

**NEVER MARRIED CHILDLESS WOMEN**

by

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### **Abstract**

A qualitative phenomenological paradigm was utilized to explore the personal development, career and relational experiences of never-married childless working women in mid-life, who regarded themselves as satisfied. Seven never-married women between the ages of 39 and 60 participated in this study. During individual, in-depth personal interviews which were audio-taped, the women described their perceptions and experiences as never-married childless women. Five common themes were extrapolated from the data using a thematic analysis procedure devised by Colaizzi (1978). The themes described the women's experiences of feeling different, the importance of relationships, the awareness of being fundamentally alone, the desire for self-reliance and the developmental influence of family role models.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

North American culture with its patriarchal and marriage/family-centered ideology leads society to regard the never-married, childless woman as an anomaly. The victim of unflattering images, she is commonly regarded as the "old maid" and the "spinster" - "the dowdy lady who wears sensible shoes and puts the cat out every night, the pitiable creature who was not invited to life's banquet" (Baruch, Barnett & Rivers, 1985, p. 255). Her history as "spinster" has been etched into our language and our literature since the fourteenth century, and is still used in law today to identify any adult woman who has never married (Simon, 1987).

Traditional established theory (e.g. Holland, 1949) maintains that women cannot achieve personal fulfillment other than through the attainment of relationship (i.e., marriage) and nurturing roles (i.e., bearing children). Perspectives of this kind continue to profoundly influence the perceptions of both the professional and lay person regarding never-married, childless women. Hinkle's (cited in Adams, 1976) statement made over 40 years ago, reflects this persistent and predominant point-of-view:

. . . in spite of freedom from social pressures and the many avenues open to women for interesting work and financial

independence, it remains true that the innate desire for home, with husband and children, continues to be the strongest and deepest longing for all normal women (p. 80).

Dominant social norms uphold the belief that women not occupying the customary roles of wife and mother, are expected to have "identity" problems, lower self-esteem and to be less happy than more traditionally oriented women (Baruch, et al., 1985). The assumption is that unmarried, childless women are marital rejects that just never got asked, the products of pathological families, or the victims of some emotional or physical handicap. From this perspective, psychological ill-adjustment is the least a woman might expect should she not marry and/or should she choose to forego having children (Verhoff, Douvan, & Kulka, 1981).

Although the classic negative image of the never-married, childless woman remains surprisingly pervasive in everyday life, unprecedented numbers of women in Canada and the United States are today delaying marriage until their mid and late thirties, and others are choosing to forego marriage and children entirely. Many demographers predict that the percentage of North American women now between the ages of twenty and forty-five who will remain single throughout their lives will far exceed the rates of never-married women recorded at any time during the past century (Simon, 1987). Changing patterns and projections seem to



suggest that for many women the never-married status is rapidly becoming a viable lifestyle alternative.

Higher percentages of women may be remaining single today for a number of reasons including women's increased labour market participation which has produced a higher proportion of financially independent women. Additionally, involvement in sexual intimacy without marriage has gained greater acceptance with the availability of contraception and abortion. The cultural impacts of feminism and the gay rights movement have also made the single life more acceptable, increasing choices and the potential for life meaning (Simon, 1987).

Although marriage continues to be a popular institution - 90 percent of all adults will marry at least once in their lifetime (Campbell, 1981) - many women seeking marriage will encounter a scarcity of marriageable men in their thirties and forties (Richardson, 1985). The lack of availability of suitable male age mates is thought to be particularly severe for women who have deferred marriage to pursue education and careers. Whereas men with the highest occupational achievements are least likely to remain single, women of the same occupational status are most likely to remain single (Spreitzer & Riley, 1974). While "the cultural pattern is for men to choose women who are not their equals" (Greer, cited in Simon, 1987, p. 5), educated women tend to prefer men with equivalent or superior education as mates, thereby narrowing further the number of suitable males for

marriage. Consequently, while some women will deliberately choose to forego traditional female roles, others will remain unmarried and childless because a desirable mate could not be found.

In spite of the increasing numbers of never-married women in North America, relatively little is known regarding the life structures and personal development of these women. Interest in female development has only recently become the focal point of psychological research. "Human development has been conceived in terms of male development, with female development either ignored, treated as an afterthought, or forced into parallel lines of reasoning (Josselson, 1987, p. 4). Consequently, studies of human development and career have tended to emphasize women's "deficiencies" and identified the ways in which women deviate from the established male standards (Gallos, 1989; Josselson, 1987; Rossi, 1980). Furthermore, historically women's experiences have been translated for them, primarily by male investigators whose studies have selected exclusively or predominantly from all male samples (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986). As a result, women's "voices" have been virtually silent or missing during the conceptualization of theory, which has come to represent them through generalization.

Only recently have women theorists begun to examine the life structures and development of women. To the present time, however, even these limited research studies have tended to

focus on women who have assumed the traditional female life roles of marriage and motherhood, as emphasized by Baruch and her colleagues (1985) -

Studies have tended to focus on one type of woman - married women with children - simply because they are the largest group. Too often it is assumed that what is true for these women is true of all women. As a result, there are many women that behavioral scientists are just starting to learn about - the never-married woman, for example (p. 16).

Research on never-married women has infrequently been undertaken and, for the most part, has been incorporated into more broadly based studies addressing singlehood and abnormality. In these studies single individuals have generally been regarded as deviant (Stein, 1981) and pathological (Bernard, 1972). In comparison to their married cohorts single men and women have been found less likely to enjoy psychological and physical well-being and have been consistently reported as being less happy with their lives than their married cohorts (Bradburn, 1969). Studies focused on single women describe them as less happy than married women (Bernard, 1972) and more likely to be anxious, depressed and less satisfied with their lives (Campbell, Converse & Rogers, 1976; Ward, 1979). More recent research findings have begun to suggest however, that the old stereotypes of never-married women may no longer apply. These studies have revealed that never-married women, particularly those who are

employed, may actually see themselves as competent and valued human beings, and regard themselves as satisfied with their lives (Baruch, et al., 1985; Gigy, 1980). Researchers suggest that such life-satisfaction for singles may be related to a woman's ability to reconcile her single life style in the midst of unflattering social stereotypes (Adams, 1976; Bernard, 1972).

Never-the-less, to the present time few research studies have examined how never-married childless women construct their lives and none have examined the lives of never-married women who identify themselves as satisfied. With more women remaining single and childless, there is an increasing need to examine the experiences of never-married women and to include them more deliberately in the formulation of theories of women's career and of women's normative development. Alternative life structures need to be examined if they are to be understood and supported as acceptable and perhaps desirable life choices for women (and men). Understanding of this kind may lead to greater societal acceptance, the presentation of new positive role models, and the creation of strategies for satisfaction and success among this group of women.

In this thesis the researcher has endeavored to examine the personal development, work and relational experiences of never-married, childless women in mid-life. The researcher was interested in how women aged 39 to 60 who regarded themselves as satisfied with their lives, created meaning out of a life

structure that is so different from that of most other women. Women presently aged 39 to 60 years were believed to represent a cohort which was raised at a time when traditional roles for women were still the norm. Consequently, these women were thought to provide a particular historical context in which their decisions to remain single and childless might be better understood.

The research study invited never-married, childless women to "tell their life stories", and to contribute their voices, experiences and perspectives to the growing body of research on women's life and career development. The research question designed to guide this inquiry asked: How do never-married childless working women in mid-life, who perceive themselves as being satisfied with their lives, experience their career progress, personal development and relationships with others?

The ultimate aim of this inquiry was to explore how never-married childless women create meaningful life structures thereby providing descriptions which might sensitize other researchers and practitioners to the experiences of these women. Current research pertaining to never-married women may help to dissuade prevalent stereotypes regarding this lifestyle and perhaps serve as the foundation for the formulation of more comprehensive theories of women's life and career development. Information regarding the lifestyles of never-married women may enable practitioners to provide these and other women with

greater support in the development of meaningful life and career structures.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

A review of the relevant literature as it relates to the life experiences of never-married women will proceed through a highlighting of three main focus areas: theories of women's development, women's career theory and a review of the current knowledge regarding the single life-style and that of never-married women. An examination of the research on women's identity, life-span and career development may assist in providing a context within which the experiences and life choices of the never-married mid-life women in this study, may be better understood.

While one of the primary purposes of this chapter is to consider what is known about never-married childless women in mid-life, it will become apparent that the most important research is yet to be done. In this chapter available literature is discussed and the major categories under which the never-married have been investigated are identified. Throughout the chapter, the term never-married has been used interchangeably with ever-married. The term single denotes the broader reference group comprised of the never-married, widowed and divorced, and is generally inclusive of all ages. Throughout the thesis reference to never-married childless women may be presented as simply

never-married women and is to be regarded as never-married and childless unless specified otherwise.

### **Research on Women's Development**

The study of women's development has been approached from two perspectives; the sociological/cultural perspective which has given rise to theories of women's life-cycle development and the psychological perspective which endeavors to illustrate the intra-psychic formation of identity and self-concept in women. While often guided by differing sets of research issues, sociological and psychological studies generally concur that life span development and identity formation in women is characterized by distinct themes and patterns that set them apart from men.

Gallos (1989), for example, proposed that "women construct their conceptions of themselves, their lives, and the world around them differently from men" (p. 110). She stated that fundamental distinctions between male and female paths of development may account for significant variations in their respective life and career experiences. Whereas theories of male development describe males as directed towards strengthening identity, empowering the self and charting a life course focused on the attainment of career success (Erikson, 1968; Perry, 1970; Levinson, 1978), current theories of women's development view women as "tied to understanding and strengthening the self in relation to others" (Gallos, p. 115). This ongoing process of



attachment to significant others is regarded by researchers as an important source of identity, maturity, and personal power for women (Bardwick, 1980; Eichenbaum & Orbach, 1988; Gilligan, 1982; Josselson, 1987; McClelland, 1975), a factor which is believed to significantly impact the ways in which women experience their lives and their careers.

To the present time, however, few studies have explored how identity is organized in women. Existing psychological theories of development, derived from the study of men, have consequently been theories of separation and autonomy rather than theories of connection and relationship (Miller, 1976; Surrey, 1984). Modern American theorists of early psychological development and of the entire life span, from Erikson (1950) to Levinson (1978), viewed all of development as a process of separating oneself out from the matrix of others. The development of the self was thought to be attained through a series of crises by which the individual accomplished a sequence of separations from others, thereby achieving an inner sense of a separated and individuated self. Erikson's concept of identity was a major contribution to psychological theory as well as the impetus for the studying of post-childhood stages of development. He proposed that much of what happens during adolescence influences the future life course through the identity development process. In his eight-stage depiction of the life-cycle Erikson (1950, 1956, 1968) theorized that issues of

identity must be resolved before issues of the next stage, intimacy versus isolation, are addressed. Thus, in this model, after the first stage, in which the aim is the development of of basic trust, the aim of every other stage until young adulthood is some form of increased separation or self-development.

As women have become the more frequent subjects of research and as women have themselves become the researchers, theoreticians have speculated that concepts of autonomy, independence and achievement do not appear to describe the primary experience of growing up female. For example, Gilligan's (1982) influential study of moral development illustrated that the women in her study conceptualized and experienced the world "in a different voice" from that of men. From this perspective Gilligan hypothesized that women's desire to remain emotionally connected to others fosters a voice which is empathetic, person-centered and less abstract than the male voice. Her theory proposes that whereas the dominant image among men describes a competition to be alone at the top, women desire to be at the center of connection to others. Gilligan concludes that because men and women operate with different internal models, experiences such as achievement and affiliation can be viewed as pervasive and fundamental differences in their life structures.

Researchers Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) have further developed these observations and proposed that women possess a unique, intuitive "way of knowing" that is

devalued in a society where there is a greater appreciation for the demonstration of abstract knowledge and logic. According to these researchers, among women, the subjective or individual experience is prized more highly than the objective, thereby allowing women's sense of self to remain more fluid and connected with their reality.

Belenky, et al. 's (1986) study, conducted over a five year period, involved in-depth interviews with 135 women of diverse age, social class, ethnic and educational backgrounds. The women's perspectives were grouped into descriptive categories based on Perry's (1970) sequence of epistemological perspectives called "positions" (i.e., basic dualism, multiplicity, relativism subordinate and relativism). Perry's positions described how conceptions of the nature and origins of knowledge evolve and how understanding of one's self as knower changes over time.

From the data collected, Belenky et al. (1986) described women's perspectives on knowing via five epistemological categories. *Silence* described the position wherein women experienced themselves as voiceless and mindless, and responsive only to the direction of external authority. *Received Knowledge* described the perspective from which women regarded themselves as capable of receiving and reproducing knowledge from authorities, but were not capable of creating knowledge on their own. *Subjective Knowledge* described the perspective wherein truth and knowledge were conceived as personal, private

and subjectively known or intuited. *Procedural Knowledge* was the position from which women sought out learning opportunities and the application of objective procedures for obtaining and communicating knowledge. Finally, *Constructed Knowledge* represented the position from which women viewed all knowledge as contextual, and regarded themselves as the creators of both subjective and objective strategies of knowing. Hence, Belenky et al. 's research illustrated five different perspectives from which women view reality and draw conclusions about truth, knowledge and authority. In doing so their study demonstrated how women's self-concepts and ways of knowing are intertwined and fluid.

Chodorow (1978), a proponent of Object-Relations theory, proposed that women never separate or individuate as much as men because of their early developmental history. Chodorow contended that daughters, because they are parented primarily by mothers who share their gender, form more permeable ego boundaries and experience themselves as more continuous with others. The theory advanced that because a daughter is experienced by her mother as a narcissistic extension of herself, separation between them becomes only partial and on some level they remain always emotionally connected. Males, however, because they must pull away from their mothers in order to identify themselves as male with fathers, are believed to experience themselves as more separate and distinct from others thereby developing more rigidly structured ego boundaries.

In adolescence, the theory proposed, daughters endeavor to move further away from their identification with mothers. This separation, however, is made difficult due to years of intense emotional attachment. Although the daughter's connectedness to others is explored within an ever-widening circle of relationships, Chodorow (1978) suggested that daughters never fully relinquish their emotional attachment to their primary emotional caretaker. Thus, the desire to connect with and be like others is seen as part of an undisturbed process between daughters and their mothers which begins early in life and continues into adulthood. This process, claimed Chodorow, illustrates that "the basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world; the basic masculine sense of self is separate" (p. 169).

