

**NO REGRETS: THE EXPERIENCE OF INTENTIONAL CHILDLESSNESS  
FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF WOMEN AT MIDLIFE**

by

**LAURIE MINUK**

B.Ed., University of British Columbia, 1973

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Department of Counselling Psychology

The University of British Columbia  
Vancouver, Canada

Date September 19, 1995

### **Abstract**

A qualitative, phenomenological methodology was used to explore the experience of intentional childlessness from the perspective of ten women at midlife. The participants were 45 to 52 years of age, believed that they had been physically capable of reproduction but were no longer fertile, and had been in a marriage or relationship where they perceived that they had the opportunity to have children. During individual, in-depth taped interviews, the women described their life experiences of intentional childlessness. Five common themes emerged from the analysis of the data, using a thematic analysis procedure devised by Colaizzi (1978). The themes described the women's sense of being an anomaly, the sense of marginalization, the sense of the overwhelming costs of motherhood, the sense of freedom and autonomy, and the sense of having made the right choice.

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"Mothering and nonmothering have been such charged concepts for us,  
precisely because *whichever we did has been turned against us.*"

Adrienne Rich, 1986

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**Dedication**

To the memory of my father who died as I was beginning my graduate program.

Howard C. Toftager

1917-1991

## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

#### **Statement of the Problem**

It is commonly assumed that women possess an instinctual biological drive to have children and that women who intentionally forego motherhood are abnormal and deviant. Researchers have investigated intentional childlessness to determine: the motivations for this choice (Gustavus & Henley, 1974; Houseknecht, 1987; Jacobson & Heaton, 1991; Veevers, 1980), how the decision is made (Houseknecht; Veevers), the correlates of the childless (Bram, 1984; Gustavus & Henley; Gerson, 1980; Houseknecht; Jacobson & Heaton; Veevers) and attitudes of society toward this minority (Blake, 1979; Bram; Griffith, 1973; Jamison, Franzini & Kaplan, 1979; Rainwater, 1965). The majority of this research has involved both male and female participants of a wide age range and some has included those who are childless for a variety of reasons.

While researchers have recently focused more specifically on intentionally childless women (Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1993), the experience of intentional childlessness for women who are at midlife has not yet been addressed. Ireland suggests that midlife may be a time for the reassessment of life choices with regard to reproduction. For women who have chosen to remain childless, that decision is no longer voluntary when their "biological clocks have rung their final alarms" (Gergen, 1990, p.479). At midlife, menopause, the cessation of menses, is an undeniable marker of the end of fertility. It signals the end of the biological possibility of childbearing and the decision to forego motherhood becomes one that is irrevocable and irreversible. Thus, midlife becomes a

time when social pressures to reproduce begin to fade as women move out of the years in which they are expected to reproduce (Peterson, 1981).

It is important to understand the experience of intentionally childless women at midlife not only because they are at the end of their reproductive capacity, but also because midlife is commonly a time when life choices are reviewed and reassessed (Gilbert, 1993; Hunter & Sundel, 1989). The midlife transition has been called "a shaking-out process, a seventh-inning stretch in the middle of life...sometimes caught up with a final concern about childlessness (Peterson, 1981, p. 185). Ireland (1993) suggests that midlife is the time for the "psychic encounter of a woman and the absence of a child" (p. 143). She states further that it is "a time of inner confrontation with those childhood identifications and illusions that have somehow carried us halfway through our lives" (p. 143). At midlife, when the choice to pursue biological motherhood is no longer salient, and the societal pressures to reproduce have waned, many women commonly address the consequences of the losses and gains that have resulted from choosing to remain childless (Gilbert, 1993). The lived experience of the midlife woman who has intentionally remained childless was the focus of this investigation.

### **Sociocultural and Developmental Context**

North American culture fosters a strongly pronatalistic ideology in that reproduction is encouraged and the role of motherhood is exalted (Peck & Senderowitz, 1974; Veevers, 1980). Both marriage and motherhood are promoted as intrinsically desirable social roles for women. This ideology leads society to view motherhood as a natural and universal instinct for all women. The motherhood mandate asserts that

childbirth is the ultimate fulfilment of womanhood and is in fact necessary for self-actualization (Russo, 1979). Acceptance of this mandate implies a view that the woman who does not choose motherhood is unnatural, unfulfilled, one who has gone astray from her prescribed destiny (Rich, 1987; Veevers).

In the context of this pronatalistic ideology, the attitudes of the dominant culture toward those who are intentionally childless are predominantly negative (Peck & Senderowitz, 1974; Veevers, 1980). These individuals have been described as cold, neurotic, selfish, self-centered, and self-involved (Rainwater, 1965; Griffith, 1973; Veevers). In an American survey of 311 men and 412 women who were 18 to 39 years of age and were or had been married, Griffith (1973) asked the participants to imagine that they were childless. She reported that the respondents felt they would be urged to have children, that they would be seen as selfish people, and that they would feel out of place in society.

As well as being considered selfish, the childless woman has also been rated as less happy, less well adjusted and less likely to get along with her parents (Jamison, Franzini & Kaplan, 1979). These researchers examined the attitudes of 156 university students toward a hypothetical childfree woman compared with a hypothetical mother. The researchers reported that the childfree woman was perceived as being less sensitive and loving than the mother, as well as more likely to be an active feminist.

Additional research findings contribute to the generally negative stereotype of the childless that appears to be widely held in North American culture. Blake (1979) presented data on attitudes toward childlessness obtained from a 1977 Gallup survey of

voting-age adults in the United States. The purpose of the survey was to determine whether large increases in voluntary childlessness were likely to contribute to extremely low fertility rates in the United States. The survey included special questions on attitudes toward childlessness using a Likert-type scale. Blake reported virtual unanimity among respondents that childlessness was not perceived as advantageous and concluded that "the childless are not seen as enjoying the most satisfying lifestyle, nor are they seen as having the most satisfying marriages" (p. 249).

Similar results were reported by Peterson (1983) in an unstructured response study that examined 143 female and 60 male university students for their attitudes toward childlessness. In a story completion format where the character was single and intended to remain childless, the respondents frequently described these characters as emotionally immature and selfish. While research indicates that these assumptions are erroneous, nevertheless it appears that the stereotype persists in North American culture (Baruch, Barnett & Rivers, 1983; Callan, 1987; Hoffman & Levant, 1985).

Not surprisingly, research indicates that women are more affected by pronatalist pressures than are men (Veevers, 1980). Dominant social norms uphold the common assumption that all women will be mothers or at least will want to be mothers, particularly women who are married or partnered in a long-term committed relationship. From this perspective, women who are married or partnered and yet remain intentionally childless are viewed as deviant and as a result they are marginalized and devalued in western society (Baruch, Barnett & Rivers, 1983; Rich; Ussher, 1989).

Conversely, Bram (1984) suggests that current attitudes towards voluntary

childlessness are more positive and accepting than they have been historically. She interprets increases in rates of voluntary childlessness as a reflection of changing attitudes toward childlessness. Bram's suggestion seems intuitively reasonable, but there is little evidence to support this conclusion (Hare-Mustin & Broderick, 1979; Jacobson & Heaton, 1991).

While it is possible that North American society is becoming more tolerant of various lifestyle choices, becoming a parent has been and still is seen as a critical ingredient in adult development (Benedek, 1960; Freud, 1965; Gerson, Berman & Morris, 1991). This traditional view of adult development supports an image of childless women as deficient or incomplete and portrays them as either unable or unwilling to fulfill a crucial feminine role (Ireland, 1993). It is implied that a childless woman has failed in the basic function for which she was created and will remain forever underdeveloped and unfulfilled (Gergen, 1990).

More recently, feminist theorists have emphasized the importance of qualities of nurturance and relatedness in the psychology of women (Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982). Considered central to female development are relational needs which are satisfied primarily by the mother-child bond. A woman's adult development is thus seen as staged around her core roles as a mother (Gergen, 1990). From this theoretical perspective, women's experiences as mothers are critical to their development and motherhood is a positive goal to be pursued by all women (Unger & Crawford, 1992). While for many women motherhood may contribute to the satisfaction of important relational needs, the view that motherhood is essential to female development may serve to encourage

conformity to the dominant social norms and to imply that non-conformity is an inferior choice (Morell, 1993).

To summarize, North American culture maintains a strongly pronatalistic ideology, with evidence of negative attitudes toward those who do not conform to this dominant norm. Individuals who choose not to have children are perceived as selfish, unhappy and maladjusted. With regard to adult development, traditional theorists view parenting as a task that is essential for adult maturity. Some feminist theorists also emphasize the mother-child relationship as one that is crucial to female development.

### **Prevalence and Demographics**

In spite of the prevailing pronatalistic cultural beliefs common to our society, a significant minority of women remain childless (Ramu, 1993). Because statistics regarding women's fertility are compiled only on women of childbearing age (15-44 years), it is impossible to know exactly how many women are childless (Romaniuc, 1984). A 1990 Canadian fertility survey indicates that among women who were born from 1945 to 1949 and who were 40 to 44 years old at the time of the survey, 20.5 percent were childless (Dumas, 1991). Because the available statistics do not distinguish between intentional childlessness and childlessness due to infertility or postponement, an accurate comparison is not possible. Researchers, however, estimate that one-third of these are childless by choice and two-thirds are involuntarily childless, suggesting a 6.3 percent rate of intentional childlessness (Houseknecht, 1987). Estimates that concur have indicated that five to seven percent of married couples remain childless by choice (Veevers, 1980).

Fertility data show unprecedented low fertility rates through the 1980s indicating

that approximately 20 percent of this cohort remained childless, for whatever reasons (Ramu, 1993). The baby boomlet currently in evidence has raised the average birthrate per woman from 1.3 in 1985 to 1.7 in 1990 (Ramu, 1993); however, these figures are still well below the 1950s baby boom high of 3.8 children per female. As a part of the generation that has been responsible for these dramatic demographic shifts (Gerson, 1985; Ramu, 1993), women from this demographic cohort who have departed from the traditional path of motherhood are well positioned to illuminate the meaning of that experience.

Low fertility rates may have been a factor in the upsurge of research that has focused on the identification of the characteristics of the intentionally childless (Houseknecht, 1987). In an attempt to develop a profile of those who choose to remain childless, researchers have looked for commonalities in these individuals (Houseknecht, 1987; Kiernan, 1989; Veevers, 1980). One characteristic found by several researchers is that as a group, the voluntarily childless represent an unusually high percentage of individuals who are first-born and only children (Nason & Paloma, 1976, Veevers). It has been suggested that because only children have never observed their parents in a parenting role with someone else, they are uncertain about their ability to care for children (Veevers). As the eldest in the family, first-born children may take on childcare responsibilities for their siblings which may in turn lead to an adult decision to forego childbearing (Rich, 1986; Veevers).

Other characteristics found to be associated with the intentionally childless are that they are mainly urban, middle-class individuals with higher than average incomes and high levels of education (Houseknecht, 1987; Veevers, 1980). It is unclear whether these

characteristics are specific to intentionally childless women or whether they are simply an indication that the research has not been based on random samples, but has taken place, for the most part, within urban, middle-class environments. It is also likely that career opportunities are greater in urban areas and alternative lifestyles are more readily accepted.

While the majority of the research has examined the experiences of men and women as married couples, the results of studies that focused only on women indicate that intentionally childless women are less traditional in their sex-role orientation (Bram, 1984). In an in-depth interview study, Bram compared 30 voluntarily childless women with 29 women who were delaying motherhood and 24 parents (wives and husbands). For the purpose of her study, Bram conceptualized sex-role orientation as being composed of behaviour, attitudes and self-image. The voluntarily childless women in this study were reported to be less traditional in that they were seen as more committed to their work, they viewed marriage as a source of personal companionship and growth, they placed high value on an egalitarian relationship of men and women and they viewed themselves in strongly individualistic terms. These voluntarily childless participants more frequently described themselves as dominant and occupationally competitive than did the delays or parents. Similarly, other researchers have also found that voluntarily childless women frequently exhibit a non-traditional gender role orientation (Ireland, 1993), place a high value on autonomy and achievement (Houseknecht, 1979), and base a large portion of their identity on work roles (Gerson, 1985; Veevers, 1980).

### **Purpose of the Study**

Since the experience of intentional childlessness for women at midlife has not been addressed in the literature, the meaning women make of their childlessness at this transitional time in their development can only be speculated. Baruch et al. (1983) point out that the results of their study contradict the ideology that children are central to a woman's psychological well-being and conclude that "many supposed truths about women are based simply on myth and misinformation... There is an urgent need to build a new vision about women's lives that is based on reality, not on stereotypes, assumptions or wishful thinking" (p. 107).

In order to discover the reality of women's lives, it is important to recognize and validate the experience of women as they themselves perceive it. This research has sought to provide a voice for a group of women who have chosen a path that differs from the social parameters traditionally applied to women. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of intentional childlessness for midlife women. A phenomenological approach provided an opportunity for each participant to articulate her own lived experience of intentional childlessness. The question that guided this research was: **what is the lived experience of intentional childlessness for women at midlife?**

One of the goals of the study was to contribute to the small body of existing literature that has investigated the phenomenon of intentional childlessness for midlife women (Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1993). In this study the researcher sought to understand the experience of being childless by choice for midlife women from the perspective of

those women.

It was hoped that the results of this research would provide information that might lead to further research in the area of intentional childlessness for women. Another goal was to provide insights that would be useful for counsellors and other professionals to better understand the needs and experiences of intentionally childless women. It was also hoped that the findings of this study would provide a voice for women who have taken the "road less travelled" and that these results would provide some recognition, validation, and new understanding of that option.

### Terminology

The discourses of our culture provide no familiar, common name for a woman who defines herself without children. Terms such as "childless", "child-free", and "nonmother" serve to define the woman by what she lacks and to indicate that a void exists. It has been suggested that linguistic gaps and crevices such as these convey attitudes and contain "powerful secrets of the culture" (Rich, 1986, p. 249). While the terms "nonfather" or "childless man" are not in common useage in our society, women are often identified by their reproductive status in a manner that reinforces the motherhood mandate.

The term "child-free" was introduced in the 1970s as an attempt to provide a more positive alternative to the word "childless" (Peck & Senderowitz, 1974). It has since been suggested that the word "child-free" has a "presumptive ring", implying that women who choose not to have children "want to be rid of children, as in those who promote a 'union-free' or 'smoke-free' environment" (Morell, 1994, p. 21). Morell suggests that what is needed is the creation of a new term which would serve to identify the woman without an

implied lack or void. She illustrates, for example, that the term "single" is used to identify those who are not married, rather than "marriedless" or "married-free". However, until the creation of new and more acceptable vocabulary, the words that are readily available and commonly understood must be used. Thus, for lack of better terminology, I have used the descriptive word "childless" most often in this study since it appears to be used most frequently in the literature and is the most straightforward of the available terminology.

One of the goals of this research was to first interview the participants, and then, from their own lived experiences, determine the terminology that would best suit these particular women. It became apparent that these women who had chosen not to have children did not use any of this vocabulary in identifying themselves. Perhaps because being a mother is an experience that they have not had, it may simply not be a part of their everyday consciousness. In an attempt to most accurately reflect the experience of the participants, I have chosen to generally use the term "intentionally childless." I believe that this term best portrays the actual experience of the women in that it seems to convey a proactive quality and a sense that their childless status was as a result of a purposeful decision. When discussing and referring to the research literature, the terminology employed in the research under discussion has most often been used.

## Chapter Two

### Review of the Literature

#### Motivations for Remaining Childless

Perhaps as a result of the predominantly pronatalist perspective of the dominant culture, little interest was shown in the phenomenon of voluntary childlessness until the 1970s when fertility rates dropped dramatically (Ramu, 1993). In her comprehensive review of the research on this topic, Houseknecht (1985) located 47 studies, the majority of which were completed after 1975. In 29 of these studies, researchers attempted to determine the reasons why individuals chose to forego parenthood. The most frequently found motivations for voluntary childlessness were: freedom from child-care responsibility, greater opportunity for self-fulfillment, more satisfactory marital relationship, and women's career considerations. The motivation for self-fulfillment seems to be in direct opposition to the dominant social norms that see motherhood as the ultimate fulfillment.

These motivational data may be questionable given the finding that many women find it difficult to articulate the reasons for their childlessness (Veevers, 1980). Most often they give what they perceive to be socially acceptable explanations depending on their circumstances. While the articulated reasons may vary, a commonly recurring theme is found to be freedom and the perception of potential freedom (Veevers, 1980). The implication seems to be that motherhood is perceived by some to involve an unacceptable loss of freedom for both present and potential lifestyles. This perception is understandable given that most mothers in our society carry the primary burden of the childrearing

responsibilities.

### **Parenthood Decision-Making**

As well as investigating the motivations of those who remain childless, researchers have also examined the decision-making process involved. In her landmark exploratory study of the voluntarily childless, Veevers (1980) conducted unstructured in-depth interviews with 120 voluntarily childless women aged 23 to 78. Veevers found that the majority of her participants remained childless as a result of a series of decisions to postpone having children. Less than a third of the participants had articulated their choice at an early age while the majority came to that decision after some experience of a lifestyle without children. Researchers have commonly found that women who postpone marriage have higher rates of childlessness (Houseknecht, 1985; Veevers). It is not clear whether the same factors that prompted the women to postpone marriage are related to childbearing decisions, whether it is due to declining fertility with age, or whether children become a lower priority as time goes on. Veevers noted that in the latter part of the postponement process people in her study had an awareness that cultural norms were being questioned and that a choice was being made that went against those norms.

