachman, 2001).

Life-span development can be a continuous or discontinuous process. Continuity is provided by the friendship, family and often the work context, but as we age we are confronted by internal and external developmental contexts that cause discontinuity. Midlife can therefore be characterized as both continuous and discontinuous depending on the particular life events faced by individuals. For example, middle-aged women who re-enter the workforce once their children have left home, are confronted with new developmental contexts. The contextual challenges could be reflected in marked increases in some intellectual domains. Other examples of life-span contexts involving issues of discontinuity are unemployment (Moen & Wethington, 1999) or widowhood, as well as health and functional changes arising as a consequence of biological ageing. Development implies growth, or gains, as well as decrements, or losses. Life-span development includes the full range of possibilities from gain to stability to loss, and believes that development is neither a continued progression to higher levels, nor a constant decline. Research on midlife development is characterized by a tie in the amount of gains and losses experienced. While some areas show progress, others have begun to decline (Lachman, 2001).

Development is therefore multidirectional and multidimensional and encompasses the increase, maintenance and decrease of functioning across different domains. 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.

He refers to culture as the entirety of psychological, social, material and symbolic (knowledge based) resources that humans have developed over time and transmitted across generations (Lachman, 2001). These two main influences on human development, biology and culture, follow a certain life-span path. In midlife development the tie between gains and losses is possibly grounded in a biological decline that is at its beginning, and a cultural “infrastructure” that challenges and supports development (Baltes, 1979). Concerning the allocation of resources, midlifers take a position between the young and the old. In some domains, resources are used for growth and in others, individuals are investing resources in maintenance, repair and management of loss. This is reflected in the fact that many women in midlife begin investing in a career, after having raised their children. These women are investing in professional growth (Lachman, 2001). Plasticity of development refers to the fact that any developmental outcome is one of numerous possible outcomes. The implication of plasticity in understanding midlife development is that any findings on what midlife is like, is open to modification given the provision of appropriate circumstances (Lachman, 2001). Development is always the outcome of forces of nature and nurture, genes and environment, and intra and extra-personal influences. In order to understand developmental contexts, it is necessary to consider the following three logics organizing environmental and biological influences, as well as their interaction: the normative age-graded, the normative history-graded, and the non-normative logic (Baltes et al., 1980).

This system of biological and cultural influence is important in understanding interpersonal and intercultural similarities, as well as accounting for differences in developmental trajectories (Dannefer, 1984). Age-graded, history-graded, and non-normative influences all play a part in producing similarities and differences in developmental opportunities. The age-graded influence refers to biological or societal conditions that are normatively linked to chronological age, such as menopause or retirement. Non-normative conditions refer to the life circumstances of an individual (Baltes, 1979). Cultural and historical influences represent contextual influences that affect development. Historical periods and cultural changes shape the nature of the opportunity structures to which people are exposed. Social structures are constantly changing and vary across socioeconomic groups and cultures.

Historical events, such as war, and historical changes in technology affect the direction of psychological development (Lachman, 2001).

The important role of history has been suggested by research on cohort differences (Baltes, Cornelius, & Nesselroade, 1979). Using longitudinal and cross-sectional research methodologies, individuals born at the same period in historical time can be monitored over time. Researchers can then determine whether individuals born in different sociocultural conditions show differences in developmental trajectories (Lachman, 2001). For example, some personality changes observed in currently middle-aged women, such as feelings of liberation may reflect limited life choices in early adulthood because of gender stereotypes and socio-economic conditions at the time (Stewart & Ostrove, 1998).

Dannefer (1984) states that in spite of the rejection of the premises of the biological growth paradigm, life-span development retains a strategy of investigation based on ontogenetic assumptions. Although Baltes (1979) acknowledges non-genetic factors such as historical (intercohort) variation and 'non-normative' (intracohort) outcomes, the logic of the traditional developmental model is retained. Although cohort differences are believed to derive from historical variations, differences within the cohort are still treated as ontogenetic or maturational. Each cohort has a 'normative' pattern, while intracohort differences are treated as error variation. Although historical variation is seen as important, variations in the individual contexts of human experience are often not (Dannefer, 1984).

In this study, historical variation will be noted. However, emphasis will be placed on variations in the individual contexts of the research participants, as they provide their subjective views of their own midlife experience.

#### Midlife development from a postmodern perspective

Postmodernists believe that psychologists can no longer presume that theoretical descriptions are neutral mapping devices for facts standing independently of these theories.

They should accept that theories are shaped by the manner in which scientists interpret or characterize events, and that these interpretations enter into the scientific literature and social life as a form of advocacy. The psychologist can therefore no longer make claims of ‘objectivity,’ and should pay close attention to the character of the theoretical formulations used. Gergen (1990) therefore believes that social constructionism, a form of postmodernism is relevant to the refurbishment of a lifespan psychology of women.

The social constructionist perspective locates meaning in an understanding of how ideas and attitudes are developed within a social, community context. This viewpoint considers the development of cultural narratives that are formed by, and in turn influence, people and then take on normative views against which people measure themselves. Cultural constructions are considered as the context that supports the development of certain problems (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996).

The focus is on how problems are encouraged by particular meaning systems constructed within the larger culture. The meaning systems influence people to see only certain ways of being as a possibility. The postmodern/constructionist perspective believes in multiple selves, multiple meanings and multiple contexts. There is no fixed personality or absolute truth, but people exist in and are influenced by multiple contexts and multiple meanings (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996).

#### A social constructionist view of women’s midlife development.

Gergen (1990) addresses the question of how a feminist developmental theory may be facilitated through a postmodern social constructionist paradigm. Rather than trying to find the ‘objective’ truth about women’s development, theorists should question how theories of development can be constructed to facilitate the expression of feminist ideals and values. The following four proposals are suggested by Gergen (1990) for structuring new visions of lifespan developmental psychology for women.



Toward new dimensions of gender. According to Parlee (cited in Gergen, 1990), the liberation of women's lives from 'biology' is a major task of feminist psychologists dealing with lifespan development. Stewart and Ostrove (1998) note that *women's* middle age is often described in terms of menopause and the empty nest, whereas *men's* middle age is discussed in terms of crisis and acting out, and executive personality. In popular culture, the middle-aged woman is depicted in even more negative terms – over the hill, sexually irrelevant and unattractive (Greer, 1992). Social constructionism focuses on how problems in society are encouraged by particular meaning systems, for example, patriarchy, constructed within the larger culture. People are influenced to see only certain ways of being as a possibility, by these meaning systems. Those afforded a position of power by the dominant culture stand to gain from these subjugating narratives that specify how individuals, for example, women, should be (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996). According to some feminist writings, many social institutions are *man* made. Male-female relations largely benefit men at the expense of women. Feminists argue that human qualities such as the ability to care for children, or assertiveness, are not innate qualities that belong solely to one sex. During this century greater freedom for women has occurred. However, men have not generally given up their more powerful position (Owen, 1992). Forms of inquiry are required that construct women in far richer and more diverse ways (Gergen, 1990). Freedman and Combs (1996) maintain that no one self is truer than any other, and that different selves come to the fore in different contexts. People are continually constituting each other's 'selves,' and there are many possible stories regarding self. Particular presentations of self are preferred by people within particular cultures. A 'preferred self' is different from a 'true' self. People have multiple experiences of self in multiple contexts. Narrative subverts the notion of a 'true self' and suggests that people are *communities of selves*, with each person containing varying points of view and a multitude of voices (Freedman & Combs, 1996). There is reason to be cautious of singular, totalizing accounts (Doan, 1997). The life experience of women in the workplace, for example, might be given a position of centrality. Existing research in this area has rarely produced novel psychological constructs with which to reframe women's lives (Gergen, 1990).

Future work focusing on more abstract levels of analysis would be desirable. According to James (1988, p.118), “it may well be that women at midlife have the potential for much richer identity resolutions than they do during earlier phases of life” and the need for developmental psychologists to explore them is great. Beyond the areas of occupational endeavors at midlife, many other areas should be expanded upon. For example, there is reason to argue that women are responsible for the maintenance of all life forms within the culture, taking into account their contributions to social cohesion, their support of the aged, ill and young, their position as spiritual leaders, educators and a political force. Many contributions of women go unrecognized and this imbalance may be the result of the application of theoretical formulations within the social sciences and the culture at large. A shift in theorizing practices could result in women claiming new identities, obliterating negative, limited self-dimensions (Gergen, 1990).

Toward Relational Theory. One of the prime assumptions of developmental psychologists is that the unit of study is the single individual, or the single self changing over time (Kvale, 1990). Interactions are seen as the outcomes of autonomous individuals acting together. However, the utility of this view has received strong criticism (Sampson, 1985, 1988; Shotter, 1984). Feminist theorists argue that the notion of the independent, single self is an integral part of the liberal humanist tradition that rejects the possibility of viewing individuals as co-creators of action. Therefore, many theorists recommend a turn to relational processes as the source of a new theory (Barry, 1989; Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn & Walkerdine, 1984; Lykes, 1985; Scheman, 1983). These models propose that the unit of analysis becomes a dyad, or other relational group, rather than the individual (Gergen, 1990).

According to Freedman and Combs (1996), a central tenet of the postmodern world view is that beliefs, social customs, laws, habits of dress and diet – all the things that constitute the psychological fabric of ‘reality’ – arise through social interaction over time. People, in interaction, construct their realities as they live them.

Emotions, actions and personal traits are believed to be dialogically derived, not under autonomous internal control. Rather than focusing on the lives of individual adult women, the study of relational networks is proposed, that encompasses inter-generational activities, family relations and social group performance. People would then be known through their participation within a particular framework and the social group would be of major concern (Gergen, 1990). According to Fraser and Nicholson (1988, p. 391) “postmodern-feminist theory would look more like a tapestry composed of threads of many different hues rather than one woven in a single colour.”

*Toward New Narrative Forms.* A constructionist orientation suggests narrative forms of developmental theory (Gergen, 1990). According to White (1991), people make sense of their lives both through the cultural narratives they are born into, and the personal narratives they construct relative to the cultural narratives. Certain narratives, in any culture, will become dominant over other narratives, specifying preferred and customary ways of behaving and believing, within that particular culture. Doan (1997) explains that social constructionism is especially interested in the narratives or discourses that have taken on a normative standard against which people measure themselves. It focuses on knowledge as power, and challenges narratives that claim to be privileged. Social constructionism questions who stands to gain from the power wielded by certain accounts. For example, Wethington (2000) states that what people read and hear may be as influential as personal experience in creating their beliefs about the world. The term ‘midlife crisis’ remains ubiquitous in popular culture, rather than the more neutral ‘midlife transition’ (Wethington, Cooper, & Holmes, 1997). In questioning this emphasis on stress, rather than growth, Wethington (2000) suggests that media attention and the attempts by social commentators and media pundits in search of opportunities to market information as products, arouse ‘moral insecurities’ that evoke a culture of fear. The fears create panic regarding ageing, regardless of whether life is going well for the individual. Cultural and social insecurities could manifest as fear of the future, and concerns over personal well being (Wethington, 2000).

The tendency of female adult developmental theories has traditionally emphasized the unidirectional countdown of the 'social clock', but has become open to challenge because of the multiple means by which women organize their lives today (Helson, Mitchell, & Moore, 1984). Hoffman (1990) favours social constructionism because it recognizes an evolving set of meanings emerging from interactions between people. These meanings may not exist inside what we think of as an individual 'mind,' but are part of a flow of constantly changing narratives. For example, traditional forms cannot explain mothers having babies at 40 years of age, grandmothers enrolling in university, and women with multiple careers and relational histories. Rather than trying to force women's lives into a traditional form, narrative may be more resonant with alternative lifestyles. These complex life stories would emphasize the notion of change as unpredictable, rather than stable and well-defined. A lifespan developmental approach would then be less concerned with meeting developmental task demands, future goals, and logical endpoints than with carrying out multiple relational patterns (Gergen, 1990).

Toward an Articulated Critique. Gergen (1990) maintains that because of the strong separation of matters of fact and value within traditional psychology, there is little room for a value-oriented critique aimed either at general cultural practices, or at the discipline. Statements of fact, from a social constructionist position, are saturated with preferences. Berger and Luckman (cited in Freedman & Coombs, 1996) distinguish *typification*, *institutionalization*, and *legitimation*, as three processes used in any social group to construct and maintain its knowledge concerning 'reality.' *Typification* is the process of sorting perceptions into types or classes. Typifications are learnt from families, playmates, schools, and so forth, and accepted as real. *Institutionalization* is the process of institutions arising around sets of typifications, for example, the institution of motherhood. Institutionalization helps society maintain and disseminate hard-won knowledge, and can blind people to other possibilities. *Legitimation* refers to processes that give legitimacy to the institutions and typifications of a society. Legitimation results in institutions being experienced as possessing an objective reality of their own (Berger & Luckman, cited in Freedman & Coombs, 1996).

Critical attention should be given to the methodological and theoretical practices within the field itself, asking what forms of life are favoured and what possibilities are closed off. Flax (1987) argued, for example, that theories of gender development affect our interpretations of biological influences. Psychologists should be critical analysts of society, challenging existing social practices through their professional work. In order to reach the potential for richer and fuller developmental theories for women at midlife, theories will need to elaborate new visions of gender; new methodologies sensitive to women's concerns; units of analysis that emphasize relational networks and new narratives that do not necessarily predict decline and desperation at midlife (Gergen, 1990).

According to Dannefer (1984), contributions of sociological research and theory provide the basis for understanding human development as socially produced and socially organized, not only by what happens earlier in life, but by the effects of social structure, social interaction, and their effects on life chances throughout the course of life.

Three major sociological principles are crucial to an understanding of human development: 1) the malleability of humans in relation to environments; 2) the structural complexity and diversity of the social environment; 3) the role of the symbolic – of social knowledge and intentionality – as factors mediating human development (Dannefer, 1984).

The interactive relationship of the culture-specific environment and the structuring of the organism as a culture-specific person is a required premise for developmental theory. The organism is *constituted* as a human being in interaction with the environment and is continually reconstituted throughout life. Characteristics that seem to 'develop' are actually produced, sustained, or modified. The effects of 'socialization' are often underestimated. The effects of context upon the individual's physical and psychosocial development are disproportionately large compared to other species. The human being develops as an open system and an adequate understanding of development must take note of the environment within which the system interacts (Dannefer, 1984).

Social environments are characterized by diversity and by multiple layers of organized, complex processes, which may potentially have an impact upon the person and, therefore, requires systematic consideration for an understanding of human development. Individual patterns through which development is constituted, are organized by positions and roles in social structure. Development needs to be understood as socially organized (Dannefer, 1984). Although social realities may not be essentially true, that does not stop them from having real effects. For example the story about how women can never be too thin, that is constantly retold in the media, has brought forth an epidemic of self-starvation among many women (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

The symbolic aspect of the environment, especially language and cultural knowledge, make a contribution to development (Dannefer, 1984). Postmodernists focus on how language *constitutes* the individual's world and beliefs. Societies construct their view of reality in language, and the only world people can know are the worlds shared in language. Language is an interactive process, not a passive receiving of 'objective' truths (Freedman & Combs, 1996). 'Knowledge' includes taken-for-granted ideas about normal development, including stereotyped ideas, and may act as a self-fulfilling prophecy, reinforcing patterns of development (Dannefer, 1984).

Two of the ways in which these effects operate are 1) cultural symbolization of individual development that shares a definition of 'normality'; and 2) specific individuals are defined by others with whom they interact, and therefore define themselves as lacking or possessing certain attributes (Dannefer, 1984).

Cultural knowledge defines the course of development and broadly shared norms of ageing and human development define what is acceptable and desirable. The notion that life stages are inevitable is an example of the cultural symbolization of development. An example of the cultural symbolization of development is the recently publicized mid-life 'stages' – with expert and 'scientific' representatives promoting a sense of cultural legitimacy and objectivity (Dannefer, 1984).

Against the backdrop of 'expert' messages (Spencer, 1982; Wortley & Amatea, 1982) that a midlife 'crisis' is normal, many individuals believe that without such an experience, one is missing out, and this may function as a self-fulfilling prophecy (Lichtman, 1981; Riley, 1978). A clear basis therefore exists for analyzing the 'midlife transition' or 'midlife crisis' as a socially constructed experience (Dannefer, 1984). According to Wethington (2000), the term midlife crisis remains a powerful metaphor and is a product of popular culture. There is considerable evidence that people at midlife use the term as a tool for constructing meaning in their lives. Kruger (1994) suggests that due to the public attention the midlife crisis has received, it is likely that a social expectation about the 'right time for a midlife crisis' is emerging, and that this will reinforce its recurrence.

When developmental patterns are conceived as ontogenetic, little thought is given to the intentionality and imagination of humans who have the potential of individual and social self-reflexiveness. Thus, a tendency of the ontogenetic paradigm is to reduce the scope of human imagination by establishing a fixed and 'normal' pattern of development. Feelings of dissatisfaction are defined as a normal maturational issue with which individuals must come to terms (Kruger, 1994).

Clausen (1993, 1997) theorized that people formulate their lives into a coherent and meaningful story. A person's life story then reflects a sense of who they are. Leonard and Burns (1999) perceived 'turning points,' or significant life events, as the means by which individuals incorporate important changes into their life story or 'self-narrative.' Self-perceived turning points do not necessarily shape the person's life, but they do represent the person's *experience* of that shaping. It is the *subjective* importance of experiences that count with the individual as opposed to researcher-chosen life events such as divorce or retirement (Clausen, 1997).

McAdams (1989) states that identity is an internalized narrative, integrating past, present and anticipated future and providing life with a sense of purpose. Each person chooses, creates and revises a life story, and this story directs future choices and goals and makes sense of the past. Certain events are considered important because they contribute to the story line, while other events are thought to be trivial.

In each society, there will be a dominant gender-line story to which most people will conform. For women in western society, there has been a shift in the past 20 years from the traditional story-line to the neo-traditional story-line (Helson & Picano, 1990). The traditional story-line defined women's identity in terms of biology or daughter, wife and mother. The neo-traditional story-line adds paid work to the roles of mother and wife (Gergen, 1990).

Bateson (1990) found that as women 'compose a life', themes derive from a diversity of times and places as well as the woman's own feelings of self, dreams and her work life. Crises in any of these areas trigger changes that influence the developmental process occurring within women during midlife. According to Waskel and Phelps (1995), all the various aspects of women in midlife should be included in attempting to develop a theory of women at midlife. It may be time to develop narratives reflecting the many faceted ways in which women live their lives.

In this study, participants will be asked to write about their lives. Themes will be inferred from these texts in order to discover meaning and achieve understanding regarding events, contexts, relationships, feelings, aspirations, and so forth, that have been meaningful to each participant in their life. These aspects of life will be different for each participant, and, therefore, each participant should experience midlife in a different way.

### **Conclusion**

The literature review reveals a number of differing opinions and theories on what constitutes the midlife developmental stage. The purpose of this study is to understand individual accounts of female midlife development from a social constructionist perspective, using the hermeneutic method of analysis to interpret textual data. The following chapter will discuss the research approach and method used in the study.



## CHAPTER THREE

### RESEARCH APPROACH

#### Introduction

The following chapter explains the research approach that will be used in this study. Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999, p. 6) define paradigms as “all-encompassing systems of interrelated practice and thinking that define for researchers the nature of their enquiry along three dimensions: ontology, epistemology and methodology.” The postmodern **ontology**, which specifies the nature of reality, and what can be known about it, and which underlies this study, will be explained. This will be followed by a description of social constructionism, an **epistemology** that fits within the postmodern tradition, and specifies the nature of the relationship between the researcher and what can be known. **Methodology** refers to how the researcher will practically study what she believes can be known. Therefore, the research methodology section will begin with an explanation of some of the defining features of the qualitative research approach. A detailed look at the research methods to be used, including sampling techniques, methods of information collection and analysis using a hermeneutic approach, will follow.

In this study, the researcher believes that there are multiple realities subjectively constructed (ontology), adopts a social constructionist stance as the researcher’s epistemology, and employs methodologies that allow her to gain access to participants’ subjective realities and to deconstruct versions of reality (qualitative approach; textual analysis).

#### Postmodernism

Doan (1997) explains that the postmodern era began when it became impossible to continue to trust the major philosophical, political and religious metaphors of our culture and the world at large. We live in a *multiverse* of realities, rather than a universe, and we need to be wary of any one singular account that claims to be the sole truth, as many truths are possible (Parry & Doan, 1994).

In the modernist worldview, the signs of language correspond to events and objects in ‘the real world.’ There is a clear distinction between the subjective (mental) world and the objective (real) world, and language is believed to be an accurate link between the subjective and objective worlds. Within the modernist belief system, language represents external reality, and our internal representations accurately reflect external reality. Postmodernists, however, focus on the way that the language people use *constitutes* their world and beliefs (Freedman & Combs, 1996). In the postmodern conception, interpretation became an end in itself, rather than a means. As a result, interpretive strategies developed which operated from the premise that it is possible to interpret cultures and their objects, products and practices, through the interpretation of texts, or narratives (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

The notion that cultures are constructed by interest groups rather than being embodiments of natural forces or universal truths, emerged logically from the notion that it is possible to interpret cultural phenomena through the interpretation of texts. The constructionist character of postmodernism was methodologically strengthened by the idea that all cultures are analyzable through their ‘discourses’ (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

The main message of postmodernism, however, is the danger of the *one* story, or *Grand Narrative* that has no room for alternative accounts. Postmodernism rejects the idea of a singular reality, stressing though that all realities do not have equal validity. There are no sole explanations or interpretations of reality, as many alternative descriptions or meanings may be possible (Doan, 1997). Freedman and Combs (1997) state that postmodernists believe that human beings are limited in their ability to measure and describe the universe in a precise, absolute way. They differ from modernists in that exceptions are of more interest to them than the rules. Specific contextualized details are looked at more often than grand generalizations, and differences rather than similarity are explored. Postmodernists are concerned with meaning, as opposed to the modernist concern with facts and rules.

Postmodernism rejects the notion of an objective knowledge and believes knowledge is “an expression of the language, values and beliefs of the particular communities and contexts in which we exist” (Lynch 1997, p. 353). It is a movement away from the inside of the psyche to the text of the world.

According to Doan (1997), being part of the postmodern age offers the potential of less intolerance and restriction than preceding eras. It allows diversity, flexibility, and the space to author a story informed by one’s own meaning, memories and perceptions. However, because postmodernism has called everything into question, we are often left in a state of ‘grand flux’ in which everything appears uncertain.

However, Rorty (1991, p. 132) states that “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.”

Freedman and Combs (1996) believe that a postmodern worldview makes it *more* necessary, not less, to examine our constructions and how to act on them.

The postmodernist view of reality is, therefore, applicable to this study because cultural phenomena will be interpreted and understood, through the process of interpreting the texts of the participants. The researcher will adhere to the postmodernist view that there are no sole explanations of reality, and many alternative meanings may be possible (Doan, 1997).

Social constructionism is an approach that fits within the Postmodern tradition. The researcher’s approach to this study will be guided by the social constructionist aim of focusing on how attitudes and ideas have developed over time, and within a social context (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996). Therefore, a summary of the history, views, and particular approach of social constructionism, as well as the role of language in social constructionism, will follow.

## Social constructionism

### The roots of social constructionism

According to Abercrombie, Hill and Turner (cited in Owen, 1992), social constructionism developed out of an earlier branch of sociology, called the sociology of knowledge, instigated by Marx and Mannheim.

This discipline was based on Marx's premise that *ideology* is linked to *base*, and that what people think is directly related to the economic base of the mode of production within society. Marx's phrase that 'social existence determines consciousness' was the basis of social constructionism. This became the basis for the concept, in social constructionism, that there is a relation between ideology and social structure within society. Social constructionists contend that the content of our consciousness and the way we relate to others, is taught by our society and culture (Owen, 1992). This idea coheres with the postmodernist notion that cultures are constructed by interest groups, rather than being embodiments of natural forces or universal truths (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

### Social constructionist views

The notion of an 'absolute Truth' is regarded, from a social constructionist perspective, as being akin to the belief in a 'Flat Earth Society', which coheres with the postmodern belief that many truths are possible. Truth is seen as arbitrary according to who is making the claim and where the action occurs. 'Facts' about human behaviour cannot exist in an absolute sense, because everything is open to differing interpretations and to dispute. Social constructionists begin an enquiry by rendering the status of all theories about human nature and morality as incomplete. Fixed ideas are given up in preference for a less orderly life (Owen, 1992).

Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999, p. 148) define social constructionism as "the research approach that seeks to analyze how signs and images have powers to create particular representations of people and objects – that underlie our experience of these people and objects."

According to Dean and Rhodes (1998) a social constructionist perspective emphasizes multiple plausible realities and meanings as socially constructed. Lynch (1997) maintains that personal identity is socially constructed. That is, a sense of who we are as individuals does not emerge from an inner awareness or knowledge, but out of a process of discussion and negotiation with individuals around us, drawing upon the language, stories and symbols of our culture. Owen (1992) describes social constructionism as the view that many of the abstract qualities, our relations according to these, and everyday life relationships are human made processes and contexts into which individuals have been born, or gain access by their credentials in society.

Social constructionists question the taken for granted assumptions regarding norms, or appropriate and inappropriate behaviour, thought and emotion, by considering who is acting on whom in what context. People are not regarded as individuals in the sense that they are isolated, but are seen as single places of resonance within a field of human forces, pulling and pushing the participants in different directions. They continually influence, and are influenced by others, regarding 'how to be'. Belief systems and knowledge are regarded as collective (Owen, 1992).

Individuals are believed to be consistent in the type of appropriate behaviour they believe is open to them according to their role and status, and display behaviour according to the social rules and ethics of the community to which they belong (Owen, 1992).

#### The social constructionist approach

Dean and Rhodes (1998) explain social constructionism as an orientation to knowledge based on the belief that knowledge arises as a result of the interaction of an observer with his or her environment. This orientation, therefore, stands in opposition to the belief that it is possible to make objective observations of the world from a neutral position. Social constructionists believe that a neutral position is impossible to attain, as the interests and values of the observer are always operative. The act of observation changes that which is being observed. Knowledge is not discovered, but created within a particular context.

Social constructionism is particularly interested in discourses or narratives that have taken on a normative standard against which individuals measure themselves (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996).

Social constructionism deconstructs these 'Grand Narratives' by focusing on how prevailing norms have evolved over time and subjugated or marginalized individuals (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996). Narratives or discourses that claim to be privileged or entitled are questioned. Grand Narratives, supported by the weight of numbers, firmly entrenched power structures, and tradition, can be metaphorically thought of as 'living entities.' Doan (1997) feels that Grand Narratives have become a 'predator and consumer' of people. People are eaten and digested by these stories that provide the fuel for their continued life.