Using the theoretical perspective of Object-Relations theory, Eichenbaum and Orbach (1983) described how female identity develops within the context of a patriarchal society and is fostered within the mother-daughter relationship. Three major activities are believed to contribute to the shaping of the mother-daughter relationship: 1) the mother identifies with the daughter because of their shared gender and projects on her the same negative, culturally prescribed feelings she holds about herself; 2) these projections include unconscious, repressed aspects of the mother's unfulfilled self (her inner "little girl") which she has learned early in life to deny and dislike; and 3) the mother's ambivalence and conflict regarding her primary life role

is directed outwardly at her daughter who then feels invalidated, rejected and insecure.

According to Eichenbaum and Orbach (1983), this process ensures that the maturing daughter, by learning to identify with her mother's caretaking role, loses any expectation that she herself will be cared for. She develops highly sensitive emotional antennae which assist her in attending to the needs of others, the requisite alternative to attending to her own unmet needs. The daughter's repression of her own "little girl" results in behavior which promotes a false way of relating to the world, difficulties in forming healthy personal boundaries and an inability to articulate her own needs. By denying her psychological needs which she believes will never be met, the young woman searches in vain for the nurturing relationship that will provide her with self-fulfillment. Hence, proponents of Object-Relations theory suggest that traditional patterns of socialization may be internalized into the construction of the self in women, without any overt expression of support by influential others for traditional or conventional roles. This perspective also describes why tasks of self-definition are experienced with difficulty by many women.

Miller and her research group (Miller, 1976, 1984; Kaplan & Klein, 1985; Surrey, 1984) have postulated the existence of a "relational self" in women that is central to their intra-psychic growth. Miller (1976) stated that -

Development according to the male model overlooks the fact that women's development is proceeding but on another basis . . . Indeed, women's sense of self becomes very much organized around being able to make and then to maintain affiliations and relationships (p. 83).

The Self-in-Relation model of identity development emphasized the importance of the mother-daughter dyad to the development of women's relational self (Jordan & Surrey, 1986; Kaplan & Surrey, 1984). It has been posited that the outcome of healthy development in women can be viewed as "relationship-differentiation" rather than "separation-individuation" which emphasizes self-reliance and individual outcome (Mahler, Pine & Bergman, 1975). This model suggested that the female self evolves due to four positive structural aspects inherent in the mother-daughter relationship: (1) an emotional attentiveness established early within the relationship; (2) mutual empathy and affective joining between the mother and daughter; (3) the expectation that relationships are a major source of growth; and (4) mutual empowerment encourages maturation within the context of relationships.

According to proponents of the Self-in-Relation model, women's connections validate their capacities as relational beings, provide the foundation for personal concepts of autonomy, competence and self-esteem, and are experienced as essential for well-being and continued growth. Problems in development which

may occur among women are thereby believed to derive not due to a failure to separate from others, but because of a woman's difficulty in remaining connected to others while asserting a differentiated, distinct self-concept (Kaplan, 1986).

Development of Object-Relations theory and the Self-in-Relation model has laid an important foundation toward understanding the origins of relatedness and attachment in women's lives. Such approaches to women's identity development however, have not been without substantial criticism. Both Eichenbaum and Orbach's (1983) approach and the Self-in-Relation theory (Jordan & Surrey, 1986) have been said to provide little insight with respect to how fathers, family interactions and the broader socio-political context influence development (Lerner, 1988). Furthermore, Lerner (1988) and Mednick (1989) caution that models which place women's identity development solely within the context of relatedness and caring create artificial dichotomies between the identity structures of men and women. These researchers propose that generalizations which define women as oriented toward caretaking (i.e., Jordan & Surrey, 1986) and attaining their identity through relationships of care and intimacy (i.e., Gilligan, 1982) may ultimately serve to reinforce stereotypical notions of autonomy as a masculine trait and relatedness as belonging exclusively to the domain of women. The capacity for independence and nurturance, theorists have emphasized, is believed to exist simultaneously within all



persons (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988). Finally, while considerable theorizing and debate has taken place regarding the centrality of relatedness to women's constructions of identity, to the present time, there exists an evident lack of empirical research with which to substantiate either claim. Furthermore, research has not examined whether women whose lives are not centered around marriage and childrearing (i.e., never-married childless women) construct lives wherein nurturance and relational connections are experienced as primary.

Although theory regarding women's identity structure and life-course development has been forthcoming in recent years, few illustrative models exist which illuminate the patterns of women's lives. Sheehy (1976) claimed that "the most one can do in describing women's life patterns is to report where various choices have led in the past. All we have to draw upon are the patterns that do have a history" (p. 206). In her analysis Sheehy conducted 115 in-depth interviews with men and women of educated middle-class backgrounds who were between the ages of 18 and 55. In describing the women's lives, Sheehy constructed a chronologically sequenced pattern of life phases, beginning with the most traditional lifestyle and ending with the most "experimental". The *Caregiver* described women who married in their early twenties or before and who were at the time, of no mind to go beyond the domestic role. The *Either-or* women felt required in their early twenties to choose between love and

children or work and accomplishment. Sheehy described two types of women belonging to the either-or category. The first type, *Nurturers Who deferred Achievement* postponed any strenuous career efforts to marry and start a family, however, unlike the caregiver these women intended to pick up on an extra-familial pursuit at a later point. The second type, *Achievers Who Deferred Nurturing*, postponed motherhood and often marriage as well, in order to spend several years completing their professional preparation. *Integrators* were women who tried to combine marriage, motherhood and career in their twenties. *Never-Married Women* included "paranurturers" (i.e. social workers, teachers, nurses, and religious vocations) and "office wives" (women who devoted their lives to the caring of public men and politicians at the exclusion of any other deep personal life). Finally, *Transients* described women who chose impermanence in their twenties, and wandered sexually, occupationally and geographically.

Sheehy (1976), in her analysis, noted that the identified categories were intended to be descriptive of women's lives, rather than prescriptive. Consistent with North American demographic trends, however, of all the life patterns illustrated, Sheehy claimed that most of the women in her study had elected to become "caregivers". Models such as Sheehy's, due to their inherent simplicity, give the impression that women's roles and life choices can easily be compartmentalized. When applied to the lives of never-married childless women, for example, problems of

categorization seem to occur. Never-married women, in addition to being represented by their own category, may also fall within the "achievers who defer nurturing" classification. Furthermore, Sheehy's description of the never-married woman as "paranurturer" and "office wife" may once again over simplify the life roles of this particular group of women.

A model devised by Bardwick (1980) suggested that women, during each phase of their lives, address the central question of how they will deal with the importance of relationships. Bardwick's tentative portrait of women's life phases endeavored to illustrate how attachments, caring and relationships interact with women's needs for achievement, thereby providing a key to the content, non-predictability and sequencing of women's life experiences. Bardwick proposed that in the *early adult years* (age 17 to 28) women focus on the attainment of marriage or a committed relationship. During the *settling down period* (age 30 to 40) the need to raise a family is addressed. In *middle adulthood* (age 40 to 50) loosening social constraints permit many women to then consider developing a career. *Age 50 and older* can be a time of significant professional accomplishment for some women and also a period of tending to life issues such as retirement, menopause, parental care and death. While Bardwick's assessment of women's life phases has been derived without the use of longitudinal data, it reflects the repeated themes of managing relationships and fulfilling nurturing needs, a perspective many

researchers believe is central to women's lives and career patterns (Giele, 1982; Baruch, Barnett & Rivers, 1985; Gallos, 1989).

Bardwick's (1980) model of women's age-specific developmental tasks may require re-examination in light of decreasing annual marriage rates and the steady increase in the age at which women are choosing to marry (Gallos; 1989). Furthermore, the model may have limited utility when applied to the lives of never-married childless women given that these women have opted out of the socially sanctioned roles of marriage and motherhood which create the foci of Bardwick's model.

Proceeding from the same basic tenant, Josselson (1987) proposed a stage theory model which described the roles played by others in the formation of women's identities. Josselson, from 1971 to 1973, conducted intensive interviews with sixty randomly selected female college and university seniors. Twelve years later, thirty-four of the women were located and interviewed again in an effort to understand how their adolescent identity formation influenced their lives. Josselson proposed that women's lives differ from each other in ways beyond the social roles (i.e., mother or worker) that they participate in and that the most important differences between women lie in their internal personality configurations and the ways in which they develop their self-concepts and identities. Josselson defined identity as -

the stable, consistent, and reliable sense of who one is and what one stands for in the world. It integrates one's meaning to oneself and one's meaning to others; it provides a match between what one regards as central to oneself and how one is viewed by significant others in one's life . . .

Identity becomes a means by which people organize and understand their experience and deeply share their meaning systems with others (p. 10-11).

Building upon Erikson's (1956) concept of ego identity and Marcia's (1966) four identity status types, Josselson (1987) constructed from her research interviews the following brief portraits of women's identity-statuses. *Foreclosures* identified women who adopted the life projects that had been passed on to them through their families. *Identity Diffusions* described women who were available to be shaped by whatever or whoever was willing to mold them. *Moratoriums* identified women who actively and consciously tested ways of being in an effort to discover an identity that was consistent with their inner selves. Finally, *Identity Achievers* were women who eventually formulated an identity, who sought out cultural avenues to express their sense of themselves, and who made commitments to ways of being and experiencing. While Josselson acknowledged that adherence to the "identity diffusion" status is not regarded as desirable, she purported that the other statuses represent differences in style, values and ways of searching for meaning in life. While

unexplored at the present time, Josselson's model of identity statuses in women may provide a unique methodology with which to explore the identity development of never-married women. Although this group of women have not "adopted the life projects" exemplified by their parent's familial roles, other important relationships may in fact play a role in the formation of these women's lives and self-concepts.

A review of the prominent literature on women's life course and identity development has emphasized the centrality of relatedness to the construction of women's lives. The research of Gilligan (1982) illustrated women's tendency to define themselves in terms of their relationships and connections to others. Belenky and her colleagues (1986) identified in their female subjects a unique subjective "way of knowing" emanating from the women's connected/fluid sense of self. Chodorow (1978) and other Object-Relation's theorists emphasized the importance of the early mother/daughter relationship in establishing empathetic qualities in women. Such affective qualities are believed to foster in women the desire for on-going connectedness to others thereby impacting their role choices and career motivations. The Self-In-Relation model theorists (i.e. Miller, 1976; Kaplan & Klein, 1985; Jordan & Surrey, 1986; etc.) posited that women's connections to others validate their capacities as relational beings thereby providing the foundation for personal concepts of autonomy, competence and self-esteem.

Sheehy (1976) described women's life course development based on the adherence or rejection of traditional female roles, and Bardwick (1980) in her model of women's life phases emphasized the importance of relationship throughout women's lives. Finally, Josselson (1987) concluded that women's identity is developed within the context of relationship with influential others. The research literature presented paints a picture wherein women's lives and identities are believed to evolve within the sphere of meaningful relationships. While relatedness to others is clearly central in the life structures of married women and women with children, current models of development for women have not addressed the importance of relatedness to the self-concepts and life structures of women who have not pursued traditionally nurturant roles. The absence of marriage and childrearing in the life structures of never-married childless women may suggest that relatedness to others is not as central in the development of these women's identities and life roles.

### **Literature on Women's Career Development**

Mainstream North American culture has traditionally acknowledged men as those who must work and pursue careers in our society. When women engaged in work it was expected to be of a limited duration, typically prior to and sometimes following the pursuit of the more sanctioned female roles of wife and mother. This view has led to the study of the career development

of males and subsequently cast theories of work and career into a representation of the male experience.

Work, described as "performance and mastery in competitive situations" (Skovholt, 1990, p. 39), implies the need for men to develop skills and character dispositions which will enable them "to achieve, to succeed, to control, to maintain power, (and) to compete" (Leafgren, 1990, p. 3) in the contemporary marketplace. Male gender-role socialization in North American culture endeavors to expose males to activities which encourage the development of achievement-oriented behavior, aggressiveness and single-mindedness. Aspects of character such as these are believed adaptive to the world of work and are therefore regarded as elements necessary for the career success of males (Levinson, 1978).

Career theory derived from male conceptions of work necessarily represents the career trajectory of the stereotype male. In order to be judged successful, a man must, in any series of jobs, demonstrate progress, hierarchical movement, an increasingly large salary, and increasing respect and recognition from colleagues (Gutek & Larwood, 1987). Research pertaining to work and career have consequently resulted in identification and support for patterned, sequential career paths which suggest a linear upward movement, epitomized in the notion of "vocational maturity" (Crites, 1969; Super, 1977).



Foremost career theorist, Super (1977), for example, regarded career development as the mastery of increasingly complex tasks during particular life stages. His theory of vocational behavior, derived from the male experience, comprised the following sequence of five vocational developmental stages with five corresponding age-appropriate developmental tasks: *Stage 1 - Growth* (from birth to age 14) included the development of self-concept, interests, capacities and needs. *Stage 2 - Exploration* (age 15 to 24) was regarded as the period of self-examination, trials, transitions and tentative decision-making. *Stage 3 - Establishment* (age 25 to 44) consisted of trial commitments leading to stabilization, consolidation and advancement. *Stage 4 - Maintenance* (age 45 to 64) described the continuation of established work and efforts to preserve achieved status and gains, and *Stage 5 - Decline* (age 65 and beyond) was regarded as the period during which work activities decreased and new roles were developed. Super's model illustrated the accepted male career path with an entry point in late adolescence, stable progress, upward movement, constant participation, and finally, exit.

While linear models of career development (e.g. Super, 1977) are believed to adequately illustrate patterns of career development in males, they seem to have little in common with the life and career experiences of women occupying more traditional roles. The infusion of women (many of whom are

mothers) into the labour force in the last half of the twentieth century has numerous researchers questioning the relevance of current conceptions of career for women (Faver, 1984; Gallos, 1989; Giele, 1982; Gutek & Larwood, 1987). Like theories of adult (male) development, popular career theories are based on psychoanalytic conceptions that stress the centrality of work to identity, and notions that maturity and personal empowerment require separation from others (Erikson, 1968; Levinson, 1978). Some feminist theorists contend that male-based perspectives do not accurately describe the career development of women, recognize their distinct developmental differences and role within the family life cycle, nor do they adequately account for the diversity of women's life and career experiences (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Gallos, 1989; Gilligan, 1977; Miller, 1976).