Since it is the woman who bears the reproductive responsibility and most often is expected to bear the child-care responsibilities in our culture, the decision to remain childless appears to be a more salient issue for women. It has been found that generally, in a heterosexual relationship, it is the woman who is the first to consider not having children (Bram, 1984; Houseknecht, 1979). For the woman, this requires an action that goes directly against her culturally prescribed maternal instinct. There is no presumed paternal

instinct for a man to reject: rather, men are primarily identified and assessed in areas other than their reproductive capabilities. In a far greater way than a man without children, a childless woman is considered to be less than complete, less feminine and less womanly (Ireland, 1993; Rich; 1986). The decision to make a choice that is in direct contradiction to the dominant cultural mandate is one that appears to be quite difficult for some women (Gerson, 1985).

In a study that investigated the difficult choices women must make, Gerson (1985) conducted open-ended, in-depth interviews with a targeted sample of 63 women from 27 to 37 years of age. The intent of the study was to explain how women make decisions about work and family. Gerson found that the women who had chosen a career life path reacted with ambivalence when faced with the dilemma of choosing between the perceived costs of parenthood and the socially inflicted costs of foregoing children. Some of the women felt simultaneous pressures to bear a child and to retain the freedom of childlessness. After weighing the costs and benefits, 23 percent of the participants concluded that motherhood had substantially higher costs than childlessness and were consequently inclined to reject childbearing and rearing in their future plans. Gerson indicated that the process involved in arriving at this decision was difficult and filled with conflicts for many women and that it often came as the result of a core belief held by these participants that a woman can have a successful career or be a good mother, but not both. Thus the decision was seen by these women as a no win either-or situation. In the context of completely sacrificing other roles in life, the price of motherhood seemed intolerably high. These results are consistent with those of Veevers (1980) who also noted that the

women in her study viewed motherhood as a dichotomous choice. Childbearing and childrearing appeared to be viewed by these women as roles that were mutually exclusive from other important life goals.

To summarize, the research on parenthood decision-making indicates that while some women articulate their choice at an early age, the majority come to their decision as adults (Veevers, 1980). As a more salient issue for women than for men, it has been found that women are generally the first to consider the decision of whether to parent (Bram, 1984; Houseknecht, 1979). Researchers have also noted that women perceive motherhood and career to represent a dichotomous choice in which the two options are mutually incompatible (Gerson, 1985; Veevers, 1980).

### Life Satisfaction

Contrary to theory and common assumptions, researchers have found that female life satisfaction over the lifespan is not altered significantly by the experience of motherhood (Baruch, Barnett & Rivers, 1983; Mercer, Nichols & Doyle, 1989). Married, childless women were a group examined by Baruch, Barnett and Rivers in a random-sample survey of 238 midlife women. The purpose of the study was to investigate the psychological well-being of women in the middle years. One of the important findings from this study was that being a mother did not enhance a woman's well-being. Baruch (1984) noted in a subsequent discussion of her study that it appeared surprising and somewhat counterintuitive that there should be no difference in well-being between women who have had children and those who were childless. It seems likely that in this random sampling there were women for whom motherhood had been wonderfully

rewarding, but also women who had experienced great difficulties and conflicts in childrearing. On balance, this research points to the fact that, contrary to popular myth and belief, having children does not guarantee happiness or satisfaction for a woman in her middle years.

The findings of Baruch et al. (1983) are consistent with the results of other quantitative researchers who have compared voluntarily childless persons with parents in terms of marital adjustment and satisfaction (Bram, 1984; Callan, 1987; Hoffman & Levant, 1985; Houseknecht, 1979). Houseknecht compared voluntarily childless wives and mothers between 25 and 40 years of age and reported that women who were childless by choice scored significantly higher than mothers in overall marital cohesion. Bram's findings were limited in that they were based on a single global question as well as subject to the bias of socially-acceptable responses; however, she reported no difference in marital adjustment and satisfaction between parents and voluntarily childless persons.

More recent quantitative research has resulted in generally consistent findings with regard to personal and marital satisfaction of voluntarily childless persons (Callan, 1987; Hoffman & Levant, 1985). Callan compared 60 mothers (average age 33 years) with 36 voluntarily childless wives (average age 34 years) for personal well-being using a questionnaire survey. He reported that levels of psychological well-being were very similar and that voluntarily childless wives were as happy and satisfied with life as were mothers. Hoffman and Levant investigated a voluntary sample of 32 childfree couples compared with 20 child-anticipated couples to test for marital adjustment using several questionnaire measures. They reported that no differences were found with regard to

marital adjustment.

These findings also concur with the earlier qualitative study completed by Veevers (1980). She found that the couples she investigated reported intense relationships with a high level of marital satisfaction. Veevers noted that she found voluntarily childless marriages to be different from parental ones in that the dyad relationship was seen to be an end in itself rather than a precursor to parenthood. The researcher concluded that for some individuals, marriages maximize the potential for the man-woman relationship by not having children.

In summary, the research on personal and marital satisfaction of voluntarily childless persons seems to indicate that parenthood is not a significant factor in the overall psychological satisfaction and well-being of an individual. Although comparison of the studies is limited due to differences in instrumentation, definition and inclusion criteria, the research does consistently suggest that the voluntarily childless are at least as happy and satisfied with their lives as other groups are and that marriages without children are highly satisfactory for some (Bram, 1974; Callan, 1987; Hoffman & Levant, 1985; Veevers, 1980).

### **Female Development**

The existing views and assumptions that place the role of motherhood at the core of women's development have recently been challenged (Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1993). In an investigation of 100 childless women between the ages of 38 and 50 in Northern California, Ireland (1993) used questionnaires and focused in-depth interviews to explore how childless women define themselves and establish their identities. The women in this

study were stratified into three groups: one group consisted of 31 women who were childless by infertility (identified as traditional), a second group of 25 women were childless by delay (transitional) and a third group of 35 women were childless by choice (identified as transformative).

Ireland (1993) found that the three groups of women each constructed a unique meaning of their experience of childlessness. For the traditional woman, the process of grief and loss was illuminated as an issue to be resolved in the journey toward self-identity. The transitional woman was seen as struggling with the conflict and ambiguity of multiple desires. The transformative woman was viewed as one who challenged the stereotype that women are destined to be mothers or caretakers. Ireland concluded that childlessness should be viewed as a variation in female identity development and that the reproductive choices women have today should provide for an expanding vision of female identity. She summarized:

A broader view of female development that could incorporate aspects of nurturance and personal empowerment would result in a conceptualization of women as different equals of men. The presence of a larger group of women who are not mothers evinces a pressing need for this redefinition (p.8).

Morell (1993) also challenged existing theories of women's development in her study of 34 intentionally childless women ranging in age from 40 to 78 years. Morell stated that the intent of the study was to "fracture the woman=mother equation" (p. 302). Several common themes were identified through analysis of the transcriptions of in-depth interviews with each participant. One theme Morell identified was that of wanting something different from what was traditionally allowed. Common desires expressed by

the women were for self-expression, independence, education and economic self-sufficiency. Motherhood was often viewed by these participants as a loss of the possibility of fulfilling these desires. Morell saw the results of her research as a challenge to the perspective that the feminine orientation is consistently relational and oriented to others. For Morell, the preoccupation with independence that dominated the women's stories suggested a conflict with the current perspectives that raise women's relational needs and characteristics above their needs for autonomy and achievement. The implication appears to be that while women have strong relational needs, at least for some women the need for autonomy and achievement may be an equally critical ingredient in their development.

While the research findings on childless women at midlife are extremely limited, the picture that does emerge challenges the stereotype held by the dominant culture. A woman's maternal status is not related to her psychological well-being at midlife (Baruch et al, 1983). Rather, those who intentionally forego children appear to place high value on freedom in many dimensions, a definition of freedom that is perceived as being incompatible with motherhood (Bram, 1984; Houseknecht, 1987; Veevers, 1980). The voluntarily childless also appear to place high value on autonomy, achievement and on egalitarian gender roles within a relationship (Bram; Gerson, 1985). It appears that for the participants these goals are also seen as being incompatible with childrearing. In the struggle with these difficult life choices, many women marry late and postpone childbearing several times before arriving at an intentionally childless state that is perceived as permanent (Gerson; Houseknecht; Veevers). The indication that voluntarily childless women find it difficult to articulate the reason for their decision (Veevers),

suggests that they feel sanctioned by societal attitudes to present a motivation for their non-conformity that is acceptable in our society. This is understandable given that current societal attitudes still reflect a view of voluntary childlessness as a deviant life choice (Houseknecht, 1987).

This composite picture indicates that some interest has been shown in the topic of intentional childlessness. The existing research, however, has been criticized in terms of: 1) the lack of operational definitions; 2) the use of childlessness as a global category including those unable to parent with those who preferred or intended not to; 3) the blurring of male, female and couple data; 4) the lack of longitudinal studies; 5) and lack of methodological and analytic detail (Houseknecht, 1987). As well, due to the difficulties in gaining access to this minority, much of the research on intentional childlessness has been based on small, purposive volunteer samples which may produce biased results and not allow for generalization (Hoffman & Levant, 1985; Houseknecht, 1979; Veevers, 1980).

While recent studies have provided valuable insight into the experience of childlessness for women and its effect on female identity, these studies have not focused specifically on women at midlife who are childless by choice (Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1993). It has been suggested that the current understanding of the development of women during midlife is so impoverished that "one would think only men survived the third decade of life" (Gergen, 1990, p. 475). Little attention has been paid to midlife women and even less is known about those who are intentionally childless at this time of life.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

A qualitative phenomenological methodology was chosen for this research study for several reasons: (a) it was considered to be a natural evolution of the research question which was to describe the meaning of a human experience, (b) the research was exploratory in nature and (c) the methodology was perceived to have close affinity with the practice of counselling (Osborne, 1990).

Since the choice of methodology must be guided by consideration of the basic research question being asked (Lock, Spirdieso & Silverman, 1993), a phenomenological approach was most appropriate for this study. The question that guided this research sought to understand the lived experience of intentional childlessness for midlife women. The phenomenological researcher focuses on the participant's subjective experience, feelings and personal views, and seeks to descriptively reveal the lived experience of that person. A phenomenological approach is appropriate for research that seeks to contact the phenomenon as the individual experiences it in the everyday world (Colaizzi, 1978; Giorgi, 1985; Van Manen, 1990). The goal of this study was to contact the phenomenon of intentional childlessness in the everyday experience of midlife women.

Another factor in the selection of a research method was that very little is known about midlife women who have chosen to remain childless. Where gaps or omissions exist with regard to a phenomenon, a phenomenological research design is particularly useful (Giorgi, 1985). Phenomenology allows for the exploration of a human experience that

leads to an understanding of what it is like to have that experience and is not intended to test an hypothesis (Osborne, 1990).

A close affinity with counselling skills and practice was also a factor in the choice of phenomenology as a research method. As well as allowing for the exploration of the inner lives of the participants, phenomenological research requires that the investigator have the personality characteristics and interview skills used by counsellors (Osborne, 1990). The researcher used skills of active listening and empathy to establish the rapport and trust that were essential for the participants to express their personal experiences. Higher level empathy skills were also required for the analysis of the data.

The phenomenological research process is both interactive and collaborative, factors which are also consistent with a feminist perspective. A significant factor in feminist research has been identified as the locating of "both researcher and researched on the same critical plane" (Harding, 1987). Consistent with this perspective, the researcher perceived the participants to be collaborative contributors and active participants in the research project.

### **Personal Assumptions**

Phenomenological methodology "recognizes the unavoidable presence of the researcher" in the investigative process (Osborne, 1990, p. 81). Rather than attempting to eradicate this influence, the researcher is required to articulate her own preconceptions, theoretical orientation, biases and assumptions regarding the phenomena through a process of bracketing, or "rigorous self-reflection" (p. 81). The illumination and clarification of these predispositions which may influence the research process, will allow

the reader to consider this perspective when viewing the data analysis.

Personal interest in the topic as well as my own lived experience has drawn me to the topic of intentional childlessness. A feminist, humanistic perspective supports my view that each woman's voice and personal experiences are as valid and important as any other. I believe that women and their experiences are complex and the sweeping generalizations with regard to women's roles that are evident in our culture have underplayed the differences that exist, differences that are both valid and interesting.

As is consistent with phenomenology, I am aware that my own experience has influenced the question chosen for study. Throughout the study, I made every attempt to carefully monitor my own perspective to ensure that my preconceptions were identified and examined as they arose. At the same time, I believe that my own experience provided benefits for this research in that my knowledge of the phenomena allowed for sensitivity to the topic but "did not preclude receiving new information about it" (Sandelowski, Davis & Harris, 1989, p. 78).

I assumed that an exploration of the experience of women who have not conformed to one of our culture's dominant norms would find that the participants shared a sense of feeling different. It also seemed possible that they may, at times, have felt sanctioned by family, friends or society at large for their decision to remain intentionally childless in a pronatalist culture. As a result of these sanctions, I anticipated that each woman may have developed her own unique methods of coping with this overt or subtle disapproval.

Based on the findings of previous research, I assumed that the participants in this

study would place high values on personal independence, autonomy and freedom (Bram, 1984; Gerson, 1985; Houseknecht, 1987; Veevers, 1980). These values might be expressed in various avenues such as career and leisure choices, as well as relationships.

Because midlife is commonly a time when life choices are reassessed and reviewed, I anticipated that the participants might be concerned with the choices made during the first half of their lives (Hunter & Sundel, 1989). As midlife women who are now permanently as well as intentionally childless, I suspected that the participants might be reflecting on the consequences of that decision as they look toward the future.

An overriding expectation of this proposed phenomenological study was to find the meaning that each participant had made of her childlessness. I expected that each woman would have integrated this aspect of her life into her own self-identity. I believed that the personal meaning made of this experience would be shaped by life experiences and the cultural influences of the time. As members of the post war baby boomer cohort, the participants have enjoyed more reproductive options than ever before; however, pronatalist societal attitudes have remained a strong influence in North American culture. As a result, I suspected that the participants might have experienced some conflicts in their decision to contradict the dominant norm in the context of the various available options.

In spite of these assumptions and expectations, my goal was to remain open to new and differing aspects of the experience of intentional childlessness. I was also aware that my own assumptions might change as a result of the research process. To be successful in the illumination of the phenomenon, it is necessary to abandon the desire for control and to tolerate some level of ambiguity (Colaizzi, 1978). Every attempt was made

to accommodate these requirements as the research process unfolded.

### **Participants**

In a phenomenological research study, the selection of participants is purposeful, in that a number of criteria are specified to ensure that the participants have experienced the phenomenon to be investigated and that they are able to articulate their experience (Colaizzi, 1978). In this study, the participants were required to be intentionally childless women who were able to express their experience verbally.

The participants were required to perceive themselves as having been physically capable of reproducing and to believe that they had had the opportunity to have children. The women had been in a committed relationship or marriage wherein they experienced both the opportunity to have children as well as the social expectation that they would. These criteria represent the definition for intentional childlessness in the study.

Since women who are single as well as childless suffer from a double stigma, a requirement of this study was that the participants perceive that they have been in a committed relationship or marriage (Simon, 1987). As women in a partnered relationship, they have experienced the social expectations of a pronatalist culture that assumes all women will partner and then become mothers (Veevers, 1980).

To ensure that the participants were permanently as well as intentionally childless, it was required that the women perceived themselves as being no longer capable of bearing children.

Phenomenological research requires that the participants have experienced the phenomenon under investigation for a sufficient length of time so that they are able to

reflect back upon their experience (Colaizzi, 1978). The participants were required to be 45 to 55 years of age. This time of life was defined as midlife for the purpose of this study. Because midlife women are past the usual child-bearing years, this age was considered to be an optimal time for the participants to reflect on the experience and meaning of intentional childlessness in their lives.

Women who are now at midlife (45-55 years) represent a large population who have had greater control over their reproductive lives than any previous generation due to the availability of reasonably reliable birth control as well as the trend towards the legalization of abortion. As midlife women in the 1990s, the participants are members of a cohort that has entered adulthood during a period of accelerated social change and a resurgence of feminism (Gerson, 1985). As a result, this cohort has likely benefited from the changes in social attitudes and the variety of role options available for women which have come as a result of these social changes, while at the same time they have been influenced by the experience of a traditional childhood.

Because phenomenological research focuses on the richness of information (Colaizzi, 1978) rather than quantity of facts, a relatively small number of women were interviewed for this study. The first ten women who met the selection criteria were selected from those who volunteered to participate in the study. The 10 participants were considered to be adequate to "illuminate the phenomenon" and to obtain "empathic generalizability" (Osborne, 1990, p 83). Empathic generalizability was established as the themes identified in the experience of one woman were also found in the experiences of the other participants (Kreftig, 1990).