Social constructionists believe that cultural narratives influence people to ascribe certain meanings to particular life events and to treat other events as relatively meaningless (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

Along with postmodernism, this approach also agrees that not all realities have equal validity, and that in fact some realities do not respect difference, age, gender, ethnicity, race or religion (Doan, 1997). Social Constructionists prefer stories based on individuals' lived experience that gives voice to their own perceptions and experiences, rather than the domain of 'expert knowledge' (Doan, 1997).

Owen (1992) explains that the social constructionist view, like that of phenomenology, involves questioning, searching, clarifying and constantly reevaluating opinions in the light of new information. Social constructionists challenge conventional knowledge by making a phenomenological enquiry into that which is taken for granted. According to Dean and Rhodes (1998), social constructionism has led to an emphasis on narrative and the intersubjective, co-construction of meaning.

#### Social constructionism and the role of language

The notion that personal identity is socially constructed can be seen as an extension of the linguistic philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1963).

Wittgenstein argued that language is a public phenomenon and our ability to speak meaningfully about existence rests on the resources of the linguistic community into which we are trained. Our view of existence is, therefore, shaped by the linguistic resources that are available to us in our own context (Lynch, 1997).

According to Anderson and Goolishian (1988), human action takes place in a reality of understanding created through social construction and dialogue. People live and understand life through socially constructed narrative realities that give meaning to their experience.

Social constructionists believe that societies construct their views of reality in language. The only worlds that people can possibly know are shared in language. Language is not a passive receiving of preexisting truths, but an interactive process. Language tells people how to see the world and what they should see in it. Speaking is not neutral or passive, and every time someone speaks, they bring forth a reality (Freedman & Combs, 1996). Language forms human experience. Our view of ourselves is an expression of the particular linguistic forms of the culture in which we live (Lynch, 1997). Language constrains what we are able to perceive and experience. It is not a collection of signs pointing to a particular concept, but rather a *system* of meanings, or a system of difference without any positive terms (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

A sign such as 'woman', for example, does not have positive meaning in itself, but points to a definite idea. Meaning is derived by virtue of standing in a relationship to other signs, such as 'girl', 'man', 'mother', 'whore', 'family', and so on. Each time the sign 'mother' is invoked, for example, related meanings are implicitly drawn upon. Social constructionist research involves interpreting the social world as a kind of language, or a system of practices and meanings that construct reality. Social constructionists believe that representations of reality, practices and physical arrangements are structured like a language. They *construct* particular versions of the world by providing a system through which individuals understand objects and practices, as well as who they are and what to do in relation to these systems. The way in which people engage with the world is therefore structured by the way in which the world is constructed.

When people act, they *reproduce* the ruling discourses of their time and *re-enact* already established relational patterns (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

Harré (cited in Lynch, 1997) believed that our sense of personal identity develops as we learn to attach linguistic statements to ourselves, being continuous persons moving across the matrix of space and time.

Not only is personal identity formed out of particular linguistic forms of a particular context and culture, but it is also formed as a process of negotiation with those around us. Personal identity may be viewed as the product of social interaction (Lynch, 1997).

Social constructionism holds that the life-world of individuals is constituted *in* language, and that language, therefore, should be the object of study. Language is not treated as neutral, or as a route to underlying realities, but helps to *construct* reality.

A researcher doing a research project on the ‘midlife crisis’, for example, would use interviews and texts to examine the way in which a ‘midlife crisis discourse’ – a socially shared way in which people discuss the ‘midlife crisis’ – functions to construct a world in which failure to ‘cope’ with ‘life events’ leads to mental or physical ‘breakdown’. ‘Crisis’ is treated as a set of *linguistic possibilities*, rather than an objective fact or a subjective experience, within which social life comes to be organized. ‘Crisis’ discourse evident in many societies enjoins people to understand a crisis as a psychological disorder, which individuals should monitor in themselves by evaluating how they are coping with life events. There are different forms of discourse, each with different linguistic possibilities. For example, a discourse could emphasize political rather than psychological constructions of social problems, or communal rather than individual solutions. In attending to language as the object of study, social constructionism should not be confused with linguistics, which is concerned with technical aspects of language structure and use (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).



### Applying the social constructionist approach to the study

This study is aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of midlife development. A social constructionist approach emphasizes multiple realities and meanings as socially constructed. Therefore, this study will respect that each participant experiences midlife in a unique way, depending on their own particular social and cultural context, and the manner in which the meaning they attach to midlife has been socially constructed. Social constructionists adhere to the postmodern belief that it is not possible to make objective observations of the world from a position of neutrality. The researcher will attempt to understand the midlife experience from the perspective of each participant whose meaning, attitudes and ideas have developed within a social context, keeping in mind that the researcher's own social context, ideas and values will affect her interpretation of the texts.

Social constructionists maintain that a sense of personal identity develops through interaction with other individuals, utilizing language and cultural symbols and discourses. The researcher, therefore, intends to take these factors into account in attempting to reach a deeper understanding of how they have affected the participant's sense of personal identity during midlife. The researcher will attempt to understand how each participant's experiential reality has been socially constructed. It is important for the researcher to accept and understand each participant's linguistic descriptions, and to focus on meaning, rather than facts (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

The researcher will attempt to deconstruct the dominant discourses or Grand Narratives that may have influenced each participant's experience of midlife. For example, although there appears to have been a shift in Western society regarding the dominant gender discourse that stresses the biological role of women in society, this discourse still appears to have a predominant effect on many women. Many women still appear to be subjugated by this discourse, believing that once their childbearing years cease, they no longer have a significant role in society. Surrendering themselves to this belief could lead to depression during midlife, as women feel that their lives have become meaningless.

Another dominant discourse in Western society, is the emphasis on the importance of looking young and beautiful. The media promotes young, thin, beautiful women, constantly emphasizing the negative aspect of looking older or putting on weight. The message that men will no longer find women attractive if they show any signs of natural ageing, is continuously conveyed to women. As a result, women reaching midlife may be subjugated by this discourse that stresses the importance of physical appearance, as opposed to other more meaningful characteristics and roles of midlife. Conforming to this discourse may lead to depression, as women note the changes their bodies are undergoing during midlife.

A further Grand Narrative that appears to have gained prominence in Western society, is one that views midlife as a time of 'crisis.' The perception that midlife is a time of turmoil and sudden change has been promoted by the media and through language in social interaction.

As a result, many women approaching midlife may be under the impression that they should experience this stage of life as a 'crisis,' although their personal circumstances and social context may not warrant such a 'crisis.' Therefore, these women may 'create' a 'crisis' in order to conform to the dominant discourse. Other women, however, may ignore such a discourse, and experience midlife as an enjoyable, fulfilling time of life. This coheres with the social constructionist belief that alternative meanings are possible, and that people can construct themselves in other more beneficial ways (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996).

In order to achieve a deeper understanding of the midlife experience, the researcher has selected a research methodology that coheres with the postmodern ontology and a social constructionist epistemology. A description of the chosen methodology will follow.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Social constructionist research methods are qualitative and interpretive, concerned with meaning, and seek to show how understanding and experiences are derived from larger discourses.

They treat people as though their feelings, thoughts and experiences were the products of systems of meaning that exist at a social rather than an individual level (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

Henning (2004) explains a qualitative inquiry as a research form, strategy or approach that allows for a different view of the theme that is studied. Respondents (often referred to as 'participants') have a more open-ended way of explaining their views and demonstrating their actions. When we refer to 'qualitative' research, we are using a term that denotes the type of inquiry in which the *qualities, characteristics* or *properties* of a phenomenon are examined, for better explanation or understanding.

Henning (2004) refers to the term 'methodology' as a coherent group of methods complementing one another, that have the 'goodness of fit' to deliver information that will reflect the research question and suit the purpose of the research.

The qualitative research approach has been chosen for this study.

The methods of information collection (document study) and information analysis (hermeneutic approach), chosen for this study, cohere with the qualitative research approach and fit the research purpose, which is to understand the midlife experience from the subjective perspectives of the participants, within their own particular social contexts.

### **Qualitative research**

As opposed to the quantitative research approach, with its goals of objective measurement, predicting and controlling human behaviour through a deductive way of reasoning, and testing hypotheses, the qualitative perspective is descriptive and exploratory (Schurink in De Vos et al., 1998). According to Creswell (cited in Lourens & Alpasian, 2002), the qualitative research process is inductive and the researcher develops concepts, abstract conclusions, hypotheses and theories from the details.

McLeod and Balamoutsou (1996, p. 73) state that “the aim of qualitative, human science research is to construct a representation of an area of human experience and action, a ‘local knowledge’ that promotes understanding within readers at a particular historical and cultural time and place.” The aim is not to generate causal propositions, but to suggest frameworks for making meaning.

According to Moon, Dillon and Sprenkle (1990, p. 358), qualitative research reflects a phenomenological perspective and researchers “attempt to understand the meaning of naturally occurring complex events, actions, and interactions in context, from the point of view of the participants involved.” These researchers examine a small number of cases intensively. They try to understand phenomena in a holistic way.

Qualitative research involves obtaining accounts of meaning, experiences and perceptions from the research participant. The emphasis is on creating understanding, rather than explaining phenomena, in natural settings. Qualitative research focuses on creating a deeper understanding and insight. Researchers develop a close relationship with the participants, who may become co-researchers. Researchers prefer to look at a few cases that highlight individual differences and context as opposed to the quantitative approach that focuses on measurement, objectivity and causal relationships (Moon, Dillon & Sprenkle, 1990).

According to Rabinow and Sullivan (cited in Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999), qualitative methodology has emerged as part of a movement which has seen an ‘interpretive turn’ in social science epistemology. A turn towards ‘contextual’ research which is less concerned with discovering universal, law-like patterns of human behaviour, and more concerned with making sense of human experience from *within* the context of human experience, has become evident. This approach takes the view that we cannot apprehend human experience without understanding the social, historical and linguistic features which have given it shape. Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999) state that the meaning of human creations, actions, words and experiences can only be understood in relation to the contexts, both personal and societal, in which they occur. Meaning is always contextually grounded.

The central achievement of qualitative methodology is the development of methodologies for understanding human phenomena *within* a context. Interpretive researchers should become a natural part of the context in which the phenomenon occurs and engage with research participants in an open and empathic manner.

This 'turn' has had a pervasive influence, and qualitative research has now become more widely accepted as a valid social science approach. 'Interpretation' is seen as one of the central theoretical concerns in the qualitative research literature. Interpretive research relies on first-hand accounts, attempts to describe what it sees in rich detail, and presents its 'findings' in engaging language (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

### Characteristics of qualitative research

Stiles (1993) identified the following distinguishing features of qualitative research:

Linguistic results. Results in qualitative research tend to be expressed in words rather than in numbers. Numbers offer precision in scientific communication, but their characterization of people's experience is often far more impoverished than their words. Because verbal information cannot be averaged, data reduction in qualitative research is done by excerpts from a text and summaries.

Empathy as an observation strategy. Empathy with participants is often used as an observation strategy in qualitative research. Researchers use their understanding of participants' reports of inner experience as information. According to Taylor (cited in Stiles, 1993), empathic understanding draws on the researcher's own experience and on intersubjective meanings shared within a society. The use of empathy encompasses the study of meanings, including the significance that people attach to what they do. Researchers should not reject their empathic understanding on account of it being less certain than direct perception.

Contextual interpretation. Events, in qualitative research, tend to be understood in their context. Context includes the researcher's and the participant's personal and cultural histories, as well as the immediate setting of the observations.

Nonlinear causality. Nonlinear causality is accommodated in qualitative research. Nonlinear systems, in which elements feed back to influence their own subsequent behaviour, often behave unpredictably.

Most systems involving human experience are nonlinear and potentially 'chaotic'. Because individuals' thoughts and intentions continually feed back to influence themselves and each other, thoughts are seldom predictable. Many traditional research hypotheses in psychology are stated in linear terms, believing that one thing causes another. However, such law-like generalizations may be untrustworthy in nonlinear behavioural systems.

Empowerment as a research goal. Many qualitative researchers advocate empowerment of participants as a legitimate purpose of research. Taking this perspective directs attention to constructing interpretations that further participants' interests and involve participants in the construction of their interpretations (Stiles, 1993).

Moon et al. (1990) identify the following characteristics of qualitative research designs:

**THEORY:** Qualitative studies are informed by theoretical frameworks.

**QUESTIONS:** Questions focus on understanding holistic complexity and context, and tend to be open-ended and discovery oriented.

**SAMPLING:** Small samples deliberately chosen to fit research goals or to help elaborate developing theory are the most common methods. There is a tendency to look intensively at a few cases and the emphasis is on individual differences and context. Samples are selected to enhance generalization to theory rather than to populations.

**ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER:** Often a participant observer, the researcher develops close relationships with participants and is intentionally subjective. Researcher roles and biases are made explicit.

**INFORMATION COLLECTION:** Information is verbal rather than numerical and both interactive and non-interactive methods are used. Methods of collection include participant observation, unstructured interviews, structured interviews and document analysis. Document analysis will be used as the method of data collection in the present study.

**INFORMATION ANALYSIS:** Generative methods are used that involve looking closely and recursively at social science phenomena in order to discern patterns. Information is coded using elaborate coding systems. The researcher is the primary data analysis instrument. This method of analysis will be used in the present study, utilizing the hermeneutic approach. A detailed explanation of this approach will follow later in the chapter.

**RESULTS:** Usually take the form of theoretical assertions, discovered theory, or categorical systems.

**REPORTING:** Writing skills are essential in order to recreate the reality studied.

**RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY:** Trustworthiness and credibility are established by prolonged engagement, persistent observation, negative case analysis, triangulation, thick description, constant comparative analysis, dependability audits, confirmability audits and participant critiques of research reports (Moon et al., 1990).

### Coherence between qualitative research, social constructionism and the study

A qualitative research inquiry coheres with a social constructionist epistemology, and appears appropriate to the present study. Corresponding features of both the social constructionist epistemology and qualitative research include: ‘contextual’ research that aims to achieve an understanding of human experience from within the context of human experience; the view that understanding human experience is not possible without understanding the social, historical and linguistic features which have shaped that experience; the understanding that meaning is derived from lived experience, and that the subjective perceptions of the participants should be studied and interpreted in order to reach a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

The participant’s first hand accounts of their midlife experience will be ‘interpreted’ by the researcher in order to reach a deeper understanding from *within* the context of the participant’s experience. As opposed to the quantitative approach of discovering universal law-like patterns of human behaviour, the researcher will use the qualitative approach to describe and understand each participant’s midlife experience, as experienced by the participant herself.

### Validity and Reliability in the qualitative context

According to Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999) data comes from observation and can take the form of numbers (quantitative data) or language (qualitative information). It is essential that the researcher has sound data to analyze in order to draw valid conclusions from a research study.

Researchers agree that valid data captures the meaning of what the researcher is observing, but this is where the agreement between positivist and interpretive researchers ends (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

Positivist researchers use quantitative measures that predefine objects to be studied. Interpretive researchers, especially those using the social constructionist approach, maintain that the meaning of phenomena varies across contexts. They adopt a more inductive approach to information collection, and investigate how categories of observation emerge in context. Positivist research generates predefined observation measures using a twofold deductive process: *conceptualization*, or defining a construct in abstract terms according to its theoretical meaning; and *operationalization*, translating this theoretical definition into observable indicators of the construct. Validity in positivist research refers to the extent to which the operational definition is a true reflection of the conceptual definition. Reliability, in positivist research, refers to the extent to which reliable measures are stable, consistently giving the same information repeatedly when used under similar conditions (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

However, many qualitative researchers reject the concept of ‘reliable, objective measures.’ These researchers argue that social phenomena are context-dependent, and meaning depends on the situation in which the participant exists. In qualitative research the researcher is the instrument of observation, collecting information and recording human behaviour in contexts of interaction. Qualitative researchers still seek valid observations. However, validity is not defined in terms of the extent to which the operational definition corresponds with the construct definition (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

Validity, in qualitative research is defined by the degree to which the researcher can produce observations that are believable for herself, the participants and the readers of the study (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

Qualitative researchers have two problems with the quantitative approach to ensuring validity of a research design, which entails identifying a set of specific validity threats in advance, and then controlling for these.



First, qualitative researchers find it impossible to identify and rule out validity threats before doing the research. Second, social constructionists reject the concept that research findings are accurate reflections of reality. They suggest, rather, that research can be evaluated according to credibility. Credible research produces convincing and believable findings. Rather than dealing with validity threats as *variables*, as in quantitative research, qualitative researchers view them as *events*. Qualitative researchers adopt a naturalistic orientation to ‘nuisance’ variables. They regard them as an integral part of real-world settings, and try to find out what impact they have on the outcome of the study, rather than trying to eliminate them. Credibility of qualitative research occurs while the research is being undertaken, as the researcher looks for discrepant evidence to the hypotheses she is developing as a means of producing a rich and credible account (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

Reliability is a highly valued criterion in quantitative research, since researchers believe they are studying a stable and unchanging reality. Because qualitative researchers do not assume that reality is stable and unchanging, they do not expect to find the same results repeatedly. Individuals are believed to behave differently and express different opinions in changing contexts (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). Qualitative researchers propose that findings should be *dependable*, in place of the criterion of reliability. *Dependability* refers to the degree to which the reader is convinced that findings occurred as the researcher claims they did. Rich and detailed descriptions lead to dependability, that show how certain opinions and actions are rooted in contextual interaction (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

According to Stiles (1993), both validity and reliability concern trustworthiness. Validity refers to the trustworthiness of interpretations or conclusions, while reliability refers to the trustworthiness of observations or data.

In the present study the researcher will be employing a qualitative methodology informed by the social constructionist approach. In attempting to gain a deeper understanding of midlife, the researcher will reject the idea that this concept can be reliably and objectively measured. The researcher will adopt the social constructionist stance that sees individuals behaving differently, and expressing differing opinions, in changing contexts.

Therefore, in discussing how validity and reliability may be achieved in this study, *dependability* and *credibility* will replace the terms reliability and validity, which pertain to a quantitative approach.

### Dependability/Trustworthiness

Disclosure of orientation. The researcher will disclose her values, orientation, and expectations for the study (Stiles, 1993).

Explication of social and cultural context. Because an investigation's social and cultural context entails many assumptions that channel the interpretations, the researcher will attempt to make implicit cultural assumptions explicit, by stating shared viewpoints and relevant values.

Description of internal processes of investigation. The researcher's internal processes while conducting the investigation and developing the interpretation are part of the investigation's context, and will therefore be described. Processes of self-examination and personal learning will be shared with the readers, as they constitute a part of the meaning of the study's interpretations.

Engagement with the material. Qualitative research involves immersion in the material and intimate familiarity with a text. The researcher will, therefore, establish a close relationship with the participants and repeatedly check participant's reactions to interpretations (Stiles, 1993).

Iteration: Cycling between interpretation and observation. The researcher will ensure repeated encounters of interpretations with the text by reading, conceptualizing, rereading, and re-conceptualizing.

Grounding and interpretation. The researcher will link her more abstract interpretations with their more concrete observations by means of extracting themes from the text.

Ask 'what,' not 'why'. The researcher will endeavor to ask participants to answer questions and tell stories of which they have direct knowledge (Stiles, 1993).

### Credibility

Triangulation. The researcher will seek information from multiple information sources, multiple methods and multiple prior theories or interpretations, assessing convergence across several perspectives and types of impact (Stiles, 1993).

Coherence. The researcher will endeavor to provide a coherent interpretation, providing internal consistency, comprehensiveness of the elements to be interpreted and the relations between elements, and usefulness in encompassing new elements. It is hoped that the interpretation will produce change or growth in the perspective of the reader.

Testimonial credibility. In order to check an interpretation's accuracy, it is necessary to ask the people whose experience it purports to represent. The researcher will check the accuracy of her interpretations by consulting with the participants and enquiring if they agree with the interpretations (Stiles, 1993). According to Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999), researchers need not only to *understand* but also to *interpret* the voices of the participants. Participants may not be able to confirm the interpretations of the researcher, but are well positioned to confirm the descriptions of their understandings.

Catalytic credibility. Catalytic credibility refers to the degree to which the research process, focuses, reorients, and energizes the participants. One of the aims of the study will be to produce change or growth in the people whose experiences are being described. The researcher will question the participants, as to whether any of these processes have taken place (Stiles, 1993).

Reflexive credibility. It is envisaged that the researcher's way of thinking will be changed by the information, as the 'hermeneutic circle' is traversed and interpretations applied to observations are changed by new observations (Stiles, 1993).

The qualitative research approach has been chosen for this study in order to obtain meaning derived from 'lived experience' regarding the midlife experience, as opposed to a more objective, causal approach.

#### The orientation of the researcher

According to Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999), the generic model of understanding in interpretive research requires researchers to recognize that they are not indifferent to the outcomes of the research. Interpretive researchers bring a pre-understanding to the research process and do not try to assume the 'view from nowhere.' The contextuality of their own engagement should be thoroughly acknowledged.

The researcher's interest in the midlife experience occurred as a result of having reached midlife herself. Her own search for meaning, having reached midlife, influenced her choice in determining a topic of study. The researcher was interested in how others gave meaning to their midlife experience and hoped to reach a deeper understanding of this particular developmental period. The researcher therefore acknowledges the contextuality of her own engagement with this topic and the fact that she brings her own pre-understanding to the research process. The researcher is also aware of the fact that she should be aware that these factors might affect her translation of the participant's textual data.

The researcher was particularly interested in the notion that midlife could be viewed as a time of 'crisis'. Her own experience of having reached midlife was that she experienced a sense of urgency regarding the amount of time left in her life to achieve what she wanted to. This sense of urgency did bring about a change, in that she took on the role of a student again, in order to complete her studies. However, this event was experienced as challenging, as opposed to undergoing a crisis.

Friends of the researcher, however, having also reached midlife, appeared to be experiencing this developmental stage in different ways. Some appeared to experience the midlife transition as distressing and depressing, implying that they were undergoing a crisis. Others appeared to make the transition with no difficulty whatsoever. The social constructionist view that the 'midlife crisis' is a socially constructed concept intrigued the researcher. She wanted to explore this developmental stage from the perspective of different participants, exploring their different contexts, and how they attributed meaning to this stage of life. Did they experience midlife as 'different' in some way to the normal developmental course of life? Could this sense of difference, if any, be attributed to the events described in a participant's life history and context, and how these events were experienced?

If they experienced midlife as a 'crisis' could this be a socially constructed concept, attributed to the amount of media attention the 'midlife crisis' has received, or was midlife truly experienced as a distressing stage of life by the participant?

These questions, amongst others, contributed to the researcher's curiosity regarding the midlife experience.

### Sampling

Rather than random sampling, theoretical or purposive sampling techniques are utilized. Information is often derived from a few cases, and it is most unlikely that these cases are selected randomly. Each case is studied against the background of more universal social processes and experiences. The reader should be able to generalize subjectively from the studied case according to his or her own experiences (Strydom & Delpont in De Vos et al., 2002).

In purposive sampling, the researcher thinks critically about the parameters of the population and chooses the sample case accordingly. Clear formulation of criteria for the selection of participants is important (Strydom & Delpont in De Vos et al., 2002).

Considering that this study is of a qualitative nature, with the aim of describing the subjective experiences of the participants, convenience sampling will be used to select research participants. The emphasis will be placed on individual differences and context. The participants will be selected to enhance generalization to theory, rather than to a population (Moon et al., 1990). Two women who have experienced the midlife developmental period will be selected on the basis of their agreeing to participate in the study.

Obtaining informed consent implies that adequate information on the goal, the procedures that will be followed, possible advantages and disadvantages of the investigation, as well as the credibility of the researcher, be rendered to the participants. Participants must fully comprehend the nature of the investigation, and be able to make a voluntary, reasoned decision about their participation (Strydom in De Vos et al. 2002). In this study, informed consent will be obtained from the participants.

### Methods of information collection

Social constructionists believe that information should be collected in context, with as little disturbance as possible to the natural setting (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

Social constructionists are opposed to imposing preconceived measuring instruments and categories on phenomena being researched, and are sceptical of claims that some kinds of information are more authentic than others. First-hand accounts of actual experiences are valued (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

In a qualitative study, information is collected with the aim of finding out what the actions of the people in the setting are, and what they think and feel. Researchers gather information using methods that will allow them to access this information and also work with the information in different ways, using different means of analysis. When this information is documented, they have to go through a process of analysis. The researcher works through the information in order to arrive at a conclusion in which she tries to 'answer' the initial research question, thus achieving the purpose of the study. It is in the analytical and synthesizing process that qualitative research is distinguished from quantitative research. The researcher is largely the analytical instrument (Henning, 2004).

In this study, the researcher will describe her role as researcher to the participants and explain that she is doing a study on midlife. She will ask them to write down their 'life stories', and to explain their subjective experience of having reached midlife. The concept of the 'midlife crisis' will deliberately not be mentioned by the researcher, in order not to give the participants any preconceived conception of what they think might be required of them. How the participants attribute meaning to their life events will be an important factor in determining any changes that may have taken place at midlife. It is, therefore, of importance to the researcher that participants provide their entire 'life story', not only events occurring during midlife. Participants will be asked to describe their own reality, based on their past experiences, cultural context and social relationships. It will be agreed that the researcher will contact the participants, should there be any queries regarding the content of the texts.

The information collection technique used in this study will be a personal document study. Personal documents are a personal account of the author's subjective perception, environment, and interpretation of his own life and events in the world around him or her. The researcher is given permission, by the person who wrote the document, to utilize it for research purposes (Strydom & Delpont in De Vos et al., 2002).

Babbie and Mouton (2001) explain that personal documents allow the researcher to probe into the 'phenomenological heart' of a human phenomenon and observe the continuous, lived flow of historically-situated phenomenal experience. This includes the ambiguity, malleability, variability and uniqueness that such experience implies (Plummer, 1983).

Babbie and Mouton (2001) summarize the usefulness and value of personal documents as follows:

- They serve as a touchstone for the evaluation of hypotheses and theories.
- They complement objectivity with subjectivity, balancing the objectivism of the instrument and participant observation with the internal and reflective elements of social experience.
- They provide us with a holistic perspective of a person in the context of his/her total life.
- Researchers can derive personalizations from the participant's point of view, allowing the participant's meanings to be attached to a conceptual framework.

The aim of obtaining the participant's texts is to become a partner with the participants, and to work together in order to achieve greater understanding and meaning regarding midlife development. According to Wilson and Hutchinson (1991), as much detail as possible should be elicited about informant's un-interpreted experiences in the subject under study.

According to Henning (2004), the researcher now needs to make meaning from the information by converting the empirical information (the 'thin' description of the phenomenon) into what is known as a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1993).