Although models such as that of Super (1977) may have limited utility in describing the career experiences of women who choose to combine more traditional roles with paid employment, research has not yet addressed the applicability of male models of career to the career development of working women who have not assumed traditional roles, such as the never-married childless woman. Because the life course development of these women is not interrupted by marriage and child-rearing responsibilities, the career paths of never-married

childless women may more closely resemble the career paths of males than those of women engaged in traditional roles.

In spite of considerable theorizing on women's life and career development, a review of the literature revealed that at the present time limited empirical research exists and few illustrative models have yet been devised. Expert opinion is also divided over whether a separate theory of career development is needed for women (Astin, 1984; Brooks, 1984; Diamond, 1987; Fitzgerald & Crites, 1980; Gilbert, 1984; Osipow, 1983). Gallos (1989), in her review of the literature on women's development, arrived at the conclusion that separate models for men and women were required for a variety of reasons -

Women's distinctive developmental voice and needs point to fundamentally different career perspectives, choices, priorities, and patterns for women that need to be understood and appreciated - differences that are only further expanded when cultural expectations, shifting social norms, employment opportunities, marital practises, childbirth and rearing, organizational policies, and institutional practices are added to the picture (p. 127).

At the present time however, a separate model of career development for women has not been advanced. In addition to the existing models of male career development only one alternative model has been devised. Astin (1984) proposed a model of career development which, she asserts, "can be used to explain the

occupational behavior of both genders" (p. 118). Her premise suggests that "basic work motivation is the same for men and women, but that they make different choices because their early socialization experiences and structural opportunities are different" (p. 118). Austin's "sociopsychological" model was developed with the intent of examining the effects of social forces and personal characteristics as they interact to shape human career choice behavior.

Astin (1984) postulated that all people are motivated to satisfy needs for survival (physiological), pleasure (intrinsic satisfactions available from work), and contribution (usefulness to society and recognition for one's contribution). She suggested that these three needs, assumed to be the same for men and women, can be satisfied in many different ways. By choosing to conceptualize a common set of work motivations for women and men, the model can potentially identify the mediating variables which translate the same set of work motivations into different work expectations, and hence, different career outcomes. Astin explains that by "using this approach, the model can explain both between-group differences in career outcomes (i.e., why women and men tend to engage in different types of work activities) and within-group differences (i.e., why some women engage exclusively in family work, while others choose paid employment, and still others engage in both)" (p. 119). Austin's model of career development in women and men, while not yet empirically tested,

may serve to illustrate the career development of never-married childless women.

A review of the literature on women's career theory has revealed that current models of career development have been based primarily on the experiences of males (e.g. Crites, 1969; Super, 1977). Theorists of women's development have advanced the perspective that male models of career do not take into account the relational component which is central in the unfoldment of women's life and career experiences (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Gallos, 1989; Gilligan, 1977; Miller, 1976). While it would seem apparent that male career paths offer little to illuminate the work experiences of more traditionally oriented women, empirical research has not determined whether male models may be applied to the career paths of never-married childless women. Astin's (1984) sociopsychological model devised to account for the work behaviors of both men and women has not yet been empirically tested. The current status of women's career development speaks to the need for further theory building, model development, and empirical research. The career development of never-married childless women, at the present time, has not been examined by proponents of women's career theory.

### **Research on Never-Married Women**

Never-married women have only recently been studied as a separate research focus. Most often they have been part of

studies of single persons which included the separated, the divorced and the widowed. When they have been identified as a unique research category, for the most part, age has not been controlled. This fact is particularly important because the never-married group, theoretically, can include teenagers to centenarians. The majority of unmarried people in this group are usually under 30, and it is reasonable to assume that most will eventually marry. Consequently, our knowledge of the never-married woman over 30, who has moved out of the so-called acceptable age at which most women marry in North America today, is presently limited.

The state of our existing knowledge about never-married women, particularly the never-married woman in mid-life, is limited at best. At this stage of the enquiry, information as it exists will be presented and inferences will be drawn from bodies of literature on single individuals. Although the singles "phenomenon" has received recent attention from the popular media, the social sciences have generally ignored unmarried adults or examined them merely in contrast to those who are married. As noted by Stein (1981), "singles have often been regarded as a somewhat deviant group, different from "normal" married adults, and until very recently they have been avoided as a subject of serious research" (p. 1).

When studies of single adults have taken place, the research has focused predominantly on the relationship between marital

status and psychopathology. These studies consistently demonstrated that married individuals were more healthy than their unmarried cohorts in terms of psychological well-being, mortality, and psychological adjustment (Bernard, 1972). Furthermore, while a cause and effect relationship has never been demonstrated between marriage and well-being, social scientists and lay-persons alike, appear to tacitly accept such a relationship (Dean & Lin, 1977).

Single adults have also been compared to married adults in terms of perceived "life satisfaction", as measured by self-reports of happiness. Unmarried adults, particularly unmarried men, have been consistently reported as less happy with their lives than their married cohorts (Freedman, 1978), although single women are believed to be more happy and satisfied with their lives than single men (Campbell, 1975). While studies have consistently shown that married people are happier than single people, theorists such as Freedman (1978) warn that there is no proof that marriage actually produces happiness nor conversely that being single prevents it. Adams (1976) stated that the persistent devaluation of singleness as deficient has predisposed many single people to define themselves as unhappy "just because they were conspicuously outside the system, or pattern of relationship that was highly, if not exclusively correlated with personal satisfaction and self-fulfillment" (p. 64). Bernard (1972) similarly concluded that single women do not consider

themselves as happy as married women, since marriage is the preferred social status in North American culture, even though they give otherwise good evidence of leading full and contented lives.

A more recent study on life satisfaction by Loewenstein, Bloch, Campion, Epstein, Gale and Salvatore (1981) addressed the stresses and rewards in the lives of single mid-life women. Sixty single women, ranging in age from 35 to 65, previously married or never-married, childless and with children, were interviewed using a semi-structured interview format which "focused on facts and feelings in the areas of relationships, sexuality, work, religion, health, help-seeking, and living arrangements . . . regrets, hopes, fears and wishes" (p. 1129). The following results were attained from the interviews: "Only 15% of the entire sample reported low life satisfaction, a percentage similar to that found in the general population" (p. 1127). Marital status was found to be statistically unrelated to life satisfaction ( $p \leq .55$ ). The perceived disadvantages of single life included "financial problems", "sole care of family members", "societal attitudes" and "loneliness", while the stated advantages were "freedom, independence, pride and self respect", "pursuit of career goals", "personal growth and friendship", and "privacy" (p. 1133). The authors concluded that the sampled women "seemed as content as other Americans: and when single mid-life women seek help, mental health professionals should not assume that their



unmarried status is necessarily the cause of their distress" (p. 1140).

The results of Loewenstein, et al.'s (1981) study advance the notion that the single lifestyle can be satisfying for some women. However, this study examined a never-married and formerly married sample. Studies on previously married men and women reveal more evidence of depression and other psychological disturbances among the widowed, divorced and separated than among never-married and married individuals (Warheit, Holzer, Bell, & Arey, 1976; Pearlin & Johnson, 1977). Hence, a sample of never-married women may serve to more clearly illustrate the positive aspects of the never-married lifestyle.

A study by Simon (1987) explored the economic, psychological and social strategies of 50 never-married childless women between the ages of 66 and 101. These women of diverse ethnic, religious and social class backgrounds discussed their experiences of relationships with families and friends, their work life, aging and retirement, as well as their attitudes towards marriage and their own singleness. A consistent theme which surfaced in the interviews was the value that the never-married participants placed on sustaining close relations with family members and friends. The women also described themselves as pivotal figures in their sibling's families, taking the roles of sister and aunt very seriously. They placed their

connectedness with friends at the very center of their self-conceptions. The role as friend appeared integral to the women's sense of themselves at all stages of adult life, but particularly during retirement, when paid work disappeared as an element in daily life and in identity construction.

The women in Simon's (1987) study emphasized three themes in their work life - inadequate salary, limited occupational choice and the centrality of paid work to their identities. For these women paid work meant economic independence which allowed them to make choices about their lives independently from the preferences of their family and friends. It also, as Simon stated, "provided the sole claim of never-married women for public recognition of their agency, responsibility, and social legitimacy" (p. 128). Of the fifty women in Simon's study 76% indicated that they chose to be single and the majority of the 50 women stated that they preferred single life.

The results of Simon's (1987) study begin to paint a previously unseen picture of the life structures of never-married women. Replete with diverse relationships and meaningful work, the lives of the women in Simon's study demonstrate the particularities of a "preferred" single lifestyle. This study examined the life experiences of never-married women in later life. At the present time a similar study has not been undertaken with never-married women in mid-life.

Adams (1976) studied 27 single women and men between the ages of 25 and 69, who were childless, never-married and divorced or widowed for five or more years. Utilizing a combination of in-depth interviews and impromptu conversations, Adams examined single persons' social functioning and their self-perceptions of singleness. The researcher addressed the pervasive belief that single people are necessarily doomed by their social status to lead lonely, isolated, vulnerable, and emotionally impoverished lives. To the contrary, Adams' data revealed that the single individuals in her study, rather than lacking in personal relationships of an intimate nature, or failing to possess the capacity for commitment to the concerns of others, appeared simply to "structure" their relationships differently than what might be found in conventional marriages or the like. Whereas exclusive dyad relationships (husband-wife, parent-child) are the norm in Western culture, many of the single individuals in Adams' study organized their social relationships according to an "extended family model". Put another way, rather than creating a relationship with a "single anchor point" many unmarried individuals tend to create and maintain "multiple attachments" (p. 65). Adams proposed that when this format is recognized by single individuals themselves and by their family and friends, the relationships it generates can serve as an important reservoir of emotional and social strength. In regard to the multiple attachments of single people Adams remarked -

Its special asset is its fluidity, which springs from the fact that the unattached status of single people allows them to relate flexibly across generations with greater ease than their married peers, who are more rigidly locked into specific and narrower roles (p. 84).

Adams (1976) proposed that sociological and psychological factors combine to define the "essential features" of the single personality and status. She found that women who chose to remain unmarried seemed to prefer a greater degree of social independence, demonstrating "consistent and purposeful resistance to succumbing to the intricately interdependent system of marriage and the nuclear family" (p. 19). Furthermore, the motives, drives and personality constituents exhibited by many of the single people in her study, suggested Adams, also implied -

a very strong sense of psychological self-sufficiency and personal integrity, both of which are independent of external emotional confirmation and are not realized through long-term exclusive emotional commitments to a specific individual, whether a lover, wife, husband or child" (p. 19).

Adams found that one of the strong forces determining singleness was the quality of "psychological autonomy." The single individuals Adams interviewed were believed to "have a special appreciation of, and need for, solitude" (p. 87). The researcher

believed that single people, in order to accommodate the benefits of the single lifestyle, recognized that certain compromises would be necessary, one of which was coming to terms with the prospect of recurrent, predictable loneliness.

Adams' (1976) observations have provided a needed insight into the personality constituents and relationship structures of individuals adhering to the single status lifestyle. Information of this kind may be valuable in more clearly understanding how never-married childless women construct their lives. Adams, using in-depth interviews and impromptu conversations, examined the lives of previously married and never-married men and women. Without further research to confirm her findings there is no assurance that Adams' findings apply to never-married childless women in mid-life.

Never-married childless women were one group examined by Baruch, Barnett, and Rivers (1985) in a random-sample survey of approximately 300 women aged 35 to 55. Questionnaires were initially presented to all of the women and intensive interviews later conducted with a smaller group of subjects. The purpose of the study was to determine what contributes to a woman's sense of well-being. The study examined two dimensions of well-being: *Mastery*, was strongly related to the doing or instrumental side of life and *Pleasure*, was closely tied to the feeling side or relational aspect of life. Utilizing an analysis based on the two measures Baruch and her colleagues examined the lives of six

different groups of women: married with children, at home; married with children, employed; married without children, employed; married without children, at home; divorced with children, employed; and never-married, employed (defined as childless, not widowed or divorced). From their analysis of all of the women the researchers arrived at the following conclusions: A woman who works hard at a challenging job is doing something positive for her mental health. Marriage and children do not guarantee well-being for a woman and being without a man or being childless does not guarantee depression or misery. Finally, the study revealed that doing and achieving were at least as important to the lives of the participants as were relationships and feelings.

The never-married women in Baruch et al.'s (1985) study illustrated that never-married women, like other working women in the study, scored higher on Mastery than non-working women. Additionally, while the Pleasure scores of previously married women were the lowest in the sample, those of never-married women were only marginally affected. Pleasure scores, claimed the researchers, are strongly related to the presence of satisfying relationships in the lives of women. Baruch and her colleagues made the observation that whereas the married women and women with children in the study had close relationships "built in" to their lives, never-married women had to "seek out" opportunities for intimacy. In addition to intimate relationships

being present in the never-married women's lives, they also relied upon "networks" of friendships, a finding consistent with that of Adams (1976). These multiple relationships functioned as important sources for both Mastery and Pleasure in the women's lives. Baruch et al. found that network building appeared to be a skill that the never-married women in their study were particularly good at. The researchers stated -

Not having the built-in companionship of husband and children, they create a web of friendships and extended family relationships to take their place. We believe this is one of the most important steps a single woman can take to ensure her well-being - perhaps second only to finding a challenging job (p. 278).

The never-married women in Baruch et al.'s (1985) study possessed the highest Mastery scores of all the status groupings and were also the best educated group in the sample. "Having a high-level job, and preferring to be employed rather than be a homemaker, were both very important for never-married women's sense of Mastery" (p. 69). For these women, Pleasure, like Mastery, was affected by work-related issues. The quality of life at work or "work balance," was regarded as particularly important as work contributed to the women's sense of enjoyment as well as to their self-esteem. The researchers also noted however, that the themes of achievement and work dominated the discussions of *all* of the women in the sample and nearly half of

the entire sample surveyed reported that the most rewarding aspect of their lives was related to achievement in education and/or work.