### **Procedure**

Participants for the study were recruited initially through word of mouth. Colleagues and friends of the researcher encouraged women they perceived to be suitable for the study to call the researcher for more information. Notices were also placed in various centres which specifically serve women's needs such as the Women's Resource Centre, the Women Students' Office at the University of British Columbia and the Women's Health Centre (see Appendix A). When only three participants were forthcoming, additional exposure was sought in the city newspaper, *The Vancouver Sun*, by means of an article in the Column One section written by columnist Archibald Rollo (see Appendix B). A brief description of the study was published and interested readers were asked to contact the researcher by telephone for additional information.

The response to the article in the newspaper was immediate and numerous. Forty-two individuals called the researcher to inquire about the study. One of these calls was from the CBC Afternoon Show radio host, Mark Forsyth, who requested an interview with the researcher to discuss the topic of intentional childlessness. At the end of that interview, potential participants were asked to call the researcher for further information. After the radio interview had aired, the researcher received an additional 43 telephone calls from interested individuals for a total of 85 inquiries as a result of this media exposure.

Individuals who responded were screened on the telephone by the researcher to determine if they met the inclusion criteria. Additional information regarding the nature of the study was provided when requested and any questions were addressed. Fifty-three

women met the criteria, were interested in participating in the study and were geographically available to the researcher.

It became apparent that far more women wished to participate than the number required for this study, and that a decision had to be made whether to make use of these potentially rich data. Several researchers had written at some length about the difficulties they had encountered in locating members of this invisible minority for their studies (Houseknecht, 1987; Morell, 1994; Veevers, 1980); therefore, it was thought that this unusual opportunity should not be disregarded. Since this relatively large number of intentionally childless women all between the ages of 45 and 55 were available and eager to participate, the decision was made to proceed to interview all of them. The data were to be collected and the first ten of those interviews were used for this thesis, as that was the number initially proposed and approved. The first ten participants also present an unbiased representation of the data. The remaining interviews have been stored and will be analyzed later and presented in an expanded study.

Appointments were made with all 53 women who wished to participate starting immediately after the radio interview. One woman rescheduled the appointment several times and did not show up at the final agreed-upon time and place. Another woman, after rescheduling several times, decided that her life was too complicated to commit to an interview at that time. A total of 51 women were interviewed.

During the telephone conversation, a mutually agreeable location and time was established for the first in-depth tape-recorded data collection interview. The majority of the interviews took place during the four months immediately after the media exposure

and were conducted either at the participant's home, the participant's office or the researcher's home office.

**The Interview.** The establishment of trust, rapport and a climate of collaboration was considered a priority at the outset of the first interview. The purpose and nature of the study were reviewed with each participant and the participant was informed of the voluntary nature of the study and reminded that she could freely withdraw at any time. Each participant was asked to read and sign two copies of an ethical consent form (see Appendix C), retaining one copy for her own records. Concerns of confidentiality were addressed and each participant was invited to choose a pseudonym for use in all oral and written reports of the study.

The interviews began with a general orienting statement (see Appendix D) to ensure that the context of the study was presented consistently to each participant. Minimal structure was used in order to encourage the participants to speak for themselves (Giorgi, 1985). Open-ended questions, paraphrasing and reflection were used as appropriate to encourage the women to tell their stories in a manner that was most comfortable to them. Counselling skills of active listening and advanced empathy were used to facilitate deeper exploration of thoughts and feelings. The researcher referred to a prepared list of questions (see Appendix E) when necessary to assist in further depth of exploration for use on topics raised by the participants themselves. The questions were used to elicit additional information or to encourage a participant who had "run out of steam" (Osborne, 1990, p. 84).

Each interview continued until the participant perceived that she had had sufficient

opportunity to express her thoughts and feelings with regard to her experience. The interviews ranged from one to three hours in length. Participants were encouraged to make note of any additional thoughts or feelings and to call the researcher with this information or, for the first ten women, to present them for discussion during the validation interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

The audio-tapes of the first ten interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher following the meetings. In order to ensure that the information from the data spoke for itself and that the researcher's assumptions were not being imposed, the first transcript was reviewed by an experienced phenomenological researcher before subsequent interviews were conducted. The feedback from this review was incorporated into subsequent interviews.

A seven-step thematic analysis procedure devised by Colaizzi (1978) was used to analyze the data. First, each participant's transcript or protocol was read in its entirety for a general sense of the description. In a second reading, significant phrases or sentences that pertained directly to the meaning of voluntary childlessness for the participant from the perspective of this stage of her life were noted. Clusters of themes were then identified by means of creative insight to "go beyond what is given in the original data and at the same time, stay with it" (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 59). The themes identified in the protocol of each participant provided the foundation or focal points for the study. These three procedural steps were repeated for each protocol and the emerging themes were organized into higher order clusters that were common for all the participants, constituting

an across persons analysis (Osborne, 1994).

The results of this thematic analysis were "integrated into an exhaustive description of the investigated topic" (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 61) and the fundamental structure of the phenomenon was formulated. To provide validation for these findings the researcher then returned to each participant to determine the accuracy of the analysis. The written report of the common themes that had been extracted from the protocols as well as the participant's own bibliographic information was sent to each woman. They were each asked to read the report of the common themes and to confirm the accuracy of their biography. In the validation interview the researcher asked each participant for her reaction to the analysis and whether she believed that it was an accurate portrayal of her experience. The women reported that they perceived the themes presented an accurate description of their own experience of intentional childlessness and that while some of the themes were more salient than others, each theme had been present to some degree in their own experience. One woman commented about the quotations saying, "I'm not sure which are mine because I could have said any of them." Several women reported that they had experienced valuable personal insights as a result of the reflective process involved in this research. For example, one woman became aware of her own dichotomous view and upon reflection, wondered if this perception of motherhood had been necessary for her in order to withstand the pressures of society to conform. The feedback provided by the participants was taken into consideration in the final written analysis.

#### **Limitations of the Study**

As a phenomenological exploration, this study was limited to those who volunteer

for research that is conducted in English. It was also limited by the recruitment methods employed and by the geographical location within which the study was conducted.

This study was further limited to an exploration of the participants' experience of intentional childlessness within the limits of an in-depth interview and a follow-up validation interview. These interviews were the primary source of data and were subject to several limitations. As a self-report study, the credibility of the results were limited by the participants' ability to recall experiences and to "illuminate the phenomenon" (Osborne, 1990, p. 82) through their own personal insight as well as their articulation skills. Issues of social desirability may also have influenced the story the participant chose to tell. The researcher's own ability to establish a non-judgmental environment of rapport and trust, as well as her listening and attending skills were crucial ingredients in accessing the desired level of self-disclosure by the participant. The training the researcher has completed in counselling was an asset in the building of trust and the encouragement of freedom of expression.

In the analysis stage, the interpretation of the data was limited by the researcher's own creative insight abilities as she sought to interpret the data while not creating the interpretation. In order to take the data from what the participant said to what the participant meant the researcher used skills that, while not described by precise definition, were similar to those skills of higher level empathy used by the counsellor in counselling sessions.

Lack of generalizability is a limitation common to phenomenological research in general. Rather than seeking to generalize the findings of the research to a larger

population, the goal is to achieve an "empathic" generalizability, meaning that the interpretation of the phenomena "resonates with the experiences of other people, not in the study, who have experienced the phenomena" (Osborne, 1990, p. 88). The aim of this study was to illuminate the meaning of intentional childlessness for the midlife women who participated. With a small number of participants, the findings cannot be generalized to all intentionally childless midlife women. As noted by Colaizzi (1978), generalizability cannot be achieved by one phenomenological study, but by on-going exploration of the experiences of other women who experience the phenomenon. While not intended to represent all intentionally childless midlife women, the findings of this study are described in sufficient detail to allow for comparison of future research.

With a view to future research, it is recognized that the unique experiences that have been investigated cannot be replicated and that a phenomenological approach in fact emphasizes the uniqueness of the experience (Kreftig 1990). Consistency, therefore, depends on "trackable variability" (Kreftig, p. 216) as detailed by the researcher. The detailed descriptions of all aspects of this study allow for comparison with future research relative to intentional childlessness in midlife women.

## Chapter Four

### Results

This chapter begins with a brief biography of each participant. These condensed life stories provide the prominent aspects of each story as well as a glimpse into the uniqueness of each woman's life experience. The biographies are followed by a discussion of the common themes that emerged from the analysis of the participants' life experiences.

#### The Participants

**Katy.** Katy is a 52-year-old married woman born to a family of mixed English, Irish, German descent in the greater Vancouver area. Until she was seven years old and her sister was born, Katy was the only child in her family. Her father worked outside the home while her mother took care of the household responsibilities and child-rearing. There were three half-siblings who were children of her father's previous marriage, but they did not play a role in her life until her adult years. Katy's maternal grandmother lived with the family and Katy remembers her grandmother as a positive and influential factor in her early years. Katy's parents did not have much formal education, but her grandmother had trained to be an elementary school teacher in England and encouraged Katy to consider a teaching career.

Katy recalls being told that she was "quite precocious" as a young child. She learned to read at an early age, memorized songs and entertained people with her singing. She remembers that she enjoyed being the centre of attention and was quite upset when her baby sister arrived. In her teen years, Katy loved to babysit and really enjoyed spending time with children in her neighbourhood, playing games with them and leading

sing-a-longs with the piano.

The family could not afford to send Katy for further education, so as the first in the family to attend university she also held down various jobs to pay for her education. The goal to have a career as a teacher became a priority for Katy and she felt that marriage and family were "way down the road." She enjoyed becoming a teacher and being able to have a place of her own. She also appreciated the financial security that provided her with this independence.

Katy had several relationships, but had no interest in marriage until she was 30 years of age and met a man who was 11 years her elder. As she recalls, there was no discussion of having children before the marriage. Katy's feeling that she "didn't have a burning desire," coupled with her husband's lack of enthusiasm for parenting led her to decide not to have children. Katy felt that she did not want to give up her career in order to raise children without a commitment for equal partnership from her spouse. She reports that this decision was reached without agonizing and felt "easy to make." The couple enjoyed a childfree lifestyle with lots of travel and recreation during their 15-year marriage. It was dissolved amicably in 1988 and the couple remain friendly.

Katy experienced some difficult years in the 1970s when her mother died of a suicide. Upon reflection, Katy perceived that depression was very likely a family pattern with her grandmother, her mother, and Katy herself. She points out that while she has fought several bouts with clinical depression, the issue of having children was never a factor in those episodes.

Katy has nurtured special long-term relationships with certain students and

maintains those connections today with students who are now having their own children. She is looking forward to retirement when she will have more time to spend with this next generation of the children with whom she has built these connections.

Katy is currently married to her partner of four years who has two adult children. She reports that she has established a deep and solid relationship with her husband's daughter and looks forward to being the grandchildren's "Omah." Education has continued to be a high priority in Katy's life, as she has completed her Master's degree in counselling and become a high school counsellor. She has been active in running marathons, leading weight-loss groups and racing cars, and is currently enjoying a summer-long motor cycle trip in North America with her spouse.

Annette. Annette is a 47-year-old school administrator. She was born to a traditional nuclear Anglo-Saxon family in the Canadian prairies and was the eldest of four children. The father was the provider of the family and Annette's mother worked at home tending to the needs of the family. As the eldest sibling, Annette recalls mothering her younger sister and two brothers and feeling concerned about their welfare.

Because education was a strong imperative in Annette's family, she was sent away to boarding school for high school to ensure that she received a good preparation for university. Annette's father was very determined that she should become the first in her family to receive a university education. He impressed upon Annette from an early age that the priority was to get an education and get established in a career in order to support herself and be financially independent. She was taught that "you should always paddle your own canoe" and not rely on a man to take care of you.

While teaching was not necessarily a burning desire for Annette, education seemed like an appropriate means to accomplish the goals her father had impressed upon her. It was also one of the few options she saw that were available to women at the time, the other two being nursing and secretarial work. Annette proceeded to earn her degree in education, enter the teaching field, and later she achieved a Master's degree as she entered the field of school administration.

Annette has enjoyed her career in education, but more importantly she has appreciated the financial independence that her work has provided. When she married at age 31, she had already become financially established as a homeowner and made use of a prenuptial agreement to maintain her sense of independence and personal security.

Being a mother was a role that Annette reports she came to perceive to be incompatible with her goals related to career and financial independence. She felt that having children would mean staying home and as a result her work and financial freedom would be sacrificed. She also thought that her marital relationship would have been severely threatened by the pressures of childrearing.

Annette has chosen to keep her private life separate from her professional life and has preferred not to discuss her childfree status with people in the workplace. She has felt that many parents would not accept that a woman who chose not to have children herself could work effectively with children. When asked point-blank about her parental status, she reports that she has glossed over it quickly and carried on with other topics.

Annette enjoys spending time with her neices and nephews and has regularly devoted time during her summer holidays to provide assistance with her sister's children.

While she enjoys these visits, she finds it hard and demanding work to be with children and "do kid things" day after day. Annette feels that it is important to teach young girls that there are many options available in life. She strives to impress upon her niece as well as other girls that they should learn to be self-reliant and to consider lifepaths that include roles other than those of wife and mother.

Annette feels that she has had a "charmed life" and that she has been very "lucky" to have options and opportunities that her mother did not enjoy. She feels fortunate that she met and married a man who was looking for a very independent wife and also did not want to have children.

Looking to the future, Annette's plans include retirement at a fairly young age, travel with and without her spouse, and possibly a second home in a warm south-western state for winter stays.

**Greta.** Greta is a 50 year old woman, the eldest of two children born to a family of European Catholic descent. Greta's family environment was traditional, with her mother's life focused on childrearing. Although Greta recalls playing with dolls as a young child, she remembers being more interested in "boyish things" like problem solving activities and mysteries. Greta trained and worked as a nurse and then after returning to university for a graduate degree she went on with a career in health care administration. During her years in nursing school, Greta established friendships with fellow students that remain strong to the present time. This group of friends has expanded over the years to include the women's partners and families in the social circle.

At the age of 25, Greta married a man who had two children from a previous

marriage. The children have lived with their mother while their father contributed to their financial support. At the time of Greta's marriage, the issue of having children was considered, and Greta decided that she was not ready for children. The fact that her husband did not desire more children, coupled with her own sense that she was not mature enough for the role of motherhood, resulted in the decision to remain childless. This decision was reassessed periodically with the same conclusion as to the outcome, although her reasons for remaining childless differed at these various decision points in her life. One of these decision points involved a pregnancy for which Greta obtained an abortion after assessment by a hospital committee. Had she not received the medical approval for the abortion, Greta believes that she and her husband would have been committed to raising a child that they had brought into the world.

Greta reports that her decision-making style is to look at the larger picture in order to determine who will be affected, then evaluate the available options and make a pragmatic choice. She says she makes purposeful decisions according to a self-defined agenda rather than being influenced by other people or the expectations of society. Greta has qualities of leadership which have won her awards and feels comfortable in leadership roles. Being strongly autonomous and self-directed, she reports feeling little concern about the opinions of others with regard to her childless status.

With her parents now in their 80s, Greta is very much involved in their lives. She calls them daily, sees them often and looks after their affairs as necessary. Greta reports some sense of guilt that neither she nor her brother provided grandchildren for their parents. Although her mother has never directly said so, Greta feels that she really did

want to be a grandmother.

Greta and her husband spend a lot of time together and enjoy a variety of sports and activities including boating. They enjoy each other's company and Greta feels that now, after 25 years of marriage, they are closer than they have ever been.

**Ashley.** Ashley was born 49 years ago in the Canadian prairies and moved with her family to the west coast at the age of three. She is the youngest of four children born to parents of Ukrainian descent. Ashley reports that as a child the relationship between her and her mother was problematic and upon reflection in later years Ashley wonders if perhaps her mother had been experiencing a difficult menopause. During her 40s, Ashley experienced the death of her mother first, then several years later, her father.

Ashley attended university to become a teacher, supporting herself with casual jobs, and then taught school for 17 years in the greater Vancouver area. She left teaching and at that point became a self-employed business owner with two other women as partners. After nine years, Ashley returned to the education field and is currently teaching again, however, she says she now has a new perspective with regard to teaching.

Ashley has had several long-term relationships with men, one of which deteriorated when it became apparent that the two partners had different goals in terms of marriage and family. The idea of settling down as a wife and mother was "just the most awful thought" to Ashley. She perceived that her freedom would be sacrificed. At the age of 28, a tubal ligation made the decision permanent, although Ashley pointed out that she had never had any "burning desire" to have children.

When she was 44 Ashley met and married a man who had adult children and

grandchildren. All of her siblings have had children and Ashley reports having connections with her neices and nephews as well as the children of close friends. Some of these relationships are casual while others are extremely close. She enjoys the time she spends with them and gives them unique gifts, many of which she creates herself. Ashley also has close, caring connections with her students, and spends many hours of her own time developing projects that she hopes will stimulate their creativity.

Now at midlife, Ashley is active in her teaching career, recreational sports, and creative art endeavours. She has a loyal following of steady customers who purchase the arts and crafts that she creates throughout the year, as well as at the Christmas season. Ashley reports having a busy life with family and friends and is often involved in the creative aspects of party-planning for birthdays and other special occasions. She enjoys the children that are in her life, but she has "no regrets" that she does not have children of her own.