This *thick description* gives an account of the phenomenon that is coherent and gives more than facts, but also interprets the information in the light of other empirical information found in the same study, as well as from the basis of a theoretical framework that locates the study (Henning, 2004).

The aim of the researcher is to achieve this ‘thick description’ by analyzing the data using a hermeneutic approach.

#### Information analysis using a Hermeneutic approach

Hermeneutics is committed to a qualitative, contextual, historic methodology in understanding human experience from a variety of perspectives, as it is transformed over time. Hermeneutics emphasizes the human experiences of interpretation and understanding. It is presented as people’s detailed stories which serve as paradigm cases of everyday practices and ‘lived experiences’. These experiences and practices are described and interpreted within their contexts. (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991). According to Van Manen (cited in Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991), the aim of hermeneutics is to understand how people experience their world pre-reflectively, and focuses on seemingly trivial aspects and details of our lives. The inconsequential is seen as consequential and the significance is seen in the taken-for-granted.

The aim of hermeneutics is “to discover meaning and to achieve understanding” (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991, p. 266) or to make sense of “that which is not yet understood” (Addison, 1992, p. 110).

In this study a hermeneutic approach will be utilized to interpret the information.

#### The model of the text

Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999) explain that while qualitative researchers are wary of the risk of overriding people’s self-accounts, understanding does not go very far if researchers simply summarize the way people already understand their own realities.



One of the strengths of qualitative research is that it is generative. It constructs new ways of understanding.

Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999) explain the distinction between the type of understanding of the world lived by the experiencing participant, and the understanding of the experience from the outside. The term 'emic' was used by Pike (1967) to describe an approach to understanding from within a cultural system. This approach, provides insight into indigenous phenomena and meaning is derived from understanding phenomena in their own terms. An emic perspective takes into account the forms of rationality that guide everyday actions and explanations arising from thinking that accompanies everyday action. Emic understanding follows an inductive process and general accounts are built from pieces of experience. An attempt is made to suspend the framework of the researcher and to 'let the data talk for itself'.

However, because researchers are led in their enquiries by specific questions which involve a particular approach to listening to the information, the extent to which this is possible is debatable. It should also be kept in mind that the idea that meaning is embedded in situations and events restricts our ability to think about that which is general or trans-situational in nature (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

Ricoeur (cited in Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999) suggests that there is more to the understanding of an experience, than can be understood from within the context of that experience. He uses the term 'distanciation' to describe the process of understanding a context from outside the context. Distanciation adds to meaning by pointing out the subjective and contextual limits of understanding. There are certain things about the context that can only be understood by looking at it from the outside. Reading a written text brings to light new questions, which allows us to interpret the author's words in new ways. In other, words, the text can mean more than the author intended it to mean. The meaning of a written event surpasses the meaning contextualized in a situation event, and this 'surplus of meaning' is an important feature of the text. When an experience is viewed from a distance, things can be said about it that could not be understood from within the situation.

Understanding a situation needs to be developed both from the perspective of being in the context (empathy) and from distanciation, using interpretation.

Distanciation is an epistemological necessity in interpreting texts, because of the author's absence, and allows more to be said than could be known from within the author's context. Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999) maintain that a good research project should develop an understanding of subjective experience, and provide an interpretation of the understanding of the subjective experience. It may occur that interpretive accounts describe individuals' actions in ways that seem unfamiliar or incorrect to them. In these instances, the tension between description and interpretation is accented. Insightful accounts should represent both insider and outsider perspectives (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

Henning (2004) believes that an interpretation of a text is not *presuppositionless*. It is not possible for the researcher to 'jump outside' the understanding he or she lives in. The researcher should, however, be aware of any presuppositions, and attempt to make them explicit. The researcher's presuppositions and modes of influence need to be taken into account in the interpretation.

The 'hermeneutic circle.' Heideggerian hermeneutics focuses on interpreting the 'lived experience' through a text. However, because lived experience is veiled, the researcher and the participant aim to unveil the shared common practices of the experience, and to see new ways of being.

The commitment is to understanding and keeping the dialogue open Throughout the process of listening, observing, thematising, coding and writing the report, interpretation should always consider the development of the whole and the other parts integrated therein (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991).

This is known as the 'hermeneutic circle' which prescribes that text interpretation should consider the meaning of the parts in relation to the meaning of the whole, which itself can only be understood in respect of its constituent parts. This is usually conceptualised as a circular movement between part and whole (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

The operation of the hermeneutic circle represents the relation between the meanings of particular experiences, and the meanings of themes that reflect a coherent clustering of themes of experience. The interpretive researcher may have to give differences the same priority as commonalities. Researchers should take note of what should be retained of contextual detail that resists incorporation into a general account. In this way, an understanding is achieved of what is distinctive about individual contexts, or of events within a context (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

Being aware of both movements of the hermeneutic circle (particular to general and general to particular) allows the researcher to arrive at an interpretation accounting both *for* contexts, and *across* contexts (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

Processes used in interpreting texts from both ‘experience-near’ and ‘distanciated’ perspectives

Immersion. This refers to the process of becoming familiar with images in order to get a feel for them and to begin to know their nuances and details. In order to do this, the researcher needs to become very familiar with the text. At this point, the researcher is still at the empathic, experience-near end of the interpretive continuum, but then starts to move towards a more distanced understanding (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

Unpacking. This term refers to the way in which researchers ‘lay out’ the meanings of images and words. Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999) compare this process to laying out the contents of a suitcase, discovering that each layer removed reveals other layers, until the text has its contents revealed. Listing everything that comes to mind during this process when thinking about the text helps to generate an overall idea of what is there. From here, further maps may be developed relating themes to other themes or sub-themes. Therefore, what was condensed with meaning, has its meaning and contents revealed as having a structure in terms of a network of themes. During this process the researcher has started to look at the text ‘from the outside’, without yet introducing much in the way of critical theory.

Associating. Interpretive researchers need to refer to the context in which texts were created, and the history of the text, in order to understand the fullness of their meaning. Research participants often supply linguistic images that need to be regarded as reflecting a particular historical reference, with a political and socio-cultural framework (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

Pattern finding. A given structure becomes a pattern by virtue of the fact that it re-occurs. This search for 'repeatable regularities' is central to an interpretive enquiry (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

Temporal linking. A theme that exists across time and situation can be based on an inferred link between two moments in time, and implies something about the participant's life because they are bound together in a sequence. Construction of temporal links involves inferring that two temporally distinct events are related and exploring the conditions of that relationship (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

Although hermeneutics does not have a set of prescribed techniques, the general processes such as immersion and unpacking which were discussed earlier on, are adhered to. More specifically, the following approach, adapted from Addison (1992), Terre Blanche and Kelly (1999) and Wilson and Hutchinson (1991) would be followed in the proposed study:

**STEP 1: FAMILIARISATION AND IMMERSION** – Information gathering in interpretive research involves the development of theories and ideas about the phenomenon being studied. The researcher should already have a preliminary understanding of the meaning of the information and should become immersed in the texts of the participants in order to make sense of their world. The texts should be read many times over in order to know the information well enough to understand what sorts of interpretations would be supported by information, and what not (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

**STEP 2: THEMATISING** – Themes are inferred from the texts of the participants. This should be done using an inductive approach, by looking at the material and trying to decipher the organizing principles that ‘naturally’ underlie the material.

Wilson and Hutchinson (1991) describe thematic analysis as recognizing common themes appearing in the textual data and articulating them, combined with excerpts that serve as evidence for the theme. Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999) suggest the following as helpful pointers in organizing a given collection of information: First, they advise using the language of the interviewees rather than abstract theoretical language to label themes. Second, the researcher should move beyond merely summarizing content and think in terms of processes, functions, tensions and contradictions. Third, an optimal level of complexity should be found. Two or three themes would probably not be enough to make the information interesting, while too many themes should be rearranged into a smaller number of main themes, with sub-themes under each. Fourth, it is not advisable to settle for one system of themes too easily, but to experiment with different kinds of themes. Finally, the researcher should not lose focus of what the study is about.

**STEP 3: CODING** – During the activity of developing themes, the researcher should also be coding the information. This entails the marking of different sections of the information as being relevant to one or more of the themes. A line, a sentence or a paragraph of the text should be coded by virtue of their containing material that pertains to the different themes under consideration. Different colours are used to group similar instances together under the same theme. Coding involves the breaking down of a body of information (text) into meaningful pieces, in order to cluster the coded material together under the code heading, and then analyzing them both as a cluster in relation to other clusters. Thematising and coding tend to blend into each other, as themes being used tend to change in the process of coding. This also occurs as a better understanding of themes is developed, and the researcher considers how they relate to other themes. Often, the researcher recognizes that a particular theme contains sub-themes and these are then analyzed. Therefore, coding should never be regarded as unchanging and final (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

**STEP 4: ELABORATION** – The themes are explored more closely in order to gain a fresh view and deeper meaning.

When collecting material for interpretive analysis and immersing oneself in the transcripts, the researcher views the material in a linear sequence. Introducing themes and coding breaks up this sequence, and events that were far away from each other in the text, are now brought closer together. This gives the researcher a fresh view and allows the comparison of sections of text that appear to belong together. *Elaboration* is the term used for exploring themes more closely in this way. The aim of elaboration is to capture the finer nuances of meaning not originally captured by the coding system, and if necessary, to return to the coding process. It is important for the researcher to keep coding, elaborating and recoding until no further significant insights emerge. Changes are made if necessary, using a constantly questioning attitude and looking for misunderstanding, deeper meanings and changes over time, as the researcher analyzes circularly individual elements of the text and the whole text in many cycles. This is called the ‘hermeneutic spiral’ (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). The ‘hermeneutic circle’ is distinguished from the ‘hermeneutic spiral’ in the following way. The ‘hermeneutic circle’ involves the principle of considering each part of the text in relation to the whole. Once each part becomes better understood, through this association with the whole, the whole becomes more transparent. In the light of this new understanding of the whole, the parts are, once again, interpreted. The ‘hermeneutic spiral’ is referred to when the procedure of the ‘hermeneutic circle’ is followed, moving back and forth between individual elements of the text, and the whole text, in many cycles (Tesch, 1990).

**STEP 5: INTERPRETATION AND CHECKING** – Thematic analysis is used which involves identifying the common themes from the information and using excerpts from the information to substantiate those themes. The researcher becomes immersed in the participant’s world of meaning and unpacks its many meanings. Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999) advise the researcher to critically examine the interpretation at this point and to try to correct any weak points. For example, the researcher should take note of any contradictions in the interpretation or instances of over-interpretation, where too much is made of something trivial. The researcher should be aware of her prejudices and reflect on her own role in collecting the information and creating the interpretation. The researcher should provide some indication of how personal involvement in the phenomenon may have coloured the way information was collected and analyzed.

This approach coheres with the study, as the aim of the study is to discover meaning and achieve understanding about the midlife developmental period, by means of textual analysis. In order to achieve this, the researcher should constantly keep the context of the participants in mind, always considering the meaning of the parts of the text, in relation to the whole, which will be understood in respect of the constituent parts.

The researcher and the participants will attempt to unveil new ways of understanding the midlife developmental period through reaching an understanding of the participants' individual contexts, and the meaning attributed to events occurring within a context. The interpretation will include both experience-near and 'distanced' perspectives.

#### The researcher's social and cultural context

Babbie (2001) explains that it is important for the researcher to recognize that her own views and feelings on matters are the result of the paradigm she has been socialized into, not an objective fact of nature. Recognizing that we are operating within a paradigm (such as the traditional Western view of the world as an objective reality distinct from individual experience) enables us to understand the apparent bizarre views of others operating from a different paradigm, and to profit from stepping outside our own paradigm.

Because the researcher's social and cultural context, values and beliefs, will inform her interpretation of the participants' texts, a brief section regarding the researcher's personal context will follow.

The researcher is a Caucasian, 'middle class,' married female. She has two children, a daughter, aged 16 years, and a son, aged 13 years. The researcher is presently following a career in psychology. The researcher has lived in South Africa all of her life, and grew up in a middle class home, with traditional 'Western' values and beliefs.

The two participants involved in this study are also Caucasian, middle class females, who grew up following 'Western' values and beliefs.

This fact, together with the fact that the researcher is a woman also experiencing midlife, could influence the study as there could be shared viewpoints between researcher and participants, and areas of common assumptions. Because cultural and historical influences, representing contextual influences that affect development, would be very similar for researcher and participants, both parties would be likely to share similar viewpoints regarding these issues.

It is expected, however, that differences in life circumstances and the life events of each participant will account for differences in how the midlife developmental period was experienced.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter provided an explanation of the social constructionist epistemology, falling within the postmodern ontology, which guided the researcher in this study. The research methodology was described as a qualitative study, utilizing the hermeneutic method of analysis to analyze the information. In the following chapter, the information, or the participant's stories will be provided in the form of themes identified by the researcher.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### NOELEEN'S STORY AND EMERGING THEMES

#### Introduction

This chapter is based on the participant's story of her midlife experience, which was given to the researcher in written form (See Appendix A).

Biographical information on the participant will be followed by the emerging themes, identified by the researcher. In this section, themes about the midlife functioning of the participant, and influences from the past that have contributed to midlife functioning, are identified by the researcher. The identification of these themes is informed by the researcher's personal context and perceptions. Therefore, the themes identified are a reflection of the researcher and the way she perceives the world. The researcher wishes to emphasize, therefore, that different themes may have been identified by different readers, who, in turn, may have been influenced by their own personal contexts and ways of perceiving the world.

The themes are not mutually exclusive, and an overlap of the themes may occur at times.

The emerging themes will be followed, in this chapter, by a self-reflection on the part of the researcher, explaining the effect the encounter with the participant had on the researcher. Finally, a summary of the main ideas regarding midlife derived from the participant's story will be described.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Participant:	*Noeleen	45 years old
Gender of participant:	Female	
Husband of participant:	*Ray	45 years old
Children:	*Alice	18 years old
	*Len	17 years old
	*Tim	15 years old
Participant's occupation:	Reflexologist	
Residential area:	Benoni, Gauteng.	

\* Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the identities of participants and their family members.

Noeleen has been a friend of the researcher for thirty years. She is a Caucasian South African female, with a South African father and a British mother. The researcher and Noeleen met at high school and have remained friends since then. Because the researcher and Noeleen are the same age, they both experienced midlife at the same time. The researcher explained to Noeleen that she was interested in researching the changes, if any, taking place when a person reaches midlife. Noeleen became intrigued by the concept and offered to provide her story to the researcher for the purpose of the research.

A discussion of themes emerging from Noeleen's story is now provided.

## EMERGING THEMES

The following themes were derived from Noeleen's story using the hermeneutic method of analysis.

Keeping in mind that Noeleen's attributed meaning was informed by her immediate context, social structures and personal history, the researcher began by immersing herself in the text of the participant in order to make sense of her world.

Themes were then inferred from the text, grouping similar instances together under the same theme. The themes were then explored more closely in order to derive deeper meaning. If necessary, changes were made, using a constantly questioning attitude and always searching for deeper meaning. Thematic analysis involved identifying common themes and using excerpts from the stories to substantiate those themes. These common themes, identified by the researcher, are a reflection of the researcher's perception of the world.

For a more detailed explanation of the analysis, the reader is referred to Chapter 2, which describes the research methodology used in the research.

**Theme: From Connection/disconnection with others throughout life, to connection with herself at midlife**

Noeleen's life story has a strong theme of connection and disconnection, both as a young girl and as an adult. Connection refers to strong emotional attachments formed with significant others throughout life, while disconnection refers to the breaking of these attachments, either in a physical or an emotional sense. It appears that this constant connection and disconnection affected Noeleen throughout her life, leading her to a point, at midlife, where she could reflect on how this had influenced her as a person. It appears to have allowed her to reach *an area of integration*, upon reaching midlife, where she could *come to terms with what had occurred and apply this understanding to her life in a meaningful way*.

Noeleen begins her story describing her family life, as a young girl growing up in the Bahamas. She implies a superficial connection to her parents, saying:

Life progressed in the Bahamas as a sort of *illusion*.....moments of happiness, shopping with my father at the hardware store.... and glorious days spent on powder white beaches and in crystal blue waters.

However, she immediately contrasts this description with the statement:

.....interspersed with the painful fighting of my parents.

Noeleen appears to be describing how painful it was to be part of a family that could have been a happy one, given their idyllic surroundings, and yet was aware, on a deeper level, that her parents were deeply unhappy and disconnected from each other. She refers to the frequent affairs that both parents had, and the arguments that frequently took place. She explains:

There were many nights we could not sleep for the screaming and hysterical tears and accusations of my mother being directed towards my father.

It seems that, as a child, Noeleen longed to be connected to both parents, but because her parents were disconnected from each other, Noeleen was forced into a situation where she took sides, perceiving her mother as completely 'bad', and her father as completely 'good'. These perceptions of her parents, especially her mother, would only be resolved later in life, as Noeleen entered midlife, and *maturity brought deeper understanding and compassion*. Noeleen's story describes her constant feelings of connection and disconnection to each of her parents.

Noeleen's relationship with her mother, throughout life, appears to have been characterized by feelings of resentment, and emotional and physical disconnection, on the one hand, and attempts to stay connected, in some way, to her mother, on the other hand. Noeleen describes her mother in the following way:

My mother was an insecure socialite with a penchant for alcohol and slimming tablets.

This description of her mother appears, to the researcher, to be Noeleen's perception of her mother at midlife. The fact that she recognizes that her mother was insecure seems to imply that Noeleen has *reached a level of maturity and compassion* which brings with it the understanding that her mother abused substances because she was insecure. However, she did not have this understanding as a young girl, and explains that as "daddy's precious girl" she could not see or understand how her father was hurting her mother. This is an *understanding* that could only be reached once Noeleen reached midlife and looked back on the situation with the benefit of years of lived experience. As a child, Noeleen detested her mother. She says:

What I could see, though, was my mother trying to stab my father in a drunken rage. I detested her.... How could she possibly try to hurt my father like that?

After her father moved out of the house, Noeleen found life unbearable. She explains:

My mother drank all the time and had boyfriends in bed who were all naked.....oooh she was disgusting.

Noeleen felt extremely emotionally disconnected from her mother at this stage of her life, and the situation worsened. She recalls, what appears to be the very painful memory, of being bitten by a centipede. Her immediate instinct was to run to her mother for reassurance and emotional support, as all children do, trying to connect with her mother. Noeleen remembers the events of that day as follows:

I remember being bitten by the centipede and running inside crying hysterically, because I thought I would now die. I sat next to my mother on the floor, pleading with her to do something, because of what had happened, and I voiced again the thought I may die, and she told me to go ahead and die..... followed by peals of drunken laughter.

Noeleen describes how her feelings for her mother totally died that day, explaining the serious level of emotional disconnection from her mother that she felt at the time. This event affected her so badly, as a child, that she wished the centipede had taken her life. Noeleen's mother does not appear to have been emotionally connected to her children at this stage of her life. However, Noeleen describes how her mother attempted to prevent Noeleen and her sister from being flown out of the country, telling them to hide in the toilets at the airport, so that she could come and fetch them. Noeleen, by now feeling totally disconnected from her mother, explains that her thought at the time was:

I don't think so mommy dearest! Why would I do that when I really didn't like you?

Noeleen explains how, many years later, she found out how traumatic it was for her mother to lose her two children:

She was found running around the airport like a madwoman, checking toilets to see if we were hidden away. She had to undergo psychiatric counseling as she had tried to kill herself.

Noeleen, as a child, having disconnected from her mother, and having cast her mother in the 'bad' role, did not understand the effect this event would have on her mother. This realization only came to Noeleen as she approached midlife, having had children of her own. She explains:

I could empathize with her feelings of loss and betrayal, as I had my own children and could not bear the thought of losing them.

Noeleen and her sister were sent to boarding school in England, by their father, and later immigrated to South Africa. She was physically disconnected from her mother for 23 years. She does not mention, in her story, how she felt about her mother during those 23 years.

However, it seems to the researcher that she must have thought about her mother often, especially during those times in life when a daughter needs a mother's advice and support, such as during adolescence, getting married and having children of her own.

Noeleen's mother also took 23 years to find her children, which seems strange, considering her reaction when they left the country. Perhaps she disconnected emotionally from her children, in order to cope with her situation. After not seeing her mother for such a long period of time, Noeleen probably hoped to re-establish an emotional connection with her mother when they finally met again. However, she appears to have been disappointed in this regard. She says:

I could not believe that I came from her.....she was, in my opinion, the most self-centred person I have ever encountered.

Noeleen was hopeful that her mother, having finally found her two daughters, would move to South Africa, and that a connection could be established between them. However, she found her mother to be emotionally cold, shooing away her grandchildren in order to read, or preferring to rest and "gather her emotions". Referring to her mother, Noeleen says:

She seemed unable to express her love in any other way, other than to purchase goodies for us all.

This reminded her of what it was like to live with her mother when she was a child. She explains:

My sister and I had a walk-in-toy cupboard, filled ....with every imaginable toy...yet, I don't think we ever experienced love from her.

On the other hand, she remembers her mother as a "smother mother" and found the connection with her mother so invasive, that it gave her asthma.

The connection she had with her mother as a child filled her with anxiety, and this was re-experienced, when, as an adult, she went back to the Bahamas to visit her mother, and found that she had trouble breathing.

Noeleen found, that even with the *understanding and compassion* midlife brought to her, allowing her *to empathize* with her mother's traumatic experience of losing her children, she still felt resentful and disconnected from her when she met her many years later. She could not understand why her mother still chose to live so far away, having found her again, and Noeleen still appeared to feel rejected and abandoned by her mother. However, having reached midlife, Noeleen is finally able to see and understand her mother differently.

Although she acknowledges that they are very different people, she realizes that she would never be the person she is today had she grown up with her mother. She still sees her mother as incredibly self-involved, and does not feel connected to her in the sense of a true mother-daughter relationship. She has, however, reached a level of maturity where she is able to thank her for being her mother, for giving birth to her, and for showing her how NOT to be a mother, and how NOT to live her life. As an adult experiencing midlife, she is now able to recognize that her mother is not all 'bad', and *to integrate her mothers' good and bad qualities*.

Midlife appears to have brought Noeleen the *gift of insight* into the nature of her relationship with mother, allowed her to acknowledge the emotional pain she experienced as a result of this relationship, and to extract meaning regarding how the constant connection and disconnection in this relationship have affected her as a person. Overall, Noeleen seems to now have a more *realistic, balanced view*.

While Noeleen's relationship with her mother was characterized by both connection and disconnection, she appears to have connected emotionally with her father throughout life, regardless of what her father did. As a child, she cast him in the 'good' role, and appears to have turned a blind eye to any of his transgressions.



From a midlife perspective, she acknowledges that he was a “woman’s man, and very fond of alcohol”.

However, as a child, she saw herself as “daddy’s precious girl”, and could not understand how he was hurting her mother. Instead, she resented her mother for expressing her anger towards her father. When her father moved out of the house, disconnecting himself physically from his children, Noeleen appears to have blamed her mother for this occurrence, and the emotional connection she had with her father became stronger. Instead of interpreting her father’s behaviour as abandonment or rejection, she chose to see her mother as the ‘bad’ person, who had caused her ‘good’ father to leave. The fact that her father left Noeleen at a strange boarding school in England without a word of farewell or an explanation, appears to have been overlooked by Noeleen, in her determination to stay connected to father. The fact that Noeleen’s father could have done this to his daughter, raises questions, in the researcher’s mind as to the strength of the emotional connection he had with his daughter.

Noeleen goes on to describe how unhappy she was as a child in South Africa, being moved from school to school, until the family settled in one place when she was in high school. She explains that she made friends in high school, and their families became her families, which was very important to her, because her father’s second marriage had come to an end. Through all the upheaval of her father’s second and third divorces, Noeleen never questioned or criticized her father’s behaviour. It seems that the connection Noeleen felt for her father could not be broken, and that she is unable to resent him for what had transpired before.

It is possible, however, that with all the disruption that took place in Noeleen’s life, and being separated from her mother, her father was the one constant element in a chaotic world, and this sense of needing to belong allowed her to ignore any transgressions on his part. However, it is possible, that as Noeleen now reviews her relationship with her father, from a midlife perspective, she may perceive her father differently.

Insight and maturity may allow Noeleen to understand that her father, too, was responsible for many of her painful childhood memories, and prevent her from placing all of the blame on her mother.

The theme of connection and disconnection is also noted in other areas of Noeleen's life. When she immigrated to South Africa, Noeleen describes a long period of unhappiness and disconnection: She explains:

A round of new schools began, with a total of 4 primary schools and different towns....as an extremely shy child, I absolutely hated starting a new school. Making friends was not easy, and I found that I had no sooner made friends, when we were packed up and off again.

However, the friendships made in high school have endured, and their families have become her families. Having reached midlife, Noeleen expresses how important these connections have been to her, and values the fact that these relationships have been stable over so many years. As an adult, Noeleen experienced both connection and disconnection with her spouse. She describes the important connection she had to him when they first met in high school, as he stayed with her "through all the upheaval". She explains:

He helped me get through a lot of emotional turmoil – at least somebody loved me... That was something to be pleased about!

Noeleen appears to have found someone, at last, whom she could rely on and depend upon, and who stayed with her despite the turmoil she was experiencing at home. She finally married him, although not without reservation. Having experienced the painful separation of her parents, and the many divorces her father went through, Noeleen was understandably afraid to commit to marriage.

She appears to have been *concerned about family patterns repeating themselves*, and she did not want to go through the experience of divorce.

She states that the decision was not made lightly, but, for the best part, and looking back on her life, having reached midlife, she has not regretted this decision, implying a strong connection between her and her spouse. Noeleen gave birth to three children and established further strong connections with them in her life.

The maturity and insight that midlife has brought to her, regarding her relationship with her own mother, has showed her how to be a mother to her own children, and not to continue the pattern of disconnection between mother and child, established between her mother and herself.

However, Noeleen's relationship with her husband has been characterized with disconnection as well as connection, during their marriage. She describes the closeness the family unit enjoyed when her husband was transferred to the United Kingdom for two years. However, when the family returned to South Africa, this sense of closeness was lost. Noeleen says:

Somehow, family and friends started to take up the time that we used to spend together as a family unit....My husband and I started drifting apart and doing our own thing.

It appears that the re-connection with family and friends in South Africa intruded upon the time that Noeleen spent with her spouse, as opposed to the time they spent together in England, when they only had each other and the children to keep them company. This re-connection with family and friends appears to have brought about a disconnection in the marital relationship at that particular time, when Noeleen was socializing and abusing alcohol to "fill empty spaces". Noeleen, at this stage of her life, appears to have repeated her mother's coping pattern, using alcohol to mask her unhappiness. However, the *re-assessment of her life, at midlife*, allowed Noeleen to understand the harm her alcohol abuse was bringing to her marital relationship, and to break this pattern, as opposed to her mother, who appeared to carry on using the same dysfunctional coping strategy.