The findings suggested that the never-married women in Baruch et al.'s (1985) study were "perhaps more intensely vulnerable to feeling different and out of step than any other group" (p. 68). These women had been born during the 1930s and 1940s to parents experiencing the Great Depression and the Second World War. Traditional societal attitudes regarding women's roles made the ever-single life path a tenuous one for many of the women of this generation. The researchers proposed that women who rejected the narrowly prescribed path that would bring social approval frequently turned to their families of origin for affirmation regarding their lives. The quality of their relationship with their family members contributed to their sense of Mastery. Consequently, family relationships which were not experienced as a source of support could also become a source of vulnerability to the women.

Life satisfaction and personal well-being seemed also to be related to the women feeling they were where they wanted to be in their lives. The never-married women in Baruch et al.'s (1985) study who said they preferred being single were found to rate highly in well-being. Conversely, women who would have preferred to be married scored relatively low on both Mastery and Pleasure. The researchers stated that -



The picture of single women that emerges shows a sharp distinction between those who are thriving, enjoying their lives, and those who are not. The women who preferred to be single - or those who expected to marry but who have come to terms with the fact that they did not - are generally doing well. But those women who feel that their singlehood means they are rejected or "not chosen", suffer in terms of well-being (p. 262).

The survey research study conducted by Baruch and her colleagues (1983) provided a needed comprehensive description of employed ever-single childless women in mid-life. These women illustrated the centrality of "network" relationships, education, income and meaningful work to their well-beings. While feeling "different" and "out of step," high levels of personal well-being were attained among those who were reconciled with their singleness and felt contented with their single status. The research of Baruch et al. represents perhaps the first and only large scale survey to examine the lives of never-married childless women in mid-life. Further research on the work and relationship patterns of never-married women is required, however, to substantiate their findings.

A review of the literature on never-married women has revealed that our knowledge regarding this group is limited, conflicting, and mostly speculative. Data have been collected from samples which have included men as well as women,

previously married individuals and parents and has included persons of variable age, social status, economic and educational backgrounds. Research has infrequently exclusively addressed the personal, relational and career experiences of never-married childless women in mid-life.

While the need for further empirical research is clearly evident, existing data have perhaps begun to help shed stereotypic notions regarding never-married women. Never-married women have reported being as satisfied with their lives as other status groups (Loewenstein, et al., 1981; Baruch et al., 1985). A repeatedly surfacing theme has been the importance of close relationships consisting of "networks" of family, friends, intimate others and co-workers (Simon, 1987; Baruch et al., 1985; Adams, 1976). Work, also, has been identified as central to the women's identities (Baruch et al., 1983) and has provided them with economic independence, public recognition and social legitimacy (Simon, 1987). Never-married women have been described as possessing qualities of personality such as independence, self-sufficiency and integrity (Adams, 1976). Although these women have reported feeling "different" and "out of step", those who preferred or were reconciled with their single status reported high levels of personal well-being (Simon, 1987; Baruch et al., 1985)

The existing research literature on never-married women is too limited to allow substantive conclusions to be drawn

regarding the personal development, career paths and relationship structures of never-married childless mid-life women. While some researchers have utilized interview formats to obtain their data, detailed experiential accounts capable of illuminating the structures of meaning contained in the women's lives have not been pursued. Qualitative studies of this nature may contribute significantly to the understanding of never-married women's lives and careers.

In summary, theories of women's life span development, identity formation and career development are important to consider when endeavoring to understand the personal experiences and life structures of never-married childless women. Contemporary notions regarding women's development encourage researchers and practitioners to recognize the centrality of the relational sense of self to the design of women's lives. While women's relational proclivities have been regarded as central to the core life structures of more traditional women, at the present time, empirical data have not demonstrated the applicability of this emphasis to women who have not adopted the socially sanctioned female roles. Never-married childless women have been described as beneficially involved in both relationships and work (Baruch et al., 1985) thereby implying that current theories of women's life and career development which emphasize women's nurturing needs may not tell the whole story.

Demographic trends indicating increases in the number of women remaining single and childless speak to the need for a re-examination of existing theories of women's normative development and theories of women's careers. Such theories, if they are to be truly representative of the diversity of women's experiences, must deliberately include the life and career paths of never-married childless women. Alternative life structures need to be examined if they are to be recognized and supported as acceptable and desirable life choices for women.

In this study, the researcher has endeavored to illuminate the personal experiences and subjective perceptions of never-married childless women in mid-life who were satisfied with their lives. As our knowledge of the life structures of never-married childless women increases, it is hoped that women choosing this lifestyle will do so with greater confidence, support and dignity.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Design**

Gallos (1989) identified three distinct approaches for studying the development of adult women: sociological explorations of the social and institutional structures which impact upon women; anthropological and social psychological research which addresses the cultural influences on women's role choices and their views of femininity and masculinity; and, psychological approaches which reveal the inner experience of how women endeavor to make sense of their worlds. This research study, intent on exploring the meaning contained in the life experiences of never-married, childless working women in mid-life, applied the psychological research approach. In doing so it focused on the perceptions and experiences of the participants and emphasized the meanings and significance they attached to their relationships, career related experiences and concepts of self.

Use of a phenomenological paradigm is appropriate for research which aims to reveal the lived experience of individuals (Colaizzi, 1978; Giorgi, 1985). Herein, the meaning attached to experience is revealed through an intensive focus on the individual's subjective experience, feelings, personal views of the world and self, and the participant's private concepts. An

interest in never-married childless women's attempt to meaningfully construct a life, led to the selection of a phenomenological paradigm to guide the research process.

A "phenomenological methodology is more of an orientation than a specific method" (Osborne, 1990, p. 83) wherein the procedure used to accomplish the research is determined by the nature of the question devised. Moreover, the researcher must remain open to the possibility that the initial question asked may not be the final question. Phenomenological methodology recognizes the "unavoidable presence of the researcher in the formulation of the question" and all phases of the research process (p. 81). As such, the phenomenological researcher through rigorous self-reflection attempts to acknowledge her or his own perspectives, assumptions and biases regarding the phenomena (bracketing). In doing so the researcher is compelled to more clearly understand the objective and perspectival knowledge attained from the research data. The researcher engaged in this study acknowledges possessing a humanistic theoretical orientation and is herself a never-married childless woman. This combined perspective, during the study, was carefully monitored to ensure that the lives of the study participants were not presented in an inaccurately favorable light and the researcher's preconceptions were identified and examined whenever they arose. To illustrate, the researcher anticipated that the women participating in the study might be expected to exhibit greater

involvement in and commitment to their careers than to the relationships in their lives. This preconception of the researcher was identified and monitored throughout the data collection and analysis process to ensure that the research procedures and outcomes would not be influenced.

A phenomenological orientation was also selected for its utility as a particularly valuable mode of inquiry when perceived biases and omissions are known to permeate a body of literature (Giorgi, 1985), as is the case within the body of research related to women's development, women's career theory, and knowledge regarding the lives of never-married, childless mid-life women. The phenomenological methodology selected allowed for exploration of the personal and career development of never-married childless mid-life women with the aim of providing descriptions which may sensitize other researchers and clinicians to the nature and meaning of the experiences articulated by the participants. The findings may assist in building a foundation for continued development of theory and instrumentation (Giorgi, 1985).

### **Selection of Participants**

A self-selected sample of 7 never-married, childless, working women in mid-life who regarded themselves as satisfied with their lives, was utilized in the present study. The criteria for measurement of life satisfaction was determined by the subjective perceptions of the participating individuals. Potential

participants who responded affirmatively to the question "Do you regard yourself as satisfied with your life?" were regarded as complying to the criteria of life satisfaction. The decision to focus the study on women who were satisfied with their lives was elected to provide a counterbalance to the volume of anecdotal literature available focused on identifying troubled individuals and to learn more about the positive adaptation of never-married women.

The researcher was intent upon revealing the perceptions and experiences of women, who either by design or circumstance, had not adopted the roles traditionally associated with their gender. Mid-life women, having essentially passed the life stage during which they might have chosen to bear children, were identified as an appropriate age group for the study because this particular cohort would likely possess the perspective necessary to reflect on and articulate how their status of having never married and having remained childless, has impacted on their career, relationships and personal development. Mid-life for women, according to researchers Baruch, et al. (1985), is believed to be most illustrative of women's lives as a whole; by the age of 40, women will have generally completed the crisis of young adulthood (career choice, selection of a marriage partner, whether to have children) and now have the opportunity to examine the outcome of such decisions. Once beyond the age of 60 years, Baruch and her colleagues proposed that women may be



less concerned with career development and more engaged in the dominant concerns of aging (retirement, mortality).

At the time of data collection, the women participating in this research study ranged in age from 39 to 60, the mean age being 49 years. While all of the women had engaged actively in paid employment throughout their lives, of the seven participants two had already accepted early retirement options and another planned to retire within the coming year. Five of the seven participants had completed post-secondary education and at the time of the study, two of the women were engaged in furthering their academic qualifications. Occupations of the participants included accounting, teaching, nursing, clerical and research fields. While data on salary were not collected within the interview process, occupational status and lifestyle choices identified each of the women as middle-class socioeconomic status at the time of the interview.

Participants for the study were recruited primarily by "word of mouth" and through a "snowball-effect" wherein friends and colleagues of the researcher encouraged women they believed to be suitable for the study to call the researcher for further information. Notices describing the study were posted in the University of British Columbia Social Work and Nursing Departments (see Appendix A), and a call for research participants listed in the UBC Report and the Western Canadian Feminist Counselling Association (WCFCA) newsletter (see

Appendix B). Sixteen women contacted the researcher regarding the study. The first seven participants fulfilling the selection criteria and who were available for interview during the data collection period were accepted into the study. Two participants were recruited by word of mouth through friends and colleagues of the researcher, one was referred by a participant who had completed her initial interview, one responded to the notice posted in the Nursing Department, two responded to the listing in the UBC Report and one heard of the study from a member of the WCFCA.

Women interested in the study contacted the researcher by telephone at which time they received additional information regarding the study (i.e., the goals and nature of the research, the requirements for their participation and further background information on the researcher). During the telephone conversation, the researcher determined if each woman met the selection criteria outlined, and answered any questions the women had regarding the research. A mutually agreeable time and location was then established for an in-depth, tape-recorded interview.

### **Data Collection**

The initial interviews took place during the months of April and May of 1992. In three instances the interviews occurred in the participant's homes and on four occasions, at the participant's requests, the interviews occurred in the researcher's office. At

the onset of the first meeting, the establishment of rapport with the participant was viewed as primary. The purpose and nature of the study was once again reviewed with the participant and parameters for the participant's involvement in the study discussed. Each participant was made aware of the voluntary nature of the study and reminded they could freely withdraw from the study 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. An opportunity was provided for the participant to ask any questions she had of the researcher prior to commencement of the interview. When concerns regarding confidentiality of particular subject matter arose during the interview, these were addressed with all participants being assured that any identifying information would be withheld.

The interviews were minimally structured to permit the participants to speak for themselves (Giorgi, 1985). Each participant was oriented toward the general theme of the study through the reading of a general introductory statement (see Appendix D). In this way the context for the study was presented consistently to each participant. The women were encouraged to tell their stories in a manner that felt most comfortable. Most elected to describe their experiences in a chronological fashion from early childhood, through youth and adolescence to mid-life and projecting forward to the future. A list of questions (see Appendix E) had been prepared to guide the interview process and

was used to help the women more fully explore specific issues and experiences as they were raised by each woman during the interviews.

Each interview was approached in a non-judgemental, process-oriented manner. Active listening was employed throughout the interview process, having the effect of creating a relaxed conversational atmosphere. Open questions were used to encourage further elaboration and discussion of areas which seemed of particular importance to the participant. Probes were used to elicit information regarding, for example, the timing of events, and to facilitate further explanation and clarification. This approach served to deepen the women's exploration of their perceptions and feelings. The use of silence allowed the participants full expression of their thoughts before probes were employed. In order not to disrupt the natural flow of storytelling, the researcher "tracked" topics during the interview that required further elaboration and redirected the participants back to these topics once they had completed expressing their thoughts. Process notes of the subjects' nuances of speech and gestures were maintained by the researcher during the interviews, and later incorporated where relevant into the research data.

Each participant agreed to be audio tape-recorded with the knowledge that the tapes would later be transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy and richness contained within each narrative description was retained. Each interview continued until the

participants felt they had received sufficient opportunity to fully articulate their thoughts and experiences. Five of the initial interviews lasted approximately 2 hours while two participants required approximately four hours to convey their stories.

The participants were invited to offer a pseudonym for ensuring confidentiality. Two of the women elected to do so and five preferred to be identified by their first names. The women were encouraged to contact the researcher by phone following the initial interview should other thoughts pertaining to the study arise. One participant contacted the researcher to enquire how the research study was progressing and all participants received a person note from the researcher by mail indicating that they would be contacted within a short time for a validation interview.

### **Data Analysis**

Following each interview the recorded tapes were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. A thematic analysis procedure devised by Colaizzi (1978) was then employed to analyze the data, proceeding in the following manner. The participants' descriptions or protocols were read through in their entirety to get a general sense of the material. Second and subsequent readings allowed the researcher to identify themes which appeared to be of particular importance to each participant. Frequently these themes provided a thread of continuity within each woman's story; a continuous element that

gave their narratives a distinctive personal quality. Clusters of themes common to all of the protocols were then identified thereby becoming the foundation or focal points for the study analysis. Creative insight on the part of the researcher was required to "go beyond what [was] given in the original data and at the same time, stay with it" (p. 59). Particular care was taken to allow the data to speak for itself and to ensure that any conceptual theories were not imposed upon the narratives. Significant phrases which seemed to illustrate particular aspects of importance to each participant were extracted and the meaning for each illuminated. The results of the analysis were then "integrated into an exhaustive description of the investigated topic" (p. 61) and a statement of its "fundamental structure" identified.