Emma. Emma is a 45-year-old woman of Philippine descent. She was born in the Philippines, the only child to a traditional mother and a father who was an English teacher. When Emma was four years old she moved with her parents to Hong Kong when her father made a career move to teach in a college there. In Hong Kong Emma's school mates and playmates were American and Chinese, so she quickly became trilingual, speaking Philippino, Cantonese, and American English. At the age of 13, Emma was sent back to the Philippines to complete her high school education and live with her extended family while her parents remained in Hong Kong. Her four older cousins were like siblings to Emma and she remembers this time as a very happy period in her life.

When Emma was 18 years old and had graduated from high school, she came to Canada to join her parents who had immigrated two years previously. She experienced a difficult period of culture shock in coming from a sophisticated urban lifestyle in the Philippines to this "dinky little town" in the interior of British Columbia. It seemed to her that she had landed in "Siberia" but she gradually came to appreciate and even love the wide open spaces of Canada.

Shortly after she immigrated, Emma met the man who would become her husband and they were married about one year later. They have now been married 25 years and much of that time have been working together as partners in various business enterprises. Over the years Emma has learned a wide variety of skills, from basic life skills such as cooking and cleaning to accounting and running a business.

Although education was a high family value and Emma's father completed a post-graduate degree, Emma had no interest in advanced education after high school. She didn't want a life that was "study, study, study." For Emma, it has been more satisfying to learn new business skills and to learn how to manage independent enterprises. She has enjoyed working with her husband towards their common goals and feels that it is a partnership of equality.

Emma and her husband experienced a period of ambivalence with regard to the question of having children in the early years of their marriage. Emma recalls that there was "no determination" and it was "not wholehearted" and basically a nonissue in their marriage. She had "no desire" even though she reports not understanding why.

Although they do not have children of their own, Emma and her spouse have many

children in their lives. They have had children of friends stay with them for months at a time at all stages, from babes in diapers to teenagers. Some of these children, although unrelated, see Emma and her husband as their aunt and uncle and maintain strong connections with the couple.

Emma reports that she is currently busy with business, a wide circle of friends, and community affairs. She enjoys travelling, sometimes with her husband, sometimes with cousins. Emma feels that life is good. Looking ahead, she would like to give back some of her good fortune to those who are less fortunate, perhaps in some humanitarian project in another country. Emma reports that her life is an on-going adventure.

**Jennifer.** Jennifer is a 47-year-old woman of Scottish-Welsh background. She is the eldest of four children and as a child took on a caretaking role with her younger three brothers. Jennifer's family was traditional in that father was away at work a great deal of the time and mother was at home running the household and raising the children. Jennifer reports enjoying a sister-like relationship with her mother as the two of them looked after the three very active little boys.

At age 19, Jennifer married her high school sweetheart. While she had some misgivings about the marriage at the time, she thought perhaps she wouldn't meet anyone else and did not really see that she had other options. She remembers being very careful with birth control and while she had no desire to have children, she did think that perhaps in four or five years she might want children. The marriage lasted four years and Jennifer was relieved that there were no pregnancies, happy to have her freedom.

Since her divorce, Jennifer has had relationships, some of which were up to five

years in duration. She continued to make use of birth control but in spite of taking precautions became pregnant. This pregnancy was terminated and Jennifer then required a hysterectomy, making her childfree status permanent.

Although Jennifer has always enjoyed paid employment in various types of office work, she has not focussed on career building. Rather, she views her work as providing her with the means to be financially independent, to travel, and to pursue activities that she enjoys. Jennifer enjoys being self-reliant and treasures the freedom that her financial independence brings.

Jennifer is currently in a fairly new relationship. She maintains a full, active and healthy lifestyle, and enjoys new activities and experiences such as skating and rollerblading. Jennifer feels that her life has a sense of fun, or "joie de vivre" that she would not enjoy had she become a mother.

**Dorothy.** Dorothy is a 51-year-old woman of German descent born in Poland during World War II. She was the third daughter in the family, with a brother whom Dorothy refers to as "the little prince" arriving two years later. Dorothy's mother came from a wealthy family and when she married Dorothy's father who was a science teacher, it was perceived that she had married below her status. Dorothy's father spent the war years working in a research station in Munich and when the war neared its end, Dorothy's mother fled with her three young children from Poland to Germany.

Dorothy remembers those early years of her life in postwar Germany as a time that was extremely difficult for her family. The family settled in the Bavarian countryside where Dorothy's father found a teaching job. He felt that living in the countryside, at least

they wouldn't starve because they would have access to wheat and potatoes. Dorothy admired this quality of resourcefulness that her father displayed as he sought to provide for his family under trying circumstances. In spite of these difficult times, Dorothy recalls that she grew up with a real sense of security in a basically happy childhood.

Being the third of four children her mother bore over a period of five years, Dorothy felt that, as a child, she needed more affection and closeness than her mother or father were able to give. While Dorothy maintains a close connection with her family, the relationship between daughter and mother remains somewhat conflictual. With her mother now in her 70s, Dorothy has resigned herself to the reality of the mother-daughter connection as it exists and no longer attempts to change this relationship.

Dorothy trained as a librarian and worked for three years in Europe in that capacity. At the age of 24, wanting to travel and see the world, she came to Canada and crossed the country by train. On her first day in the Vancouver area, Dorothy met the man who was to become her husband. Six years later, after living together for several years and travelling back and forth to Europe together, they were married. They have now been married for 21 years. Dorothy reports that she has "never had the need for children" and she has never detected that need in her husband. She feels that if they should want children at some point they will seek opportunities such as fostering.

Dorothy's work has always been very important to her as it has provided her with the financial independence that she values highly. She spent many years working in a university library, and more recently enjoys a job that involves human resource work. She reports that having her own income provides her not only with financial independence, but

also equality within her marriage. She sees herself and her husband as equal partners who share ownership of their home, investments, and other possessions.

Now enjoying the sense of perspective that midlife has brought, Dorothy says she loves her work and enjoys socializing with her co-workers, as well as the circle of friends she sees with her husband. Recreational time is spent travelling, camping, gardening and landscaping with her spouse in the large yard of their new home in greater Vancouver. Dorothy travels to Europe every one to two years and maintains what she believes to be good connections with her family, albeit from a distance.

**Jacque.** Jacque is a 49-year-old woman of British ethnic origin who was born in the interior of British Columbia. Jacque and her younger brother grew up on the family ranch and Jacque learned to ride horses from the time she learned to walk. Swimming in nearby lakes, caring for her horses and entering in horse shows, Jacque reports that she had a wonderfully happy childhood. She recalls that the family home was one that was filled with love and that her parents treated their children with respect and as equals. Financially, life was difficult for the family and the parents had to work very hard on the ranch, but they always knew they would be fed. Jacque feels very lucky to have had the kind of childhood she experienced.

One of the family values promoted by Jacque's parents was that of education, and Jacque was encouraged to go to university and complete a degree. She earned tuition money by working during summers picking fruit, cleaning motel rooms, and providing tourist information.

Jacque met her future husband when she was 15 years of age and they became

high school sweethearts. They remained a twosome throughout their university and professional training and were married when Jacquie had completed her first year of teaching. After the marriage, the couple moved to the Vancouver area where Jacquie obtained a teaching position and her husband had also been offered an attractive employment opportunity.

For the next 13 years, Jacquie enjoyed teaching elementary school and developed friendships with colleagues that have lasted to the present time. A job transfer for Jacquie's husband resulted in Jacquie's resignation from teaching and she now works as a private tutor. She also devotes much time and energy to a leadership position she holds with a national health organization.

Jacquie reports experiencing a period of ambivalence as to the question of whether or not to have children when she was in her mid-thirties. For about two years she weighed the pros and cons around this issue. The fact that Jacquie did not feel a strong desire to have children coupled with her husband's equally ambivalent attitude led her to the decision to remain childfree. She has no regrets regarding her decision and believes it was the best choice for herself as well as her marital relationship.

Jacquie feels that she has a full and rich life. She is busy with her tutoring, volunteer work and recreational time with her husband and friends. Jacquie and her spouse enjoy gardening, boating and other leisure activities together and after 27 years of marriage still feel that they were lucky to find each other as partners.

**Marj.** Marj is a 50-year-old woman born in Norway to parents of Norwegian and Scottish descent. She was the second eldest of four children and the eldest daughter to

parents who had been very active in World War II freedom forces and secret service work. Shortly after the war, when Marj was 10 years of age, the family emigrated to Canada and ended up in a small farming community in northern Alberta. Marj's mother, who had come from a cosmopolitan Norwegian family, found herself in extremely difficult circumstances. As a trained concert pianist with a degree in Business Administration, Marj's mother found that in their new rural home there was no demand for the skills and talents that she possessed and the cultural climate of the 1950s did not encourage or support women in their careers. To add to the already troublesome situation, it became apparent that Marj's father was an alcoholic.

For Marj, her parents' difficulties in supporting the family meant that Marj was obliged to take on much of the housekeeping and caretaking of her siblings. Her recollection of childhood is one of "working, always working" while her mother found casual domestic jobs to support the family. As the family moved from town to town looking for opportunities, Marj's father drifted in and out of the family situation, but could not be relied on for consistent support.

At 19 years of age, Marj got married and left home. She was aware that she was getting married in order to get out of her family situation, but felt that it was worth it to get away. For her, it seemed the best option. The couple moved to the west coast and Marj enrolled in art school to make use of her creative talents. The marriage lasted two years and then Marj finished the last two years of school on her own.

After graduating from art school, Marj worked in various cities in both Canada and the United States, building an impressive portfolio of her work and continuing to pursue

her art and theatre interests. Coming back to the Vancouver area, she found a secretarial job in national television and within eight years she was running a substantial component of the department. Marj then went on to head up the entire department culminating her climb up the career ladder with the position of Director. She is now at the point of retirement, at an early age, and is looking forward to leaving her job.

Marj has been married for 16 years to "the most wonderful man on the face of the earth" and places high priority on her marital relationship. It was very clear to Marj from an early age that she did not want to have children. She says she just did not have the desire and was not stirred by the cries of a baby. Her mother's unhappy and difficult experience in childrearing also impressed Marj with the negative aspects of having children. Marj and her husband discussed the issue before they were married and both agreed that they did not wish to have children.

Now at the midpoint, Marj feels very good about her life. After 16 years of marriage Marj says she shares a very close relationship with her husband and enjoys spending time with him. She is looking forward to many new plans, projects and activities for the future as she takes advantage of an early retirement. She says she plans to use her many talents and skills in community projects as well as art classes and creative writing. Marj reports that her relationship with her mother remains somewhat problematic, but since her mother is now 84 years of age, Marj is inclined to place their earlier conflicts aside and do whatever she can to make her mother's last years enjoyable. Today Marj feels very glad that she made the decision to remain childfree and says that she and her spouse have "no regrets."

**Theodora**. Theodora is a 48-year-old Caucasian woman of mixed Anglo-Saxon descent. She is the eldest of three children born to a mother who was an alcoholic and a father who, while struggling to provide nurturance for his children, was also a problem drinker. Theodora reports that her mother had not really wanted to have children and that she felt her life had been put on hold as a full-time homemaker. Theodora remembers her mother telling her about the negative aspects of having children and "scary stories" about childbirth. As a result of the parents' preoccupation with alcohol, Theodora assumed much of the responsibility for the parenting of her younger brothers.

Theodora says she knew even as a young girl of six years of age that she did not want to be a mother. She recalls playing "rough and tough" with boys for friends and having no interest in dolls. As she grew up she decided that she wanted to have a career and that motherhood was not compatible with these career goals. She felt that she had no "maternal instinct."

When Theodora was in her early 20s she married her first husband. She was very clear with regard to the issue of having children and although her husband knew that, after several years of marriage he suggested that they have children. Theodora was adamantly firm in her decision and at 28 years of age she chose to have a tubal ligation. This procedure required her husband's consent as well as the consent of a psychiatrist who had examined her. The operation confirmed her permanent childfree status and was an immense relief for Theodora. Theodora reports that she had "repeated the family pattern" and married an alcoholic and as a result the relationship between husband and wife deteriorated. Several years later, after a total of ten years, the marriage ended.

At this point Theodora returned to university to complete a law degree. She spent a period of time devoted to her career as a lawyer, working 12 and 14-hour days and eventually felt that she had become a burned-out workaholic. A career move to the field of adult education has provided for a more balanced lifestyle for Theodora and allows her the time and energy to pursue other interests she considers important.

Theodora was married a second time at the age of 42, this time to an artist 18 years younger than herself. While the marriage ended after about four years, the two remain good friends and Theodora enjoys the original artwork of her ex-husband in her home. She reports that she doesn't feel suited to marriage and feels more "myself" as a single person.

Now at midlife, Theodora is experiencing the menopause transition and looking forward to the much-touted "post-menopausal zest" that she has observed in friends. While she enjoys being self-reliant and treasures her freedom, she also maintains a network of supportive friends, many of whom are also professional women. Theodora leads a rich and interesting life pursuing many interests including personal growth, spirituality and physical recreation. She looks forward to the future optimistically and talks about retirement plans that may include cooperative living with some of her close female friends.

### **Common Themes**

Five common themes emerged from the process of data analysis and the subsequent validation interviews. These five themes were common to the lived experience of intentional childlessness for all ten participants. The order in which the themes are presented is not representative of priority or frequency.

### 1. The sense of being an anomaly.

A sense of being an anomaly or atypical was found to be a major aspect in the life experience of all the women who participated in this research. They used words such as "not mainstream", "in a minority" and "not traditional" to convey the sense that they felt different from the majority of women. One woman, speaking for herself and her spouse, said, "Well, you feel different. You know, what's wrong with us? Everyone else wants them and we don't. I would say to J., you know, we're weirdos, I mean with no kids." This sense of being an anomaly was characterized by the women in two ways: first by the perceived absence of a sense of maternal drive and secondly by a sense of being personally inadequate for the task of mothering.

For the women in this study, the absence of a maternal drive was an important contributor to their sense of being an anomaly. The women stated that they "didn't have that burning desire", or "I just didn't have the nesting instinct", or "I don't think I've ever had that maternal urge or instinct," implying that they believed such instinct exists and that they were unusual in not experiencing or possessing this instinct. The implied acceptance of the traditional view that the normal and accepted path for a woman was to be a mother or at least to want to be a mother served to reinforce their sense of being an anomaly.

While four of the participants had been aware from an early age that they did not have a maternal drive, others came to know gradually. One of the women who knew early in life that she would never be a mother said, "When I was a little girl, like six, seven years old, really young, I decided very, very early that I did not want to have children." In

talking about their lack of maternal instinct these women explained that even as girls they had not been drawn to babies. One participant noted that she "never, never went overboard about kids the way other little girls sometimes did. I wouldn't look at a baby and say it would be so nice, it would be so nice to have a baby of my own." In illustrating her perception that she lacked the maternal feelings other women appear to possess, another woman said:

I can't relate to children until they're about six. And then I get along with them just great, you know, but up until about then, when a baby cries, it, - I've heard women say that when a baby cries it stirs them. It does nothing to me. I get a lot more out of me if a puppy whimpers, and that's the way that I am.

Also in reference to her reaction to babies, one participant remarked that "when I'm around babies I just don't, I mean I don't dislike them, but I don't have a lot of maternal feelings. It just isn't there." The maternal instinct or biological urge that they perceived as "normal" for women simply did not materialize at any stage in the development of the women in this study, contributing substantially to their sense of being different from other women, their sense of being an anomaly.

In contrast to the women who said they knew from a very early age that they would not have children, six women felt that they had come to know this gradually. For example, one of these participants said, "Not having children, that happens over quite a time span, you know it's not like one day you say now we are [not having children]." While the sense of knowing that they would not have children came gradually to these women they reported that they experienced little difficulty with the decision to not have children. They commented that "it was not a hard decision to come to" and "the easiest

thing was to not have kids and it was not a big issue." For these women, the decision was perceived as one that was easily and simply arrived at because they did not feel a need to have children. There was no struggle because there was no sense of desire for children; no sense of maternal drive.

A two year period of ambivalence was experienced by one participant, during which time she struggled with whether to join the ranks of most other women and attempt to become a mother. She eventually concluded:

You have to want children so badly and you have to love them so much that you can't be wishy-washy. And if you're going to be wishy-washy, forget it. I think that was what was my final conclusion. I thought, no, I don't want them badly enough.

Like the other women in the study this woman perceived that the decision to have children was one that was so life-altering that it was essential to be very certain about the choice.

Another woman spoke of making a definite decision, and then reassessing the decision to have children at various times of her life. She said, "It was a definite choice, but a reassessment of the choice. The reassessment was based on: is it the right thing now? And it's still not the right thing, but for different reasons."

Some women reported waiting for the maternal instinct to 'kick in' as illustrated by one participant: "I was kind of hoping, well when 23 comes maybe I'll know by then, something'll hit me in the head and I'll go, oh, yes, I want kids." Some believed that perhaps a biological urge would materialize and they would experience the strong maternal drive that other women reported and that they appeared to be missing. Because the women did not feel a maternal urge, they perceived themselves as intrinsically different

from the norm.

The lack of this maternal instinct was not experienced as painful or distressing for the women in this study. For example, in reference to her lack of maternal instinct, one woman said, "there's nothing wrong with me, it just isn't there. I have many good qualities, but I don't have this one and that's the way it is." Maternal feelings were perceived by the women as being similar to character traits in that some people had certain traits and others simply did not. Since the maternal drive was perceived to be generally common to most women, however, the absence of this drive left the women feeling very much like an anomaly.