As a result, Noeleen's marriage appears to have survived that particular stage of upheaval. This *understanding* brought a new stability to Noeleen's life, allowing her to connect with her husband again.

It seems that reaching midlife enabled Noeleen to look back upon the connection and disconnection she has had with other people throughout life, and to *derive meaning and understanding* as to how these relationships affected her up to that point, and allowed her to grow as a person. This *integration and insight* appears to have allowed Noeleen to connect with herself.

The *understanding* that the *mature perspective* of midlife has brought her, appears to have enabled her to use these experiences for personal growth, and to use this new knowledge for a beneficial, meaningful future life.

**Theme: From feeling at the mercy of circumstances to taking control at midlife**

As a child, Noeleen appears to have been at the mercy of circumstances beyond her control. She appears to have felt helpless when faced with the continual arguments that took place between her parents. She explains:

There were many nights we could not sleep for the screaming and hysterical tears and accusations of my mother being directed towards my father.

She describes her father as a "woman's man" who was "very fond of alcohol", and her mother as an "insecure socialite with a penchant for alcohol and slimming tablets". Alcohol abuse, and the manner in which it has affected Noeleen in a detrimental way, is noted throughout her life story. She has memories of her mother trying to stab her father "in a drunken rage", an event which must have been extremely frightening for a young child in a powerless position. Her uncle, who lived with them, was also an alcoholic, and Noeleen has memories of him "wetting his pants when he had had too much to drink" and slitting his wrists after an argument with his wife.

These circumstances finally led to Noeleen's father moving out and going to live with an air hostess. Noeleen, being strongly connected to her father, probably saw him as her protector, and she must have felt even more vulnerable and defenseless when he left. She was then left at the mercy of her 'drunken' mother, and she still remembers the incident when the centipede bit her and her mother told her to "go ahead and die...followed by peals of drunken laughter". This event had a devastating effect on Noeleen, and she can recall wishing that the centipede had taken her life. That such a young girl could have such a thought, is indicative of the sense of desperation and loneliness Noeleen experienced at that time, feeling totally at the mercy of circumstances beyond her control.

As a result of the break-up of her parents' marriage, Noeleen was sent to boarding school in England. This is another example of Noeleen's life being controlled by circumstances beyond her control. She was left at a boarding school, without an explanation or a word of farewell, and she must have felt isolated, abandoned and rejected. She was later collected from boarding school, once again with no explanations offered, and flown to South Africa. Once there she was moved from school to school, finding it difficult to settle and make friends. The unhappiness she felt at this time, was, once again, determined by circumstances beyond her control. Her life continued to be affected by her father's subsequent divorces. Noeleen describes an event that occurred while she was writing preliminaries for matric:

I arrived home to find the house had been emptied. Funny, this time, I was left behind-only the furniture was gone! My stepmother had moved out with my brothers.

Once again, Noeleen must have felt abandoned, lonely and rejected.

Noeleen eventually married and had three children of her own. Her life was no longer controlled by what her parents did. However, alcohol began to control her life. She explains:

There were many up's and down's living with an alcoholic. My theory became, if you can't beat them, what the hell, join them!

Noeleen appears to have tried to cope with her unhappiness by abusing alcohol, something she had seen her parents do. Although she relates how living in England brought a closeness to the family unit, Noeleen was probably lonely, missing family and friends in South Africa. As a result "beer became her timekeeper".

By the time the family returned to South Africa, Noeleen's pattern of alcohol abuse was already established and she continued to allow alcohol to control her life, having fallen into the trap of repeating the very patterns she wished to avoid – until she reached midlife.

Noeleen explains how turning 40 allowed her to *take control of her life*. She *re-assessed her life*, looking back on where she had come from, and she looked to the future, *asking questions about what she wanted and where she wanted to go*. After "wallowing in self-pity for a while", Noeleen *set about achieving her goals*. She purchased a plot in order to *realize her dream* of owning and running a herb farm. She became a reflexologist and began to study different philosophies. She stopped drinking, refusing to allow alcohol to control her life. She says:

Alcohol clouds and exaggerates emotions, happy or sad.

Noeleen appears to have come to the realization, at midlife, that she was depending on alcohol for happiness, and that happiness could not be achieved in this way.

*She understood that she needed to take control, find a purpose to life, and to set and achieve her own goals*. At midlife Noeleen discovered, after being at the mercy of circumstances controlling her life for many years, that it was up to her to take control of her own life, in order to *find meaning and fulfillment*.

**Theme: From disruption and chaos to discovering peace at midlife**

Noeleen's early life was characterized by traumatic incidents with a theme of disruption and chaos. She describes the many nights when her mother's anger was directed at her father and she could not sleep for all the screaming and tears. She has vivid memories, too, of her drunk mother trying to stab her father. Her alcoholic uncle moved into the house with his wife and baby, and then attempted to slit his wrists. The fact that this family moved into the house probably had a very disruptive effect on the family on its own, let alone the chaotic scenes of alcohol abuse, arguments and attempted suicide.

Noeleen's life was further disrupted when she was sent to boarding school in England, taken away from her mother, and left there by her father without any explanation as to why she was sent there, or how long she would be there. She must have felt very confused and insecure, sensing a lack of stability and chaos in her life. The disruption continued once she had settled in South Africa, when her father's second marriage fell apart and he "remarried a nutcase".

Noeleen contrasts these scenes of chaos with scenes that create a sense of peace. Her description of the "powder white beaches and crystal blue waters" of the Bahamas is the only peaceful description of her childhood, and she only appears to have regained *a sense of peace and harmony* upon reaching midlife. She appears to have found a *sense of peace in realizing her dream* of purchasing a plot, which was "the beginning of her dream to own and run a herb farm. She appears to have found a *spiritual peace* in the *understanding that "love can conquer all"*. Having studied various philosophies she was able to make peace with her mother and "see her differently". She also appears to have found peace by giving up alcohol and reaching the understanding that "alcohol clouds and exaggerates emotions, happy or sad". Midlife appears to have brought Noeleen peace of mind, as she finally *found her purpose*.

She explains:

At this point of my life, I can only see forward. I have finally found my purpose, my life path, a reason for being, and it feels good and it feels right.

Noeleen, having reached midlife, appears to now *have a point of comparison*, where, having experienced the trauma of disruption and chaos during her life, she can truly appreciate her new found *sense of peace and stability*.

**Theme: From being constantly uprooted to putting down roots at midlife**

The theme of being constantly uprooted, or moved from one place to another, is evident throughout Noeleen's life, as opposed to having a sense of stability, staying in one place, and putting down roots in her middle years.

When her father left her mother, she was uprooted and moved to another house to live with her mother and sister. In 1969, she was uprooted, once again, and sent to boarding school in England without any explanation as to why she was sent there. In 1971, again without any explanations, she was taken out of the boarding school in England and flown to South Africa. She then describes a period of being uprooted and moved from town to town, changing schools constantly, and never being in one place long enough to 'put down roots' and make friends.

Noeleen also appears to have struggled to find permanence and stability during her married life, with the family transferring to the United Kingdom for a period of time, and then returning to South Africa. This too, could have been an unsettling experience for Noeleen and her family, trying to adapt to new homes, schools and environments.

However, things began to change for Noeleen as she approached midlife. She purchased a plot in 1999, and she describes this event as follows:



The beginning of my dreams to own and run a herb farm, and to spread the word of *taking responsibility for our selves and our own health*.

The advent of midlife, bringing with it Noeleen's search for purpose and setting and achieving goals, appears to have resulted in Noeleen finally *finding permanence and stability*. She literally 'put down roots', for the first time in her life.

Noeleen explains:

I have always loved the earth..... The joy of planting a seed, and seeing it grow, seeing a tree bear fruit, after all the fertilizer and watering, all the hard work that goes into it all, is to reap the rewards or fruits of one's labour of love. God planted us all a natural pharmacy – we moderns need to learn to utilize it again. The good earth earths me, when I threaten to get airborne and airy-fairy,

Perhaps this joy, at midlife, of being in one place, putting down roots and reaping the benefits of the fruit, was borne out of the constant uprooting she experienced as a child and is a metaphor for her life now.

### **Theme: From denial to confronting reality at midlife**

Noeleen's story is characterized by denial, which she appears to have used as a coping strategy for many years, until finally *confronting reality* when midlife arrived.

As a child, denial was evident, regarding the way she perceived her father. In her eyes, he could do no wrong, and she could not acknowledge the fact that he also contributed to the disruption of her home life. She coped by seeing her mother as 'bad', and denying any wrongdoing on the part of her father, making him 'good' in her eyes. The way she perceived her parents appears evident in the manner she left the Bahamas, never to see her mother again for 23 years.

Her mother asked her to hide in the toilets at the airport, but Noeleen never gave this any consideration, explaining how she felt:

I don't think so mommy dearest! Why would I do that when I really didn't like you?

Noeleen's coping strategy of denial is seen later in her story, when she began to abuse alcohol. She explains how her theory became:

If you can't beat them, what the hell, join them!

Transferring to the United Kingdom, Noeleen appears to have coped with possible unhappiness and loneliness by drinking alcohol, and denying the reality of the situation. She relates how beer became her timekeeper. Upon returning to South Africa, Noeleen explains:

Life became one big party, we had everything we could have wanted – a house paid off, a big 4x4, and money to blow..... and the prospect of turning 40 was just up on the horizon! Let's not go there just yet, drink drink drink instead!

This statement explains how Noeleen denied unhappy or disturbing thoughts, using alcohol to mask the unhappiness she was experiencing at the time.

She herself describes this strategy as escapism, explaining how drinking played a big role in all social events, and her husband and her started drifting apart. Noeleen also appears to have denied the emptiness she felt inside by trying to keep busy. She relates:

I tried to fill up empty spaces in my life by doing as much as I could. I organized a social club, I worked and I partied..... and partied....and I took kids to school and partied, and then suddenly life became one big round of drinks. I couldn't bear the thought of going home without a drink.

She was aware that her 40<sup>th</sup> birthday was approaching, that the emptiness inside was related to things that she felt she had not achieved in life, but continued to deny this fact. She explains:

Then the day started creeping up.... The 40<sup>th</sup> birthday....eek scream, scream – no I certainly was not ready. I had not even taken the time to evaluate my life, check out a direction of any sort ... I had always had a herb garden. I had always been interested in complementary medicine, but, hey, so what, bumble on dilly bee.

She did not want to celebrate her 40<sup>th</sup> birthday because she “felt inept and incomplete”. Noeleen explains:

I felt I was a ‘no one’, that I had not made any kind of contribution to society in any way. I did not know what I would be remembered for should I die – certainly for throwing wild parties and drinking to excess, raucous laughter too, but that thought did not please me too much.

The party was organized by her sister, but Noeleen, feeling depressed, and continuing to deny her situation, sat for most of the night in a corner by herself, drinking beer.

However, as Noeleen explains, turning 40 was the milestone in her life, that allowed her to *confront reality and re-assess her life*. She stresses, in her text, that she did not want to be 40 yet, and she asked herself what she had achieved in the last 40 years. She asked herself what she had actually done with her life and had she set or achieved any goals? She appears to be *looking for self-definition* when she asks herself who she is. Is she defined as a mother, wife, daughter or sister? She expresses resentment in the phrase “a slave to all”. The question “What do YOU want for YOU?” implies that she is *recognizing her self as an important independent entity*, finally expressing her needs after looking after everyone else’s needs for so long. This is further qualified by her stressing that turning 40 made her angry, because she had overlooked a very important person in her life, and that person was herself.

It appears that the realization that midlife had begun for Noeleen, enabled her to finally cease using denial as a coping strategy, and to *confront the issues* that had been underlying her deep-seated feelings of emptiness and unhappiness. This led to a *questioning attitude regarding her role in life*, what she had achieved up to that point, and what she still wanted to achieve. Confronting these issues at the midpoint of life, and looking back on her life with a mature perspective, allowed Noeleen to *re-assess, and plan realistically for the future* she wanted for herself. She finally appears to have understood that the coping strategy of denial, which she had used up to that point, had been ineffective in resolving her life issues, and that it was now up to her to *face reality, to plan her future, and to put these plans into action*.

**Theme: From re-enacting old patterns to re-assessing life and breaking old patterns at midlife**

Noeleen's description of her thoughts when she turned 40 have a strong theme of how she re-assessed her life in order to break old patterns, as opposed to re-enacting old patterns.

*Re-assessment and self-appraisal* are implied by Noeleen's examination of her past, confronting herself, resolving past issues, determining what she has achieved and would still like to achieve, making decisions, and setting and achieving goals based on those decisions. The questions that Noeleen's self-appraisal had raised when she turned 40, helped her to look back on her life, and to understand the effect that her past had had on her.

The painful incidents of her childhood are expressed in the text by comments such as "...the painful fighting of my parents," "Life progressively got worse.....", "Life was unbearable", "Maybe I wished too, that the centipede had taken my life", "I absolutely hated starting a new school". Re-assessing her life at midlife, enabled Noeleen to remember these painful incidents and the effect they had had on her.

It is possible that these painful memories contributed towards Noeleen's feelings of emptiness and unhappiness as she approached midlife, and that she was using ineffective coping patterns, such as denial and alcohol abuse, to cope with these feelings. Confronting these past issues helped Noeleen to understand that these were not patterns she wished to perpetuate.

Noeleen looks at her time as an adult and recounts how her family experienced a closeness when it was just the five of them in the UK, but also at how she began to drink excessively at that time due to extreme loneliness and being disconnected from friends and family in South Africa. She describes how her and her husband began to drift apart on their return to South Africa and how she continued to drink excessively despite having her family and all she could desire materially. She "tried to fill up empty spaces" by doing as much as she could, and by continuing to drink.

She seems to be expressing the fact that her life did not have meaning at that stage, and all these events were leading her to the re-assessment of her life, the questions she had to ask herself, and the truths she had to face, in order to break the harmful patterns of the past.

Turning 40 made Noeleen feel old, while her children still seemed so young. She describes her concern that she did not know what she would be remembered for should she die, implying that the inevitability of death was now being considered. She later mentions that her husband and herself have attended many funerals over the past few years and that this has made her ponder her own mortality. These thoughts imply that Noeleen was *recognizing the finiteness of life*. She acknowledges that she does not have forever to achieve her goals, and that the harmful pattern of procrastination used by her in the past, would have to be broken, in order to accomplish her goals.

The insight Noeleen gained at midlife, appears to have aided her in *resolving past issues*.

Resolving these issues appears to have prevented Noeleen from continuing harmful family patterns. Having studied various philosophies, Noeleen is finally able to see her mother differently. She realizes that she would not be the person she is today, had she grown up with her mother. She has been able to thank her for being her mother, for giving birth to her and for showing her how NOT to be a mother and how NOT to live her life. Resolving this past issue has enabled Noeleen to understand how to be a good mother, as opposed to the way her mother treated her, and to prevent her from continuing a harmful family pattern of abuse. She states that she can see things clearly now. This knowledge has enabled her to stop drinking, believing that alcohol clouds and exaggerates emotions, happy or sad. This implies that she has realized that alcohol will not fill the “empty spaces” she referred to earlier and that she needs to look for something else to fill those empty spaces. This realization enables Noeleen to break the harmful family pattern of alcohol abuse.

Noeleen expresses regret at not having thought about all these things earlier in her life, but then she has the *insight* to acknowledge that perhaps life had to be lived the way it was for her to stop, at midlife, and *evaluate* where she was heading, and to realize the emptiness of just existing.

**Theme: From a sense of meaninglessness to finding new meaning at midlife**

After “wallowing in self pity” for a while, Noeleen, at midlife, began to find new meaning in her life. New meaning refers to taking responsibility for one’s life, setting and achieving goals, exploring the spiritual aspects of one’s life in order to find a purpose to life, and using this information to try to achieve self-actualization and thus reach her full potential.

Noeleen saw the importance of *taking responsibility* for herself and her own health. She stopped drinking alcohol, realizing the futility of this habit. She states that alcohol only clouds and exaggerates emotions, happy or sad.

Realizing that this habit was not filling the “empty spaces” in her life, she took responsibility for herself and her own health and stopped drinking. She could have remained irresponsible, continuing to drink regardless of the harmful consequences, but chose not to.

Having realized the importance of *setting and achieving goals* for herself, Noeleen decided that “a plan of action was required”. She purchased a plot in order to realize the dream she had always had of running her own herb farm. She started working for a natural therapist and did a reflexology course. She offered her services as a volunteer reflexologist to Hospice. Noeleen explains her goals:

I hope to study homeopathy next year, as my need to heal people is great, and not to heal only on a physical level, but on a psychological and spiritual level too. A holistic approach to healing – to making people feel good about their life.

Noeleen appears to be on her way to achieving the goals she has set for herself. Without being motivated to set and achieve these goals, Noeleen would have remained unmotivated and continued to view her life as “meaningless”.

Noeleen appears to have discovered *spiritual meaning* upon reaching midlife. In her quest to find deeper meaning and purpose, Noeleen started exploring the spiritual aspects of life. She joined a meditation group, which explored the spiritual world and the philosophies of life after death. This led her to the belief that death is merely a transition from one life to another. Noeleen explains:

Death is only the end of the physical vehicle we use to drive through life on earth, and love conquers all.

This new found belief led her to volunteer to work for Hospice. She appears to have discovered meaning from her new found spiritual beliefs, as opposed to wondering what possible meaning could lie behind her existence.

Reaching midlife allowed Noeleen to find *new purpose* in her life. She has put a plan of action in place to run her herb farm. She is fulfilling her inner needs to heal people, and possible herself, by working as a natural therapist and reflexologist. Her spiritual searching has led her to believe that there is a purpose to our existence.

Towards the end of her story, Noeleen says that at this point in her life she can only see forward, implying that she has resolved many past issues and looks forward to living the rest of her life with new found purpose. She states:

I have finally found my purpose, my life path, a reason for being and it feels good and it feels right.

Noeleen refers to the emptiness of “just existing”, which she had experienced previously, and contrasts this with her new belief that “there **MUST** be a purpose to it all”. She has found another purpose:

To enjoy life to its fullest – to live every moment to its fullest; to live in the moment, to stop planning for tomorrows and to stop thinking about yesterdays – they are gone to the box of memories.

This line implies that Noeleen has been able to resolve a lot of her past issues and come to terms with them. She says:

One should not dwell too long on the bad, rejoice in the good and use the combination for today.

Noeleen, at midlife, appears to have used her past experience and her spiritual searching to *find new meaning and purpose in her life*.



The last line of Noeleen's text refers to her inner need, at midlife, to make a meaningful difference to the lives of others, and expresses her newly found purpose in life:

May I die having made a positive difference to someone's life.

### **SELF REFLECTION**

This section involves a self-reflection on the part of the researcher, indicating the effect the encounter with the participant had on the researcher.

The researcher found that she became personally involved with the participant's story, as she became immersed in the text, and themes were explored in order to derive deeper meaning. Knowing Noeleen personally, and having a personal perception and understanding of Noeleen, may also have affected the researcher's interpretation of the text.

Reading about Noeleen's early childhood evoked strong emotion in the researcher. as she thought about how difficult life must have been for Noeleen as a child.

The researcher's feelings of admiration and respect for Noeleen grew, as the researcher acknowledged Noeleen's strength and courage in overcoming adversity, and yet still remaining the caring individual she is today.

The researcher also empathized, on a personal level, with the difficulties Noeleen experienced, as midlife approached. Although the researcher's personal history is very different to that of Noeleen, both Noeleen and the researcher experienced similar feelings as midlife approached. The researcher, too, experienced a sense of dismay that life was passing by too quickly, and that there was not much time left to set and achieve unfulfilled goals. This sense of urgency led to the researcher's decision to complete her studies.

Noeleen and the researcher both appear to have searched for, and found new meaning in life, at midlife. Having experienced similar feelings, the researcher understood Noeleen's feelings of emptiness, and the need to find new purpose in life at midlife, and empathized with her.

### **SUMMARY OF THE MAIN IDEAS REGARDING MIDLIFE DEEMED FROM NOELEEN'S STORY**

Noeleen appears to have initially experienced midlife as a time of '*crisis*'. She appears to have approached midlife with a feeling of *emptiness*. She felt she had *achieved nothing* and she *did not appear to have a clear definition of self*. She felt the *need to set goals*, with the *recognition of the finiteness of life*, and that there was now *limited time to achieve what she wanted to achieve*. An intense period of *re-assessment and self-appraisal* followed, during which time she *examined her past, confronted herself, resolved past issues, determined what she wanted to achieve and set goals* based on those decisions.

This period of re-assessment was followed by a period of *finding new meaning* in her life. Noeleen *took responsibility* for her life, *set goals*, and *found spiritual meaning* in her life. Doing these things enabled Noeleen to finally *find a purpose to life*, and this appeared to bring to her *an inner peace and stability*, which had been lacking in her life for many years.

Noeleen herself acknowledges that the life events preceding midlife, and her relationships with others up to that point in her life, influenced how she experienced midlife.

Noeleen experienced a *sense of urgency to achieve goals and find meaning in her life*, as she approached midlife. Western society values achievement and sets a social norm of reaching a career peak at midlife.

Noeleen's experience of midlife as a 'crisis' could have been influenced by societal norms, put forth in the media, which advocate a 'crisis' if this sense of achievement has not been attained by the time a person reaches midlife. In this way, 'midlife' can be viewed as a social construction. Noeleen, states in her story, however, that although she wishes she had thought about these things earlier in her life, she realizes that life had to be lived the way it was for her to evaluate where she was heading.

Noeleen's life events, context, social structures and personal history all appear to have played a part in leading her to the point where she was able to evaluate her life and make decisions regarding her purpose in life, and in finding a meaningful future.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DANA'S STORY AND EMERGING THEMES

#### Introduction

This chapter is based on the participant's story of her midlife experience, which was given to the researcher in written form (See Appendix A).

The same format and principles followed in the previous chapter will be employed in this chapter to identify the emerging themes in Dana's story.

The emerging themes will be followed, in this chapter, by a self-reflection on the part of the researcher, explaining the effect the encounter with the participant had on the researcher. Finally, a summary of the main ideas regarding midlife derived from the participant's text, will be described.

#### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Participant:	*Dana	52 years old
Gender of participant:	*Female	
Children:	*Brent	28 years old
	*Lorna	25 years old
Participant's occupation:	Unemployed	
Residential area.	Benoni, Gauteng	

\* Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the identities of participants and their family members.

The researcher and the participant became acquainted through their membership of a book club. Dana is a Caucasian South African female.

The researcher noted that Dana is experiencing midlife, and explained to her that she intended to do a study on the midlife experience, asking her if she would be interested in participating in the study. Dana expressed interest and agreed to provide her life story to the researcher for the purpose of this study.

A discussion of themes emerging from Dana's story is now provided.

### **EMERGING THEMES**

As was the case with the previous story, the following themes were derived from Dana's story using the hermeneutic method of analysis. The researcher, once again, immersed herself in the text of the participant in order to make sense of her world, keeping in mind that Dana's attributed meaning was informed by her immediate context, social structures and personal history.

Themes were then inferred from the text, grouping similar instances together under the same theme.

The themes were then explored more closely in order to derive deeper meaning. If necessary, changes were made, using a constantly questioning attitude and always searching for deeper meaning. Thematic analysis involved identifying common themes and using excerpts from the stories to substantiate those themes.

#### **Theme: From connection/disconnection throughout life to assessing the value of this connection/disconnection at midlife**

Dana's story relates how she formed connections with significant others throughout life, referring to the strong emotional attachments she formed with these people. Disconnection, referring to the breaking of these attachments, either in an emotional or a physical sense, also seems apparent throughout her life. At midlife, Dana appears to assess the value of the connections she has formed with others.

She also appears to value the disconnections with others that have occurred in her life, understanding, from a *mature perspective*, and with the *insight* that midlife has brought to her, that these disconnections have *defined the person she is today*. Although disconnecting with significant others may not have been pleasant, she is able *find meaning* in the way these events have *shaped the person she is now*, and helped her, in many respects, to *grow as a person*.

Dana appears to have been strongly connected to her father, describing him in the following way:

He was the most wonderful father any child could wish for, being funny, patient, firm, kind and very stable. He sorted out all our problems. He was a big man in stature and also personality.....I was definitely a 'daddy's girl' and I was always 'draped' over him.

However, Dana was suddenly disconnected from her father. She describes this painful memory, saying:

My darling father died on the operating table while undergoing heart surgery. He was only 52. I miss him still, very much.

This event changed the course of Dana's life, and, at midlife, Dana appears to be able to look back on her life and understand how her father's death determined this course, leading her to form further connections with others. For example, this event appeared to change the way Dana perceived her mother.

As a child, Dana does not appear to have had a strong connection with her mother. Dana says:

My mother was very beautiful in her day.....very poised and well groomed. So much so, that Ken and I were always kept at arm's length and were brought up to be 'seen and not heard'.

However, at midlife, Dana expresses her admiration for how her mother coped after her father's death. She explains:

My mother managed to turn herself from a spoiled woman into a very strong lady and has managed to keep herself right into her old age.

Dana describes how both her father and her granny spoiled her mother. After Dana's father's death, this situation changed. Dana says:

After my father's death, my mother was thrown into the deep-end with three children at school and not a lot of money to go around.

Dana's mother had to go to work for the first time in her life, but managed to cope and to support her family. Although Dana's describes her mother as unaffectionate, her mother must have had a strong connection with her children. This seems apparent in the way she showed courage, strength and determination to support her children, despite having lived a 'spoiled' privileged life for so long. Dana seems to express her admiration for her mother, explaining:

She was only 43 when she was widowed. She is still alive at the age of 79....on twenty four hours oxygen, which she deals with very well and still manages to maintain her sense of humour.

It appears that the death of Dana's father, and the manner in which her mother subsequently coped, allowed Dana, at midlife, to admire her mother for the strength and resilience she displayed, as opposed to viewing her as spoiled, cold and unemotional. Dana has formed a strong connection with her mother, and at midlife, understanding how difficult life must have been for her mother, can truly appreciate the value of this connection.

Dana and her brother Ken share a close bond, which has endured since they were children. She says:

Ken, my brother and I were the best of friends as children, going everywhere hand in hand, and not worrying about other kids. We still have that close bond today.

Dana's father's death appears to have strengthened the connection she has with her brother. She explains:

Ken is very like my father in personality, and perhaps I have cast him in the role of father and brother rolled into one.