Following the preliminary determination of themes from the transcripts, validation interviews took place with each of the participants to ensure the accuracy of the researcher's synthesis. Each of the women were requested to read their own life narratives containing bibliographic information of their experiences, as well as the common themes and verbatim quotations distilled from the women's protocols. Any omissions or changes were incorporated into the final product of the research. Process notes maintained by the researcher during the interviews, were also included in the participant validation

process to ensure the investigated phenomenon was accurately represented.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Phenomenological research methodology is based upon different metatheoretical assumptions than those used in natural science (Wertz, cited in Osborne, 1990). These differences influence the nature of individual research goals and the methods used to obtain them. Whereas natural science research aims at objectivity through explanation, control and prediction, phenomenological research aims at the elucidation of meaning and the understanding of human existence from an individual's point of view. Phenomenological research, as demonstrated in this study, is not concerned with the generalizability of its findings to a wider population (Giorgi, 1985). As suggested by Osborne (1990), statistical generalizability is the aim of natural science methodology while phenomenological research strives for a kind of generalizability which might be more appropriately regarded as "empathetic". The aim of this research was to illuminate the meaning contained in the life structures created by the never-married childless women participating in this study. While not intended to represent all women of never-married childless status, the study results will hopefully provide a foundation for the development of theory and promote further research interests in this infrequently studied group.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **RESULTS**

The results obtained from the in-depth interviews of the seven study participants will be presented in this chapter. To help familiarize the reader with the salient aspects of each women's experiences a brief synopsis of the women's life stories will first be presented. Each narrative focuses on the woman's family composition, her personal development from childhood to the present time, her career development and her relationships with others. The common themes which arose from the interviews with the women will then be listed, followed by a detailed discussion of each of the theme groupings. The women's words have been used wherever possible to enrich the data findings and to retain the authenticity of the women's experiences.

#### **The Women's Stories**

##### **Eva's Life Narrative**

Eva was born in Western Canada in 1932, making her 60 years old at the time of the interview. She was the youngest among six children, the daughter of European parents who emigrated to Canada in 1926. Early life during the depression was difficult; Eva's parents struggled to sustain their growing family, her father working as a miner and on the rail lines. At age five, a severe burn accident isolated Eva from her family during her



recovery for over a year and a half. In contrast to her siblings Eva was timid and shy but exuded a quiet strength.

With the end of World War 2 in 1947, Eva, then fourteen, relinquished her Canadian citizenship and returned with her family to Europe. For the next five years she was challenged to adjust to her new environment. Struggling with the language Eva went to work, forfeiting education beyond grade seven. At age 19, she obtained an exit visa, and returned to Canada a year preceding her parents to work and re-establish their home. Arriving in Vancouver alone, Eva immediately found work, first in the health care field and later in advertising.

As a reprise from her work-a-day world commitments, Eva developed her athletic abilities becoming a proficient downhill skier, cyclist and hiker. Providing the primary financial support for her family, Eva lived with her parents until age 30. She then embarked on a 6 month European ski holiday which was to become eight years of world travel before she returned home to Canada. As a solitary female traveller during the 1960s, Eva explored varied cultures and worked in countries throughout Europe, Asia and Indo-China including such destinations as Greece, North Africa, India, Nepal, Vietnam and Burma.

Unable to adjust to cosmopolitan living upon her return, Eva continued on to Alaska and the Yukon, finally settling in a northern community with her brother and his family where she attended a vocational school studying accounting. By age 40, Eva

returned to Vancouver and secured a position with the government where she remained for the next twenty years. During that time Eva accumulated sufficient earnings to purchase her own apartment and later a ski resort residential property. She remained an avid outdoor enthusiast and developed a strong and varied network of friendships. While Eva did not marry, two intimate relationships with male partners offered her the opportunity to do so. She feels that her never-married status was not elected as a conscious choice but rather something which evolved. Eva is the only sibling in her family who currently lives without an intimate partner and of the six children in her family, only two chose to raise children.

As her aging parents required care, Eva again returned to her parent's home to live, while continuing a demanding career in auditing. With approximately a year remaining until retirement, at the time of this interview Eva was looking forward to moving to her resort property where she planned to reside among friends and pursue her sports and nature interests.

### **Joan's Life Narrative**

When the interview took place, Joan was 47 years old and had been working in the nursing field for over twenty years. Feeling thwarted in her ability to advance her career, Joan had returned to university and was engaged in studies toward a Bachelor of Science degree.

Raised in a Northern Alberta rural community setting, Joan was the second eldest of four children, preceded by a brother two years her senior and followed by two sisters, two and four years younger. The unexpected suicide death of Joan's father when she was nine, required Joan's mother to become the primary income earner by resuming her teaching career. Joan's family, then living with her maternal grandparents, adopted a very strong religious orientation that impacted the lives of all family members significantly. As she was growing up, Joan regularly attended religious study classes, bible camp and she completed eight years of post-secondary education at bible college in Religious Studies and later Nursing. Spirituality and education were predominant elements in the lives of Joan's immediate and extended family; one aunt was a missionary, another a teacher, her maternal grandparents were well-educated, as was her mother and each of her siblings.

From an early age, Joan recognized within herself a growing dissatisfaction with traditional female role behaviors, adopting instead interests and activities which gave rise to a "tomboy-ish persona". Football, track and field and gardening were preferred to baking and sewing in her youth. In adult life Joan continues to enjoy fishing, hiking, and canoeing, while remaining actively involved in the church. Joan's first nursing position at age 26 coincided with the emerging awareness of her lesbian orientation. Until that time Joan lived an essentially A-sexual lifestyle. The

recognition of her lesbianism prompted a period of significant inner conflict as she endeavored to resolve the turmoil between her life-style and religious values. During this time, Joan participated in a volunteer mission project in an isolated Native Indian reserve in Northern Ontario. Here she began to develop a profound appreciation for minority cultures and the benefits of community living. Upon returning, a significant intimate relationship and the awareness of impending mid-life prompted Joan to move to the West Coast where she found the desired support for her lifestyle and religious commitment.

Joan continued her nursing career in Vancouver for several years, accepting increasing levels of challenge and responsibility while refining her career interests and direction. Having been in a few significant intimate relationships, Joan is currently unattached and living in a shared housing situation as a student. She values her independence and ability to adapt positively to a solitary lifestyle. While Joan enjoys the diversity and challenge available when living in a cosmopolitan center, she looks forward to returning to the connectedness of a smaller community, where she hopes to pursue her interests in Nursing and Community Care.

### **Linda's Life Narrative**

Linda, an English Second Language (ESL) teacher, was 43 at the time of the interview. She is the youngest among four children and a sister of the study participant Joan, whose biography was presented earlier. Linda currently possesses a

teaching degree and is attending university to attain her ESL diploma.

Raised in a devout Christian family, Linda recognized the profound meaning spirituality would play in her life from a very early age. By age ten she felt that she knew her "whole life was for that purpose" and planned to become a missionary nurse or teacher. Following four years of bible college and three years at university, Linda went overseas for two years and taught with a Christian organization in Hong Kong, similar to her missionary aunt and uncle. While the cultural adjustment was exceedingly challenging it resulted in Linda developing an acute sensitivity to and empathy for the plights of immigrant settlers in foreign cultures, an experience which has shaped her career path to the present time. Linda worked in various capacities with the Christian organization for several years until a growing dissatisfaction caused her to begin to question her high level of involvement with the church.

Turning forty was experienced as a traumatic transition period for Linda, at which time she began to re-evaluate her life's work and her personal values and needs. While her career shift to teaching ESL children was assumed with relative ease, the process of redefining and integrating who Linda was as a person came as a deeper challenge. The desire to attain more life balance prompted Linda to claim more time for solitude. Understanding the life choices she had made required that Linda also examine

the significance of "growing up without a father" and the impact of being parented by her maternal grandparents in the absence of her working mother.

Linda grew up with the expectation that she would "have it all" including an education, a career, marriage and a family. While she did have several opportunities to marry, various factors, particularly Linda's commitment to her religious career, seem to have intervened. Although she still holds the desire for marriage and companionship, Linda expressed with some regret that she would likely not have children at this late a stage. This absence seems to be filled through her teaching career and through special relationships with her nieces and nephews, and children of friends.

At the time of the interview Linda was completing a diploma course and looking forward to a summer spent with close female friends, most of whom are single like herself. Her diverse friendships allow her to share varied interests including swimming, sports, cycling, concerts and other cultural activities. While Linda has tended to change jobs every five or six years she is looking forward to remaining settled in her present career and to expanding her personal interests and activities.

### **Judy's Life Narrative**

Judy was born in Eastern Canada in 1951, making her 40 years old at the time of the interview. She has one married sister, who is six years older. Her father, now deceased, owned and

operated an insurance business during Judy's youth and her mother was primarily a homemaker. Judy's relationship with her sister has always been experienced as non-supportive and distant, and she describes her family as not being particularly "close knit".

Judy described herself as living a very sheltered life when she was growing up; not having a wide circle of friends or interests, working summers for her father and feeling quite restricted socially and culturally in the community in which she was raised. Her father was quite traditional in his views regarding women, whereas Judy's mother, strong and independent, ensured that both of her daughters attended university in spite of their father's disapproval.

Following high school, wishing to distance herself as far from home as possible, Judy chose a more remote university where she attained a Bachelor's degree in Geography. Away from family influence Judy had more social freedom, permitting her to attend parties and to continue a discouraged high school relationship without the watchful eye of her parents.

Unable to secure employment in her chosen field, Judy regretfully returned to university to attain a Bachelor of Education degree. Following further unsuccessful job-finding attempts, Judy finally accepted her first teaching position at a private girl's school; which she described as a particularly negative experience. Unable to find work and with a series of career disappointments behind her, Judy reluctantly accepted a

service position with Bell Canada where she remained for the next six years. During this period, feeling unchallenged by her work, Judy became increasingly disillusioned and depressed. Having alienated most of her friends, she returned home to her parents every weekend for support. Finally, against her father's wishes, Judy quit her job and was fortunate to find part-time teaching work prior to returning to university for a third time to attain a diploma in School Librarianship.

The academic milieu was a gratifying experience for Judy as she immersed herself in the rigorous two year program. Before her education was complete however, she dealt with the equally traumatic experiences of her father's death and then that of her dog. Supporting her mother through an emotionally difficult period, Judy finished her academic studies and once again struggled to find employment. A trip to Vancouver with her mother to visit Judy's sister and husband resulted in Judy finding the long sought after employment as a part-time teacher librarian.

With many opportunities for work, Judy decided to remain permanently in Vancouver. While boarding with her sister and husband, Judy's already tenuous relationship with her sibling was further challenged. During a visit to her home in Ontario, Judy purchased another dog and returned to find accommodation for them both in Vancouver.



A resident of Vancouver for five years, Judy's life is highly focused on her work which she finds quite satisfying. She maintains a close relationship with her mother and enjoys the company of her dog Sarah. Judy has not communicated with her sister and brother-in-law in over two years. With the financial assistance of her mother, Judy recently purchased a home where she and her dog find the privacy and comfort desired. Judy is in frequent contact with her mother by phone and her mother often visits her for extended periods. Judy has four female colleagues that she sees periodically but is not very active socially, preferring instead to spend much of her time in a solitary fashion. Judy's relationship with her dog is particularly important to her and while she is open to male companionship, she clearly stated that her dog is likely to remain the priority in her life. At the time of the interview Judy expressed that both she and her dog Sarah were quite satisfied and content.

### **Lorraine's Life Narrative**

Born in Vancouver in 1938, Lorraine was 54 years old at the time of the interview. She has one brother three years younger who has been married twice and has four children. Her grandfather, father and brother operated a family business founded at the turn of the century, which has remained notable in it's field. Lorraine's mother was a homemaker and was recently deceased after spending several years in a care home.

Somewhat broody and shy, Lorraine recalled as an adolescent growing up amid a family life wherein her mother appeared unhappy and dissatisfied. A favorable relationship with her father ended when, at twelve, Lorraine became her mother's confidant. Hearing massive criticisms regarding her father's shortcomings, Lorraine's relationships with both of her parents was irrevocably changed.

Possessing an aptitude for typing and shorthand during high school, and not wanting to pursue the university education her father encouraged her toward, Lorraine found clerical work within a large corporation. While she initially enjoyed her job, Lorraine regarded herself as having been in the wrong field all of her life. Describing herself as a "bird in a gilded cage", Lorraine rose to a position as executive secretary, a routine job which afforded her ample income, the opportunity to purchase property and to travel extensively. While she made a few attempts to pursue other career interests, Lorraine, appreciative of her comfortable lifestyle, remained with the company for thirty years.

An energetic woman, Lorraine described her life as equally balanced between her work and intimate relationships. Rarely lacking for male companionship, most of Lorraine's five long-term relationship partners offered the opportunity for marriage. While none resulted in life-long commitment, Lorraine expressed few regrets and continues to lead an active social life. A recently

acquired inheritance has allowed Lorraine to secure her economic future; as a result she has a clear title on her home and has accepted an early retirement. Her lifestyle permits her ample solitude which she cherishes and freedom to travel, to treat her friends, and to engage in various recreational pursuits.

While a recent injury has kept Lorraine closer to home, at the time of the interview she expressed delight and optimism at the direction her life was taking. She looked forward to the freedom of her new found lifestyle and hoped to volunteer in animal rescue and care, a life-long love. Lorraine currently resides with her three feline companions.

### **Ambika's Life Narrative**

At the time of the interview Ambika, a retired school teacher and librarian, was 60 years old. Born in Northern Alberta in 1932, she moved with her parents and younger sister to the Vancouver area when Ambika was ten years old. Her father, previously a farmer and mechanic, became a self-taught fisherman and Ambika's mother gave birth to a son ten years Ambika's junior. From an early age it was apparent that Ambika did not aspire to feminine roles, preferring instead to join her father in his work and participate in farm chores and outdoor recreation. Her aunt provided her with the nurturing and emotional support lacking from Ambika's mother. By adolescence, Ambika was aware that her relationship preferences were for other females.

While high school studies were experienced as challenging, Ambika prepared herself for education training as a school teacher in the hopes of avoiding the anticipated drudgery of the clerical field. She succeeded and after teaching elementary school for a few years, enrolled in university to acquire her Bachelor of Education degree, a decision that demanded that Ambika remain committed to summer and night school courses for the next six years. While Ambika's younger sister married and left home at age nineteen, Ambika remained living with her parents for years to come. At age twenty-five, Ambika prepared to move out and reside with her lesbian partner, but threats by Ambika's mother of revealing the teachers' lifestyles to the school board made her plans go awry. While her intimate relationship lasted for the next fifteen years, Ambika remained living with her parents, even purchasing them a home.