The second aspect of this theme was that the participants expressed a sense of inadequacy as to their ability to cope with the task of motherhood. They felt that while many women were somehow equipped to handle the pressures of motherhood, they themselves were different in that they simply wouldn't be able to cope with these pressures. This feeling of being less able than other women to handle the pressures of mothering contributed to their sense of being an anomaly. One woman commented that "I just couldn't handle the kinds of things that parents have to do now." The sense of inadequacy was closely linked with another theme that emerged: the sense of the overwhelming costs of motherhood. The more overwhelming the task of motherhood was seen to be, the greater the sense of inadequacy the women felt to manage this role. They perceived the responsibility of being a mother to be so full of pressures that it would exceed their own personal resources. For example, one woman said, "I'm glad that I didn't have any kids because I'm not sure how I would have dealt with all the pressures."

Other self-doubts expressed by the participants regarding their ability to perform well as a parent concerned reservations about having enough patience and about being too strict or over-protective. One woman illustrated this concern with a description of her experience while taking care of a small child:

I mean I had to sit this child down and make her promise me that she was never going to go anywhere that we couldn't see her, because she's just all over the place. It scares the daylights out of me. I guess I knew it then, that this was something that, I probably would have had the kid in a closet until she was twenty-one.

Another self-doubt that was strongly present in four of the ten participants was the fear that they could have been abusive parents. One of these women related an experience in her workplace:

Today a kid was screaming at school. This was a preschool kid, and this kid was screaming and I thought, God, it's making me crazy. If I had to stay home with that I'd go nuts. Oh, I couldn't stand it. I might have been an abusive mother or something.

Concerns of continuing an abusive parenting pattern also were evident in another participant whose mother had been an alcoholic. This participant felt that her mother's alcoholism prevented her from being there for her children and when considering her own options, the participant said, "I didn't think I'd be a very good mother. I was afraid I'd be abusive. I was afraid of the family pattern of abuse that I would be abusive and I just wanted to stop that pattern. The variety of self-doubts and feelings of being inadequate for the task of mothering appeared to contribute substantially to the sense of being an anomaly. The participants perceived that some women were simply "meant to be mothers" and that these preordained mothers likely did not share the same self-doubts and feelings of inadequacy that the participants felt. One woman offered the perspective that

"there are just some people who are not meant to be mothers". This rationale appeared to be one way of explaining or understanding the sense of being fundamentally different from other women.

While seeking to understand their sense of being an anomaly, the participants struggled to explain why they were different. One woman remarked "It seems strange, doesn't it?" in regard to the fact that she never wanted children. She repeatedly commented, "I just don't know what the answer is. I just don't know." Another woman spoke of this difference as though it were a missing piece of the whole. She said:

I'm just not a mother. I'm just not. And yet I'm quite a nurturing person. I mean, my friends tell me that I am. And I really care about people. I'm very affectionate and everything like that. But, it's just not there. It's just not there.

Offering some insight into the self-reflective process that she had gone through, one of the participants stated:

Other people are not like me. I started out thinking why is this, why aren't people like me? And I was fighting it and I was miserable about it and maybe growing old I have switched to the other side, and I say, well, you know, I'm different.

Another woman also indicated the influence of her own development on her change in perception about this aspect of herself. She said: "I thought it was kind of odd for quite a few years, but I don't think that way now. I just believe that I am different in that way and I see nothing wrong with it." Like the other women in the study, at midlife she appeared to have come to an acceptance of herself and her difference from other women who were or wanted to be mothers.

It seemed that while the participants had attempted to make sense of this difference, to explain their sense of being an anomaly, they eventually and ultimately

concluded that in some basic way they were simply different from other women, and each woman came to accept this fact as part of her own unique identity. There appeared to be no specific explanation for the lack of maternal drive and the sense of feeling inadequate to the task of mothering. The women came to accept their childlessness as part of their identity as though they had green eyes instead of brown or blue.

To summarize, for the women in this study the sense of being an anomaly included a perceived lack of maternal drive as well as a sense of inadequacy for the role of motherhood. Some of the participants knew from an early age that they did not want to have children while others came to know this as their lives unfolded and the desire to have children did not emerge. For some of these women, the sense of inadequacy involved a fear of becoming an abusive mother. Other women felt they were inadequate for the task of mothering because they would not be able to cope with the perceived pressures involved in childrearing. The attempt to make sense of being an anomaly proved difficult for some, leaving the participants to question if they were "weird" or "abnormal," particularly during their childbearing years. The conflicts that the women experienced were not about remaining childless, since having children was not a felt need. Rather, these conflicts appeared to be with regard to reconciling, explaining and justifying their sense of being an anomaly both to themselves and to others. They eventually arrived, in midlife, at the point where they decided it didn't matter why, each woman simply accepted this difference as a part of her own unique identity.

## 2. The sense of marginalization.

All the women who participated in this study of intentional childlessness

experienced a sense of marginalization in that they felt they were viewed in negative terms by society. The women indicated that they were aware that they had been viewed by others as "not normal", "deficient", "unfulfilled" and "selfish." The participants noted that they experienced this negative sanctioning and pressure to conform primarily during their childbearing years. Looking back over their experiences, they believe the cultural climate toward the intentionally childless has changed over their lifetime, and is now more accepting of different reproductive choices than in the past.

The women reported that they experienced this sense of marginalization as a feeling of disapproval from society in general rather than from their immediate families. None of the women referred to parental pressure to reproduce, rather, they spoke of family directives that stressed the need for attaining economic self-reliance before marriage and children. While perceiving that their childlessness was accepted without criticism by their families, some women felt that they were seen as abnormal or deficient by others and at times they were even asked "what's wrong with you?" One woman said that she felt others viewed her as "suspect" and that people likely said "what's wrong with this woman?" implying "there's something wrong with you if you don't have children." Another participant commented that she had perceived a judgmental attitude from others who made comments such as, "What's wrong with you? If you could and you didn't, then there must be something seriously wrong." Because the women had chosen to go against a dominant cultural norm they felt that they were held accountable for this choice. For these women, a sense of marginalization resulted from choosing an alternate life path and thereby not meeting with the approval or acceptance of society.

Some of the women felt marginalized in response to subtle unspoken attitudes of others to their childlessness. As one participant explained: "There's a part of me that thinks that when they get behind closed doors they say, 'Well, I wonder what's wrong with them?'" Although these women did not report being directly challenged by others regarding their childlessness, they perceived an attitude of disapproval that left them feeling like outsiders.

For other women, their sense of marginalization resulted from direct confrontations with others who held the childless woman accountable to justify her choice. For example, one woman described a social incident that had occurred earlier in her life:

The fellow sitting next to me said, "Don't you have any children?" And I said, "No, I don't." And he said, "What's the matter with you?" And I could not believe that he said it. He had no idea whether I was childless by choice, or that I couldn't have any kids. I couldn't believe that anybody would be that insensitive or that stupid to say such a thing.

As well as the perception of being viewed as deficient or abnormal, the participants in this study also experienced a sense of marginalization in being viewed by others as unfulfilled women. This perception was described by one woman: "You're nothing without being a mother, are you? You know, you're unfulfilled, you have no kids, what's wrong with you"? Another woman described an incident with a male colleague who was angered by her decision to remain childless:

He told me that I was awful, that I was denying my womanhood, that I was missing out on one of the greatest - he was like absolutely enraged that I would do this. He was very, very upset.

Similarly, another participant recalled being told: "You cannot possibly be fulfilled if you have not had a child." The perception that they were viewed by others as unfulfilled

women contributed to the sense of marginalization the women experienced.

The women also felt that they were viewed as selfish by society because they chose not to have children. While all of the women in the study talked about the societal perception of the childless woman as selfish, they responded to the criticism in different ways. Some of the participants accepted and agreed with this perspective, while others adamantly rejected this contention. For example one woman said, "People say you're very selfish. And I just say, yes I am, because what's the point of arguing with them?" Another woman said quite matter-of-factly, "We are a couple that don't have children and we know we're more selfish because of it. We know that." This woman accepted the contention that her lack of willingness to take on the responsibility of raising children was an indication of her selfishness. Another participant with a similar opinion said, "We're both fairly selfish in that we like our own time and our own space."

While some of the women in the study agreed with the perspective that they were selfish, others were not willing to accept that label. One woman reported on how she had previously felt that her decision to not have children was a selfish one, but that now at 50 years of age, she wondered if it were possible that "it's a very selfish decision to have children." Another woman felt that it was selfish to have children if you were not prepared to take on the childcare responsibilities yourself. She commented, "to me, it's more selfish to have them and to have somebody else look after them." Questioning whether the concept of selfishness was relevant to the issue of children at all, one participant related a situation she had encountered. She had been told that "people who don't have kids become very selfish", and her response was, "That's very inappropriate. I

don't think because you make your personal circle slightly bigger by including other family members you're any less selfish in general." She went on to say:

I remember somebody commenting that one of the things that they've found having kids was they were less selfish. I said, "Well, I don't think you can conclude that because if you observe the person they weren't any less selfish than the average person." It's just that their identity included that child now. That was the only difference.

It was apparent that while the women in the study all linked the notion of selfishness with the childbearing decision, they were far from agreed on how that connection related to their lives and on their willingness to accept the stereotype of the childless woman as selfish.

In a seeming contradiction to the view that a woman who does not have children is selfish, some participants in this study also noted that they had been encouraged to have children in order to be taken care of in old age. One woman said, "Some people have said to me, 'What's going to happen to you when you're old? Your children won't be there to look after you.'" Another woman had encountered similar comments and reported:

I can remember a number of people saying to me, 'Well what are you going to do when you're old?' And I can remember saying, 'You think that I'd have kids so they can take care of me when I'm elderly?' That's bizarre! I was quite astounded because it was so silly.

These women rejected the suggestion that one should have children as an insurance policy against isolation in old age. They perceived this to be a selfish reason for having children.

While all the women experienced being labeled by others as selfish, they chose different ways of coping with and making sense of that stereotype. One of the strategies the participants used to minimize their sense of marginalization was the deflection of

people's curiosity by using humour or "glossing over it." A common example was: "Oh, we make it a joke. Never take it too seriously. L. and I just answer in a way like: 'well, we don't know how to do it yet. We're trying to perfect it.'" Another woman's example of humour was: "A. always would say, 'we're still practising, we're still practising', with a wide grin on his face." Lighthearted humour was used by these women and their partners to discourage further interrogation by others.

Another strategy the participants used to cope with marginalizing stereotypes was to ignore the topic. The women in this study did not feel that they owed anyone an explanation for their childless state, with one participant commenting, "I don't deign to give them an answer because it's really quite pointless." Another woman noted, "I've got more important things to talk about right now than [satisfying] somebody's curiosity." Deflecting or ignoring the comments were often used as techniques because the women in this study perceived that many questions asked did not warrant a genuine answer. They felt that questions regarding a person's reproductive status were often asked in a critical and judgmental manner and that it was necessary to set boundaries with others on this issue. An example given by one participant was: "I've known you five minutes and you're asking me this? I don't think so. So I just handle it and keep on trekking."

The women indicated that their sense of marginalization has decreased over their lifetime. They felt that one of the factors in this change was that our society has become more tolerant of those who choose different reproductive options. One woman who expressed this view said, "I think society has changed, too. I really do. I think we were on the leading edge of it all." Other participants agreed that attitudes have gradually changed

and that it is much more accepted now that women will pursue different life paths. Participants also noted that if they had felt the need to defend their choice earlier in life, they no longer felt that need. At least part of this change was attributed to a cultural change in North American society. The women also believed that, since they are now past their childbearing years, society in general is no longer interested or concerned with their reproductive choices.

Another aspect related to the decrease in the women's sense of marginalization was the participants' own attitudes toward themselves and others. The women in this study reported that now at midlife, they were no longer so concerned about what others thought, and felt more comfortable with their own choices. One woman stated, "I think I deal with it a lot better in terms of the questions that people ask because I don't have that feeling that I have to defend myself anymore." The participants felt that they no longer needed to conform to social pressures. Another participant noted the different perspective she enjoys now at midlife:

I find my life is perhaps less complicated than it has been, because I have things in a degree of perspective that I haven't enjoyed before. I don't care what people think about me the way that I used to.

Now at midlife, when having children is no longer a biological option, the women reported no longer feeling any need to live up to the expectations of others.

In summary, the women in this study felt a sense of marginalization in that they were aware of being viewed by other members of society as being abnormal, unfulfilled and selfish. In reaction to this sense of marginalization, the women in this study used a variety of strategies to deflect and cope with the negative attitudes and comments of

others. They reported that this marginalization had become less pronounced over their lifetimes, which they attributed both to changes in cultural values toward the childless, and the change in their reproductive status, as well as their own developmental growth. While the participants acknowledged that they have experienced pressure to conform, the source of this pressure was perceived to be society in general rather than their own families. They also reported that now at midlife they no longer feel the weight of negative social sanctions.

### 3. A sense of the overwhelming costs of motherhood.

All of the women who participated in this study reported a strong sense of the overwhelming costs of motherhood. In fact, none of the women even spoke of any rewards of motherhood. Rather they described at length the many sacrifices required in childrearing, including the sacrifice of self. They perceived that motherhood would be a negative choice for them, characterized by many losses. The participants spoke of parenting as "really tough", "hard, hard work", "such a big responsibility" and "the hardest job in the world." Some women noted that being a mother "demands so much patience and caring and time" and that "it is extremely tough to raise kids." For the women in this study the role of motherhood was viewed as a long-term commitment to hard work and stressful responsibilities. The enormous costs involved in assuming the role of mother were considered to be far greater than the participants could see themselves coping with and accepting.

As well as being costly in terms of overall hard work, motherhood was perceived to demand very costly personal sacrifices such as: loss of freedom and spontaneity, loss of

self-identity, loss of dyadic intensity, and losses in time and money.

The participants reported their perceived loss of freedom and spontaneity as a primary cost of motherhood. One woman declared, "I wanted the freedom. I wanted to be able to go and do as I pleased and I knew that that would not happen if I had children." Loss of spontaneity was a concern as well for all the women, with the role of mothering being viewed by the women as constricting, "rigid" and "regimented." "You can't sit and read a book. You go to bed when they go to bed because they get up early. You can't sit and drink wine and watch television till the wee hours because they're up early."

For some of the women the perception of freedom was more important in theory than in actual practise. One woman noted, "I didn't go and do as much as I wanted, but the option was there. I had the choice." The women perceived that the motherhood role would restrict their freedom, as well as their sense of having choices. The importance of having options in their lives made the cost of relinquishing this sense of choice unacceptable to these participants.

The women in this study also perceived motherhood as exacting a heavy cost in terms of a woman's self definition and identity. The role of mother was seen to be one which required total selflessness, infinite patience and self-sacrifice. All the women perceived that taking on the motherhood role would result in enormous personal costs to their own sense of self. The perceived costs ranged from those who felt that they would have become "harried" and "resentful" to those who felt that they would have had no self-identity at all. One woman believed that if she had become a mother she would have become totally involved in their lives and her own life would have been "on hold." She

explained in these words, "It's a big job and it's much more important than having a career and all the rest of it. So I would have put everything into it and I probably would have put too much into it." Another woman for whom a total loss of self-identity was seen as a probable cost of motherhood expressed the opinion that "if I had had children I would have had no self-identity at all." For the women in this study, motherhood was raised to a highly idealized status that involved enormous and unacceptable costs to their own self identities. In order to preserve their individual identities, the logical decision was to reject motherhood.

Loss of the opportunity and impetus for personal development was seen as another costly sacrifice in assuming the motherhood role. One woman thought that women who have had children "have a lot of catching up to do in order to come to the place that I'm at." She believed that perhaps women with children were missing out on many of the experiences that contributed to her own identity and that she perceived had been an important aspect of her personal development. "They've got about a ten-year gap of experiences in things they could have been doing for themselves but didn't have time to do." Expressing a similar view, another participant said, "If I'd had children I would not have had the opportunity to learn the things that I know now. I think I would have stayed fairly regressed in my mother's kind of image." The participants perceived that they had experienced opportunities for self-development that women with children most likely had not enjoyed. Most commonly, they linked their own personal development to their childless status, contradicting the view that women without children are unfulfilled.

Another cost of motherhood perceived by the women was that of the loss of

dyadic intensity. This potential loss was expressed by the nine women in the study who were married or in a common-law relationship. The pressures and difficulties of raising children were seen to be factors that would threaten their intimate relationship with their partners. One of the women wondered, "Can marriage really survive children? I mean you can have the perfect children, no health problems, no nothing, everything's hunky dory, money's coming in, and yet you can still have problems." Several of the women believed that the problems involved in parenting were severe enough to divide the marital dyad. Reflecting these concerns one participant said: "I just really felt that it would divide J. and me. I could just see this sort of being a triangle. It would have pulled us apart." Similarly, another married woman noted that if she and her spouse had become parents "I think it would have been the end of our marriage."