At midlife, Dana is able to *understand and appreciate* the sacrifices her brother made for the family, after their father's death. She relates how he left school before matriculating in order to help his mother financially. She expresses her admiration for the way he coped, explaining:

Although he started working for a monthly salary of R60, he is now, with hardly any education, a multi-millionaire through extremely hard work and street-smart business knowledge.

Ken, through sacrificing so much to support the family, and by continuing to support Dana at midlife, has shown the strong connection he has with his sibling. Dana has recently been physically disconnected from her brother, after he emigrated to Australia. She explains how painful this disconnection has been for her:

Waving goodbye at the airport is still a very painful affair and I really don't think I will ever get used to that part.

Although early midlife appears to have been a lonely time for Dana, her connection with her brother appears to have helped her to become more independent.



After Dana's divorce, Ken asked her to become a partner in a business enterprise, opening a coffee shop. He emigrated to Australia shortly afterwards, and Dana found that she was capable of running the coffee shop on her own. She eventually sold the business for a profit. Her statement, "So I didn't do too badly!" implies that *her self esteem and self-confidence, at midlife, increased*, with the *understanding* that she had the capability of running a business successfully. It seems that Dana, having being through a divorce and left alone at midlife, needed this boost to her self-esteem and confidence, and that the connection she has with her brother has made this possible.

Dana explains how her connection with her sister Gwyn was not a very strong one until Dana reached midlife. She says:

She was so much younger than I was, and I had Ken, so she just did not really feature. We got on well enough and were each other's bridesmaids, but never had that bond that Ken and I had.

Gwyn did not get on well with Dana's husband, and Dana's and Gwyn's interests in life were very different. She says:

...my life went in a totally different direction to hers, as I had children and she did not. She liked sailing and sports cars and I liked neither. We only got together during birthdays or Christmas' and it was Ken who held the family together.

*Looking back, from her midlife perspective*, Dana is able to understand how she and her sister took very different life paths, and how it took the life event of her divorce to connect with her sister, despite their differences. She explains:

...today we are very close indeed with her spending every other month with me.....

Dana regrets that it took so long to form a strong connection with her sister, explaining:

I feel that I have been the poorer for having taken so much time in getting to know her as a person, but we are able to laugh and have a good time together at last.

It appears that midlife has brought Dana an *understanding of how valuable connections with family* are to her, an aspect of her life that she appears not to have understood earlier in life. She states:

I feel very privileged to have two such wonderful siblings and I love them both very much.

Perhaps *a re-assessment of her life at midlife*, allowed Dana to appreciate the connections that have been truly valuable and enduring in her life, as opposed to those that have not.

Dana's relationship with her husband, Wesley, appears to have been characterized by connection and disconnection. She does not appear to have been strongly connected to him when they married, explaining:

When Wesley came along and showed a bit of interest, I kind of fell into the idea of marriage and saw it as a way out of the house:

However, this connection grew stronger over time. Dana states:

I fell in love with him and grew to love him more over time....Wesley was very good fun when he was young and good-looking, but I allowed him to dominate me in every way....but our marriage worked out like this for a long time, and I was not unhappily married.

Dana, appears, at that time to have been dependent on Wesley, who controlled her. While Dana accepted this role, the relationship was maintained, and Dana and Wesley remained connected to each other. Dana gave birth to two children, Brent and Lorna, and appears to be strongly connected to them both. She says:

They are really good children and I am very proud of them both.

She explains that Brent and Lorna have a relationship not unlike the one she has with her brother, Ken, describing the strong connection between her children. The connection between Dana and Wesley appears to have weakened when he was retrenched from work, and Dana had to start working. Looking back on her life, having reached midlife, Dana understands how beneficial this event was for her, although she dreaded it at the time. She made connections with friends at work that she still has today, and, at midlife, *values these friendships*, explaining:

...the friends I made there will be special to me for the rest of my life.

However, Dana found that she lost respect for her husband, because he was unable to find a job.

Dana explains that she was now in her 30's which she regards as:

The best time in a lifetime, as you are physically at your best, mentally you are mature and have usually had your family by then.

However, looking back from the *perspective of midlife*, Dana can see this time as the beginning of her disconnection from her husband, and more specifically, his disconnection from her. She explains:

Wesley had already stopped seeing me as a person. I was just his 'wife'. Perhaps this is where the first cracks appeared in my marriage, although at the time I was unaware of it.

Dana describes how midlife began for her:

It was during this time that I moved into the 40's of my life, and as they say in the classics "Life begins at 40!"

Dana's description of midlife could be viewed as a social construction. However, regardless of what Dana had heard about midlife, early midlife did not appear to be a pleasant time for her. She explains:

I had an inkling that things were not great at home....In a nutshell, he (Wesley) was not home often, and when he was, he was distant and short tempered and impatient with me. I tried to overlook it and made excuses for him, but things got worse and the fighting escalated and I knew things were not good for the children either.

Things finally came to a head. Dana relates:

After rivers of tears and lots of heartache I eventually found out that Wesley was having an affair with one of my 'friends'.

This event led to divorce, and her final disconnection from Wesley. Early midlife appears to have been a very painful time for Dana. She says:

I just could not grasp what had happened and could not even imagine what the future would hold for me.....then began the long, long road to recovery.

Dana, at 52, is now able to integrate the connection and disconnection that occurred in her relationship with Wesley, and to *appreciate the lessons learned and experience gained* from this. She explains:

He studied philosophy at the School of Philosophy and Science and I know that if there was any good reason to be married to him at all, it was for what he could teach me with regards to opening my mind to a number of things, and in particular, to religion.....it was inevitable that I picked up on these teachings. I am not a religious person as I do not like the thought of another human being telling me what to believe in, and what not to, but I learned that to believe something different to what I was taught at the Convents was alright.

Dana's connection with Wesley appears to have allowed her to open her mind to new possibilities, and at midlife Dana is able to *appreciate how valuable this lesson* was to her.

Although her divorce and disconnection from Wesley left her alone for the first time in her life, at midlife Dana learnt to *value this freedom*. She explains:

I could make decisions for myself and no one needed to be consulted first...I learned that I did have opinions, and more than that, people listened to them. I also learned that I had likes and dislikes and that I had something to offer to my friends, and family. I learned to like myself and I learned to enjoy my own company, and to this day I am *very comfortable to be alone with myself*.

It appears that her disconnection from Wesley, after much heartache and soul-searching, allowed Dana *to connect with, and rediscover her true self*. This event, coinciding with the *maturity and insight* that midlife brings, appears to have been beneficial to Dana, in allowing her to *realize her own strength and unique characteristics*.

Dana's story describes her connection and disconnection to significant others throughout her life.

Midlife appears to have brought to her a *deeper understanding* of how *valuable this connection and disconnection has been in shaping the person she is today*.

She *understands the value* of knowing people she has since disconnected from, and places great value on the connections that have endured. This is explained in the way she ends her story:

I have a strong bond with my siblings and my children and as time moves on, I know *I am getting stronger in myself*.

**Theme: From dependence on others throughout life to independence at midlife**

Dana's story appears to describe how she depended upon significant male relationships throughout her life, until she reached midlife, when she discovered the *value of her own independence*. The significant males in her life appear to have been her father, her brother, and her husband.

Dependence refers to the way Dana relied on these men to make decisions for her. However, each of these men left Dana, although in different ways, during her life, leaving Dana no choice but to become independent. *Independence* refers to the manner in which Dana discovered that she is capable of *making her own decisions and controlling her own life*.

As a child, Dana was naturally dependent on her father. She admired her father greatly, and appears to have viewed him as the person she could depend upon to provide for her and to 'sort out all her problems'. She describes how she adored him, while appearing to view her mother, at the time, as unresponsive, cold and distant. Because of the nature of her father's work, Dana was sent to boarding school. The family then moved to different towns a number of times, which necessitated that Dana attend a number of different schools. However, Dana appears to have accepted this disruption without question. Dana herself explains:

I have a very mutable nature and seem to be able to make the most of any situation; from boarding schools to divorce.

It appears that Dana's dependent nature, at the time, allowed her to accept any inconvenience she faced without question, simply obeying the father that she depended upon, and adored.

After her father's death, Dana appears to have transferred the dependence and adoration she had for her father, to her brother, Ken. As a child she was dependent on Ken for companionship. She describes how close they were as children, never needing other children for companionship. When Dana's father died, Ken appears to have taken over the role of father in the family, leaving school to start working to provide for the family. Dana, at that time, was dependent on Ken as provider, as the money he earned helped to sustain the family. She explains how Ken took over the role of her father, in her life:

He is very like my father in personality and perhaps I have cast him in the role of father and brother rolled into one.

Dana continued to be emotionally dependent on Ken throughout her adult life. He appears to have been a strong source of support to her, particularly when she went through a traumatic divorce. He provided both emotional and financial support in the form of setting her up in her own business, and allowing her to *discover her own personal strengths*, at a time in her life when she lacked confidence in herself. However, life events finally determined that Ken left the country, emigrating to Australia, and leaving Dana to manage on her own. Although he still visits Dana, she has found Ken's absence from her life particularly difficult, explaining:

Waving goodbye at the airport is still a very painful affair and I really don't think I will ever get used to that part.

Dana's dependant nature appears to have led to her marriage to Wesley. She explains:

When Wesley came along and showed a bit of interest, I kind of fell into the idea of marriage and saw it as a way out of the house.

Her description of how she got married, implies that she was not making an independent decision based on her own needs and wants, but simply looking for another male to take care of her. At midlife, Dana *recognizes* that she allowed Wesley to dominate her in every way, and that she was very easily manipulated. Her dependent nature appears to have allowed the marriage to continue for some time, as she never disputed Wesley's controlling nature. Dana was dependent on Wesley to the extent that she made excuses for him when the marriage began to fall apart, and Wesley became short tempered and impatient with her, and was not often at home. However, when Wesley had an affair which ultimately led to the end of the marriage, Dana, at midlife, was forced to *become independent* for the first time in her life. Dana was devastated and explains:

I just could not imagine what it would be like to be a 40-something year old with no formal training, and no money to speak of....I just could not grasp what had happened and *could not even imagine what the future would hold for me.*

Dana, at midlife, was *alone for the first time in her life.* Even her children were overseas. The *insight and maturity* that midlife offered Dana, allowed her to *understand, for the first time,* how she had depended on others throughout life. She explains:

I had moved out of my mother's house and into Wesley's and I realized that I had never really needed to make any decision of any sort – they were always made for me by someone else.

However, as Dana began to accept her situation, her *life began to change.* She explains:



At first I did not quite know what to do with all this freedom, but before long I got the hang of it and *my whole life changed*. I *could make decisions for myself* and no one needed to be consulted first....if I wanted to paint the roof purple – I could!

I slowly *learned that I did have opinions*, and more than that, people listened to them. I also learned that I had likes and dislikes and *that I had something to offer* to my friends, and family. *I learned to like myself* and I learned to *enjoy my own company*, and to this day, I am *very comfortable to be alone with myself*. *It was totally exhilarating and this freedom I value very much even to this day*.

From being dependent on others throughout life, Dana, at midlife, appears to have *discovered the joy of her own independence*. She has *discovered qualities about her self* that she may never have been aware of, had Wesley not left her.

Although Dana was devastated at the time of the divorce, she now, with the *maturity* and *insight* that midlife has brought her, *understands* that had this event not occurred she may never have understood the *value of her own independence*, and the *satisfaction gained from making her own decisions and controlling her own destiny*.

**Theme: From helplessness to strength and overcoming adversity at midlife**

Dana describes the easy privileged life she had as a child in Zimbabwe:

In those days Rhodesia was almost colonial and all three children had our own nannies who took care of us, plus we had a cook and also a gardener for the front and one for the back garden.

However, life changed for Dana when her father died. This event probably left her feeling helpless and powerless, as the person she had depended upon up to that point was no longer there for her.

Dana describes how her mother and her brother showed strength of character, with her mother going out to work for the first time, and her brother giving up his schooling to support the family. However, Dana appears to have felt helpless in the face of this adversity and admits that she “was a monster of a teenager and gave her mother a hard time”, as opposed to having the strength to constructively help the family.

Her sense of helplessness also seems apparent in the way she describes her decision to marry Wesley, simply seeing it as a way out of the house, and implying a sense of powerlessness to do otherwise. The way she allowed Wesley to dominate and manipulate her also implies that she felt helpless and unable to assert herself. When Wesley became unemployed and Dana was told to get a job, she dreaded this, explaining:

I was dreading this as I had not worked for eight years and knew that I was right out of the working arena.

However, she overcame these feelings of helplessness and found, to her delight, that she enjoyed work and made many friends.

Dana again experienced a deep feeling of helplessness when she found out that Wesley was having an affair, and admits:

I was being the proverbial ostrich as I just could not imagine what it would be like to be a 40-something year old with no formal training and no money to speak of, and so just avoided the truth.....I just could not grasp what had happened and could not even imagine what the future would hold for me.

Dana’s divorce, which occurred during early midlife, increased her sense of helplessness for a short period of time.

However, this event, occurring during midlife for Dana, helped her to *discover that she was capable of overcoming adversity*, and allowed her to *discover an inner strength*, that, up to that point, she had not been aware of. Dana overcame her sense of helplessness when she joined her brother as a partner in opening a coffee shop. Her brother left for Australia, and Dana had to manage “all the teething problems on her own”, which she did, although she admits that the shop was not run as it should have been run, because she was just “skipping through each day”. She did, however, make a good profit when she sold it, which probably *increased her feelings of independence and self-sufficiency*.

Although Dana relates how helpless she felt shortly after her divorce, she soon “got the hang of it” and her whole life changed. She describes the *joy of discovering that she could make decisions for herself* without consulting anyone else, and she learnt to *value her own opinions*. Dana learnt to be *comfortable to be alone with herself*, implying that, at midlife, she *overcame feelings of helplessness and dependence*. and *discovered an inner strength* that sustains her, even when she is alone. Dana expresses this point of view when she states:

I see myself as having come along a long and sometimes bumpy road, but I also see my future as bright and secure, I know that I still have issues to deal with, and hope I am now strong enough to deal with most problems....I know I am getting stronger in myself.

**Theme: From re-enacting old patterns to reassessing life and breaking old patterns at midlife**

Dana describes, in her story, her awareness of family norms and patterns, particularly with regard to marriage, and her attempts to re-enact the pattern of the ‘fairy tale marriage’ throughout her married life. However, at midlife, Dana has to come to terms with the fact that her marriage is not ‘perfect’, and the pattern of the perfect marriage in the family, is broken.

Dana's *reassessment of her life at midlife*, and the *insight gained from looking back on her life*, allows her to *understand* how patterns have been established, re-enacted and broken throughout her life. Dana explains how her ideas of marriage were based on the marriage of her parents:

My father adored my mother and spoiled her in every way. In fact, I never heard them disagree or either one raise their voice at the other. I thought that was how all marriages were run and that everyone behaved in this way towards their spouse. How wrong can you be?

Dana's expectations of marriage appear to have been based on the family norms of her own parents, and she was unaware of the fact that other marriages were not the same. Her mother appears to have felt that her marriage was special, as she never went out with another man after Dana's father died. Dana says:

Strangely, she (her mother) has never looked at another man or even been out with one for a cup of coffee, saying that she would not put up with second best after she had had the best for twenty-two years.

This family pattern appears to have been re-enacted in Dana's sister's marriage, which Dana describes as:

A marriage like my parents had and the fairy tale type of marriage we all want.

However, this pattern was not re-enacted in Dana's marriage to Wesley and she states that she had a "big wake up call" with regard to her idea of marriage. She explains:

He came from a home where his parents argued continually and his father really did not speak nicely to his mother at all. I suppose that's what his idea of marriage was.

Dana appears, at midlife, to be able to *understand* that because her and Wesley were brought up in different homes, with different family norms, it was inevitable that they would both try to re-enact different family patterns, each expecting the other to adhere to different norms, and leading to conflict in the marriage.

During the early years of their marriage, Dana and Wesley adhered to what she believes are the social norms of marriage:

Wesley and I did everything as it should have been done, marriage, babies, bigger houses, bigger cars. I was not working at the time, thinking it was good to be a 'real' mother to my children.

However, the life event of Wesley's retrenchment, made it impossible for Dana to adhere to the norm of being a 'real' mother, and she had to go back to work. She then describes how the first cracks began to appear in her marriage:

Wesley had stopped seeing me as a person. I was just his 'wife'.

When Dana moved into the 40's of her life, Wesley became distant, short tempered and impatient, and she discovered that he was having an affair with one of her 'friends'. Although Dana had tried to overlook Wesley's shortcomings, she finally had to face the fact that her marriage was over. She says:

Wesley had treated me so badly, mentally, over the last five years of our marriage, that in some subconscious way, I think I was really glad to have a valid excuse to leave him.

The pattern of the 'perfect' marriage in Dana's family had been broken, and Dana, at midlife, had to *reassess her life*. After a period of unhappiness and uncertainty, this *reassessment of her life allowed Dana to discover* the value of freedom and independence.

This led to the realization that life, at midlife, without her husband, was preferable to an unhappy marriage. In this case, the breaking of family patterns, had been advantageous to Dana, although she did not realize it at the time.

Dana's awareness of how patterns repeat themselves seems evident in her description of her relationship with Jim. She describes the first year of their relationship as the best for her "as far as a relationship is concerned". For a while, the pattern of her parent's marriage appears to have been re-enacted, when Jim treated her like "bone china". However, the pattern of her marriage to Wesley appears to have been re-enacted when Jim was retrenched. Dana comments:

I have done this all before with Wesley, no job, no money, and the uncertainty of how he feels about me.

With the benefit of years of lived experience, and *looking back at her life from a midlife perspective*, Dana is able to *make use of the knowledge* she has acquired regarding the re-enactment and breaking of patterns in her life. This *life experience* appears to have given Dana the *insight* to ponder the wisdom of pursuing her relationship with Jim. She says:

So where does this leave me? I am not sure whether this is the man for me in the long term. I am still afraid of giving too much of my self to someone else and it appears to me that I am going around in circles.

*Re-assessing her life*, and *understanding the patterns* that have occurred in her life, appears to have made Dana *wiser, and more cautious* regarding making rash decisions, and re-enacting old dysfunctional patterns.

*Finding inner strength* and *discovering the freedom that independence has brought* her, appears to have led to Dana following the pattern her mother followed after her husband's death. While Dana's father was alive, her mother appears to have been extremely dependent on him.

After the death of her husband, Dana's mother developed her own independence to the extent that she never felt the need to marry again. Like her mother, Dana appears to prefer her own independence to 'giving too much of herself to someone else', and at midlife, Dana is displaying the same characteristics of inner strength and independence, that she admired in her mother.

**Theme: Finding new meaning at midlife**

Dana's story describes how, at midlife, she was able to *find new meaning* regarding many aspects of her life, that, up to that point in her life, she had not considered.

Dana's divorce brought her closer to her sister, Gwyn, with whom she never shared a close bond. She *found new meaning* in her relationship with her sister at a time when she was probably experiencing a strong sense of hopelessness and meaninglessness. Dana realized, at midlife, that she has been "the poorer for having taken so much time in getting to know her as a person".

The experience of her divorce brought her to the *realization* that she is "very privileged to have two such wonderful siblings" and that she loves them both very much.

Dana appears to have found meaning in her marriage to Wesley, explaining:

I know that if there was any good reason to be married to him at all, it was for what he could teach me with regards to opening my mind to a number of things, and in particular, to religion.....I am not a religious person as I do not like the thought of another human being telling me what to believe in and what not to, but I learned that to believe something different to what I was taught at the Convents was alright.

Dana appears to have *found spiritual meaning*, through what Wesley taught her.

Although Dana dreaded going back to work, she found meaning in the friends she made in the workplace. She explains:

... the friends I made there will be special to me for the rest of my life.

After going through a process of mourning her lost marriage, Dana emerges having a *new perspective on her self and life in general*. Dana looks back on her life and describes her 30's:

By this time I was in my 30's which I think is the best time in a lifetime, as you are physically at your best, mentally you are mature, and have usually had your children by then.

Dana, at midlife, appears to have *come to value the meaning she finds in her relationship with her children*, and the *pride she feels* at having raised two "really good children". It appears that she has come to recognize the value of this relationship more clearly.

Dana describes how she moved into her 40's, and began to realize that her marriage was falling apart. Having gone through the divorce, Dana *reflects on the meaning she derived* from this experience. She realizes that she was easily manipulated, and dependent on others and that she was inclined towards denial, being the "proverbial ostrich".

Being alone for the first time in her life, when her children went to live in London, Dana realized that she had always allowed others to make decisions for her. *Her roles as mother and wife had changed*, and she had to adapt to *a new role*, where she only had herself to consider. She understood that although this new found freedom was confusing, it changed her whole life. For the first time in her life she could *make her own decisions* and found enjoyment in this fact.



Dana found new meaning in *learning that she did have opinions of her own* and that people actually listened to them. She *learnt, at midlife, that she had likes and dislikes* and that she *“had something to offer ....”*. More importantly, *Dana learnt to like herself and enjoy her own company*. She describes the joy of this new discovery:

It was totally exhilarating and this freedom I value very much to this day.

Dana summarizes the meaning she discovered at midlife, saying:

*I see myself as having come along a long and sometimes bumpy road, but I also see my future as bright and secure. I know that I still have issues to deal with, and hope I am now strong enough to deal with most problems. I have a strong bond with my siblings and my children and as time moves on, I know I am getting stronger in myself.*

Dana's *reassessment of her life*, at midlife, appears to have resulted in her deriving *meaning* from the way *she has changed* from being a dependent, easily manipulated person who was prone to denial, to one who now *values her independence, values her own opinions and decisions*, and has *learnt to like herself and her own company*. She believes that she has *grown stronger*, and that she will continue to do so. She has also learnt to *value the special bond she has with her siblings and her children*.

### **SELF-REFLECTION**

This section involves a self-reflection on the part of the researcher, indicating the effect the encounter with the participant had on the researcher.

The researcher was personally struck by the differences in the midlife experience of Dana, as compared with that of both the researcher and Noeleen.

Dana's crisis at midlife, appears to have been due to the life event of her divorce, which left Dana alone for the first time in her life.

Dana did not appear to have a stereotypical 'midlife crisis' and was not concerned with her ageing body, setting and achieving goals, or consciously searching for and finding new meaning and purpose in life. The researcher mentioned this to Dana, who explained that she 'did not have the luxury of having a midlife crisis', as she was too busy trying to cope with her circumstances.

It was of interest to the researcher however, that despite the differences in their personal histories, both Dana and the researcher were led to a time of re-assessment and finding new meaning, at midlife. However, in Dana's case, she found new meaning in the re-discovery of self, which was a direct result of her divorce and the difficult circumstances she found herself in at the time. Dana's re-assessment of life and finding new meaning, appear to have occurred coincidentally, as a result of trying to cope with life events, at midlife. The researcher, on the other hand, experienced midlife as a time of consciously being aware that 'time was running out', and that there was an urgent need to set and achieve goals. The researcher could therefore empathize with Dana's fears of being a "40-something year old with no formal training..." and "concern about what the future would hold"..

The differences in the personal contexts of the researcher and Dana appear to have influenced the way they experienced midlife.

As the researcher read Dana's story and extracted themes from the story, she found that she experienced a growing admiration and respect for the way Dana coped with her difficulties during midlife, and transformed herself from a position of dependence and helplessness, to one of strength and independence

#### **SUMMARY OF THE MAIN IDEAS REGARDING MIDLIFE DEEMED FROM DANA'S STORY**

Dana does not appear to have experienced a '*midlife crisis*' in the social constructionist sense of the term.

She was not concerned with ageing, not having achieved anything worthwhile, or finding new meaning and purpose in life. Rather, Dana's crisis involved coping with traumatic life events which had occurred at midlife.

Dana states, in her story, that '*life begins at 40*', which appears to be a social construction. However, early midlife, for Dana, appears to have been a traumatic time, as she discovered that her marriage was ending, and then tried to *adjust* to the fact that she was divorced and alone for the first time in her life. It was, however, also *a time of self-discovery*, as she discovered the *joy of freedom, independence and making her own decisions*.

Dana's *period of re-assessing her life* resulted in *new meaning* being derived regarding *personal growth and inner strength*, as opposed to setting and achieving particular goals for herself. She explains how she *values* her new found freedom and independence, to the extent that she would rather face old age alone than ever again allow another person to tell her what to do. Dana's midlife experience does not seem to have resulted in her searching for a purpose in life, as was the case with Noeleen, but rather a *period of deep introspection, gaining insight, and learning to like her self*.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, and the previous chapter, the stories of the two participants, Noeleen and Dana, were presented. Themes were derived from the text of each participant, using the hermeneutic method of analysis. The emerging themes of each participant were followed by a self-reflection on the part of the researcher, and a summary of the main ideas regarding midlife deemed from the text of each participant was provided.

In the following chapter, a comparative analysis will be performed between themes derived from the stories of the participants, and the literature review on midlife.

## CHAPTER SIX

### COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

#### Introduction

In this chapter, similarities and differences between themes extracted from the two participants' stories will be discussed. A comparative analysis will also be undertaken, between themes on the midlife experience that were derived from the two participants' stories, and previous literature on midlife, to include as many voices as possible.

#### **Themes that were identified.**

Themes regarding the midlife experience that emerged from the two participants' stories were the following:

- From connection/disconnection with others throughout life, to connection with self at midlife.
- From helplessness and feeling at the mercy of circumstances to overcoming adversity and taking control at midlife.
- From re-enacting old patterns to re-assessing life and breaking old patterns at midlife.
- From disruption and chaos to discovering peace at midlife
- From being constantly uprooted to putting down roots at midlife.
- From denial to confronting reality at midlife.
- From dependence on others throughout life to independence at midlife.
- From a sense of meaninglessness to finding new meaning at midlife.
- Midlife 'crisis'.

The abovementioned themes will be compared with existing literature relating to midlife. In the discussion the similarities and differences in the two participants' stories regarding a particular theme, will also become clear.