In the years that followed, Ambika found respite from her mother's interference in her life through her work, her relationships and by working on home and boat construction projects with her father. Following her father's death, Ambika continued to support her mother and at age 35, having purchased another residential property, moved out on her own. She became involved in a second intimate relationship that would last twenty-two years, however, the women retained separate residences. During this time Ambika explored her interests in classical music, the opera, European travel, swimming and hiking.

After 33 years of teaching and librarianship Ambika accepted an early retirement opportunity. In need of a new challenge she took courses preparing for a possible business venture and designed and contracted the building of her own house.

At the time of the interview Ambika was enrolled in a Continuing Education course for personal interest and continued caring for her elderly mother who resides in a senior's home. Previous over-involvement in community development activities has encouraged Ambika to lead a more solitary lifestyle at the present time. In addition to dealing with the hardships of arthritis, Ambika is attempting to resolve the emotional pain she has experienced and continues to experience in her relationship with her mother.

### **Margaret's Life Narrative**

Margaret was born in Eastern Canada in 1952, making her 39 years old at the time of the interview. She was the second eldest child of three, her brother aged seven years older and her sister thirteen years younger. Margaret's father worked as a Law Clerk and her mother was a traditional homemaker of Roman Catholic faith.

From an early age Margaret identified with her father who shared her love of literature and she also idolized her brother who was preparing to become a journalist. A "tom-boy" through association with other males, Margaret took easily to stereotypically masculine activities and feeling that she did not

fit in with her female peers resorted to academic achievement. Education being valued in Margaret's family, she went on to attain a Bachelor's degree in English. Margaret explained that her mother was particularly upset at the onset of her second year of university when she elected to move out of the family home. Defining herself separately from her mother while retaining an emotional connection to her has continued to be a source of challenge to Margaret throughout her adult life.

While attending university Margaret supported herself financially and lived with her boyfriend, an important relationship which was not supported by her parents. During her university years Margaret also travelled to Europe and observed her feminist orientation develop in the university milieu. Like her brother, she then pursued a Degree in Journalism and worked as a reporter for the next few years. Finding herself unsuited to the profession, Margaret returned to university on a fellowship to attain her Master's degree in English. While working on her thesis, Margaret's parent's separation was initiated thereby upsetting further an already unstable family constellation. Distressed by the emotional tug-of-war Margaret experienced as her parents vied for their children's support and by her simultaneous breakup with her boyfriend, Margaret left her education incomplete.

For the next several years Margaret endeavored to recover from her family's traumatic episode and her own academic shortfall. She worked for a time as the office co-ordinator for a

hostelling association and then as a Medical Research Assistant for a university clinic where Margaret remained for seven years. Eventual emotional and physical burnout related to her work place setting forced Margaret to leave.

Seeking an environment which was more amenable to alternative lifestyles, Margaret traveled across Canada solo to Vancouver a year ago, where she is now nurturing herself into full health. She continues to work as a researcher, is an active club member and traveller, and plans to engage in watercolor painting and piano in the future. Margaret describes her gender orientation as androgynous and while not actively seeking male companionship she remains open to developing quality relationships with both men and women.

### **Common Themes**

The process of data analysis revealed five common themes which arose from the women's in-depth interviews and the subsequent validation interviews. Each of the identified themes reflects the experience of all of the women. Quotations have been selected for their ability to illustrate and exemplify the experiences of all of the participants.

1. The experience of self as different.
2. The experience of connectedness.
3. The experience of fundamental aloneness.
4. The experience of influential family role models.
5. The experience of self-reliance.

### **The Experience of Self as Different**

The women in the study described themselves as feeling different from their peers. This perception took on different forms for the participants as they entered various phases in their lives. For some it was the experience during girlhood and adolescence of perceiving themselves as different from their classmates in regard to their emerging self-definitions. In adulthood the differences were most clearly illustrated through the differing roles and life paths the study participants followed from those of their traditionally oriented friends.

For several of the women in the study, the experience of being different from their peers was first recognized when they reached puberty. Having identified with males and participated in typically masculine activities in their youth, many of the women described being out of touch with the experiences of girls their age. As expressed by Margaret, this experience resulted in a bewilderment at not possessing a peer group with whom they could identify:

As an adolescent I didn't really have a sense of what girlhood was all about. I spent so much time being a tom boy and being buddies with boys, that all of a sudden when they were not buddies anymore and you haven't achieved intimate relationships with girlfriends - where are you? How do you do it? What is it to be a girl?



A lack of appreciation for and unwillingness to conform to the roles traditionally assumed by their gender prompted four of the women in the study to feel somewhat like "outsiders" and "nonconformists". They longed for a life style which during their generation was not widely accepted or promoted among women. Joan's statement which follows illustrated the women's preferences for more independence and self-determination:

If anything was different about me I think it was that I had a strong sense that I didn't like the traditional kinds of roles that girls got cast into . . . and I always felt that girls had the raw end of the stick and for a long time I really envied boys. Not so much that I actually wanted to be male, but I just wanted to have the privileges and the freedom that guys had.

The experience of feeling different from one's peers was not exclusive to the women's early stages of development. For some, having shared companionship and activities with girlhood chums, adulthood was the point at which life paths diverged. Like many of the women, Lorraine reflected on feeling 'out of step' as an adult when she observed her women friends taking on the traditional roles which she did not assume:

We started out very close in school and all through high school. Very close, we did things together constantly. And as we got out of high school and started working, they were getting married quite young. In fact, all three of them . . . so

then we started parting ways and they started having children.

For several of the women, the experience of being different was exhibited through activities that seemed to portray a strength, courageousness or daring unusual among women of their cohort. For Lorraine and others, it "was kind of breaking ground" to be a single female property owner at a time when few women could access mortgages for the purchase of their own homes. For Eva it was through her eight continuous years of world travel as a single woman in the early nineteen sixties:

I did some things that a lot of people would probably have never done and I'm thinking about my travels through India and Pakistan and the countries I have gone through and travelled alone in a good deal of them. And the way I travelled was probably pretty unusual because I certainly didn't meet too many women doing it the way I was.

Finally, all of the women in the study recognized their status as never-married childless women, and particularly their singleness in a family oriented society, as being an integral part of feeling different from others. Linda expressed her concern that she was, much to her dismay, similar in terms of lifestyle to the "spinster aunt" that her family looked upon as something of an oddity. Judy found herself bristling at the perception other's held of her as being helpless and peculiar without a mate. For Eva, the

discomfort of friends with her single status was both surprising and disappointing. She explained:

I think other people are far more uncomfortable with the fact that a person is single, than the person that is single. I've always felt very comfortable about my status. I guess the only time you don't feel comfortable is if you don't have a date for special occasions.

Lorraine also expressed her outrage and dismay at being regarded as an aging single woman and thereby a social outcast:

And you know the odd thing . . . when I tell them I am single and I have never been married I am almost viewed as a pariah . . . but I have never been conscious about this until just since I turned fifty, say, the last three or four years . . . I have just never been aware of the fact that I was such an oddball!

While the experience of being perceived as different due to their status as never-married women was at times expressed as one of frustration, each of the women spoke also of the gratification they experienced as a result of their single lifestyle. All of the women described their lives as full, active with friends and family, all cherished their freedom, independence and solitude, and several had experienced profound satisfaction through their careers.

### **The Experience of Connectedness**

The experience of nurturance, caring and intimacy was central to the lives of the women who participated in this study. Fundamentally, it represented their desire to be connected to others and to express that aspect of self which desired relatedness and communion. These women portrayed qualities of nurturing and caring and reinforced the value of intimate relationships in creating a meaningful life structure. The importance of the experience of connectedness to others was characterized through the women's family ties, meaningful intimate relationships, friendships and community.

The desire to experience a connectedness to others was for most of the women in the study fulfilled by maintaining relationships with their families of origin. Parents, and particularly mothers, were frequently the recipients of nurturing and caring from their never-married daughters. In fact, all of the women in the study participated in the care-giver role with their parents; a more or less significant role at different stages in their life course. For example, following her parent's separation, Margaret found it especially important to support her "emotionally devastated mother" irrespective of their significant proximal distance and Margaret's need to be independent. With great empathy, Margaret described her commitment to her relationship with her mother:

It has been really hard for her to see her family torn apart.

So a part of me wants to just hang in there as much as I can even though I am so mobile. That she's still got a daughter who loves her . . . emotionally there is a lot of love there.

All of the women in the study exhibited a bond with their family members which for some derived from a sense of effort and obligation, and for others from love and the experience of self as fundamentally nurturing. Whatever their motivation, maintaining family connections was a critical component of all the women's lives.

In addition to exploring their connections to family members, the women in the study also described the importance of meaningful intimate relationships in their lives. Each woman confirmed that she had been offered the opportunity for marriage or for a committed relationship with a significant other. Unlike most women of their cohort however, these women expressed their love and commitment without choosing marriage. Additionally, involvement in intimate relationships contained different meanings and consequences for each of the women in the study. Whether the relationships were with men or with women all reinforced the importance of love and intimacy in their lives, as reflected in the sentiments of Eva:

You have to love yourself, but until somebody else loves you it is hard to love yourself. You might know that your family does but you need that conformation from another. I was

lucky enough I suppose, to have met two wonderful men who did that for me and that confirmed it.

In addition to experiencing themselves as nurturing, caring and intimate in the context of relationships with family and significant others, the women in the study spoke highly of the important role friendships played in their lives. Several of the women were particularly conscious of the quality of their friendships, feeling that depth of sharing and mutual support was central in this sphere of relatedness. Linda, in the passage which follows, illustrates the nurturing and connected qualities many of the women cherished in their special relationships with women friends:

We share common interests and we want the kind of jobs that reach out to people, that can touch other people, and not just are in our own little space. Those are the kind of friends that I have. They are all pretty real and we can share on pretty deep levels and we can call each other when we are going through hard times.

The significance of friendship shifted in importance at different points in the life courses of these women. For example, as stated by Lorraine, friendship has taken on a particularly important tone as she and her peers enter their later mid-life together. While initially their paths diverged as marriage and child-rearing encompassed the lives of many of her friends, at the present time, with children grown and husbands divorced,

Lorraine finds herself sharing time with her schoolmates once again. She explained:

Always have your friends. Your friends are so important. We are getting a real network going as we get older. None of us really wants to end up alone or sick so we are kinder to each other. And I imagine it will be getting more so in the next few years. It is very nice.

The desire to be part of a community was also felt to offer the women in the study a vital link to others and provide a sense of belonging. For these women community created the sought after continuity and relatedness so central to the nurturing cores they identified within themselves. For example, Ambika explained with evident pride the thread of continuity she saw created by her work between the generations of her students and friends:

I've stayed in the same community since 1942 . . . which all sounds terribly dull, but you see, I have taught the children of school chums, the children of kids I babysat and their children practically, and taught children of my former students.

Whether through their work or where they selected to live, having a sense of community was felt as important to all of the women, as expressed in Joan's words:

I really enjoy the smaller community settings where you have a sense of being known, of knowing your neighbor, of being more supportive and more involved in more concrete

ways with what is happening in the community. What you basically focus on is establishing intimate relationships and maintaining strong friendships . . . where you have a greater sense of flowing in and out of each others lives.

The participants spoke of the importance of their relationships with family, intimate others, friends and community members. The sense of connection, being nurtured by others and nurturing others was a central component in creating satisfying life structures for all of the women in the study.

### **The Experience of Fundamental Aloneness**

Another highly dominant aspect revealed through the women's life narratives was their awareness of what it meant to feel fundamentally alone. Among their shared descriptions were self definitions as being solitary; the expressed desire for time alone; distinctions made between loneliness and solitude; and the importance of knowing oneself as a means of coping successfully in a essentially singular lifestyle.

The women in the study, while possessing varied meaningful relationships, described the acute sense of feeling fundamentally alone. The experience of viewing oneself as alone in the world contributed to the women's self-definitions, as characterized by Lorraine who described herself as "solitary at the core of it." This recognition of fundamental aloneness as a single woman was also illustrated by Joan in the passage which follows. She reflected on the reality that with the eventual passing of parents, never-



married childless women are truly alone and at the "end of the line". She explained:

If mom died we are an orphan. That is literally the feeling. Women who are mothers would not have such difficulty with losing their mothers, whereas single daughters because of not being mothers themselves and not having the connection with children through future generations, when their mother dies they're adrift! I mean they are parentless.

Another aspect of being alone - one the women often sought out and that was consistent with their personalities - was the need to have time alone with themselves to think, to read and to participate in any number of meaningful solitary activities. Several of the women described themselves as valuing their solitude even as children when they preferred to entertain themselves alone rather than engaging in activities with other children. This essential need to be alone was described by Lorraine as possibly one of the reasons why she and other women remained single well into their adult years. Reflecting the sentiments of the other women in the study she related that "sometimes I think I wouldn't have been very good at marriage as I do really require a fair amount of solitude".

Many of the women emphasized the importance of taking time for themselves as a measure of ensuring that their lives were kept in balance. Amid time with family, friends and co-

workers the women described the necessity of taking time for "self-regeneration", as Linda explained:

(There was) not enough time alone. Understanding who I am with my personality is that I do well with fairly long periods alone. It relates to the space that I am in now, but I don't need a lot of people to be happy. I have a fairly rich inner life and lots to reflect on and can enjoy being alone.

While the women in the study did speak about aloneness as it might be experienced as "loneliness", none of them felt that they spent very much time, if any, feeling lonely. When their lives weren't busy with relationships or careers, time alone was savored rather than feared. For many the feeling of being alone seemed to be an experience they had come to understand and were reconciled with. When reflecting on what living alone might be like in her later years, Margaret summarized the sentiments of several of the women in the study when she explained her perception of the origins of loneliness:

I rarely experience a sense of loneliness. I am very comfortable being a loner. Loneliness for me is the feeling that you are missing out on something that should be there. It is a way of imposing an expectation on yourself and can be reflective of not satisfying your needs. So I am aware of controlling what I want out of life.