To explain how they perceived that having children would have threatened their marriages, the women reported that they believed the responsibility of caring for children would have been divided unequally between them and their partners and this inequity would create friction in their relationships. When they considered the impact children would have on their marriage, it was apparent that the women maintained a view of the traditional family perhaps based on the one in which they had grown up where the mother was responsible for the majority of the child care tasks. The participants feared that if they were mothers they would have felt resentful of the sacrifices they had made and would have lashed out at their husbands as the ones who had put them in that position. The women definitely felt that as mothers, the responsibility of childrearing would ultimately be their burden and that they would come to resent carrying the full load that their husbands,

due to their gender, would not be obligated to share.

Financial losses and the resulting pressures were also perceived to be a cost of motherhood for the women in the study. One participant stated, "If you have kids you're going to need more money and be able to spend less on yourself. You have to spend more on kids so that then makes the financial problems worse." Having children was seen to be a financial burden for two reasons: first, these women believed that being a mother would mean giving up work outside the home or working less, and second, the costs of raising children were seen to be enormous.

As well as the actual financial cost involved in having children, the loss of financial independence was seen as an inevitable cost of motherhood. The women in the study perceived that in order to fulfill the responsibilities of motherhood they would have to sacrifice at least part of that sense of independence by relinquishing all or part of their work commitments outside the home. The importance of financial security was emphasized by one of the women:

It was instilled in me from the time I was 12 that money is security. I also felt quite strongly that if I was going to have any kids that I wanted to stay home with them for the first couple of years. And yet at the same time P. and I had enjoyed two or three years of living very comfortably on two salaries and the idea of cutting back was something that I really didn't want to do.

Another participant reinforced the importance of financial independence when she said: "I've learned to really like the financial independence. Really like it. I like being able to pay my own life, being able to do my own thing, and call my own shots." The women in this study felt that motherhood would cost them the surrender of their financial independence, a sacrifice that was perceived as unacceptable.

For the participants of this study the ultimate cost of motherhood was the perception that it was an all-consuming role. The choice to have children was viewed as an all-or-nothing dichotomous decision. Reflecting these perceptions one woman stated, "I believe that if you have children you have to look after them. And there is no compromise. If you want to work, don't have children. If you have children, you have to stay home." Another participant expressed a similarly dichotomous view: "The choice was you either have children and stay home with them and you don't do anything else." For the women in this study, the options of career and motherhood were seen as completely incompatible. One participant commented that "to me a mother should look after her children. If you have them, look after them is my perception. Don't give them to someone else to look after, because you're not raising them then." In a validation interview one woman noted that she had been somewhat surprised at her "black and white stance" on this issue because she usually is able to "see the grey areas." She wondered if perhaps it had been necessary for her to hold this dichotomous view of motherhood in order to remain firm in her conviction to remain childless. This participant reported that the process of the initial interview and the subsequent reflection on the emergent themes had provided her with valuable personal insights. Generally the participants in this study held the view that if a woman chooses to be a mother she should be a traditional, stay-at-home mother. The options of career and motherhood were perceived to be completely incompatible. When remaining childless was set against the all-consuming, sacrificial nature of motherhood, it was perceived as a very appealing choice.

In attempting to make sense of their negative perceptions of motherhood, some

participants linked this perception to their own mothers' roles. Others linked their view of motherhood to their own experiences of caretaking siblings or their observations of people who were parents. When discussing their view of their own mothers' roles, the women in this study talked about self-sacrifice and selflessness. One participant illustrated:

I remember thinking that I did not want to be like my mom, where everything else came first. I mean, she would end up giving herself the little scraps or the leftovers. She'd serve everybody else. I mean, my dad first, and then my grandmother, then my sister and I. She always put herself last.

Other women noted that their mothers never bought things for themselves and never seemed to feel that they deserved new things. One woman felt that this was because "she was getting money from my dad. It wasn't her money." The women generally saw their mothers as traditional women who were dependent on their husbands and had little self-sufficiency or independent identity. One woman talked about her mother being "tied in that role and not able to go anywhere. My mother lived through my father. That is something that is really scary to see." Another woman felt that her mother was "trapped" and she never wanted to be like that. The participants were determined to follow a different path than their mothers and to reject the role of mothering that they perceived as demanding enormous self-sacrifice and personal costs.

Another factor that was seen to contribute to their negative perception of motherhood was the fact that as children many of the women had taken on a role of caretaking with siblings. Six of the participants in this study had taken care of other siblings when their mothers were unavailable to parent for various reasons. One woman who had three younger brothers said, "I ended up babysitting a lot and looking after the

three brothers because I was the eldest. I knew what they were all about so there was no curiosity left for me." Adult burdens and responsibilities fell on the shoulders of another participant when her mother was earning money to support the family. She said, "I was doing the laundry and I was looking after the children and I worked. I've worked since I was 11 years old." This woman felt that she played a large role in the difficult task of holding the family together. "I had to learn to focus from a very, very young age in order to assist the family. I was an integral part of the family, making it work." When discussing their responsibilities as caretakers in the family, the six participants who shared this experience all felt that it played a crucial role in their decision to remain childless. As difficult as these caretaking roles were for the women as young girls, none of the participants perceived that these roles would be any less demanding for them as adults.

When discussing their sense of motherhood as overwhelmingly costly, the women in this study described their perception as pragmatic and realistic and were somewhat curious as to why others did not share this perception. For example, one woman spoke of her friend, herself a new mother, and her surprise at the burden she felt:

She said, "I don't understand it. I'm just so frustrated. I feel tied down". She thought it was like you're lying on the bed and there's kittens and little rolls of toilet paper, and I can't believe that people still buy that.

The participants wondered why other women did not "see" the inherent costs and sacrifices involved in becoming mothers. Being aware that they were so different from other women in their perspective that motherhood was unbearably costly served also to underscore their sense of being an anomaly. It was evident to the women in this study that the vast majority of women viewed motherhood from a totally different perspective than

they did. And yet, because the women in this study viewed motherhood as a costly and negative condition, they perceived that their decision to remain childless was a logical and affirmative option.

To summarize, the participants in this research all shared a sense of the overwhelming costs of motherhood. They saw childrearing in dichotomous terms as totally incompatible with career or work outside the home and as requiring a full-time commitment from the mother at enormous cost to herself. The combination of the costs of motherhood along with their own sense of inadequacy for the role provided the women with a comprehensible rationale for not having children. This rationale helped them to understand and make sense of the way in which they were fundamentally different from other women. The participants understood that their perceptions of motherhood had emerged from three sources. These sources were perceived to be: A negative perception of their own mother's role, an experience as a caretaker when young, and a sense of pragmatism that prevented them from succumbing to cultural myths that glorified motherhood.

#### 4. A sense of freedom and autonomy in being childless.

For all the women who participated in this research, a sense of freedom and autonomy was an important component in their life experience as intentionally childless women. They spoke of "freedom from" and "freedom to" and expressed the view that their personal independence was a highly-valued element in their lives. The meaning or explanation that the women gave to this priority in their lives varied from early family messages to the perception of deficiencies in their mothers' lives and to a basic sense of

self as independent from others.

When the participants spoke about their life experience as women who were childless by choice, they all used the word "freedom." They placed high value on the freedom they experienced from the perceived pressures and responsibilities of raising children. One woman expressed the importance of freedom in her life in this way:

I like the idea of doing my own thing after work. I don't have to go home to cook a meal or look after any kids. The whole idea of having that personal freedom is really nice. So that was probably the basis for the way I live my life. It all centered around the fact that I did have this freedom to do whatever I wanted to do when I wanted to do it.

Similarly, another participant described the priority of freedom in her life: "Freedom has always been very important in my life. I'm a child of the 60s. I was a hippie and it's always been very important to be free. It's a big, big thing with me."

The feeling of freedom was also expressed as a sense of being "exempt" from all the responsibilities that mothers were perceived to have. One participant felt that she had somehow gotten off "scot-free" because she did not have caregiving obligations. The expression of being "exempt" may be linked to the women's sense of being an anomaly in that they felt they were somehow just different and therefore not required to take on the responsibilities of childrearing.

The "freedom to" that the women in this study described was variable. For some of the women it was the freedom to pursue their own careers: "I went into law school, so I knew that I was going for a full-out career and that was it. I wanted to be free to pursue that." For other women, freedom meant being able to enjoy a wide variety of experiences. For example, one participant explained:

Because I didn't have any kids I was able to do things that I don't think I would have done if I'd had a family, because I wouldn't have had the time nor the energy. I trained for two marathons and I really got into running.

Other women talked about being free to have "adventures" and try new activities and felt that being child-free allowed them the time to do these things. One 47-year-old participant described this freedom:

I'm free to have other interests, things that I like to do. And somebody will say, "Well, what do you like to do?" Well I like to rollerblade. "What?" Because somebody my age isn't supposed to be able to rollerblade.

For the women in this study motherhood was seen as a choice that would have eliminated many different activities and opportunities in their lives. They perceived that their interests would have been more restricted to aspects that involved children and family life. Ironically for some of these women, the freedom they experienced as a result of remaining childless was viewed as allowing them the time and energy to pursue relationships with other children. One of the participants described a long term relationship she has had with one of her former students and noted, "that's a relationship I was able to nurture because I didn't have kids of my own." Other women in this study described close connections they had with children and young people and perceived that they would not have been able to develop these relationships had they been raising their own children. Being intentionally childless did not preclude having children in their lives in other ways for the participants. Rather, most of the women reported that they liked children and enjoyed having connections with them, but did not want to have their own biological children or the commitments that this would entail.

As well as freedom, a sense of autonomy was an important component in the

experience of being intentionally childless for the participants. The sense of autonomy in being childless ranged from one woman who said "I really enjoy being independent" to another who described herself as "obsessed" with independence. She said:

I'm quite obsessed with being independent. I really like being able to make my own decisions, to the point where I didn't change my name when I got married. I have all my own accounts. We have a marriage agreement, a prenuptial agreement. Because I own my own townhouse and he moved in and I wanted to make sure that if the marriage didn't work I wanted the right to dissolve it so that he took whatever he brought into the marriage and I had whatever I came into the marriage with.

This participant felt that only as a childless woman was she able to maintain this level of independence and autonomy that was such a priority in her life.

Another important aspect of independence for most of the women in this study was that of financial independence. One woman noted that "I had my own money so of course that meant a lot of independence, too." She went on to add:

I have always been looking after my own money. I cannot imagine what it would be like having to go to somebody else and ask for money. I mean, to me that is so demeaning.

For these women it was very important to be self-reliant and able to support themselves and since they believed that motherhood and career were incompatible, the only way to do this was to remain childless. If they were to become mothers, the participants felt that they would inevitably be dependent on their husbands and lose their autonomy. One woman commented, "I think that no matter whatever happens I can always look after myself." She added, "You want to be sure that you can always paddle your own canoe."

In attempting to understand their sense of freedom and autonomy in being childless, participants of this research offered various rationales. For example, some of the

women explained their desire for independence as a result of a strong family imperative to be self-supporting. One participant said, "My mother told all of us girls: 'Don't ever rely on a man. Learn something so that you can support yourself'. For another woman it was her father who instilled this message:

You have to look after yourself. Because even if you get married, men can leave you or can die. And so you need to have a skill or some kind of job, some training that you can do so that you can always support yourself, so you never depend on your husband to look after you.

For many of the women the family imperative for independence appeared to be stronger than the imperative to marry and raise a family. As stated by one participant:

My father didn't care what I did as long as I got a degree and had a job. And the message I got was: fine to get married, but you must, must, you know, at least work for a little while. Get yourself established in some kind of field.

Another woman received a very similar message from her father: "Always make sure you can support yourself. You will have to take care of yourself. That was made very clear to me." These participants received support and encouragement in the form of early family messages, to be independent, to have a career and to be self-reliant. The women in this study did not perceive that it would be possible to retain their sense of freedom and autonomy were they to become mothers.

For other women in this study, the desire for independence was explained as a reaction to the perceived dependence and lack of freedom that their mothers endured. One participant explained her need for financial independence and security by explaining her perception of her mother's situation: "Watching my mother, who was an educated woman, having to clean motel rooms and having to take in ironing and laundry to keep her

children going. And I saw what it did to her." Another woman described her mother's situation:

I did look in her closet later and I thought, you know, this is pathetic. Look at this poor woman, what she's got to wear here. And occasionally she'd go out and buy things, but she never felt like she deserved it, or never pushed for it because she was getting money from my dad. It wasn't her money.

Based on their perceptions of their own mothers' experience, the participants view of motherhood was decidedly negative. They saw that while their mothers worked hard, they were not financially rewarded and relied on their husbands for support. As such, the participants perceived the role of full-time mother necessitated the relinquishment of freedom and autonomy.

While the majority of the women in this study saw their drive for independence as a result of family imperatives or experiences, some of the women viewed this desire for autonomy more as a self-defined need. One woman stated, "I had something inside of me that said I had to have a career before I did anything else. I had to have this career." For these women it was not a verbalized directive, but rather, a sense of being true to their own selves.

To summarize, the women who participated in this study experienced a strong sense of freedom and autonomy in being childless. Family imperatives for independence as well as the participants' perceptions of their own mothers' experiences played significant roles in the participants' strong desire for freedom and autonomy. Some of the women also perceived that their sense of freedom and autonomy in being childless was a result of being true to personal self-defined needs.

### 5. Sense of having made the right choice.

A sense of having made the right choice emerged as a theme for all the participants in this research with regard to the decision to remain intentionally childless. While they came to intentional childlessness by different paths, all the women reported a strong conviction that they had done "the right thing" for themselves. The decision was reaffirmed over their lifetime internally through life satisfaction, as well as by the external benefits that they perceived.

The strength the women expressed in their convictions was indicated by one participant who said firmly, "I don't regret anything about the fact that I haven't had any kids." Another said, "There's absolutely no regrets. It was I think probably the smartest decision I ever made." In a similar voice, another participant said, "We just don't have any regrets about it." The phrase "no regrets" was used by the women in this study as they sought to make their feelings very clear. One woman expressed some surprise that she had been so firm in a decision that was seemingly so socially unacceptable:

It amazes me that I actually managed to do that because I usually do tend to be a wimp and will do things that I don't really want to do just simply because they should be done. I'm sure that even unconsciously my conviction was strong enough to make me be able to do that, to stick to that, because I certainly don't in other ways.

The participants talked about doing "the right thing" and making "the right decision." To explain her definition of "the right thing" one woman said: "I would want to make sure that whatever I did was the right thing as opposed to morally right, the expected thing for the person, the expected role in society, or the expectations from the culture." The women in this study were very emphatic in their conviction that they had

made the correct decision in choosing to be intentionally childless. One of the participants emphasized this stance, saying:

I knew I would never regret it. This is the one thing I knew was absolutely right for me. Absolutely, like I could feel it right in there. This was the right thing to do. And I've never had any doubts about that.

Another woman fiercely defended her choice, saying, "I know it was the right decision and I don't have any regrets. I would argue it down to the last moment with anyone should they care to discuss it."

Other women who had reassessed their decision periodically over time felt this decision had been reaffirmed and this reaffirmation provided evidence for the sense of certainty that they felt. One woman commented, "I think the older I get the stronger I feel that we did the right thing not having children. And I feel more confident than I've ever felt about it."

Closely connected to their sense of having made the right choice was the strong feeling that each woman is entitled to make her own reproductive decisions. This decision was considered private and personal and not available for public speculation or interference. As one woman expressed: "No one else knew about it. It wasn't anybody else's decision. Not that I was ashamed of that decision, but it didn't have anything to do with anyone else." Another woman agreed that "It wasn't anybody else's business really. My reasons are mine." This sense of privacy was closely linked to the sense of marginalization. Because they perceived the social climate to be unsupportive and disapproving of the choice to be intentionally childless, the women protected themselves by defining this choice as a strictly personal issue.

The sense of entitlement to choice and privacy extended to others as the women in this study demonstrated sensitivity to other women's reproductive circumstances and decisions. For example, one participant described a situation with a coworker who was experiencing fertility problems: "I never really talked to her or told her about this because that would have hurt her unbelievably because she was trying so hard to have a child." The participants were very much aware that many other women were childless due to infertility and not by personal choice.

The participants of this research agreed that each woman should be informed and decide for herself whether she should be a mother. The importance of allowing for individual differences was underscored by one woman. She said:

What makes me angry is that they think there's only one way for people to be - that people have children. I mean who's to say, anymore than I could tell you what's right for you. All I know is you have to decide what's right for you. It's as simple as that.

Another participant indicated that her choice was not necessarily appropriate for others: "You can't go around telling everybody, 'Don't have kids', in the same way that everybody went around telling us to have kids. We're more polite than that." The women felt that in order to remain true to their inner selves, it was important to withstand any pressure to conform to society's expectations.

The sense of having made the right choice was substantiated for the women by the benefits that they felt they had realized as a result of their decision to remain childless. These benefits were perceived as both personal internal rewards and also external benefits related to others and outside interests. The advantages that the participants felt they

experienced as a result of remaining childless provided the counterpoint to the sense of the overwhelming costs of motherhood that they perceived.