**Theme: From connection/disconnection with others throughout life, to connection with self at midlife**

Noeleen's life story describes the importance of the connections and disconnections with significant others in her life, such as her mother, father, husband, children and friends. These connections and disconnections have a particular significance, as they appear to have shaped the person she now is, at midlife. From the mature perspective of midlife, Noeleen was able to evaluate how these connections and disconnections have played a role in helping her to determine the person she wants to be, allowing her to connect with herself at midlife. This seems to be in line with Levinson's (1980) belief that an important developmental task at midlife is to understand that destruction and creation are universal processes. Understanding these processes and evaluating the part they have played in life, enables individuals to recognize what has been done to them by others and what they have done to others. This may be a painful process, but assuming greater control over destruction and creation processes is the developmental task at the midlife stage of life. Noeleen, at midlife, appears to have reflected on the effect that significant people in her life have had on her, as well as being aware of the effect she has had on others. For example, she appears to be aware of the effect her alcohol abuse had on her husband, and how their relationship suffered as a result. Kvale (1990) points out that one of the prime assumptions of developmental psychologists is that the unit of study is the single individual, or the single self changing over time. Interactions are seen as the outcomes of autonomous individuals acting together. Feminist theorists, however, argue that the notion of the independent, single self is an integral part of the liberal humanist tradition that rejects the possibility of viewing individuals as co-creators of action. Therefore many theorists recommend a turn to relational processes as the source of a new theory and propose that the unit of analysis becomes a dyad, or relational group, rather than the individual (Gergen, 1990). Instead of focusing on the lives of individual adult women, the study of relational networks is proposed, that encompasses inter-generational activities, family relations and social group performance. People would then be known through their participation within a particular framework, and the social group would be of major concern (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

Noeleen's description of her connection and disconnection with significant others throughout her life is an example of how her relational network defined the person she is at midlife, and brought her to a point at midlife that determined how she would experience midlife. For example, her relationship with her mother showed her how not to be a mother, and how not to live her life. Her disconnection from others led to her alcohol abuse, but the insight that midlife brought to her, allowed her to understand how this disconnection had negatively affected her life, and to make the required changes necessary for her own sense of fulfillment. Dannefer (1984) states that the effects of 'socialization' are often underestimated. The effects of context upon the individual's physical and psychosocial development are disproportionately large compared to other species. The human being develops as an open system and an adequate understanding of development must take note of the environment within which the system interacts. Development needs to be understood as socially organized.

Connection and disconnection with family and friends were also important in Dana's life, helping her, at midlife, to understand how she had relied on others throughout her life. This realization led to the joy she felt at making her own decisions and becoming independent at midlife, thereby allowing her to connect with herself. A national survey conducted by the American Board of Family Practice revealed that one of the important goals of midlife was improving relationships with family and friends (American Board of Family Practice, 1990). This goal is evident in Dana's explanation of how she, at midlife, appreciates the value of the strong connections she has with her children, mother, brother, sister, and her friends. Marks and Lambert (1998) found that unmarried individuals reported higher levels of personal growth and autonomy than married individuals at midlife. Dana's disconnection from her husband, at midlife, appears to have allowed her to discover her own autonomy, and her personal growth is evident in her descriptions of how she discovered that she had her own opinions, could make her own decisions and enjoy her independence.

Lifespan theorists propose that age-graded, history-graded, and non-normative influences all play a part in producing similarities and differences in developmental opportunities. The age-graded influence refers to biological conditions normatively linked to chronological age, such as menopause.

History graded influences represent contextual influences that affect development. Non-normative conditions refer to the life circumstances of an individual (Baltes, 1979). In Dana's case, the age-graded influences of midlife appear to have been of little importance to her, as she was trying to cope with the non-normative condition of her divorce, and final disconnection from her husband. History graded influences were also of importance as Dana's context underwent a change which she found difficult to adapt to. Therefore, history graded and non-normative influences appear to have been of importance in determining Dana's midlife experience and personal growth. From a social constructionist perspective, Freedman and Combs (1996), maintain that no one self is truer than any other, and that different selves come to the fore in different contexts. People have multiple experiences of self in multiple contexts. Narrative subverts the notion of a 'true self' and suggests that people are communities of selves, with each person containing varying points of view and a multitude of voices. Dana's connection and disconnection with significant others in different contexts appears to have brought forth 'different selves', different points of view and a different voice. Her disconnection from her husband, at midlife, placed her in a context where she went from being a dependent person, to being alone for the first time in her life, finding independence, and learning that she had her own opinions and that people valued them. She connected with her true self, and in doing so found her own voice. Hoffman (1990) favours social constructionism because it recognizes an evolving set of meanings emerging from interactions between people. These meanings may not exist inside what we think of as an individual 'mind' but are part of a flow of constantly changing narratives. These complex life stories would emphasize the notion of change as unpredictable, rather than stable and well-defined.

Dana's description of how the unpredictable change of her disconnection from her husband led to her valuing her connections with her family and her connection with her self, is an example of how a new set of meanings emerged, at midlife, through her interactions with other people. Dannefer (1984) states that the organism is *constituted* as a human being in interaction with the environment and is continually reconstituted throughout life. Characteristics that seem to 'develop' are actually produced, sustained, or modified. Lynch (1997) also believes that personal identity is formed not only out of particular linguistic forms of a particular context and culture, but it is also formed as a process of negotiation with those around us. Personal identity may be viewed as the product of social interaction. Dana's discovery of her own personal identity at midlife, may be viewed as a product of her social interactions throughout life.

**Theme: From helplessness and feeling at the mercy of circumstances to overcoming adversity and taking control at midlife**

Noeleen's life story is characterized by feelings of helplessness and being at the mercy of circumstances she could not control, to overcoming these feelings and taking control of her life at midlife. She describes how her life was affected by the constant arguments between her parents, and then by their divorce, which set off a chain of events in which Noeleen was moved to different countries, towns, and schools, never staying in one place long enough to make friends. When she grew older, Noeleen's circumstances led to her life being controlled by her alcohol abuse. It was only as midlife approached, that Noeleen was able to overcome adversity and feelings of helplessness, and take control of her life. Lachman (2001) notes that many people have experienced midlife in positive terms, reporting feelings of more personal control and freedom, financial security, and opportunities for exploring new interests, growth and fulfillment. Helson and Wink (1992) examined personality change in women from the early 40's to the early 50's and hypothesized that these women would increase in emotional stability, masculinity, cognitive breadth and skill, and that there would be a decrease in femininity.



They further hypothesized that this increase in stability would be constructive rather than regressive, that the increase in masculinity would mean a gain in decisiveness and confidence, and that a decrease in femininity would result in a reduction in dependence and vulnerability. These hypotheses seemed to be supported in Noeleen's story. The findings of this study seem to be in line with Noeleen's experiences, in the way she took control of her life at midlife, stopped abusing alcohol, and found the confidence to make decisions regarding goals she had set and wished to achieve for herself. This seems to be in direct contrast to Freud's (1965) theory on the biological role of women, that stressed that for a woman to achieve mature development, she must renounce masculine activity and accept her feminine nature, governed by passivity. From a social constructionist perspective, James (1988) asserts that women have the potential for much richer identity resolutions at midlife, than they do during earlier phases of life. Gergen (1990) believes that a shift in current theorizing practices, in the culture at large, that recognize women's contributions to society, could result in women claiming new identities, obliterating negative, limited self-dimensions. Noeleen, at midlife, appears to have overcome the popular Western cultural narrative describing women's middle age in terms of menopause and the empty nest. Overcoming feelings of helplessness and taking control of her life, Noeleen focused on how she, as an individual, could achieve her goals, attain self-actualization, and contribute to society. Bateson (1990) found that as women 'compose a life', themes derive from a diversity of times and places as well as the woman's own feelings of self, dreams and her work life. Crises in any of these areas trigger changes that influence the developmental process occurring within women during midlife. Noeleen's description of overcoming adversity and taking control of her life at midlife, appears to be in line with the postmodern view, which allows diversity, flexibility, and the space to author a story informed by one's own meaning, memories and perceptions (Doan, 1997).

Dana's life story also describes feelings of helplessness and being at the mercy of circumstances, particularly when her father died, her brother emigrated, and her husband divorced her.

Dana realizing, at midlife, that she had been dependent on the men in her family throughout her life to make decisions for her, was able to overcome the turmoil caused by her divorce, and take control of her life. Based on their longitudinal study of women between the ages of 43 and 52, Helson and Wink (1992) noted that feelings about life in the areas of turmoil and identity questioning were rated higher in the early 40s than in the early 50s. Dana, in her early 40s, experienced turmoil and questioned her own identity. However, this appeared to occur as a result of her divorce. Had this life event not occurred, would she have experienced turmoil and identity questioning as a developmental stage, regardless of the life events occurring in her own personal context? Perhaps a combination of having reached a developmental stage at midlife that led to her questioning her own identity, and the turmoil caused by the life event of her divorce, allowed Dana to overcome feelings of helplessness and find a personal identity, taking control of her life. Levinson (1980) believed that midlife is a time when both masculine and feminine aspects of one's personality must be accepted and integrated. From a social constructionist perspective, Gergen (1990) notes how psychological theories of how women experience midlife are restricted, negative and scarce, focusing on the woman as a biological creature, especially a mother, and how she inevitably goes into a decline after reaching the age of forty. Little attention has been paid to women's life narratives. Dana's description of how she found her personal identity at midlife and began to enjoy life for the first time as an independent woman, making her own choices, appears to be in line with Gergen's view that psychological theories that focus on the biological role of women, without taking into account women's life narratives, do not give an accurate account of women's midlife experience. Dana's description of her midlife experience further appears to link with lifespan theorist's description of plasticity of development, which refers to the fact that any developmental outcome is one of numerous possible outcomes. The implication of plasticity in understanding midlife development is that any findings on what midlife is like, is open to modification given the provision of appropriate circumstances (Lachman, 2001).

**Theme: From re-enacting old patterns to re-assessing life and breaking old patterns at midlife**

Noeleen's re-assessment of life at midlife led to the breaking of old patterns that she had been re-enacting throughout her life. For example, looking back at the relationship she had had with her mother throughout life, gave her the insight regarding how NOT to be a mother, thereby breaking a possible family pattern of parental abuse and neglect. Although she followed a family pattern of alcohol abuse through much of her adult life, re-assessment at midlife enabled her to discern the harmful aspects of this pattern, and to stop abusing alcohol. Neugarten et al. (1965) argued that during midlife, the adult's sense of time and timing play a role not seen in earlier development. The blending of past, present and future becomes a psychological reality and allows individuals a sense of self across time, or a sense of their own life cycle. This appears to have been the case with Noeleen, and her sense of self across time appears to have enabled her to discern family patterns that have been re-enacted, how these patterns have affected her, and to determine the necessity of breaking harmful patterns. According to life-span theory, development extends from conception until death, and the particulars of any given life phase need a point of comparison to be identified (Lachman, 2001). The insight Noeleen appeared to acquire at midlife regarding the re-enactment and breaking of harmful patterns throughout her life, implies that she now had a point of comparison from which to understand how differing contexts may have created patterns that have influenced her life. According to Dickerson and Zimmerman (1996), the social constructionist perspective locates meaning in an understanding of how ideas and attitudes are developed within a social, community context. This viewpoint considers the development of cultural narratives that are formed by, and in turn influence, people and then take on normative views against which people measure themselves. Cultural constructions are considered as the context that supports the development of certain problems. The pattern of alcohol abuse evident in Noeleen's adult years may be seen as an example of how her ideas and attitudes were developed within a social, community context.

That is, she was exposed, from an early age, to the abuse of alcohol by both her parents and other members of her family. An example of a cultural narrative that perpetuated the pattern of abuse is Noeleen's use of the phrase "if you can't beat them, join them!" However, at midlife, Noeleen was able to understand how she was re-enacting this harmful pattern, and to break that pattern. Freedman and Combs (1996) assert that people, in interaction, construct their realities as they live them. Emotions, actions and personal traits are believed to be dialogically derived, not under autonomous internal control. Rather than focusing on the lives of individual adult women, the study of relational networks is proposed that encompasses inter-generational activities, family relations and social group performance. The patterns established, re-enacted and ultimately broken, which appear in Noeleen's story, seem to be the result of relational networks encompassing inter-generational activities, family relations and social group performance. Noeleen appears to have constructed her own reality as she interacted with others throughout her life. At midlife, Noeleen was able to recognize the significance of these relational networks in establishing patterns and constructing not only her own reality, but also the way she experienced midlife. Fraser and Nicholson's (1988) idea of postmodern-feminist theory looking more like a tapestry composed of threads of many different hues, concurs with the idea of patterns shaping and influencing Noeleen's life and her midlife experience.

Re-assessment of life at midlife brought insight to Dana regarding family patterns that had been broken, and wisdom and caution regarding re-enacting harmful patterns in the future. She understood that she had tried to re-enact the family pattern of the 'fairy tale' marriage, to the extent that she had, for a time, denied the fact that her marriage was not a happy one. However, breaking this family pattern proved to be advantageous for Dana, as getting divorced allowed her to discover her own unique characteristics and capacities. The experiences she had shared with her husband gave her the insight, at midlife, that it was possible to re-enact this harmful pattern in the future. The wisdom that midlife had brought her allowed Dana to exercise caution in her future relationships, and not to repeat harmful patterns. Social constructionists consider who is acting on whom in what context.

People are not regarded as individuals in the sense that they are isolated, but are seen as single places of resonance within a field of human forces, pulling and pushing the participant in different directions. They continually influence, and are influenced by others (Owen, 1992). This view appears to link to Dana's explanation of how interactions with others throughout life, and the patterns formed by these interactions, influenced her personal development and how she experienced midlife. Social constructionists focus on how problems are encouraged by particular meaning systems constructed within the larger culture. These meaning systems influence people to see only certain ways of being as a possibility (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996). Dana's desperate attempt to preserve an unhappy marriage may be seen as an example of a problem being encouraged by the particular meaning system, or pattern, of the 'perfect marriage' constructed within her social context, influencing her to see this as the only possibility open to her. Only by breaking this pattern, or meaning system, at midlife, was Dana able to discover other possibilities available to her, such as an independent existence free from dominance and control. Gergen (1990) believes that a constructionist orientation suggests narrative forms of developmental theory less concerned with meeting developmental task demands, future goals and logical endpoints, than with carrying out multiple relational patterns. Dana's story appears to link with the notion of the importance of relational patterns in defining how she experienced midlife, as opposed to adult stage theorists' emphasis on midlife developmental task demands and the setting of future goals.

**Theme: From disruption and chaos to discovering peace at midlife**

As a child Noeleen was exposed to constant arguments between her parents, and the disruption caused by her uncle and his wife moving in with the family. She was then taken to a boarding school in England, and left there, without any explanation. Noeleen was later subjected to the effects of her father's second divorce, coming home to find that her stepmother had left, with Noeleen's brothers, without saying good-bye to her. As a married woman, Noeleen's story was still characterized by disruption and chaos.

She describes her alcohol abuse, which led to problems in her marriage and other areas of her life. Life-span theory describes development as the lifelong change in adaptive capacity influenced by a constant process of the individual's interaction with changing contexts, including historical transformations of society (Lachman, 2001). Noeleen had to adapt constantly to the changing contexts in her life, and the disruption and chaos that accompanied these changes. Noeleen appears to have experienced midlife as a time of discovering peace for the first time in her life. After much self-appraisal and re-evaluation of her past, Noeleen stopped abusing alcohol and set goals for the future. Her relationship difficulties appear to have been resolved. With the maturity and insight midlife brought to her, Noeleen was able to make peace with her mother. She appears to have achieved a sense of peace by purchasing a plot, studying holistic healing and joining Hospice, in order to achieve her goal of healing herself, and others, holistically. Life-span theorists refer to the term 'transactional adaptation' which implies that it is not only psychological functioning that changes with age, but also contexts, and the functional consequences of development (Lachman, 2001). Noeleen's psychological functioning appears to have changed at midlife, in that she was able to re-evaluate her relationships with others from a mature perspective. Her context changed at midlife, when she bought a plot in order to achieve her goals, and the functional consequences of these changes in her development, appear to have led Noeleen to discovering a sense of peace for the first time in her life.

The opposite appears to be the case with Dana, who seems to have gone from peace and stability, to disruption and chaos as she approached midlife. Dana describes her blissful, privileged childhood, and the 'fairy tale' marriage her parents had. As opposed to Noeleen's parents, Dana never saw her parents argue, and believed that that was how all marriages should be. She adored her father, and had a very close relationship with her brother, Ken. Although Dana was moved from town to town, and to different boarding schools as a child, this did not appear to have a disruptive effect on her. She explains how she 'kind of fell into marriage', and that the marriage went well for a time.

Dana gave birth to two children, of whom she is very proud. However, this peaceful existence was disrupted, for Dana, in early midlife, when she discovered that her husband was having an affair, and the marriage ended in divorce. She was no longer defined as a wife, and her role of mother changed, when both her children left home and went to live overseas. Therefore, early midlife, for Dana, appears to have been characterized by disruption and chaos, as she learned to redefine her role in society, and found herself alone for the first time in her life. However, as midlife progressed for Dana, she discovered the joy of being independent and making her own choices and decisions. The confusion brought about by her divorce, appears to have given way to a sense of peace, once again, as Dana became accustomed to her new role, and began to enjoy life as an independent woman. Dana's midlife experience appears to be in line with Gould's (cited in Santrock, 1992) belief that although midlife is as turbulent a developmental period as adolescence, striving to handle crises during middle adulthood will probably produce a happier healthier lifestyle. Life-span theorists maintain that development implies growth, or gains, as well as decrements or losses (Lachman, 2001). For example, Dana, at midlife, experienced the loss of her marriage and the role of being a wife, as well as the loss of the mothering role when her children left home. She was alone for the first time in her life, which could be viewed, according to life-span theory, as a loss. However, Dana gained a sense of peace in discovering the joy of independence and in being self-sufficient for the first time in her life, which could be seen as a gain. According to Lachman (2001), research on midlife development is characterized by a tie in the amount of gains and losses experienced. While some areas show progress, others have begun to decline.

**Theme: From being constantly uprooted to putting down roots at midlife**

This theme emerged from Noeleen's story as she described how she constantly moved from one place to another as a child, and as an adult, only finding stability once she reached midlife. As a child she was moved from the Bahamas to a boarding school in England, and then to South Africa where the family moved from town to town. As a result Noeleen never remained in one place long enough to make friends and this appears to have contributed to Noeleen's feelings of insecurity and isolation.

As a married adult, the family moved from South Africa to England for a number of years, and Noeleen explains that although the family became closer, she missed her friends and family in South Africa, and the loneliness she experienced resulted in the beginning of her alcohol abuse. However, at midlife, Noeleen finally ‘put down roots’, purchasing a plot, planting herbs, and planning a future as a holistic healer. Noeleen describes her joy at planting a seed and watching it grow, and she explains how ‘the good earth earths her’, expressing her appreciation at finally attaining a sense of stability at midlife, after lacking one for so many years. Life-span theorists, referring to the allocation of resources at midlife, place midlifers in a position between the young and the old. In some domains, resources are used for growth and in others, individuals are investing resources in maintenance, repair and management of loss (Lachman, 2001). Noeleen, at midlife, appears to have used the resources available to her to establish a sense of stability in her life, while repairing the psychological damage she experienced through being constantly uprooted throughout her life. According to Crary, O’ Connor and Wolfe (1990) bringing an era of life to a close and initiating the next, changes the life structure. New contexts are created which often result in increased conflict between the individual’s life contexts. Individuals have needs for stability that are a source of resistance to the changes that take the individual into the unknown. In spite of this the midlife transition is a time when many life structures become more complex, flexible, and self-determined, and offers potential for a wide range of needs. Noeleen, however, had lacked stability throughout her life, and the midlife transition for her appears to have been a time when she initiated change to create stability, as opposed to those who resist change for fear of losing stability.

Dana, however, does not appear to have experienced the same sense of lacking stability throughout life. Although Dana’s family moved many times when she was a child, and she was sent to many different schools, she does not appear to have been inconvenienced, or distressed, by these changes. It is possible that Dana felt secure as a child, in that she did not experience the disruptive effects of her parents divorcing, or have to deal with alcohol abuse in the family, as did Noeleen.



Perhaps, feeling secure in the family enabled Dana to cope with many moves, and different schools, without the detrimental feelings of insecurity and isolation that Noeleen experienced. Dana appears to have felt secure in her marriage for many years, and her bonds with family and friends endured. However, as opposed to Noeleen, early midlife appears to have been a time when Dana lacked stability for the first time in her life. Although she remained in her home after her divorce, and was not physically ‘uprooted’, the emotional effects of her divorce appear to have disrupted her sense of stability, leaving her feeling confused, isolated, and insecure for a time. Levinson (cited in Crary, O’Connor & Wolfe, 1990) describes the adult life course as alternating phases of stability and change of the life structure. The life structure refers to the pattern of involvement in relationships, activities, roles and physical settings. It is a bridge between the inner self and the demands of society, and is a product of both forces. While the life structure allows one to adapt to one’s surroundings, it tends to outlive its usefulness after a period of time, because people often make life choices without truly understanding what these choices entail. The process of discovering what one has chosen raises new perspectives and needs, and the circumstances surrounding the individual often change in unpredictable ways. An example of a life structure that outlived its usefulness after a period of time, could possibly be Dana’s marriage. The phase of stability in the marriage ended in divorce, and a change in Dana’s life structure. This change in her life structure, meant changes in her relationships, activities and roles, although not her actual physical setting. Although Dana’s physical setting remained the same, she had to adapt to her new role as a single woman. She eventually understood that the life structure she had built for many years had outlived its usefulness, and new needs were raised in terms of Dana wanting to be independent and self-sufficient. Although her physical setting remained the same, Dana’s context changed in a way she had not predicted. Levinson (1980) proposed that in middle adulthood there is a commitment to new choices as the desired future becomes clearer and the individual modifies life structures accordingly. As Dana adjusted to her new circumstances, she appears to have regained a new sense of emotional stability as midlife progressed.

**Theme: From denial to confronting reality at midlife**

Noeleen describes how she used denial as a coping strategy for most of her life, until she finally confronted reality at midlife. As a child Noeleen denied the fact that her father could have played any part in the disintegration of her parent's marriage. Instead she perceived her mother as 'all bad', while perceiving her father as 'all good'. She was separated from her mother at an early age, and chose to blame her mother for breaking up the family, while denying the fact that her father could have played a contributing role. As an adult, Noeleen denied the feelings of emptiness and lack of fulfillment she was experiencing, and used alcohol as a coping strategy to ignore these feelings. She also tried to deny these feelings by socializing and keeping busy. However, these feelings never disappeared, and at midlife, Noeleen acknowledged that the coping strategy of denial that she had employed throughout her life, had not been effective. According to Neugarten et al., (1965), middle-age adults believe themselves to have shown personal growth since their youth and anticipate further personal growth in the future. Awareness of one's own life cycle allows the individual to compare one's own progress through life with the expected, or normative, societal timing of major events and transitions. This 'normal life cycle' results in individuals comparing themselves to others in terms of how they are facing the challenges of midlife (Lachman, 2001). Research has shown that individuals carry stereotypes about what should have been accomplished by midlife (Krueger, Heckhausen, & Hundertmark, 1995). Noeleen's feelings of emptiness, and not having accomplished anything, appear to link to Neugarten's assertion (Neugarten et al., 1965), as she finally abandoned the coping strategy of denial, and faced reality. Feeling that she had achieved nothing could have been the result of comparing herself with stereotypical expectations of what should have been accomplished by midlife. Noeleen, at midlife, confronted these feelings and the reality of her situation. In their study of the turning points in the lives of midlife and older women, Leonard and Burns (1999) found that the most frequently reported turning points were personal growth experiences, involving psychological 'self-work', such as changing one's lifestyle. After re-assessing her situation and re-appraising her past, Noeleen's psychological 'self-work' resulted in a change in lifestyle.

She began to understand that her feelings of emptiness could have been related to relationship difficulties she had experienced in the past. She resolved feelings of hostility she held towards her mother, understanding, from a mature perspective, the difficulties her mother must have experienced. Noeleen stopped abusing alcohol, thereby improving her relationship with her spouse. She acknowledged that she felt like a 'no one' because she had never considered her own needs and what she wanted to achieve with her life. At midlife, Noeleen experienced a sense of urgency that time was speeding by. Acknowledging the fact that she did not have forever to achieve her life goals, she put a plan into action in order to achieve her goals, and experience fulfillment in her life.

Dana, on the other hand does not appear to have used denial as a coping strategy, except for a short period of time when she denied that there were difficulties in her marriage. Dana explains, in her story, that her mutable nature allowed her to accept whatever came her way. Unlike Noeleen, Dana did not have a traumatic childhood, and her accepting nature appears to have allowed her to depend on others, throughout her life, to provide for her, without questioning what her needs were, or what she wanted to achieve for herself. Dana, therefore, did not have a need to use denial as a coping strategy until she reached midlife. At midlife Dana, like Noeleen, had to confront reality, but for different reasons. Dana had to cope with the life event of her divorce, and the consequences of that divorce. For example, she had to face the reality that she was no longer someone's wife, that her children had left home, and that she had to learn to cope with living life on her own. Leonard and Burns (1999) perceived significant life events as the means by which individuals incorporate important changes into their life story. These events do not necessarily shape the person's life, but they do represent the person's *experience* of that shaping. It is the *subjective* importance of experiences that count with the individual as opposed to researcher-chosen life events (Clausen, 1997). Dana, for example, confronting the reality of her divorce, discovered how meaningful significant relationships have been in defining the person she is today. Dana's description of her divorce, and how this event led to her discovering a 'new' independent self, is an example of the subjective importance that event played in shaping her life.

Confronting reality for Noeleen meant facing the fact that she was dissatisfied with what she had achieved up to that point in her life, and setting and achieving goals for the future. For Dana, confronting reality at midlife led to a period of self-exploration, and discovering qualities about herself that she had not been aware of. Confronting reality appears to have led to personal growth for both participants. Noeleen finally set about achieving her goals, while Dana discovered the joy of being independent and making her own choices and decisions. According to Crary, O'Connor and Wolfe (1990) when individuals progress through the midlife transition, questioning underlying values and experimenting through new relationships and activities can help to carry the individual through this time of development. To the extent that various life contexts can allow and support processes of introspection and experiment, the individual has greater chances to build a self-determined life structure responsive to the multiple needs of self and circumstances at midlife.

**Theme: From dependence on others throughout life to independence at midlife**

The two participants differed with regard to this theme. Noeleen appears to have become independent at an early age. After her parents divorced, she was left at a boarding school in England, where she had to be independent and take care of herself. Although Noeleen does not describe the relationship she had with her father when they moved to South Africa, it appears that Noeleen was often expected to fend for herself, being moved from town to town and having to get used to new schools. During her matric year, Noeleen came home to find that her stepmother had moved out, once again leaving Noeleen to take care of herself. Noeleen was only re-united with her mother after many years, and, she had to face her childhood, adolescence, getting married, and having children without the emotional support and care of her mother. It appears that Noeleen was an independent person, as she describes how she did not rush into marriage, even though she had a child. It seems that, had she been a dependent person, Noeleen would probably have married, rather than cope with supporting a child on her own. Midlife, for Noeleen, appears to have been a time of utilizing her independent nature to set and achieve future goals, and find meaning in her life, rather than discovering independence, as was the case with Dana.