To Linda and several of the women, aloneness also meant "learning to know ourselves and what is good for us." The

experience of fundamental aloneness meant, to each of the women in this study, the necessity of learning to live happily with themselves, a reward that only came when each of the women had taken time for self-exploration and personal discovery. To Eva, for example, the experience of fundamental aloneness as a never-married woman translated into the importance of knowing herself which she captured in the following words:

Women have trouble being single because they don't know how to live with themselves. A lot of my married friends are not happy in marriages and if they break up they get into another arrangement because they don't know how to live by themselves. I really feel sorry for somebody that doesn't know themselves enough to be comfortable with themselves.

The stories of the women in this study illustrated the centrality of aloneness to the women's definitions of self; the value they held for solitary time; the distinctions made between loneliness and feeling alone; and the importance of knowing oneself as a means towards feeling satisfaction in a fundamentally singular lifestyle.

### **The Experience of Influential Family Role Models**

The participants in the study described the importance of influential relationships in the development of their identities and in the formulation of their values and life goals. The women's predominant references were to their relationships with their

mothers, relationships with other female family members such as sisters, grandmothers and "spinster" aunts, and their relationships with male family members.

Several of the study participants had been raised in an environment where the influence of their mothers had been felt as particularly pronounced. For some, these mother/daughter relationships were experienced as supportive, while for others their relationships with their mothers were experienced as non-supportive. In either case, these relationships were a significant factor in the choices the women made and the paths they chose to follow.

Women with positively experienced mother/daughter relationships tended to portray their mothers in a favorable light and generally regarded their mothers as exemplifying the values and life goals they personally strove to attain. For example, Eva, a participant who lived with her parents until age thirty and who returned home again to caretake years later, felt that her mother represented the "strength" and the "soul" of the family. Like several of the women in the study, Eva remarked that her mother was her "strongest mentor in a lot of ways." The women also described how their mothers had been positive role models influential in encouraging their independence and the development of their self-reliance. Relating this experience, Joan emphasized how her mother "never really held us back." She described the unconditional support she and her sister Linda received which

helped them to define their life goals in personally meaningful ways:

I appreciate my mother a great deal for her lack of structuring us to be a certain way. She believed that what was really important was the kind of character that we had . . . (not) whether we should be successful or married or high achievers.

The negatively experienced relationships which occurred between some of these daughters and their mothers had the effect of intensifying the participants' needs to attain independence and differentiation from their mothers. Three of the women in the study described their mother/daughter relationships as having been particularly difficult and negative. These mothers were described by the participants as "controlling and manipulative", "emotionally distant" and their relationships as "lacking in support and validation."

The women in the study conveyed that their mother's dissatisfaction with marital and family life influenced their own perceptions regarding the lack of satisfaction inherent in traditional roles for women. For example, Ambika felt that her mother's character and perceptions altered her view of men dramatically, as she expressed in the following passage:

My mother was a very unhappy person in her whole marriage experience and she never had anything good to say about men and so that definitely impacted on me.

Female family members such as spinster aunts, grandmothers and sisters also represented a source of influence and identification for several of the study participants. As illustrated by Joan, the life choices of her ever-single aunt unexpectedly served as a model for her own career success and life satisfaction:

I had an aunt who was also single who had made a career in nursing. I quite admired her and thought that her world and experiences, the places that she'd been and things that she'd done were kind of appealing.

Two of the participants in the study regarded the presence of a maternal grandmother as having served as a powerful influence and guide in the development of their identities, personal values and life directions. For example, Ambika fondly related her experience of her grandmother:

She was a very liberated lady. She was the first Avon lady I ever knew and very artistic . . . Grandmother was quite a character, she loved to tell jokes and was very sociable and I think she was probably a very intelligent person because she had a pretty good education and she liked to read a lot, again, much to my mother's disgust.

Linda described as one of her significant female family influences, her sister Joan who participated in this study. Her narrative is included here for the illustration it provides of the

role modeling and encouragement shared between the sisters in this study:

A role model had been my sister to a large degree . . . knowing that I have an older sister who is also single and happy and she has made choices that seem right to her and she is content with that, basically, has given me the freedom to be able to do that too.

For three of the women in the study the presence of male family figures (e.g., fathers, uncles, brothers and cousins) during their early formative years appeared to have a particularly important impact on the development of their self concepts and contributed to the formation of their non-traditional values and lifestyles. Margaret's sentiments express the women's experiences of feeling more personally connected to their fathers:

I was closer to my dad than to my mom. I had to do a lot of separating from my mom and it seemed to me that my dad was the one who supported me in my life goals whether it was career or university.

Several of the women in the study also spoke of the lack of their father's involvement in "family matters" thereby questioning the impact this may have had on their development. For Joan and Linda, the literal absence of their deceased father raised questions for them regarding their personal development and the evolution of their life structures. Joan's statement, while making reference to a physically absent father, illustrated the

question raised by several of the women in the study. She pondered:

What meaning has it had in my life that I grew up without a father and that my life has been primarily influenced by strong female figures?

Through a recounting of their life stories the women in the study felt that the presence of influential relationships with their mothers, other female family members and male figures had impacted their self-definitions, personal values and life choices. These relationships served to model and at other times to dissuade the women from adhering to particular life paths with the outcome being one of satisfaction with a never-married life style.

### **The Experience of Self-Reliance**

The women in the study defined themselves as self-reliant and described themselves as independent, self-sufficient, resourceful and ambitious. They expressed the need to experience themselves as self-reliant and also to be perceived by others as capable of fulfilling their own needs. The women exhibited their self-reliance through the attainment of higher education, sustained employment, property ownership and through living alone.

Without exception, the women in the study recognized the critical nature of work toward the attainment of their self-reliance. Each of the participants held the expectation that they



would be required to financially provide for themselves (and possibly for dependent parents) throughout their adult lives. Six of the seven participants in the study completed post-secondary education as a means of enhancing their opportunity for gainful employment. In the passage which follows, Joan, representative of the other participants, explains how education and economic independence became important goals in her life:

My father had died very unexpectedly and left my mother as the main income earner for our family. If she had not had her teaching certificate she would have been adrift . . .

because of that, the emphasis on education, having a career, options for stability and financial resourcefulness were really important in our family.

Confidence in their ability to generate an income meant that four of the seven women purchased their own residential properties. The women who owned their own homes unanimously agreed on the importance acquisition of property was to their feelings of independence and self-reliance. In reflecting on her advice to other single women, Lorraine captured the sentiments of most of the women in the study by saying:

I would advise them to buy some property. I'd advise anybody to do that. That has been one of the most powerful things in my life . . . it makes you independent.

The women's stories also conveyed the belief that a woman was not truly self-reliant, or at least would not appear as such to

others, until she lived alone. Most of the women in the study lived apart from their parents during their college and university years thereby, emphasizing the important role living alone contributed to their feelings of self-reliance. Even the older participants broke with tradition in setting out on their own. For example, Eva was finally able to leave home to travel at age thirty and Ambika lived with her mother until age thirty-five at which time she bought her first property. Like each of the participants, Ambika described the critical importance of moving away from home:

I bought my own place. I had had it with living at home . . . I didn't want to get caught. I knew if I didn't move out now I would be stuck there forever.

For several of the women the attainment of true self-reliance meant "learning to enjoy [their] own company" and "developing [their] own internal resources". Self-reliance was viewed by the women as the ability to take care of themselves and to create their own happiness, as expressed by Linda in the following passage:

Your life and your own happiness does not depend on another person. You have no guarantees in that relationship. You don't know if the needs that you have now will be met. If you are depending on that person to meet your needs I think that you are setting yourself up for a lot of disappointment.

The women in the study seemed to possess an inner awareness of the importance of self-reliance in the attainment

of a full and satisfying life as a never-married women. Eva's comments serve to illustrate the central components of this need for self-reliance that was reflected in the experiences of all the women:

Women need to have the awareness that they can sustain themselves and they definitely have to be independent. That they can create their own happiness - they can't count on somebody else to create it for them. Your fulfillment has to come from you and from your own achievements. It can't be generated by other people because it won't work. You have to have your own motivation.

### **Summary**

The women participating in the study regarded themselves as satisfied with their lives. The descriptions of their personal development, career progress and relationships with others illustrated what a meaningful life structure can look like for never-married childless women. The thematic groupings common to all of the women illustrated five central self-perceptions. The women regarded themselves as different and recognized their non-conformance to the traditional life roles attained by most women. The participants, while experiencing close committed relationships, also acknowledged their fundamental aloneness and the value they placed on solitude. These never-married women felt they had been affected by significant familial relationships which influenced them to structure their life paths in ways

uncharacteristic to most women. Finally, the desire to experience themselves as self-reliant and to be perceived as such by others was shared by all of the women who participated in this study.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **DISCUSSION**

It was the purpose of this study to examine the personal development, relational and career experiences of never-married childless mid-life women. The research question designed to guide the inquiry asked "How do never-married childless working women in mid-life, who perceive themselves as being satisfied with their lives, experience their personal development, career progress and relationships with others?" In this chapter, a narrative profile representing a synopsis of the women's experiences will be presented. The common themes emerging from the participant's accounts will then be discussed as they relate to the existing literature on women's life cycle development, identity formation and career development. Finally, the implications for counselling and future research will be considered.

#### **Profile of Never-Married Childless Women**

The seven women in this study grew up during a period when socialization pressures reinforced the importance of family life and the roles of marriage and child rearing for women. The women's families maintained the traditional structure of a working father and homemaker mother in all but one instance, where the mother resumed employment due to her husband's death. For some of the women family configurations also included

extended family wherein grandparents served to further reinforce traditional value systems within the home. However, of the women in this study, only one anticipated that her life would likely include marriage and children.

When reflecting on their childhoods none of the women emphasized having participated in female activities of play which revolved around the role-playing of marriage, keeping house and caring for children. Instead, some of the women described themselves as more interested in traditionally male activities including outdoor recreational pursuits such as hockey and track and field activities. They also described themselves as being of a more solitary nature thereby enjoying independent activities such as reading and individually oriented sports. The women described feeling somewhat different from and not fitting in well with other female children their age.

The women acknowledged having been influenced by either positive or negative models which reinforced their desire to attain personal independence and self-reliance as primary life goals. Mothers were experienced as an important source of influence on their daughters, as well as other significant family members such as grandmothers, fathers and ever-single aunts. These individuals served as primary role models of what the women did, and in some cases did not want to emulate.

With late adolescence and the completion of high school at hand, all of the women prepared themselves for entry into either

the work force or post-secondary education. One of the participants had been employed full-time since age fourteen and several had held summer jobs or shared in family chore responsibilities from an early age. The women recognized the divergence of their interests from that of most of the females of their age group who were focusing their attention predominantly, at that time, on dating and the attainment of male partners for marriage. As a result, the women expressed feeling different and, at times, isolated.

Five of the women attained one or more post-secondary degrees and one completed a college diploma. Education and/or career played a central role in the lives of each of the women in the study, providing them with a source for both pleasure and personal accomplishment. The women all arrived at adulthood with the expectation that they would be required to provide for their own financial needs and as well, in some instances, for the needs of their parents. Even though each of the women achieved either a professional status or a noteworthy position within their work organizations, the women's involvement in their careers did not however, appear to be more significant in their construction of a meaningful life structure than their involvement in the important relationships in their lives.

All of the women emphasized the centrality of relationships in creating a meaningful life structure. Differing only by degrees of involvement they each described a rich and varied network of

relationships which included immediate and extended family, co-workers, friends, intimate others and community members. While all of the women had meaningful intimate involvements, they chose to decline opportunities for marriage or long-term committed live-in relationships. The most common reason stated among the women for being unmarried was that their single status had just evolved; in no instance was the decision to remain single elected as a life choice. All of the women while stating unequivocally that they were satisfied with their single lifestyles, were open to engaging in meaningful intimate relationships. However, the exchange of marriage vows was not regarded by any of the participants as a requirement for intimacy or commitment.

The women in this study defined themselves as self-sufficient, resourceful, and independent. While they valued their relationships with others they also cherished their privacy and solitude. Recognizing themselves as single women in a society oriented towards couples, marriage and families, the participants never-the-less denied regretting their decisions not to marry and felt their lives were satisfying and fulfilling. Only one of the study participants, the eldest, expressed regret at not having raised children.

When the participants were asked to offer advice to women who were considering a single lifestyle the encouragement was to "go for it". Among their recommendations for a satisfying



single life were the following: know yourself as a person, recognize and fulfill your own needs, find meaningful work, ensure your financial future, develop a network of meaningful relationships and maintain a positive outlook on life. The women acknowledged these factors as instrumental in contributing to the success and satisfaction of their own life structures as never-married mid-life women.

### **Discussion of the Findings**

Five central themes were identified as common to each of the women participating in this research; the experience of self as different, the experience of connectedness, the experience of fundamental aloneness, the experience of family role models and the experience of self-reliance. The available literature on women's identity formation, role development and career theory, when examined in conjunction with the common themes derived from the narrative data of the study participants, revealed four salient points of interest which will be used to guide this discussion:

1. The Relational Sense of Self
2. The Need for Self Reliance
3. The Mother/Daughter Relationship
4. Coming to Terms with being Different

### **The Relational Sense of Self**

Current theories of women's development have emphasized the importance of women's relational sense of self to their identities and to the construction of their personal lives and careers (Gilligan, 1980; 1982). Established in early life through emotional connectedness to primary caregivers, the desire to fulfil nurturant qualities are thought to remain at the central core of a woman's identity throughout her adult life (Chodorow, 1978). The women in this study exhibited nurturant and relational qualities of self, not through the traditional roles of wife and mother, but rather via their involvement in "helping" careers and through the meaningful relationships they developed with their families and friends.

Sheehy (1976) in her illustrative model of women's life roles described never-married women as "paranurturers" and "office wives". The women in this study participated in teaching professions, religious roles, nursing careers and other service related occupations, thereby confirming Sheehy's observations. While recognizing that career opportunities for women during the 1950s and 1960s particularly, were more restricted to the helping professions, the women in this study tended to remain in their helping careers over time. Few of the women deviated far from their initial career choices claiming that they felt their work was satisfying. Several of the women described the gratification they received through their work and the close

relationships they had developed with patients, students, and co-workers. Some of the women continued their education so they could refine their care-based skills and assist/support others better. Hence, career was not pursued only out of economic necessity but for its ability to provide opportunity for meaningful interaction and continuity with others. Like the never-married women in the survey of Baruch et al. (1985), the women in this study experienced work as important to their feelings of pleasure as well as to their experiences of mastery.