The internal benefits that were perceived to reinforce the sense of certainty were: opportunities for personal growth, a sense of life satisfaction, and generally a sense of feeling fortunate or lucky. As a result of being free from the responsibilities of child rearing, the women felt that they had more time and energy to devote to their own personal growth. One participant saw her choice as a "personal gain." She said, "I'm richer for it and it means I can bring more to other people. I can bring more energy. I can bring more life experience." Another woman spoke of the benefit to her own personal growth, saying:

It's afforded me the opportunity and when you're on this kind of voyage of self-discovery and inner work, I think when you're tied down with a family you can't devote a lot of time to that, and that's probably really important.

During the validation interview this woman noted that, upon reflection, her belief that the responsibilities of mothering were an obstacle to personal growth was likely a fairly biased view. She suggested that this perspective had likely been an important factor in her own justification of her choice to forego motherhood.

Another personal benefit for the women in this study was seen to be that of a sense of life satisfaction. They typically said, "Life is good"; "I feel very, very good about my life"; "I really have the good life." While expressing their sense of satisfaction with their lives, some of the participants also pointed out that they had no sense of something missing from their life experience. As reflected in the words of one participant, "I don't feel like I'm unfulfilled. I don't feel it makes me less of a woman. I don't feel any of those

things." Another said, "There's no void there really." While at an earlier time in life some wondered whether they were missing out on some important element in life, in midlife they had come to feel that they were enjoying a full and satisfying life.

Another aspect of their lives that was perceived to substantiate their sense of having made the right choice was the feeling of good fortune. They talked about "how fortunate" they had been, "how lucky" and that "God was good to me." One woman, when assessing her lifepath, said "I feel really quite fortunate. I've really led a charmed life, I have to say. I've really been lucky." The women felt that they had been lucky in terms of opportunities that had come along, in terms of having options that their mothers never had, in terms of finding the right partners (for those who were partnered), and in terms of making the right decisions for themselves. One of the women wondered, "Was it luck or did I just sort of orchestrate this thing so that this is how it happened?"

The external benefits that were perceived by the participants to substantiate the sense of certainty in remaining childless were primarily in two areas: the benefit of being able to take advantage of opportunities and the benefit of a close intimate relationship.

The women who participated in this study found that being free from the responsibilities of child care allowed them increased time and energy to seize opportunities in other areas of interest. They expressed strong interests in having a variety of on-going experiences such as travel, sports, gardening, education, relationships with children and spiritual activities. One woman, who felt that because she was childless she had the freedom to pursue her spiritual life, said:

My spiritual life is the most important thing in the world to me. It has been now

for a number of years. I'm not saying you can't have a spiritual life with children, you can, but it's different. It's just different when you have the time to pursue it.

Another participant felt that she had been able to accomplish things that she never could have done as a mother. Some of these accomplishments involved long-term caring relationships with students and ex-students. Other accomplishments were educational - completing a Master's degree, and recreational - running marathons. She felt that these activities required a focus of energy that she would not have had if she had been raising children. In describing this benefit she said:

Part way through my Master's I started racing cars, and now my husband and I ride motor cycles. If I'd had kids, if I was worrying about juggling babysitters and worrying about money, most of those things, if not all, I probably would not have done because I wouldn't have been able to. I think that not having kids has given me the freedom to pursue things that I never would have dreamed possible.

The emphasis placed on freedom as a benefit of a childfree life served to underscore the importance of the sense of freedom in the womens' lives and the great sacrifice that they believed they would have felt if that freedom had been lost.

Of the ten women who participated in this research, eight were married at the time of the interview. The married women felt that one of the benefits of their childfree lives was having a closer relationship with their spouse which in turn provided evidence for their sense of certainty in their decision. Like freedom, dyadic intensity was perceived as a benefit of remaining childless. One woman said, "My husband and I are closer than we ever were. We probably have done a lot more together than most couples." The opportunity to spend more time together was seen as the most important factor in the creation of more intimacy in their relationships. One participant commented, "Perhaps we

do things more together as a couple. There's that opportunity to do it more because you're not, one of you is not taking the kids off to basketball while the other one is doing something else." Time was also identified as a factor in the development of a closer, more intimate relationship with her partner for another participant:

I think B. and I have had a lot of time for each other that possibly we wouldn't have had if we'd had children. We've had a lot of time to grow and develop. I think B. and I are closer than any couple that we know who has children.

As well as time being a factor in the degree of intensity in their relationships, the quality of that time was also seen to be important: "I know that we're probably happier in that we have time for each other. We're not stressed out and exhausted." The women perceived that as mothers they would have had little energy left to devote to the marital relationship.

In summary, all of the women in this research felt a sense of having made the right choice with respect to not having children. With clear strength of convictions, at this stage in their lives they all reported that they had "no regrets" about their choice. The participants strongly believed that women are entitled to make all choices about reproduction themselves, in spite of pressures from family, friends or society. The participants perceived that their decision had been reaffirmed over time as a result of the benefits that they experienced as an outcome of that decision. The benefits provided substantiation and confirmation that resulted in a sense of certainty in their decision to remain childless. These benefits were perceived to be personal internal gains as well as the external rewards derived from the involvement in many diverse experiences and from the enjoyment of increased dyadic intensity.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of midlife women who chose not to have children. The research question was: "what is the lived experience of intentional childlessness for midlife women?" A synopsis which represents the essential structure of the women's experience is presented as a narrative in this chapter. This narrative is followed by a comparison of the results to the existing literature, and discussion of the implications for counselling, as well as suggestions for future research. A brief summary concludes this chapter.

#### **The Essential Structure**

In phenomenological research an attempt is made to systematically develop a narrative that represents the universal quality or essence of the experience that is being studied (Van Manen, 1990). The essential structure is a condensed version of the participants' experience presented as concisely as possible. Because of the unique life experiences of this cohort of midlife women, the essential structure is introduced with a brief description of the socio/cultural context within which these women made and lived with their decisions to remain childless.

The women who participated in this study were born at the end of World War II in an era of enormous growth and change. The children born during this time of unprecedented peak rates of fertility have been labeled "baby boomers" and have been the largest recorded age group to move through life en masse (Ramu, 1993). During this post-war era, strong societal emphasis was placed on women's maternal roles and the

typical mother was a full-time homemaker who did not work outside the home unless there was financial need (Unger & Crawford, 1992). Many baby boomer girls grew up watching their mothers sacrifice their own self identities in order to fulfill their requisite roles as housewives and mothers.

As young adults, the women in this first cohort of the baby boomer generation lived through the "free love" and revolution of the hippie era as well as consciousness-raising during the 1970s feminist movement. With the emerging availability of reliable birth control and the trend toward the legalization of abortion, young women were able to exercise more reproductive freedom than previous generations. Thus becoming a mother became a realistic option, rather than being the inevitable outcome of sexual intimacy. According to Lang (1991), many women of the baby boomer generation felt considerable social pressure to pursue a challenging career as well as motherhood. Most of these women juggled the multiple roles of wife, mother, and career while some, like the women in this study, opted out of the motherhood roles, choosing instead to remain childless.

Now in the 1990s, these first baby boomer women are at midlife and are living with the consequences of their reproductive choices. They have created a life structure very different from many of the women who came before them, including their mothers.

It was within this socio/cultural context of the post-war years, that the women in this study were born. Six of the ten women were the first born and one was an only child, while the remaining three were second, middle and youngest children. Raised in traditional families, the participants' fathers worked outside the home to support the family and their mothers stayed at home to tend to the childrearing and housework. As young

girls, six of the participants in this research took on caretaking roles to aid in the upbringing of younger siblings. Through the experience of first-hand surrogate parenting, they became aware of the time and energy required to raise children.

The women in this study also observed their mothers' roles as housewives and mothers. Most perceived that their mothers had sacrificed a great deal for the family. It seemed to them that their mothers had put their own hopes and dreams on hold in order to devote themselves to the needs of their families. The women also saw that while money was spent on the children for food, clothing and education, the mothers rarely, if ever, spent money frivolously on themselves. The family finances may have been organized by their mothers, but it seemed clear to the participants that the money actually was earned and controlled by their fathers. They often perceived their mothers' lives as martyr-like and saw little that appealed to them in this degree of self-sacrifice.

Education was a valued commodity in the homes of the majority of the women in this study. Most were encouraged to pursue higher levels of education than their parents had, and without exception they all completed high school and most went on to university or college, some to post-graduate training. Consistent with their levels of academic preparation and achievement, the women in this study placed high value on their financial independence and sense of autonomy. They perceived that their work provided them with the opportunity and freedom to lead a different life than that of their mothers.

After marriage, financial independence remained a priority for most of the women, and was seen as necessary to provide for an equal balance of power within the marital relationship. The women married partners who were either ambivalent toward the

question of having children or definitely opposed to the idea. Given their partners' ambivalence or opposition to becoming parents, the women believed that, were they to have children, the majority of the childrearing responsibilities would fall on their shoulders. The women felt mothering would require the sacrifice of their own careers and many intolerable losses, and anticipated that if they had children they would come to resent their spouses' lack of equal commitment to childrearing.

While some of the women in this study knew from a very early age that they did not want to be mothers, for others the knowledge evolved over time. Some of the women who gradually came to know that they did not want children, undertook regular assessments of their decision where they re-evaluated their present life situation and their current parenting motivation to determine whether these had changed enough to include mothering. Others experienced a period of ambivalence when they felt uncertain and resolved this ambivalence with a definite and final decision to remain childless. Regardless of which path they followed to their choice, they all reported that they had never had a "burning desire" or a strong "maternal urge" to have children. They pointed out that while they saw other women show excitement over new-born babies, they felt no such stirring themselves. Because the women felt no inner desire to have children, they did not perceive that the decision to remain childless was a difficult one. The actual conflict for these women appeared to be whether to be faithful to their "inner self" and forego motherhood, or to live up to society's expectations and have children. The women experienced their lack of maternal drive as an aspect of themselves which set them apart from other women, and struggled to understand and make sense of this difference.

In seeking to understand why they did not want children, the women speculated about themselves as potential mothers and felt they would be inadequate for the role. They were concerned that they would not be "good" mothers because they lacked the patience and self-sacrificing they felt was required. The women feared that they might be unable to cope with the pressures of childrearing and would take out their fears and frustrations on their children as well as their marital partners.

As further substantiation for why they were unsuitable for childrearing, the women viewed the role of motherhood in selective terms. They perceived that mothers were required to be selfless and self-sacrificing. These idealistic requirements were impossible for the women to live up to, providing support for their decision to remain childless. For these women it seemed that presenting themselves as inadequate to the task of motherhood was a more acceptable explanation for their childlessness than simply stating that they did not want to have children.

The roles of motherhood and career were seen in strictly dichotomous terms by the women in this study in that mothering was perceived to be completely incompatible with a career or work outside the home. They believed that giving up a career would also imply the loss of financial independence, freedom, spontaneity and, ultimately, the sacrifice of their own self-identities. Faced with this dichotomous choice, the women felt that choosing not to have children was the affirmative option for them, while choosing motherhood would have represented a negative choice involving unacceptable potential losses.

Occasionally the women would sense that others, mainly those outside their circle

of family and close friends, disapproved of their decision to go against the dominant norm of childbearing. Some were told emphatically that they would be unfulfilled as women and that they would live to regret their choice. All were aware that because they intentionally chose not to have children they were seen by others as not only unfulfilled, but also as selfish and abnormal. In spite of reporting that they were aware of this pressure to conform, the women did not acknowledge that they felt this pressure themselves and did not perceive that they were influenced by others in their decision making. They reported that the expectations and pressures of society had little effect on them because they were firmly convinced that they were entitled to make their own decision with regard to childbearing. It is also likely that because the pressure was perceived to originate outside their close circle of family and friends, the impact of these expectations was lessened. The women had a strong sense of conviction that they were listening to their own "inner voice" and were making the "right" choice for themselves. To cope with the curiosity of others regarding their reproductive status, the participants set boundaries around discussions of having children and deflected, reframed or simply ignored negative comments.

As the years went by and the women progressed through adulthood and into midlife, they perceived that their decision was reaffirmed. They reported that they felt "no regrets" with regard to their decision and were certain that not having children was "the right thing" for them.

The women in this study are now between 45 and 52 years of age and appreciate that they have had many opportunities that were unavailable to their own mothers. They feel fortunate to have had the freedom to choose their own lifepaths and to have found the

partners that they have married. Some of the women enjoy spending time with the children of others and providing alternative adult role models for these young people.

The women who participated in this research volunteered to tell their stories so that they might have their life paths known and understood by others. They had not been asked to talk in-depth about their experience before and expressed delight that "someone is finally checking us out." They also showed considerable curiosity about each other, suggesting a certain degree of isolation for women who are intentionally childless.

### **Comparison to the Existing Literature**

As noted in Chapter Two, the existing research of voluntary childlessness is flawed in various ways. Most notably, many of the studies make use of demographic data which include both men and women, married and single and do not differentiate the voluntarily childless from those who would choose to have children if they could (Houseknecht, 1987). However, since the studies tend to be fairly consistent in terms of the reported characteristics of the voluntarily childless, comparisons of this research will be made to those studies which included women as participants as well as those studies which focussed solely on women who were intentionally childless.

**Demographic Characteristics.** The women in this study were very well-educated, Caucasian, middle-class and from an urban environment with the exception of one participant who differed in that she was of Asian descent and lived in a rural area.

These characteristics are consistent with the findings of other researchers who have reported that the voluntarily childless who volunteer for research conducted in English are mainly urban, middle-class individuals with unusually high levels of education (Bram,

1984; Gustavus & Henley, 1971; Houseknecht, 1987; Nason & Paloma, 1976; Veevers, 1980). However, it is important to note that since this study was conducted in an urban area, the participants were those who were geographically available to the researcher and therefore the "urban factor" may not necessarily be indicative of a characteristic that is specific to the intentionally childless woman.

The participants in this study included an unusually high number of first-borns, with six of the ten participants being the first-born in their families as compared to a ratio in the general population of about one to three (Veevers, 1980). These findings are similar to those of other researchers who have reported that the voluntarily childless tend to be either firstborns or only children (Houseknecht, 1987; Ireland, 1993; Nason & Paloma, 1976; Veevers, 1980). For example, Veevers reported about half of her respondents were first-born. Five of the first-born women in this study, as well as one participant who was an eldest daughter, reported that as girls they had taken on a caretaking role with younger siblings and thus had few illusions about the role of motherhood. These participants believed that their experience of surrogate parenting was an important factor in their reproductive decision as they perceived that little mystery remained in the role of motherhood. Veevers (1980) also reported that the first-borns in her study who supervised siblings held an evaluation of parenthood that was realistic rather than romantic and that this experience may have diminished their interest in pursuing the option of parenting.

The majority of the women in this study reported that they had experienced a secure and happy childhood. Eight of the participants grew up in intact families and only

three women reported that their relationship with their parents was unsatisfactory since one or both of their parents were alcoholics or emotionally unavailable. These three women all had siblings who grew up to become parents and it has been noted in the research literature that most women from dysfunctional families do, in fact, become mothers (Morell, 1994). In terms of family background, the literature indicates that the voluntarily childless most often come from families that are unremarkable. Veevers (1980) described the backgrounds of her respondents as "remarkably unremarkable" in that they were stable two-parent homes unbroken by divorce or death. Ireland (1993) and Morell (1994) reported similar findings in their research and found little evidence to suggest that women who choose not to have children are any more likely to have unhappy childhoods than women who become mothers. While early family experiences may contribute in some way to the motherhood decision then, the extent of this contribution remains to be determined.

**Decision-Making Characteristics.** The participants of this study all viewed motherhood as a all-or-nothing choice that was incompatible with other important life goals such as paid work in the public sphere, personal growth and autonomy. Other researchers have similarly reported that the voluntarily childless women in their studies viewed motherhood and childrearing versus career and self-actualization as a dichotomous choice (Gerson, 1985; Morell, 1994; Veevers, 1980). When motherhood was perceived to be a choice that negated all other life goals, then remaining childless was seen as an attractive option for these women. Closely linked to the perception of motherhood as part of a dichotomous choice was the particularly negative view of motherhood that was

shared by the participants. This selective view of motherhood has also been reported to be commonly held by the voluntarily childless women in other research (Morell, 1994; Veevers, 1980). Like participants in previous studies, the women in this investigation believed that the costs of motherhood were unacceptable and incompatible with important life goals.

The women in this study came to the decision to remain childless via two general paths. Four of the women knew from an early age, well before marriage, that they had decided not to become mothers. The other six participants came to their decision after marriage and after considering their options at various points. Some of these six did not identify their decision-making as postponing, but rather, as reassessing their situation and after reevaluation, determining that it was still the "right decision" to remain childless. These decision-making styles are similar to those of the "early articulators" and "postponers" identified in previous research (Houseknecht, 1987; Veevers, 1980).

All the women were or had been married, and reported that they, rather than their partners, were primarily responsible for initiating the decision to remain childless. Four of the women had decided not to have children before they married. The other six women felt that their spouses were either ambivalent or disinterested in parenting. They reported that if their husbands had been very enthusiastic about having children they may have reconsidered their decision to remain childless. However, perceiving that a husband who lacked enthusiasm with regard to parenting would not provide the support and equality the women sought in their marriages and in childrearing, the participants made the decision to remain childless. Previous studies have similarly found that generally when the decision is

made within a marriage, it is the wife who is the first to initiate the childless choice (Bram, 1984; Houseknecht, 1979; Nason & Paloma, 1976).