Crary, O'Connor and Wolfe (1990) found that people in midlife transitions were experiencing underlying paradigm shifts of varying degrees. They defined these paradigm shifts as the underlying set of assumptions, beliefs, values, feelings and expectations that people hold. With a paradigm shift, the midlife transition initiates a change to a new level of development and adaptation. Noeleen appears to have been an independent person throughout her life, but she possibly underwent a paradigm shift during her midlife transition, resulting in an inner drive to do what she considered necessary to achieve her goals.

Dana's story, on the other hand, describes how she was dependent on male figures, namely, her father, her brother and her husband, until discovering her own independence at midlife. Coming to terms with her divorce when she reached midlife, Dana realized how she had always allowed these individuals to make decisions for her. Dana's divorce forced her into a situation where she had no choice but to become independent. Stewart and Ostrove (1998) note that some personality changes observed in currently middle-aged women, such as feelings of liberation may reflect limited choices in early adulthood because of gender stereotypes at the time. It is possible, therefore, that Dana's dependent relationships with the significant male connections she made throughout life, were a result of gender stereotypes at the time, and could be related to her feelings of liberation at finally experiencing independence at midlife. In their study on gender role identity, Helson and Wink (1992) revealed that the scales measuring masculinity/femininity showed the greatest magnitude of change in women between the ages of 43 and 52. Women in this study showed a decrease in feminine characteristics such as vulnerability. It is possible, therefore, that having to face divorce and being alone for the first time in her life was easier for Dana to cope with at midlife. At this stage of her life, the decrease in feminine characteristics such as vulnerability, allowed Dana to overcome her dependence on the male figures in her family, and to become independent. She valued this independence, and the fact that she could make her own choices, so much so, that she appears to be very wary of getting involved in another relationship and letting another person control her life in the future.

From a social constructionist perspective, James (1988) asserts that women have the potential for much richer identity resolutions at midlife, than they do during earlier phases of life. Dana's discovery of her own independence links to this assertion, in that she appeared to discover a new identity at midlife. Social constructionism focuses on how problems in society are encouraged by particular meaning systems, for example patriarchy, constructed within the larger culture. People are influenced to see only certain ways of being as a possibility, by these meaning systems. Those afforded a position of power by the dominant culture stand to gain from these subjugating narratives that specify how women, for example, should be (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996). Dana's dependence on the significant males in her life to make decisions for her could have been influenced by the meaning system of patriarchy evident in the dominant culture she grew up in. However, the advent of midlife, appears to have allowed Dana to recognize this fact, and to overcome feelings of helplessness and dependence, striving to assert herself, value her own opinions, and become independent.

**Theme: From a sense of meaninglessness to finding new meaning at midlife**

Midlife appeared to be a time when Noeleen discovered new meaning in her life, referring to the way she took responsibility for her life, set about achieving her goals, explored the spiritual aspects of her life in order to find a purpose to life, and used this information to achieve self-actualization and reach her full potential. Erikson's 'epigenetic principle' states that anything that grows has a blueprint, and a special time of ascendancy. According to Erikson (cited in Santrock, 1992), development unfolds in this way, until all parts have arisen to form a functioning whole. He conceptualized the human life course in a sequence of eight stages. At each stage, the individual is challenged to resolve a particular crisis. The stage of 'generativity versus stagnation' is associated with the middle years. Generativity encompasses adults' plans of what they hope to do to leave a legacy of themselves to the next generation (Erikson, 1963).

Adults express generativity through teaching, nurturing and leading the next generation, while generating outcomes that aim to benefit the social system, promoting its continuity from one generation to the next (McAdams et al. 1993). Noeleen appears to have reached the stage of 'generativity versus stagnation' at midlife, expressing her need to be remembered for doing something meaningful in society, and making plans to grow a herb farm, leaving a legacy for future generations. Finding meaning through holistic healing appears to be an example of generating an outcome that would nurture and heal society. The virtue associated with successful negotiation of the 'generativity versus stagnation' stage is 'care', (Lachman, 2001), which Noeleen appears to have achieved through caring about the health of others. Gould (cited in Santrock, 1992) stated that people in their forties begin to feel a sense of urgency that life is speeding by, and that a sense of urgency is a natural reaction to this stage of life, helping to keep people on the path to adult maturity. Noeleen appears to have experienced this sense of urgency that her life was speeding by, and that she did not have forever to accomplish what she wanted to achieve. This sense of urgency could have promoted Noeleen's search for new meaning, thereby setting her on the path to achieving her goals. Although Levinson (1977) studied male adult development, his ideas are becoming increasingly applicable to women, because of their increasing involvement in the workplace. Levinson saw middle adulthood as a time when individuals lack, and are striving to find new meaning in their lives. Looking at one's achievements gained thus far, and questioning the meaning of these achievements in terms of life lived and life left to live, results in a crisis. Noeleen, at midlife, questioned what she had achieved in terms of life already lived, which she did not feel satisfied with, and looked to the future in terms of life left to live. Levinson referred to the midlife transitional period, which aims to terminate existing structures and to work towards the initiation of a new structure. This may be indicative of growth and maturity although it involves emotional turmoil and doubt (Levinson, 1977). Levinson associated the features of self-appraisal, re-appraisal of the past and the recognition of the finiteness of life with the midlife transition (Fiske, 1980).

Noeleen's midlife experience links to Levinson's theory in the following ways: As midlife approached, Noeleen's self-appraisal resulted in feelings of emptiness and lack of meaning in her life. Re-appraisal of her past led her to question what she had achieved up to that point in her life, what her role in life was, and what her values and priorities were. Recognizing the finiteness of life paved the way for Noeleen to set and achieve her goals, realizing that time was running out for her to put plans into action, and to have a meaningful existence. From a social constructionist perspective, Noeleen's search for new meaning in her life at midlife, may have been influenced by the meaning systems constructed within the larger culture. For example, Noeleen's feelings of inadequacy and not having achieved, may have occurred as a result of Western society's emphasis on achievement, resulting in her comparing herself to others, and to what, according to society's expectations, should have been achieved by midlife.

Dana, too discovered new meaning at midlife regarding aspects of her life that, up to that point, she had not considered. She found new meaning in the close relationships she has with members of her family. She realized, for example, that she had been the poorer for taking such a long time to get to know her sister as a person. Re-assessment of her life at midlife, also gave Dana a new appreciation of the value of the strong bond she has with her brother, her mother, and her children. Being alone for the first time in her life, Dana found new meaning in discovering aspects about herself that were only experienced at midlife. She realized that she had been dependent on others throughout life, and discovered the joy of being independent and making her own choices and decisions for the first time in her life. Vaillant's (cited in Santrock, 1992) adult stage of 'keeping the meaning versus rigidity', maintains that from approximately 45 to 55 years of age, adults become more relaxed if they have met their goals and accept the fact if they have not. At this time the concern is with extracting meaning from their lives and fighting against a rigid orientation. This stage appears to concur with Dana's midlife experience, in that, as opposed to setting goals and focusing on achievement, Dana found meaning in her life lived up to that point.



Levinson (1980) refers to the 'attachment-separateness polarity', which he explains as the dichotomy between being involved with the outside world and being introspectively involved with one's own inner world. The task, at midlife, is to achieve a new balance in outer-inner involvement. Dana appears to have experienced this polarity at midlife, as she evaluated the meaning of her relationships with others throughout life, and became introspectively involved with discovering her own independence and unique characteristics. The changes she discovered in herself appear to have given new meaning to Dana's life, and, at midlife she had to balance her need to retain these new characteristics and to have meaningful relationships with others in the future. For example, Dana expressed her fear of getting emotionally involved with men who would attempt to control her life in the future. Clausen (1993, 1997) theorized, from a social constructionist perspective, that people formulate their lives into a coherent and meaningful story, and that a person's life story then reflects a sense of who they are. According to Doan (1997), being part of the postmodern age offers the potential for diversity, flexibility, and the space to author a story informed by one's own meaning, memories and perceptions.

### **Theme: The 'midlife crisis'**

Although the 'midlife crisis' was not identified as a theme in the previous two chapters, the researcher included it in this chapter in order to assimilate information and provide a general overview of whether the participants experienced midlife as a time of 'crisis', or not.

According to Wethington (2000), the term 'midlife crisis' is a familiar description of prevalent experiences in midlife. The term describes personal turmoil and sudden changes in personal goals and lifestyle, resulting from the realization of ageing, physical decline, or entrapment in certain roles. According to this description, Noeleen appears to have experienced a stereotypical 'midlife crisis'. The personal turmoil she experienced is evident in her description of her feelings of emptiness and of feeling old. She felt that she had achieved nothing over the past 40 years, and questioned who she was and what her role in life was.

Noeleen describes feeling inept and incomplete, as well as feeling that she was a 'no one', not having made any contribution to society in any way. The personal turmoil Noeleen experienced led to sudden changes in her personal goals and lifestyle. She stopped drinking alcohol and set about planning her future and achieving her goals. Based on their longitudinal study of women between the ages of 43 and 52, Helson and Wink (1992) found evidence that pointed to uncertainty and strong affect in the early 40's, that gave way to calm and stability in the early 50's. As mentioned earlier, feelings about life in the areas of turmoil and identity questioning were rated higher in the early 40's than in the early 50's. Noeleen's personal feelings of turmoil and uncertainty occurred in her early 40's and appeared to give way to calm and stability as she took responsibility for her life and resolved her problems. Sheehy (cited in Lourens & Alpasian, 2002) believes that between the ages of 35 and 45 the so-called 'midlife crisis' develops. This is a time when self-evaluation takes place and thought is given to future prospects and the direction one's life is taking. Ageing becomes a reality and the realization that life is only temporary occurs at this time of life. According to this description, Noeleen appears to have undergone a typical 'midlife crisis', as she describes, in her story, a period of self-evaluation and how she pondered her future prospects and where her life was leading. She also became aware that she was ageing, and realizing that life is only temporary, she felt a sense of urgency to focus on her future prospects and achieve her goals. Levinson (1978) saw the 'midlife crisis' as an attempt for individuals to review their lives and reorder their priorities. Looking at one's achievements gained thus far, and questioning the meaning of these achievements in terms of life lived and life left to live, results in a crisis. A major task of midlife is to find a meaningful and adaptive balance between love and work. Noeleen certainly appeared, at midlife, to review her life and reorder her priorities. Looking at what she had achieved up to that point in her life, she felt extremely dissatisfied, resulting in the 'crisis' that allowed her to change her life. The 'crisis' Noeleen experienced, appears to have been advantageous for her, allowing her to make positive changes in her life. From a social constructionist perspective, White (1991) proposes that people make sense of their lives both through the cultural narratives they are born into, and the personal narratives they construct relative to the cultural narratives.

Certain narratives, in any culture, will become dominant over other narratives, specifying preferred and customary ways of behaving and believing, within that particular culture. Wethington (2000) states that what people read and hear may be as influential as personal experience in creating their beliefs about the world. The term 'midlife crisis' remains ubiquitous in popular culture, rather than the more neutral 'midlife transition' (Wethington, Cooper, & Holmes, 1997). In questioning this emphasis on stress, rather than growth, Wethington (2000) suggests that media attention and the attempts by social commentators and media pundits in search of opportunities to market information as products, arouse 'moral insecurities' that evoke a culture of fear. These fears create panic regarding ageing, regardless of whether life is going well for the individual. Cultural and social insecurities could manifest as fear of the future, and concerns over personal well-being. Noeleen's 'midlife crisis' could have been influenced by a dominant cultural narrative, put forth in the media, that promotes midlife as a time of crisis, rather than growth. She therefore could have perceived ageing in a negative light, creating fear regarding her future. Freedman and Combs (1996) maintain that although social realities may not be essentially true, that does not stop them from having real effects. Dannefer (1984) explains how cultural knowledge defines the course of development, and broadly shared norms of ageing and human development define what is acceptable and desirable. A clear basis therefore exists for analyzing the 'midlife crisis' as a socially constructed experience. Wethington (2000) believes that the term 'midlife crisis' remains a powerful metaphor and that people at midlife use the term as a tool for constructing meaning in their lives. It is possible that Noeleen used midlife, as a tool for creating a 'crisis' in her life, in order to construct meaning in her life.

Although Dana experienced a 'crisis' at midlife, this crisis was brought about by the life event of her divorce. She had to come to terms with the fact that her marriage had ended, that she was no longer defined by the roles of wife and mother, and that she was alone for the first time in her life. Dana, therefore, does not appear to have experienced the stereotypical 'midlife crisis' popularized in the media.

Wethington (2000), found in their telephone survey analyzing self-reports of midlife crises, that crises were attributed more to major life events that posed a severe threat and challenge during a very broadly-defined period of 'midlife', than to ageing. This appears to apply to Dana's 'midlife crisis', in that the crisis she experienced was attributed to her divorce, rather than becoming aware of ageing. Wethington (2000) notes that several major academic studies, using representative samples of the population, dispute the inevitability of the 'midlife crisis' for people in their forties. One possible explanation for the persistence of the belief in the midlife crisis is that researchers and middle-aged individuals hold different notions of what the midlife crisis means, and that researchers and theorists have used different definitions of the 'midlife crisis'. Wethington (2000, p. 86), proposes a simple definition, and suggests that "a midlife crisis is a difficult transition occurring at about the age of 40." Dana, according to this definition, appears to have experienced a 'midlife crisis'. However, Wethington (2000) states that stressors normally associated in popular lore with the 'midlife crisis', such as marital disruption, do not peak in midlife, and appear to be more characteristic of earlier periods of adulthood. This was not the case with Dana, who experienced her marital disruption at midlife. Life-span theorists note that for many people, midlife is connected to negative stereotypical expectations, believing that middle-aged people are crisis-stricken or bored and that midlife is a time of decline and despair (Lachman, 2001). The life-span view argues against such a simplistic view of development and conceptualizes development across the life-span as multidimensional and multidirectional, challenging theories of midlife development and ageing that focus exclusively on decrements (Baltes, 1993; Riley & Riley, 1989; Rowe & Kahn, 1987). As opposed to stage theorists, who stress the inevitability of a 'crisis' occurring at midlife, Dana's midlife experience appears to link to life-span theory in the sense that the 'crisis' she experienced at midlife was a result of her interactions with others, and her changing context. From a social constructionist perspective, Kruger (1994) suggests that due to the public attention the midlife crisis has received, it is likely that a social expectation about the 'right time for a midlife crisis' is emerging, and that this will reinforce its recurrence. However, this does not appear to have been the case with Dana, who appears not to have experienced the stereotypical 'midlife crisis' put forth in the media as a dominant cultural narrative.

Dana does, however, appear to have experienced a 'midlife crisis' as a result of following a dominant gender-line story to which most people conform. According to Helson and Picano (1990), the traditional gender-line story, in Western culture, defined women's identity in terms of biology, or wife and mother. Having to deviate from this traditional gender-line story because of her divorce, appears to have resulted in Dana's 'midlife crisis'. Her roles as wife and mother suddenly changed, and she had to re-define herself in terms of the role she now played in society. Owen (1992) explains that individuals are believed to be consistent in the type of appropriate behaviour they believe is open to them according to their role and status, and display behaviour according to the social rules and ethics of the community to which they belong. Dana's 'midlife crisis' could have occurred as a result of confusion regarding how to behave according to the social rules and ethics of the community, now that her role in society had changed.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, themes that emerged from the two participants' stories were discussed. Although each participant described the same stage of development, that is, midlife, their experience of this stage of life would inevitably differ in some respects, as each participant described her own unique context and life history. Themes that emerged from the two participants' stories were then compared with available literature on midlife. These themes cohered, in many respects, with pre-existing theories on midlife development. However, the themes also differed with some of the theories. Other themes may also have been identified by different researchers, but were not necessarily included in the dissertation. While common themes emerged from each participant's story, and these themes linked to some of the available theories on midlife development, it should be kept in mind that each person derived her own meaning from her midlife experience, based on her own personal history and life context.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

#### Introduction

This chapter will evaluate the present study in terms of strengths and limitations, as well as making recommendations for future research.

#### Evaluation of the present study

The aim of the present study was to allow women to give voice to their midlife experience, taking each participant's unique social context and personal history into account. This came about as a result of the researcher noting, from the available literature on midlife, that there appears to be little research available on women's personal narratives regarding their midlife experience. Waskel (1995), for example, noted that the majority of research conducted on middle age has been devoted to the study of men. Gergen (1990), referring to available research specific to midlife development on women, noted that women have been given little opportunity to develop life narratives that are not centred on biologically related episodes, suggesting that future research should consider other aspects of women's functioning. For this reason, a qualitative study on the midlife experience was undertaken, using the social constructionist epistemology to inform the research approach. It is believed that the research aim was achieved, as the participants provided their stories, explaining their subjective views on their midlife experiences. Each participant provided their life story, which allowed readers to gain an understanding of the participant's social context and personal history, and how this influenced the meaning derived from each participant's midlife experience. Understanding how each participant was influenced by their interactions with others, and the events occurring in their life, allowed the researcher to appreciate the value and importance of context in shaping the participant's way of experiencing their world.

It is believed that this understanding added value to existing research on midlife development, particularly those theories that perceive development as a sequence of 'stages', which all individuals are said to experience.

Theories such as these do not appear to take into account the fact that each person is a unique individual, affected by their own personal and social context, subjectively experiencing their world, and therefore deriving their own meaning from their midlife experience. Themes were derived from each participant's story, using the hermeneutic method of analysis. The following themes emerged from the stories:

- From connection/disconnection with others throughout life, to connection with self at midlife.
- From helplessness and feeling at the mercy of circumstances to overcoming adversity and taking control at midlife.
- From disruption and chaos to discovering peace at midlife.
- From being constantly uprooted to putting down roots at midlife.
- From denial to confronting reality at midlife.
- From re-enacting old patterns to re-assessing life and breaking patterns at midlife.
- From dependence on others throughout life to independence at midlife.
- From a sense of meaninglessness to finding new meaning at midlife.
- Midlife 'crisis'.

Each participant's social and personal context influenced the meaning they attributed to their midlife experience, and they therefore differed in this regard. However, common themes were derived from these stories, and may be useful to those hoping to gain a deeper understanding of how individuals experience midlife.

### Strengths of the study

#### Postmodern ontology

This study, in keeping with the postmodern ontology, emphasized context and respected each participant's subjective reality. Doan (1987) explains postmodernism as a belief in a multiverse of realities, cautioning against any singular account, that claims to be the sole truth. This study took into account that many truths are possible, and respected each participant's description of her midlife experience as authentic and unique.

As opposed to the modernist concern with facts and rules (Freedman & Combs, 1997), this study looked at the meaning derived from each participant's midlife experience. This study followed the social constructionist stance that it is not possible to make objective observations of the world from a neutral position, and that knowledge is not discovered, but created within a particular context (Dean & Rhodes, 1998). The researcher, therefore, attempted to understand the midlife experience from the perspective of each participant whose meaning, attitudes and ideas have developed within a social context, keeping in mind that the researcher's own social context, ideas and values affected her interpretation of the texts.

A social constructionist approach was followed in this study, focusing on how attitudes and ideas have developed over time and within a social context (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1986). Both Noeleen's and Dana's stories explained how the attitudes and ideas they hold at midlife have developed over time, and were influenced by their social context. These attitudes and ideas were similar in some respects, but often differed between participants. For example, both Noeleen and Dana differed in their attitude regarding what constitutes a midlife 'crisis'. Noeleen's idea of what constitutes a midlife 'crisis' could have been a social construction.



Her fear of getting old, and her feelings of emptiness regarding the fact that she felt she had achieved nothing in her life, could have been influenced by the stereotypical explanations of the midlife 'crisis' put forth in the media, and mentioned in social interaction with others. Dana experienced midlife as a 'crisis' too, brought about by the life event of her divorce. However, Dana's view of what constituted her midlife 'crisis' differed from Noeleen's view. As Dana explained, she did not have the 'luxury' of having a stereotypical midlife 'crisis' because she was too busy trying to cope with the effects of her divorce. Dana's midlife 'crisis' appears to have been the result of having to deviate from what she perceived as socially appropriate norms, roles and behaviour. She was suddenly no longer defined as a wife and mother, and had to cope with this reality. Her dependence on men, throughout her life, could have been influenced by the dominant cultural system of patriarchy, to which she had become accustomed, and she now had to change, becoming an independent woman. Dana's context differed from Noeleen's, and these differing contexts appear to have influenced how they experienced their midlife 'crises'.

Each participant's unique experience of their midlife 'crisis' appears to uphold the social constructionist notion that our consciousness and the way we relate to others, is taught by our society and culture (Owen, 1992), and that our realities and meanings are socially constructed (Dean & Rhodes, 1998).

#### Deconstruction of grand narratives

This study deconstructed the 'grand narratives', or discourses, pertaining to midlife, that have taken on a normative standard against which individuals measure themselves (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996). For example, in Western culture, a 'grand narrative' pertaining to midlife describes midlife as a time of 'crisis'. Another 'grand narrative' pertaining to midlife views women as biological creatures, perceived only in their biological roles of wife and mother. According to this 'grand narrative', women experience menopause at midlife, and, therefore, no longer fulfill a reproductive role in society. Therefore, women's lives lack meaning after midlife.

Dana, for example, appears to have been influenced by this cultural narrative. She defined herself according to this narrative, seeing her life as meaningful because she was a wife and a mother. The event of her divorce resulted in the 'crisis' she experienced at midlife, because she could no longer define herself in terms of this cultural narrative. However, once Dana had been through a process of self-appraisal and introspection, she discovered joy and freedom in being an independent woman. Midlife, for Dana, was a time of new discovery and personal growth, as opposed to the 'grand narrative's' prediction of meaninglessness and decline. Noeleen, after an initial period of turmoil, also experienced midlife as a time of connecting with herself and finally putting plans into action to achieve her future goals. After resolving many difficulties, Noeleen, at midlife, describes her future as bright, believing that she now has a purpose to fulfill in life, as opposed to the cultural narrative view that women go into a decline after the age of 40.

This study deconstructed relevant 'grand narratives' in terms of how they influenced the participants. It explains the way the participants measured themselves against these normative standards, and how they conformed to and deviated from these cultural narratives. Social constructionism holds that the life-world of individuals is constituted in language, and that language, therefore, should be the object of study.

Language helps to construct reality (TerreBlanche & Durrheim, 1999). This study upheld this view by using the participants' texts to examine 'midlife crisis discourse', or how the socially shared way in which people discuss the 'midlife crisis' affected the participants' views, and how they experienced this event.

#### Qualitative research approach

A qualitative research approach, that coheres with a social constructionist epistemology, was chosen for this study.

According to McLeod and Balamoutsou (1996, p.73) “the aim of qualitative human science research is to construct a representation of an area of human experience and action, a ‘local knowledge’ that promotes understanding with readers at a particular historical and cultural time and place.” The aim is not to generate causal proposition, but to suggest frameworks for making meaning. This study explored meaning derived from the midlife experience, taking the personal history and context of the participants into account, in order to promote deeper understanding and insight of this developmental period. The researcher developed a close relationship with the participants, and individual differences and context were explored. As opposed to the quantitative stance of objectivity, the researcher’s relationship with the participants was a subjective one. This required empathic understanding on the part of the researcher, which, according to Taylor (cited in Stiles, 1993), draws on the researcher’s own experience and on intersubjective meanings shared within a society.

#### Attention to women’s life narratives.

Gergen (1990) noted that psychological theories of how women experience midlife are restricted, negative and scarce, and advocated that more attention be paid to women’s life narratives. This study cohered with this view, and used interpretive research strategies to explore the life narratives of both Noeleen and Dana. As opposed to psychological theories which focus on the biological roles of women at midlife, this study explored the participants’ life contexts, highlighting their dreams, aspirations, roles that differ from the biological role, and meaning derived from their midlife experience. The researcher, being a woman experiencing midlife, shared the life world of the participants in this respect, lending credibility to the study.

#### Credibility and dependability

As explained in Chapter 3, the terms validity and reliability have been replaced with the terms credibility and dependability respectively, to cohere with the qualitative nature of this study. In terms of the qualitative conceptualization of these terms, both credibility and dependability were achieved in this study.

This study was credible to the extent that it produced convincing and believable findings. Triangulation was achieved as the researcher sought information from multiple sources, methods and theories on midlife. The researcher provided a coherent interpretation of the participants' texts, in the hope of providing growth regarding the reader's perspective of the midlife experience.

Dependability was achieved as rich and detailed descriptions of the participants' contexts showed the reader how the participants' opinions and actions were rooted in contextual interaction (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). Other facets of dependability, mentioned in detail in Chapter 3, were achieved. The researcher's orientation was disclosed and she made her cultural assumptions explicit. The researcher's internal processes while interpreting the participants' texts were described. Iteration was achieved, using the hermeneutic method of analysis, as repeated encounters of interpretation with the text were ensured. Using this method of analysis, grounding and interpretation were achieved by extracting themes from the text. Catalytic credibility was established to the extent that both participants expressed how therapeutic it was for them to write their own life narratives. They voiced the opinion that writing their life stories helped them to view their lives, and their midlife experience, from a new perspective. Reflexive credibility was achieved by changing the researcher's way of thinking as the 'hermeneutic cycle' was traversed. In this way, new understanding was achieved. 'Distanciation', as described in Chapter 3, was used in order to understand the context of the participants from outside the context, bringing new questions to light, and interpreting the participants' words in new ways. Differences between Noeleen's and Dana's stories were given the same priority as similarities, in order to gain deeper insight into what was unique and distinctive about each participant's individual context, and the events occurring within that context.

#### Limitations of the study

Because of the nature of the information collection technique used in this study, it was not possible to repeatedly check participants' reactions to interpretations.

The personal document study technique was used, and the researcher was supplied with the participants' texts, as opposed to the interview technique. Therefore, interaction on a personal level did not take place between researcher and participants. As a result, it was not possible to view participant's reactions to interpretations as they occurred, which may have compromised the dependability, or trustworthiness of the study. This may also have affected the testimonial credibility of the study, as the participants were not asked if they agreed with the interpretations.

Henning (2004) believes that an interpretation of a text is not *presuppositionless*. It is not possible for the researcher to 'jump outside' the understanding he or she lives in. In this study the interpretation of the texts was influenced by the researcher's own subjective understanding of her world. This affected the way the researcher interpreted the texts, and determined the particular themes that were extracted from the texts. Although the researcher's personal context was made explicit, it should be kept in mind that different themes and meanings could have been extracted by different readers.