**Thematic Comparisons.** An important discovery of this research is that the participants experienced a sense of being an anomaly in that they reported a lack of maternal desire. While the women came to their decision to remain childless at different points in life, they all perceived that they were different from most women in that they did not really want to have children and had never experienced a "burning desire" to become mothers. They reported that they did not perceive foregoing motherhood to be a sacrifice since they did not experience the desire to have children. Other researchers have also found that their participants felt no call to motherhood (Morell, 1994; Ireland, 1993; Veevers, 1980). Morell noted that the participants in her research did not experience conflict over the decision to remain childless since it was never a felt desire, and that the women she interviewed could not account for their lack of desire to have children. The women in this study also reported that they could not explain why they did not experience a maternal urge and concluded that they were simply different from other women in this way. This conclusion was accepted by the women without perceived concern or discomfort.

A sense of marginalization was experienced by the participants in this study in that they were aware of being perceived as selfish and viewed with disapproval by society. The women developed methods of intercepting, deflecting, and reinterpreting the attitudes directed toward them and over time they perceived that they had evolved to the point where they no longer were concerned about the expectations or approval of society.

Many previous studies have investigated the attitudes of society toward the voluntarily childless and reported the existence of a negative stereotype toward those who are childless by choice (Blake, 1979; Callan, 1987; Griffith, 1979; Jamison et al., 1979; Peterson, 1983; Veevers, 1980). In one of the few studies that reported the reactions of the voluntarily childless toward this stereotype, Veevers found that some childless people redefined this disapproval, interpreting it as envy of their childfree lifestyle. Morell (1994) reported that, like the women in the present study, her respondents found ways to reconstruct the discourses of stigmatization. An important insight provided by the results of this exploration is that the sense of being an anomaly and feeling marginalized were experienced by the participants mainly during their reproductive years, and subsided gradually as they reached midlife. It is also important to note that the women perceived the source of this sense of disapproval to be society in general, rather than their immediate families.

Maintaining a sense of freedom and autonomy was a high priority for the women in this study. They reported high levels of involvement in their work and perceived that their work assured them of the financial independence they believed to be an essential part of their autonomy. The women believed that this financial independence also contributed to the egalitarian nature of the relationships they had with their spouses. Similarly, other researchers, although using different methodologies, have found that voluntarily childless women are strongly committed to their work and place high value on the personal independence and autonomy that their careers provide (Bram, 1984; Gerson, 1985; Houseknecht, 1987; Ireland, 1993; Veevers, 1980). For the women in this study the desire

for autonomy was linked to their strong commitment to career since they perceived that their work provided the financial independence they required to maintain their autonomy.

While none of the previous research has focussed on the experience of intentional childlessness solely from the perspective of the midlife woman, Ireland's (1993) investigation of female identity in both voluntarily and involuntarily childless women between the ages of 38 and 50, included a group of women she identified as "transformative," who chose not to have children. Ireland reported that the "transformative" women in her study felt a strong need to connect with an "essential aspect" of themselves and that the expression of this aspect precluded motherhood. In much the same manner, the women in this study expressed the need to be true to themselves and to listen to their "inner voice". In order to be true to themselves, the participants perceived that it was necessary to forego motherhood as they believed that childrearing would have meant the sacrifice of self-identity.

One of the important results of this study not reported by other researchers was the sense of certainty in their decision that the women experienced. Because the investigation focussed on the life experience from the perspective of midlife, the women were able to reflect back upon their experience of being intentionally childless and, from that perspective, to evaluate this important decision. For these women, the sense of having "no regrets" reflected their certainty that the option they had chosen was "right" for them.

To summarize, the participants in this research shared characteristics common to the intentionally childless in other studies. Consistent with the literature, the women in

this study were highly educated, middle-class, urban and often the first-born child in an intact family of origin. Like the voluntarily childless women in previous studies, the participants in this research placed priority on freedom, financial independence, and autonomy, and held a selectively negative view of motherhood that was seen to be incompatible with these personal values. While the results of this study were similar to previous research in many ways, several important contributions have emerged. One of the important discoveries of this study is that the sense of being an anomaly and feeling of marginalization were found to be experienced by the participants as developmental issues, mainly during the childbearing years when the pressures to conform were greatest. The women reported that as younger women in their twenties and thirties they had experienced far more difficulty in withstanding the pressures of others. At midlife, they reported feeling much less concerned about fulfilling others' expectations.

Another important contribution this study provides is the knowledge that, from the perspective of midlife, the participants experienced a sense of certainty that their decision to remain childless was the right choice for them and they reported that they had "no regrets." Previous research has not focussed on the perspective of women at midlife, so it has been unclear how women would feel about their earlier reproductive decisions when they reached the stage of life from which they could reflect back on their choices. For at least these ten women, the decision to forego motherhood was perceived to be a positive one from the vantage point of midlife.

Consistent with a feminist perspective that places value on each woman's voice and experience, this investigation offered individual women an opportunity to relate their

experiences and have their life stories validated as an important contribution to the small existing body of knowledge of midlife women. The women who participated in this study indicated that they had never been asked to talk at length about their experience of intentional childlessness and that the experience had served to validate their choice of a different life path.

This study also provides data that challenge the widely-accepted stereotype of childless women. The commonly-held myth that women choose to be childless because they do not like children was not supported by these participants, since most of them had close connections and involvement with children. Other misconceptions common to the stereotype of the intentionally childless as selfish and unhappy were contradicted by these women as they were found to be individuals who felt they were known by their friends and families to be caring, nurturing women and who reported a high degree of happiness and life satisfaction.

### **Implications for Counselling**

The results of this study provide insights for counselling professionals who work with women. In light of the sense of marginalization felt by the intentionally childless women in this study during their childbearing years, it is important for counsellors to be aware of the pervasive bias against women who choose not to have children. The counsellors' own personal values, assumptions, and biases with regard to motherhood also need to be identified and acknowledged so that they are not imposed on the childless client. It should not be assumed that all adult women want to be or should be mothers. By challenging this assumption counsellors can support a diversity of lifepaths for women.

Some of the women in this study reported that they were very certain from an early age that they would not have children and did not stray from that position. For counsellors who work with young adult women, it is important to understand and respect that some women are "early articulators" and that they can be very clear about the decision to remain childless as young women. An appropriate counsellor role would be to facilitate exploration and clarification of that decision while not discounting the choice due to the woman's youth. In light of the pressures experienced by the women in this study when they were at this stage of life, the development of some strategies designed to cope with these external pressures would also be helpful. Counsellors can inform their clients by placing reproductive decisions within a social context that is both patriarchal and pronatalist. Some of the pressures women may be experiencing will be external ones resulting from expectations of friends, family and society and it may be helpful for them to be aware of the larger ideological context in which these opinions are developed.

Some of the women in this study reported experiencing a period of ambivalence with regard to their reproductive decisions. When counselling younger women who are experiencing this ambivalence about whether they want to have children, it may be most helpful to ask them to listen to their "inner voice" as the participants did, so that they feel empowered to determine what is "right" for them as opposed to what is expected of them. For some of these women, it may be most useful to facilitate a decision that is temporary rather than permanent, and that may be reassessed periodically during the childbearing years, so that premature closure of the issue is not forced.

Another valuable insight for counsellors suggested by the results of this study is

that not all women experience conflict over the actual decision to remain childless. For some women, like those in this study, the maternal urge may not be experienced as an inner urge to be resisted; rather, remaining childless may be perceived by some women as remaining true to one's self. Because the greater conflict may exist between being true to self or living up to the expectations of others, the nonjudgmental support of a counsellor may be invaluable in the decision-making process. Counsellors can reframe intentional childlessness as a valid and positive option, and thus contribute to the acceptance and recognition of diverse identities for women. It may also be useful for counsellors to provide clients with the information that, from the perspective of midlife, there are women role models who have reported that they were very satisfied with their decision to remain childless and felt certain that they had made the "right" choice.

For the women in this study, the experience of being intentionally childless changed substantially over their lifetime. They reported that they had felt the greatest pressure to conform while in their twenties and thirties during their childbearing years. It was during this period of life that the women felt most marginalized and atypical. For those who counsel women who are at this stage of life, it is important to be aware of the pressures that their clients may be experiencing as they are called upon to justify their reproductive choice. Counsellors can provide support and encouragement for women who choose to resist conforming to the norm and, as stated previously, place these external pressures within the larger pronatalist, patriarchal context.

It is important for counsellors to be aware that relationships issues may also arise during a time when important reproductive decisions are being made. If women have

partners who want to have children while they, themselves, are opposed or uncertain, the women may require assistance in the exploration of each partner's needs, desires and expectations. Facilitation of conflict resolution and clarification of each partner's perceived gender roles may be useful counsellor roles in working to resolve conflicts between partners.

At midlife, the women in this study reported a strong sense of personal satisfaction with life, implying that their sense of life satisfaction was not dependent on parental status. This finding suggests that counsellors of midlife women should avoid necessarily linking any presenting problems to the issue of childlessness. For example, if a woman is depressed at midlife there are a myriad of possibilities for the cause of that depression none of which may be related to her childless status. Several of the participants reported that while they had experienced periods of depression during their lifetime, these resulted from developmental issues such as the death of a parent, and were unrelated to their decision to remain childless.

Given the fact that the women in this study all shared a sense of being an anomaly, it is important that counsellors of intentionally childless women validate and normalize the reality of this experience, and communicate a sense of empathy. Since the participants reported that they felt judged and labelled as "selfish" because they chose not to have children, it is important for counsellors to be aware of this negative bias, to maintain a non-judgmental attitude, and to normalize intentional childlessness as a viable life option. The women in this study reported that they felt happy and satisfied with their lives, indicating that it is possible for a woman to feel fulfilled and content without the

experience of motherhood. Counsellors can promote the normalcy of intentional childlessness by challenging the assumption that having children is a desirable or essential goal for all women, and by accepting and validating an adult female identity that does not necessarily include motherhood.

### **Implications for Future Research**

The results of this study are consistent with the findings of previous research of the intentionally childless women in areas such as demographics, common characteristics and socio/psychological factors. However, while it is apparent that the intentionally childless share some common characteristics, what role these characteristics play in the decision to forego motherhood is far from clear. For example, the results of this study suggest that the observation of their own mother's experience played a major role in the participants' conceptions of motherhood and subsequent decision-making. This finding points to the need for further investigation and clarification of the importance of early family experiences in the decision to remain childless.

The majority of the women in this study were white, highly educated, and from middle to upper-middle class income groups. Further research is needed with groups of women from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. Since the decision to "not mother" is linked to a perceived sociocultural definition of motherhood, that definition may vary with cultural differences and thus affect the decision-making process. There may also be differences in cultural pressures to conform as well as the perceived gains and losses intrinsic in the roles of motherhood. These questions could be addressed through the investigation of the experience of intentionally childless women from other cultural and

socioeconomic backgrounds.

This research represents an investigation of the phenomenon of intentional childlessness as it has been experienced by the midlife woman. As an exploratory study, the lived experiences of a relatively small group of 10 women were examined in this study. Further research with more participants, such as the additional 41 interviews undertaken by this researcher, will be useful to further refine the themes that emerged from this investigation and perhaps identify factors that serve to differentiate among the experiences of these women (Colaizzi, 1978).

While the women in this study reflected upon their experiences from the perspective of midlife, it would be useful to investigate the experiences of younger and older women who have also chosen to remain childless. Younger women who are still in their reproductive years may feel much more external pressure to conform and, as a result, experience intentional childlessness in a different manner, perhaps with a more intense sense of marginalization. Since older women have lived through vastly different sociocultural times with fewer apparent options, their experience as intentionally childless women may also have a very different meaning.

An important comparison could be examined in the future by investigating the experience of midlife women who are from a different age cohort. The women who enter midlife in the twenty-first century may experience intentional childlessness in a different manner than the generations of women that preceded them. These women may have had access to a greater variety of role models represented by other women as well as greater access to support systems that ease the burden of child care. Since it has been suggested

that societal attitudes toward the intentionally childless are becoming more positive (Bram, 1984), it would be useful to investigate the experience of younger women in their childbearing years who are childless by choice, to determine if they perceive that they are marginalized to the extent that the women in this study reported. The results of such an investigation would help to determine whether our society is becoming more accepting of different reproductive choices for women or whether perceived changes in societal attitudes are more closely linked to women's developmental changes.

In addition, using a longitudinal research paradigm, researchers could compare the experience of the childless women who are "early articulators" with those who gradually become childless by choice. While the "early articulators" formulate an explicit intention to forego motherhood as girls or young women, others postpone or reevaluate their options throughout their lives, often waiting for the desire for children to surface. It may be useful to understand these different decision-making paths and the factors affecting the women's choices. Longitudinal research may also be helpful to clarify the dynamics of the decision-making process, particularly for women whose decision to remain childless evolves over a period of time through a series of postponements.

Since statistics are not available to determine the actual percentage of intentionally childless women in our population, the numbers have only been estimated by researchers (Ramu, 1993). Further research in the quantitative realm is needed to determine the actual prevalence of the intentionally childless in our society as well as other demographic factors such as geographical location.

Quantitative studies that assess personality variables and decision-making styles

may provide insight into the differences between those women who decide to forego motherhood at an early age and those who experience a period of ambivalence, as well as those who become childless by continually postponing the reproductive decision. The finding that the sense of freedom and autonomy was an important experience for the women in this study suggests that common personality factors may be present.

Quantitative research combined with qualitative investigations that provide experiential information would provide a broader profile of intentionally childless women.

### **Conclusion**

The results of this study suggest that while the participants made a conscious choice to forego motherhood, that decision was shaped by a social context that both glorifies motherhood and simultaneously requires martyrdom of the women who become mothers. These women perceived the role of motherhood to be so costly and imprisoning that their very identities would be in jeopardy were they to have children, and thus there appeared to be no choice but to forego motherhood if they were to be true to their own selves. The social forces that contribute to an ideology in which motherhood is the normal and natural role for all women require those who deviate from this path to justify and explain their choice. It appears that, for the participants, the most effective way to justify their choice was to view motherhood in strictly negative terms as an ideal that was impossible for them to attain. This selective view of motherhood may have been perceived as necessary to enable the women to withstand the pressures of society to conform, thus allowing them to remain true to an essential aspect of themselves rather than comply with the expectations of society.

The term "intentionally childless" acquires its meaning in direct opposition to the current cultural significance of motherhood. When mothers are seen as nurturing, self-sacrificing and fulfilled, then in a false dichotomy, non-mothers, such as the women in this study, are viewed as unloving, selfish, and incomplete. Based on the stories of these women it would appear that new discourses which attempt to eliminate this polarity and expand the definitions of women's identities, both mothers and non-mothers, are needed to allow true reproductive freedom and choice.

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**APPENDIX A****CHILDLESS BY CHOICE?****A Study Exploring  
VOLUNTARY CHILDLESSNESS IN MIDLIFE WOMEN**

A research study is being conducted as part of a Master's thesis in Counselling Psychology at the University of British Columbia, under the supervision of Dr. J. Daniluk, 822-5768. This study will investigate the experience of being childless by choice for midlife women.

**You can participate if:**

- you are a woman 45 to 55 years of age
- you believe you had the opportunity and capacity to have children within a committed relationship, but remained childless
- you believe that you are no longer fertile

**Participation in this study involves:**

- a total of approximately 3 hours consisting of two separate confidential meetings
- discussing with a voluntarily childless female researcher your thoughts and feelings regarding your experience of being voluntarily childless

**Completely confidential.** Results of the study will be shared with you upon completion.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION PLEASE CALL:**

**Laurie - 271-6391**

**M.A. Counselling Psychology (Candidate)**

## APPENDIX D

### Orienting Statement

The following statement will be read by the researcher to all participants at the beginning of the first interview:

I am interested in learning about your experience as a voluntarily childless woman. Very little research has looked at voluntary childlessness from the perspective of the midlife woman to discover what the experience of living as a childless woman has actually been like. The main question I am asking you is: **What is your lived experience of being a voluntarily childless woman?**

Please feel free to take the time you need to reflect on and answer this question. You may wish to talk about your voluntary childlessness like a story, with a beginning, middle, and end, to describe how living as a voluntarily childless woman has been for you during your life and how it is for you now.

During the interview I may ask you for more information or clarification about something that you have said in order to be sure that I understand your experience. You are not obligated to answer or discuss anything you do not feel comfortable with.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

## APPENDIX E

### Interview Questions

#### General research question:

**What is the lived experience of voluntary childlessness for women?**

#### Interview question:

**What is your life experience of being a voluntarily childless woman?**

#### Additional interview questions:

1. Looking back to when you first thought about whether or not you would have children, can you tell me a story about your life and being voluntarily childless?
2. What has it been like for you as a voluntarily childless woman in our society?
3. What support or lack of support have you had for your decision to remain childless?
4. How have others reacted to your choice to remain childless? How have you responded to these reactions?
5. How do you feel your life has been affected because of your choice to remain childless?
6. What if any effect has your voluntary childlessness had on your relationships throughout life?
7. What might you tell other women who are considering remaining childless?
8. Has your experience of childlessness changed over the years and if so, how?
9. Did entering mid-life herald any changes for you in terms of your thoughts or feelings regarding being a childless woman?
10. How have you responded when asked if you have children?