Because of the time-consuming nature of qualitative research, it was not possible to use large samples in this study. In qualitative research, researchers look for universal principles by examining a small number of cases intensively, trying to understand phenomena in a holistic way. Researchers prefer to look at a few cases that highlight individual differences and context, as opposed to the less time-consuming nature of quantitative research that focuses on measurement, objectivity and causal relationships, using large samples. In qualitative research, samples are selected to enhance generalization to theory rather than to populations (Moon, Dillon & Sprenkle, 1990). In this study, according to the nature of qualitative research, the texts of only two participants were studied intensively. Therefore, although credibility was gained, a limitation of this study would be its generalizability to the population.

This study took only one culture into account. Social constructionism, the epistemology that informed this study, explores the way language and cultural narratives influence people to ascribe certain meanings to life events, and thereby, to construct their own reality. In this study, the researcher was interested in how cultural narratives influenced women's experience of midlife. Because of the time-consuming nature of qualitative research, it was not possible to explore the many different cultures and their cultural narratives, prevalent in South Africa. The fact that Western culture was the only culture explored in this study could be seen as a limitation of this study, as women from different cultural backgrounds may experience midlife in a different way to the participants in this study.

Another limitation of this study is that the two women participants came from the same social class. Neither Noeleen nor Dana appeared to experience any financial difficulties. It is possible that women from the same cultural background, but with differing financial circumstances, may experience midlife in a different way, and attribute different meaning to their midlife experience. For example, many women in South Africa are finding it difficult to 'make ends meet', as a result of the high unemployment levels in South Africa at the present time. These women may be experiencing midlife as a time of simply trying to survive, as opposed to a time of 'crisis', personal growth, or fulfillment, that women in a secure financial situation describe.

This study focused on women currently experiencing midlife. Therefore, cohort differences in how women experience midlife were not fully investigated, and may be considered a limitation of this study. For example, fifty years ago, women may have experienced midlife in a different way to women today, considering the changing meaning systems in society over time. A dominant patriarchal society at that time, may have influenced women, who defined themselves according to their biological role in society, to experience midlife in a different way, to the way modern women experience midlife.

### **Recommendations for future research.**

A recommendation for future research would be to explore how women from different cultures experience midlife in the South African context. Because South Africa has a diverse cultural heritage, it would be of interest to explore, from a social constructionist perspective, these differing cultural narratives, meaning systems and languages, and how they influence the meaning women ascribe to midlife.

As mentioned earlier, women from within one culture, but from differing financial contexts, may experience midlife in different ways, and this may be an area for future research. Those struggling to cope with their financial burdens, for example, may not have the time to have a stereotypical 'midlife crisis', searching for new meaning and purpose in life.

It would be of interest to study cohort differences in women's midlife experiences in the South African context. The last 100 years have brought many historical changes to the South African context, as well as changes in meaning systems and cultural narratives. Although it may be difficult to locate texts describing women's midlife experiences over a long period of time, possible sources may be autobiographies and personal diaries, if not too difficult to locate.

### **Conclusion**

This study provided valuable information concerning how women experience midlife. The importance of context, culture and social relationships in determining meaning attributed to the midlife experience was highlighted. Themes extracted from the texts of the participants provided deeper insight into the influences affecting how women experience midlife, and may prove useful to those working with women of this age. Strengths and limitation of the study were explored, and recommendations for future research were made. These included the future study of differing cultures, financial contexts, and cohort differences, in the South African context.

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# **APPENDIX A**

## NOELEEN'S STORY

So what's up with turning 40? And well you may ask! Turning 40 was a milestone in my life. I did not wish to be there just yet. Suddenly I felt so old, my children seemed so young still, and the big questions I asked myself were: So, what the hell have you achieved in the last 40 years? What have you actually DONE with your life? Have you even set goals? Do you have any goals? Who the hell are you? Mother, wife, daughter, sister..... (a slave to all). What do YOU want for YOU? Man, turning 40 made me angry – with myself of course, because I realized I had overlooked a very important person in my life – and that person was ME.

Those questions made me look back on my life, and forward into the future.

Looking back on where I came from was a lot easier than looking to the future and knowing what I wanted and where I wanted to go.

So here's the past:

I was born in Singapore on the 20<sup>th</sup> November 1960 to a South African father and a British mother. My sister was born on 12<sup>th</sup> May 1962. We left Singapore for the Bahamas in 1962. Life progressed in the Bahamas as a sort of illusion – moments I can remember of happiness, shopping with my dad at the hardware store, and glorious days spent on the powder white beaches and in crystal blue waters, interspersed with the painful fighting of my parents. My father was a woman's man in those days, and very fond of alcohol, and my mother was an insecure socialite with a penchant for alcohol and slimming tablets. There were many nights we could not sleep for the screaming and hysterical tears and accusations of my mother being directed towards my father. Naturally as "daddy's precious girl," I could not see or understand how he was hurting her. What I could see, though, was my mother trying to stab my father in a drunken rage. I detested her..... how could she possibly try to hurt my father like that? Life progressively got worse when my uncle moved in.

He is an alcoholic and used to wet his pants when he had too much to drink. He also tried to slit his wrists one night after an argument with his wife, who now lived with us too, along with my baby cousin. My father finally moved out, and into a flat with an airhostess. My sister and I moved into a house with my mother. Life was unbearable – she drank all the time and had boyfriends in bed who were all naked ..... oooh, she was disgusting.

I remember being bitten by a centipede and running inside crying hysterically, because I thought I would now die. I sat next to my mother on the floor, pleading with her to do something, because of what had happened, and I voiced again the thought I may die, and she told me to go ahead and die..... followed by peals of drunken laughter. I think my feelings for my mother totally died that day. Maybe I wished too, that the centipede had taken my life. Unfortunately/fortunately it did not.

In 1969 my sister and I came home from school one day, (to my father's flat) and found a whole lot of winter clothing laid out for us to try on..... strange, we never wore winter clothing in Nassau. It was far too hot for that! Before we could even ask questions, we were packed, taken to the airport, and flown to England, left at a boarding school, without a word of farewell or even an explanation of what on earth had just happened. I did not see my mother again for 23 years. (No big loss I thought for most of the time, or so I thought.....). At the airport, I did recall my mother's words "If your father takes you to the airport, hide in the toilets and I will come and fetch you" – I don't think so mommy dearest! Why would I do that when I really didn't like you?

During the two years spent at boarding school, my father married the airhostess, who was only 15 years older than me. We emigrated to South Africa in 1971. Again we were collected from boarding school, again no explanations offered, and we were flown to South Africa. Once here, a round of new schools began, with a total of 4 primary schools in different towns. As an extremely shy child, I absolutely hated starting a new school. Making friends was not easy, and I found that I had no sooner made friends, than we were packed up and off again.

I finally settled into high school and thankfully remained there for the entire duration of my high school education. This was extremely important to me, as I still have friends that I made while there. Their families became my family. I suppose this was a coping mechanism, as my father's second marriage had started to fall apart. I did by now, have two half brothers – a bonus in my life (now, not so much then, as I was quite jealous of the attention they received).

In 1978, while writing prelims for matric, I arrived home to find the house had been emptied. Funny, this time, I was left behind – only the furniture was gone! My stepmother had moved out with my brothers. I passed matric, went to secretarial college for a year and then started work, and started my own independent life. I had a boyfriend in school, and we stayed together through all the upheaval. He helped me get through a lot of the emotional turmoil – at least somebody loved me ..... That was something to be pleased about!!

My father remarried a nutcase. She tried to shoot him on a number of occasions, as well as fake her own suicide a few times. That marriage did not last either.

I finally married my high school sweetheart after a lot of soul searching – I felt I had been through so many divorces; I did not so much not want to get married, as I really did not want to get divorced. I already had a daughter with him, and found myself pregnant again with my eldest son. I decided that as much as I feared marriage, we had a commitment to our children. A decision that was not made lightly, and one that, for the best part, I have not regretted. We bought a house and our third child, a boy, was born.

I met my mother again shortly after the birth of my son. She came out from the Bahamas for a few weeks. I could not believe that I came from her ..... she was, in my opinion, the most self-centred person I had ever encountered. I fully expected her to move to South Africa, having now found her two long lost daughters. This will never happen.

While she professed that “family is number one”, she would shoo her grandchildren away if she was reading a book, or needing to rest or gather her emotions at the prospect of leaving us all and going home!

I could not quite believe her reactions. I really felt for two weeks, she could put her needs to one side and seize every opportunity to interact with her family. I felt intense resentment towards her. She seemed unable to express her love in any other way, than to purchase goodies for us all. That somehow made me think again about how life had been with her. My sister and I had a walk-in toy cupboard, filled from ceiling to floor with every imaginable toy.... yet, I don't think we ever experienced love from her. She was a smother mother, and I used to have asthma when living with her.

She created that much anxiety in me! Even going back to the Bahamas as an adult, by myself, I found I would have trouble breathing. There was an incident under Paradise Island bridge, in which she became abusive towards a native who had shouted at me, and I received a letter of apology from the Bahamian Tourism Authority ..... How could such a small incident amount to so much?

I learnt of her trauma of having lost my sister and I. She had been taken out of the airport in a straight jacket the day we left for England. (She was found running around the airport like a madwoman checking the toilets to see if we had hidden away). She had to undergo psychiatric counseling as she had tried to kill herself. I could empathize with her feelings of loss and betrayal, as I had my own children and could not bear the thought of losing them. This knowledge though made me bitter and resentful about the fact that she chose to live so far away, having found us again. What are her real feelings regarding family? I shall never understand as she is now retired and wealthy enough to live in both countries.

There were many up's and down's living with an alcoholic. My theory became, if you can't beat them, what the hell, join them!

And so I did..... and so life carried on..... We transferred to the UK for 2 years and enjoyed a closeness as a family unit of 5. Beer became my timekeeper. We moved back to South Africa and re-settled the children into new schools. Not easy for them but we all adjusted being back on familiar turf and surrounded by family and friends.

Life became one big party, we had everything we could have wanted – a house paid off, a big 4x4, money to blow..... and the prospect of turning 40 was just up on the horizon! Let's not go there just yet, drink drink drink instead!

Escapism was working ..... somehow, upon our return to South Africa, family and friends started to take up the time that we used to spend together as a family unit (just the 5 of us). My husband and I started drifting apart and doing our own thing. Drinking played a big role in all social events. I tried to fill up empty spaces in my life by doing as much as I could. I organized a social club, I worked and I partied..... and partied..... and I took the kids to school and partied, and then suddenly life became one big round of drinks. I couldn't bear the thought of going home without the knowledge of lots to drink.

Then the day started creeping up ..... The 40<sup>th</sup> birthday ..... eek scream scream – no I certainly was not ready. I had not even taken the time to evaluate my life, check out a direction of any sort..... I had always had an herb garden. I had always been interested in complementary medicine, but, hey, so what, bumble on dilly bee.

I did not even wish for a party – I did not wish to celebrate – I felt inept and incomplete. I felt that I was a 'no one', that I had not made any kind of contribution to society in any special way. I did not know what I would be remembered for should I die – certainly for throwing wild parties and drinking to excess, raucous laughter too, but that thought did not please me too much. However, the party was had at the insistence of my sister. I sat for most of the night in a corner, by myself, drinking beer.

And here is the future:

I did wallow in self-pity for a while, and then decided that a plan of action was required. We purchased a plot in 1999 – the beginning of my dreams to own and run an herb farm and to spread the word of taking responsibility for our selves and our own health.

I have always loved the earth (and the ocean, it's just a bit too far away.) The joy of planting a seed, and seeing it grow, seeing a tree bear fruit, after all the fertilizer and watering, all the hard work that goes into it all, is to reap the rewards or fruits of one's labour of love. God planted us all a natural pharmacy – we moderns need to learn to utilize it again. The good earth earths me, when I threaten to get airborne and airy- fairy.

I started working for a natural therapist, who insisted I do a reflexology course. I joined a meditation group, through the Spiritual Church, dealing with the spiritual world and the philosophies of life after death, the understanding that death is merely a transition from one life to another. This led me to Hospice, where I offered my services as a volunteer reflexologist to the patients, and an understanding again that death is only the end of the physical vehicle we use to drive through life on earth, and that love can conquer all.

I have finally been able to see my mother differently, having studied these various philosophies. I traveled to see her earlier this year, only to be struck again at our incredible differences, the knowledge that I would never be who I am today, had I grown up with her. Her incredible self-involvement astounds me. She is retired and lives for her dog! On mother's day of this year I could not even bring myself to call her – I felt she had not been my mother in the true sense. After the Hospice course on personal growth, the realization dawned ..... I was able to thank her for being my mother, for giving birth to me, for showing me how NOT to be a mother, how NOT to live my life (she lives with an alcoholic).



A young man, who is close to being my brother, brought this to my attention one evening when I voiced my feelings about why on earth I would ever have chosen her to be my mother. I thank him for his insightfulness.

I stopped drinking. I really can see things clearly now. Alcohol clouds and exaggerates emotions, happy or sad.

My husband and I have attended many funerals over the past few years, possibly more than we have in our lives to date..... this makes one ponder one's own mortality.

At this point in my life, I can only see forward. I have finally found my purpose, my life path, a reason for being, and it feels good and it feels right. I do wish I had thought about it all earlier in my life but then perhaps, life had to be lived the way it was for me to stop and evaluate where I was heading, and to realize the emptiness of just existing – there MUST be a purpose to it all.

I hope to study homeopathy next year, as my need to heal other people is great, and not to heal only on a physical level, but on a psychological and spiritual level too. A holistic approach to healing – to making people feel good about their life. To enjoy life to the fullest. When speaking to someone the other day, I was on top of the world and said so, the joy bubbling through my voice; she asked me what my secret was; my reply was to live every moment to its fullest; to live in the moment; to stop planning for tomorrows and to stop thinking about yesterdays – they are gone to the box of memories.

Pull the box out when needed, but don't dwell too long on the bad, rejoice in the good, and use the combinations for your todays.

May I die, having made a positive difference to someone's life.

### **DANA'S STORY**

I was born in a very tiny village called Gwanda in Zimbabwe, or then, Rhodesia, and grew up in an even smaller village called West Nicholson. I am the second child of Clive and Sally, only 16 months younger than my brother, Ken. To my mother's horror, seven and a half years later, my sister Gwyn was born. I had the most wonderful childhood and have great memories of the freedom that Ken and I had. In those days Rhodesia was almost colonial and all three children had our own nannies who took care of us, plus we had a cook and also a gardener for the front and one for the back garden. Ken and I played endlessly in the bed of the Umzimgwane River and roamed the veld to our heart's content, often going to the black people's compound, sitting around their fires eating their 'sudza' and tomato and onion gravy. However, we also knew that when we reached school going age, we would have to go to boarding school in Bulawayo, which for a small six year old, was quite difficult. We moved from Rhodesia when I was about nine and lived in the then South West Africa for three years. Once again, Ken and I were sent to boarding school, but this time in Windhoek. From there we moved to Florida on the West Rand where I met my best friend, Avril. We were only in Florida for ten months, but Avril and I started a very special friendship that still lasts today. Also to our joy, we were day scholars for the first time since starting school. However, this did not last too long as we then moved to Vryburg in the Cape, before finally settling in Benoni in 1968.

My father was the manager of the Oxo/Fray Bentos factory in West Nicholson and opened canning factories in South West Africa and in Vryburg. Finally the price of beef became too expensive and the factories closed down, so he started an engineering supplies firm with an old friend from the war. He was the most wonderful father any child could wish for, being funny, patient, firm, kind and very stable. He sorted out all our problems. He was a big man in stature and also personality, with lots of friends coming and going all the time. I was definitely a 'daddy's girl' and I was always 'draped' over him. He adored my mother and spoiled her in every way. In fact, I never heard them disagree or either one raise their voice at the other.

I thought that was how all marriages were run and that everyone behaved in this way towards their spouse. How wrong can you be? My darling father died on the operating table while undergoing open-heart surgery. He was only 52. I miss him still, very much.

My mother was very beautiful in her day, and was very poised and well groomed. So much so, that Ken and I were always kept at arm's length and were brought up to be 'seen and not heard'. My granny, her mother, lived with us until she died, and she too spoiled my mother very much as she was her only child. After my father's death, my mother was thrown into the deep-end with three children at school and not a lot of money to go around. She started working for the first time in her life and during the years made many a 'deal' to earn more money. She managed to turn herself from a spoiled woman into a very strong lady and has managed to keep herself right into her old age. She had a very good relationship with my sister who was only nine years old when my father died, and I think, Gwyn kept her sane at this time. Strangely, she has never looked at another man or even been out with one for a cup of coffee, saying that she would not put up with second best after she had had the best for twenty-two years. She was only 43 when she was widowed. She is still alive at the age of seventy-nine but is on twenty four hours oxygen, which she deals with very well and still manages to maintain her sense of humour.

Ken, my brother and I were the best of friends as children, going everywhere hand in hand and not worrying about other kids. We still have that very close bond today. He left school before matriculating because he wanted to help my mother financially. He started working at my father's company for a monthly salary of R60. He gave R40 of this to my mother for rent, had a R10 savings account and ran a car and entertainment on the rest. I wanted to tell you this because he is now, with hardly any education, a multi-millionaire through extremely hard work and street-smart business knowledge. He is also a father of four children and because of them, he and his wife, Liz, have emigrated to Australia. I see him a few times a year. I have been there and he comes to Africa to keep an eye on his many businesses, and we just pick up where we left off.

Waving goodbye at the airport is still a very painful affair and I really don't think I will ever get used to that part. He is very like my father in personality and perhaps I have cast him in the role of father and brother rolled into one.

My sister Gwyn, as a child was always there of course, but did not make an impact on me till a few years ago. She was so much younger than I was, and I had Ken, so she just did not really feature. We got on well enough and were each other's bridesmaids, but never had that bond that Ken and I had. As an adult she never got on too well with my husband, Wesley, and my life went in a totally different direction to her, as I had children and she did not. She liked sailing and sports cars and I liked neither. We only got together during birthdays or Christmas' and it was Ken who held the family together. It took my divorce to bring us together and today we are very close indeed with her spending every other month with me, as her husband, Hank, works as an electrical designer on the oil rigs in Angola. She and Hank seem to have a marriage like my parents had, and the fairy tale type of marriage we all want. They live on a yacht in Richards Bay and I go down there quite a lot and have learned over the years to enjoy yachting and the open sea. I feel that I have been the poorer for having taken so much time in getting to know her as a person, but we are able to laugh and have a good time together at last. I feel very privileged to have two such wonderful siblings and I love them both very much.

I got married when I was quite young, only just 21. I think it was partly to get out of the house. I was only sixteen years old when my dad died, and am ashamed to admit that I was a monster of a teenager and gave my mother a hard time. When Wesley came along and showed a bit of interest, I kind of fell into the idea of marriage and saw it as a way out of the house. I fell in love with him and grew to love him more over time, although I had a big wake up call with regard to my idea of marriage. He came from a home where his parents argued continually, and his father really did not speak nicely to his mother at all, so I suppose that's what his idea of marriage was. He studied philosophy at the School of Philosophy and Science and I know that if there was any good reason to be married to him at all, it was for what he could teach me with regards to opening my mind to a number of things, and in particular, to religion.

He eventually became a lecturer at his school and it was inevitable that I picked up on their teachings. I am not a religious person as I do not like the thought of another human being telling me what to believe in, and what not to, but I learned that to believe something different to what I was taught at the Convents was alright.

Wesley was very good fun when he was young and good-looking, but I allowed him to dominate me in every way. I realize that I was very easily manipulated, but our marriage worked out like this for a long time, and I was not unhappily married.

I had my son Brent at the age of twenty-four and he was the perfect child. He was a quiet child and very beautiful and then came his sister, Lorna, three years later. She is the exact opposite to him, very noisy and very demanding, but has grown into a beautiful woman. He has dark hair and blue eyes and she has fair hair and green eyes. I am very glad to say, they have a relationship not unlike Ken's and mine. They have their ups and downs, Lorna more so than Brent, but they are really good children and I am very proud of them both. Lorna is in London and she is doing extremely well in business and hopes to stay there, while Brent lives with me. He works for his father as a CAD designer in the engineering field and will be studying animation in the new- year, which is his passion.

Wesley and I did everything as it should have been done, marriage, babies, bigger houses, bigger cars, until one day he was retrenched at work. I was not working at the time, thinking it was good to be a 'real' mother to my children, but after eighteen months of no work for him, he told me I had better try and get a job to help support the family and to keep our house. I was dreading this as I had not worked for eight years and knew that I was right out of the working arena. As it turned out, I found the most wonderful job at a computer company in Bedfordview. I worked there as the secretary to the sales manager for six years and had the most fantastic time. We did more play than work, and not surprisingly, the company went bankrupt, but I still have the friends that I made there. As for Wesley, I think I lost a bit of respect for him, as I felt he was unable to find a job in all that time, and even knowing it was not his fault, I just could not shake the feeling, albeit subliminal.

By this time I was in my 30's, which I think is the best time in a lifetime, as you are physically at your best, mentally you are mature and have usually had your family by then. By that time I had already been married for quite a while and Wesley had already stopped seeing me as a person. I was just his 'wife'. Perhaps this is where the first cracks appeared in my marriage, although at the time I was unaware of it. Nonetheless, time went by and Wesley got a very good job as managing director of a specialized fastening company, of which he now part owns and which is doing exceptionally well.

After the computer company went down, I stayed at home for a while, but got bored quite quickly, and when my sister mentioned that there was an opening for a half-day job at her friends' fathers' company. I applied and got it. I worked there for ten wonderful years. I just answered the switchboard and did reception work, but the friends I made there will be special to me for the rest of my life.

Larry, the owner's son, and I made the best of friends although he is only a few years older than my son. We laughed and cried together, but mostly, we laughed together. It was during this time that I moved into the 40's of my life, and as they say in the classics "Life begins at 40!" I had an inkling that things were not great at home, but put it down to extra stress on Wesley, as he was working long hours. He also spent long hours at the philosophy school, as well as on the sports field, or traveling on business. In a nutshell, he was not home often, and when he was, he was distant and short tempered and impatient with me. I tried to overlook it and made excuses for him, but things got worse and the fighting escalated and I knew things were not good for the children either. After rivers of tears and lots of heartache I eventually found out that Wesley was having an affair with one of my 'friends.'

It has been said that if you don't take care of life, life takes care of you, and I guess I was being the proverbial ostrich, as I just could not imagine what it would be like to be a 40-something year old with no formal training, and no money to speak of, and so just avoided the truth.

I was devastated and poor Larry got the brunt of it as I talked about it day after day – I just could not grasp what had happened and could not even imagine what the future would hold for me.

After a long, drawn out battle we got divorced in 1998 and he moved in with his girlfriend in Pretoria. The children stayed with me and then began the long, long road to recovery.

At this time my brother wanted to open a coffee shop at one of his factories and asked me to run it for him. I decided that I would like to make a go of it and joined him as a partner. It was during this time that he went to live in Australia, so I had to manage all the teething problems on my own. It went well enough although I did not make my fortune, as I did not run it as it should have been run – I just skipped through each day and made the best of it. I had a lot of laughs and lots of good times, and we ran it for three years. Then Lorna went to live in London and somehow, the fun went out of it for me, so I decided to sell it.

Not only did I sell it, but I sold it one and a half times over, the one half being sold to the man who rented the back part of the factory and wanted it for office space, the other half being sold to Wesley, who opened up a canteen at his company. So I didn't do too badly!

For the first time in my life I was completely alone as both the children were in London on a two-year working visa. I had moved out of my mother's house and into Wesley's and I realized that I had never really needed to make any decision of any sort- they were always made for me by someone else. This suited me as I have a very mutable nature and seem to be able to make the most of any situation; from boarding schools to divorce! Wesley had treated me so badly, mentally, over the last five years of our marriage, that in some subconscious way, I think I was really glad to have a valid excuse to leave him.

Luckily for me, I kept the house, as the children needed a roof over their heads, and I have to say that Wesley was, and still is very generous, financially. At first I did not quite know what to do with all this freedom, but before long I got the hang of it and my whole life changed.

I could make decisions for myself and no one needed to be consulted first... if I wanted to paint the roof purple – I could! I slowly learned that I did have opinions, and more than that, people listened to them. I also learned that I had likes and dislikes and that I had something to offer to my friends, and family. I learned to like myself and I learned to enjoy my own company, and to this day, I am very comfortable to be alone with myself. It was totally exhilarating and this freedom I value very much even to this day – six years later. In fact the thought of another partner in my life telling me what to do is more scary than the thought of facing old age alone. I did go through a lot of trauma in the beginning, but I have a friend, Dee, who was divorced one month before me and we stuck together for the first five years of our free years. We were both a bit ‘free-stuck’ in the beginning and we certainly painted the town red. We got together every Friday to catch up on the previous weeks news, and did things and travelled to places that we just would not have been able to go to had we been married. We used each other as a crutch, knowing how lonely we would be without the other, and we built up a very good friendship. She met a man, and I am able to admit that I am glad it was only after five years, as I was then much stronger and able to live my life without her to hold on.

Then I met Jim through my sister two years ago. He lives in Durban, so it was a long distance relationship, but as I explained earlier; the freedom factor is so valuable to me that I don't mind. He comes up once a month to spend the weekend or a long holiday with me, and by the time its time for him to go, its ok with me! Our first year together was great, making the weekends that he came up very special, we were always on honeymoon – need I say more? We went on a wonderful camping holiday in Mozambique at the end of last year during which time I was treated like bone china. Jim did everything for me, spoiling me with everything. He did the cooking, cleaning up, even washing our clothes.



We went for long walks on the beach and went on a boat on sunset cruises, and for the first time in my life, scuba dived. Life was wonderful indeed. That first year we were together has been the best for me as far as a relationship is concerned.

However, life does have a way of rocking the boat when you get comfortable. Jim was retrenched from Toyota where he had worked for fourteen years. His life during the course of this year has been bad and I have not seen him since Easter of last year. We still talk a lot on the phone and send 100's of sms's, but it's not the same as being with him. He has now made the decision to go to Iraq to boost his finances and try and get his life together again when he returns.

So where does this leave me? I am not sure whether this is the man for me in the long term. I am still afraid of giving too much of myself to someone else and it appears to me that I am going around in circles. I have done this all before with Wesley, no job, no money and the uncertainty of how he feels about me. I realize that he is in his early 40's now, which is not a good time for a man – the menopause thing? I guess I still lack confidence in myself.

I am going to see my brother in Australia soon with my sister and her husband. We are going on an ocean liner up the coast from the Gold Coast to the Barrier Reef as well as going down to Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide. What more could a girl ask for? I am looking very forward to it all, not only to see the new places but to have a chance of being with both of my siblings at one time, what heaven!

To summarize myself, I see myself as having come along a long and sometimes bumpy road, but I also see my future as bright and secure. I know that I still have issues to deal with, and hope I am now strong enough to deal with most problems. I have a strong bond with my siblings and my children and as time moves on, I know I am getting stronger in myself.