The participants in this study placed particular importance on the role friendships played in contributing to their life satisfaction. Consistent with the findings of Baruch and her colleagues (1985) friendship appeared to be a central contributor toward pleasure and well-being among these never-married childless women. The need for connectedness with others was attained through "networks" (Baruch, et al., 1985) of friendships, or "multiple attachments" (Adams, 1976). Unlike theories of women's development (Bardwick, 1980) which emphasize the importance of "dyadic" relationships (wife-husband, mother-child) in women's lives, the never-married women in this study found satisfying alternatives for their relational needs. Adams (1976) proposed that the ability of never-married persons to relate flexibly and fluidly in such a manner suggests a greater adaptive ability than does the more ridged and narrow relational roles of married persons.

For the never-married women in this study, friendships with others increased in importance as the women progressed in their life cycles. Retaining meaningful friendships ensured that the process of aging was met with shared support, kindness and freedom from fear of isolation. The women in this study acknowledged the value they placed on the thoughtfulness of their friends during times of sickness and celebration. This finding was consistent with that of Simon (1987) who claimed that for the never-married women in her study, the role of friends appeared integral to the women at all stages of adult life, growing in importance with retirement and later life. The need for never-married (and possibly other) women to remain connected to friends and/or siblings as they enter later life is not currently acknowledged in models of women's life span development. Here again, the assumption has been that women will rely on spouses and children for life-long relational support.

The concept of a relational sense of self proffered by theorists of women's development appeared central to the self-concepts and life structures of the never-married women in this study. They particularly found avenues for the expression of their nurturant capacities through their careers and through networks of meaningful friendships.

### **The Need for Self Reliance**

Adams (1976), in her description of the essential features of the single personality and status, identified social

independence, psychological self-sufficiency and personal integrity as central elements in the characters of those having chosen the unmarried lifestyle. The never-married women in this study similarly, defined themselves as independent, self-sufficient, resourceful and ambitious. The women's confidence in their ability to meet their own needs appeared to be central to their self-concepts and to their perceptions of possessing life satisfaction. This need for self-reliance was characterized primarily by their involvement in career, through their ability to sustain themselves financially, and by their capacity to create meaningful friendships and to deal successfully with solitude and loneliness.

Baruch et al. (1985) identified mastery as a key component contributing to the well-being of the never-married childless women in their study. The researchers described mastery as "strongly related to the doing side of life" (p. 33) which is frequently associated with career. The never-married childless women in Baruch et al.'s study were all employed and were the best educated women in their sample. The researchers regarded mastery as the ability of women to fulfill their own needs, as the avenue to self-esteem and a central component in ensuring freedom from depression and anxiety. The never-married childless women in Baruch et al.'s study possessed the highest mastery scores among all of the participant groups suggesting that for these women career was of central importance. While

levels of mastery were not evaluated in this research, similarities appear to exist between Baruch et al.'s never-married childless women and the participants of this study. The thesis participants were also well educated and all engaged in work/career. Employment appeared to play an important role in the lives the participants in this study by affording them the opportunity be involved in meaningful activities, by providing an avenue through which they could ensure their financial well-being and by confirming the women's competence in roles other than those traditionally ascribed to women. Unlike the never-married childless women who participated in Baruch et al.'s study, however, none of the women in this study claimed to have sought out "high level jobs" as a means of ensuring their feelings of well-being, and none appeared to be interested in achieving "traditional" career success (Crites, 1969; Super, 1977, Levinson, 1978). Instead, employment ensured the women in this study that they could take care of their own financial needs, a finding consistent with the values of Simon's (1987) participants. Furthermore, it appeared that the never-married childless women in this study sought a balance in their lives between the need for achievement and mastery and the need for nurturance and affiliation. Theories regarding the career development of women do not at the present time acknowledge the co-existence of women's affiliative and achievement needs, nor the diverse means through which these needs may be attained.

Finally, self-reliance was characterized by the women in this study through their ability to deal successfully with solitude and loneliness in their lives. Consistent with the findings of Adams' (1976) participants who appeared to "have a special appreciation of, and need for, solitude" (p. 87), the women in this study similarly identified needing time to be alone. Furthermore, the ability to constantly confront and mobilize their resources to deal with predictable loneliness is perhaps illustrative of the "psychological autonomy" attributed by Adams to the persons in her study.

In summary, the need for self-reliance was evidenced as central to the lives of the never-married childless women in this study. Personality characteristics such as independence and self-sufficiency attributed to the ever-single women in Adams' (1976) study appeared to be consistent with qualities exhibited by the thesis study participants. The ever-single women described by Baruch, et al. (1985) and the women in this study both placed importance on the roles of education and career toward ensuring their well-being and self-reliance. However, the never-married women in this study denied being motivated to attain "high-level" career positions, and instead appeared to desire a life balance between career and relationship needs. Finally, like the women in Adams' (1976) study the never-married women in this study appreciated solitude and regarded their ability to deal with loneliness as important to their attainment of self-reliance.

### **The Mother/Daughter Relationship**

Chodorow (1978), Eichenbaum and Orbach (1983) and others, emphasized the importance of the mother/daughter relationship in the development of a woman's sense of self. Because mothers and daughters are the same gender, the daughter is believed to not separate completely from the mother with whom she identifies and loves. The identification process results in the formulation of fluid ego boundaries in women that allow them to remain more connected to others. Intense emotional relatedness from the early stages of female development, these theorists propose, ensures that daughters and mothers continue to share an emotional bond into their adult years.

The women in this study described the central roles their mothers played in their lives. At times the women's relationships with their mothers were experienced harmoniously, in which instances the mothers often became sources of positive guidance and role models to emulate. For other women in the study, their relationships with their mothers were experienced as negative and non-supportive thereby causing these women to actively select options which moved them further away from their mothers emotionally, psychologically and physically, and in terms of their elected life paths.

Some of the women in the study described the difficult relationships they continued to experience with their elderly mothers. The stories they related conveyed the discomfort and



frustration these women felt due to their inability to remain independent from their mothers' powerful emotional hold. Hence, for some of the women "self-differentiation" or the ability to see the self as separate and capable of operating independently from their mothers (Mahler, Pine & Bergman, 1975) appeared to have remained on some level, incomplete. This finding may be reflective of Kaplan's (1986) hypothesis which suggested that problems in development may derive due to women's difficulty in remaining connected to others while asserting a differentiated, distinct self-concept.

Further evidence of the mother/daughter connection displayed by the study participants was the caretaking role each of the women participated in with their mothers at various points in their lives. For some of the women caretaking their mothers was regarded as "a way of giving back" what they had received and valued in their own early nurturant experiences with their primary caregivers. Others described the caregiving experience as fraught with resentment and ambivalence. Bardwick (1980), in her portrait of women's life phases suggests that "at age 50 and older" some women turn their attention to caring for their elderly parents. For the never-married women in this study, assuming responsibility for parents generally began much earlier in life. The women felt that this may have been due to the belief among some family members that as single women, without the

responsibilities of husbands and children, they were likely more available for care-giving roles.

In summary, the mother/daughter relationships described by the participants in this study appeared to play an important role in the development of the women's identities and their life path outcomes. These findings, plus the women's relational qualities of self appear to be consistent with contemporary research findings by Chodorow (1978), Eichenbaum and Orbach (1983) and others which emphasized the centrality of the mother/daughter relationship in the determination of women's self-concepts and life roles.

### **Coming to Terms with Being Different**

The never-married women in this study described themselves as did those in Baruch et al.'s (1985) research as "feeling different" and "out of step" with others. As children and adolescents the women felt they didn't fit in with their peers, and frequently expressed little interest in the stereotypically feminine activities of childhood play. As they entered adulthood divergence in terms of "normative" female developmental behavior, as described in Bardwick's (1980) model became exceedingly apparent, leaving the women feeling, at times, odd and isolated. A review of Bardwick's (1980) developmental phases for women illustrates the numerous ways in which the never-married childless women in this study deviated from the "norm"

thereby challenging them to come to terms with their differentness at various phases during their life courses.

Bardwick (1980) described women's "early adult years" (age 17 to 28) as the phase during which women focused on the attainment of marriage or a life-long committed relationship. Contrary to this experience, the never-married women in the study reported that by late adolescence they had recognized and accepted that their lives would not be guided by the attainment of a marriage partner or a committed relationship. These women acknowledged that their priority was to find employment and/or to engage in further education as a means of ensuring their future economic viability. By the age of twenty-eight (Bardwick's parameter), six of the women in the study had already committed to full-time employment. During this phase of development, recognizing their divergence from the trend toward marriage, the never-married women in this study dealt with their differentness by turning their attentions to education, career, the cultivation of athletic prowess and the development of friendships with others with whom they could relate.

The "settling down period" (age 30 to 40) described by Bardwick (1980) identified the period during which women engaged in their need to raise a family. The "middle adulthood" phase (age 40 to 50) demonstrated the period when women generally began to consider developing a career. Once again, inconsistent with Bardwick's theory, the never-married women in

the study, by age thirty, had clearly identified and committed to their career paths and by age forty, most were well established in their chosen professions. Dealing with differentness during this stage of the life cycle found one woman in the study involved in eight years of continuous world travel. Other women were advancing careers and moving to different communities where they hoped their alternative life style choices would be more readily accepted.

Finally, Bardwick's (1980) model described that "age 50 and older" could be a time of significant career accomplishment for some women and was also a time of tending to the life issues of retirement, menopause, parental care and death. The lives of the never-married women in this study were more consistent with Bardwick's speculations for this life phase than for the others reviewed. For example, the careers of the women in this study had, in fact, shown evidence of fruition. Two of the women had retired and one would retire within the coming year. Those women having reached the age of 50 had encountered menopause. However, as for engaging in parental care, the never-married women in this study initially engaged in such caretaking responsibilities during middle adulthood or earlier, and continued this care, if their parents were still alive, into this later life period. By this phase of life many of the women in this study appeared to have come to terms with their differentness, and

changing social values had become somewhat more accepting of women who had elected divergent lifestyles.

Finally, while the women in this study acknowledged feeling "out of step" and "different" from other women they also emphasized that they were indeed satisfied with their lives. Consistent with the never-married childless women in Baruch et al.'s (1985) study, the thesis participants, by having come to terms with their feelings of being different, appeared to be where they wanted to be in their lives. Hence, acceptance of and appreciation for their single, childless status seemed to have contributed to their feelings of life satisfaction and well-being.

In summary, the lives of the never-married childless women participating in this study showed significant divergence from the phase theory developed by Bardwick (1980) currently regarded as illustrative of women's normative development. These women, perhaps due to their unique qualities of character (independence, self-reliance, etc.), found creative ways of dealing with their feelings of being different at various phases in their lives. All of the women, having described themselves as satisfied with their lives, illustrated that, at least to some degree, they had in fact come to terms with their feelings of being different.

In conclusion, the findings of this study demonstrate that with little exception, existing models of women's life span development (e.g. Bardwick, 1980) do not adequately account for the life experiences of the never-married childless women in this

study. Theories of women's identity formation emphasizing the relational concept of self, seem to have greater application to the never-married childless women described in this study. Finally, current conceptualizations of career development appear not to be representative of the experiences of the never-married women in this study. While these women did exhibit a more sustained involvement in their career much like the male models of career propose (Super, 1977), the participants expressed having different career aspirations; high-level career achievement was not a motivating factor for these women as it tends to be for career focused men. Hence, the model developed by Astin (1984) may better illustrate the experiences of the never-married childless women in this study.

In this study the researcher examined the personal development, work and relational experiences of never-married childless women in mid-life who regarded themselves as satisfied with their lives. She endeavored to reveal how these women find meaning in a life structure that is so different from the life roles selected by most of the women in North American culture. She aimed to give never-married women the opportunity to contribute their "voices", perspectives and experiences to the growing body of research on women's life and career development. It is hoped that the descriptive findings will further sensitize other researchers and practitioners to the experiences and needs of this particular group of women.

### **Implications for Future Research**

The body of research on never-married childless women in mid-life illustrated that knowledge regarding this group, at the present time, is significantly limited. While disappointing, this fact is equally exciting as it indicates the unlimited possibilities for research which will advance our understanding of the lives of these women.

In this study the researcher examined the lives of never-married childless women in mid-life who regarded themselves as satisfied with their lives. The researcher's intention to study satisfied women was prompted by the desire to offer an alternative view of this frequently stigmatized and marginalized segment of society. In this way, she endeavored to dispel the myths which tend to surround women who have forfeited traditional nurturing roles. Future research might examine the lives of never-married childless women who are not satisfied with their lives , as well as the influential factors. Comparisons between the life structures of satisfied and unsatisfied never-married childless women may permit researchers to more clearly identify the elements which appear to be central toward the construction of a satisfying life style for this group of women.

The study undertaken explored the experiences of never-married childless women in mid-life. It was believed that these women would offer a particular perspective on the single and childless life status because mid-life women have essentially

passed the age during which most women choose to marry and raise a family. While the mid-life vantage point offered a unique perspective to this study, further research might be undertaken with other age groups of never-married women. For example, this research study revealed the centrality of friendships in the life structures of never-married women in mid-life. It might be illuminating, for example, to discover the salience of friendship for never-married childless women as they enter later life. Alternatively, researchers might explore the centrality of friendships in the lives of never-married women across the life span.

Additionally, the participants in this study reflected the experiences of a particular historical cohort. These women, born between 1932 and 1952, were raised during an era when traditional roles were still the norm for most women. Although only the youngest participant directly acknowledged the impact of feminism on her life choices, the feminist movement had, never-the-less, begun to make educational and employment opportunities more accessible to this cohort of women. Hence, the findings of this research are recognized as having taken place within a unique economic climate. The women in this study were homogeneous in that they were all able to attain financial self-reliance and life satisfaction. Should this study take place with a different cohort of women, the findings may be different in important ways due to the prevailing economic and social



climates, and their impact on the creation of a meaningful life structure.

The never-married childless women in this study described their single status as having "evolved". These women related not having made deliberate decisions to remain single as a part of a larger life plan and all felt that they would be open to long-term committed relationships in the future. Further research might proceed by examining the life structures of women who have "deliberately" chosen to not engage in the traditionally sanctioned feminine roles of wife and mother. Whereas each of the women in this study expressed a preference for engaging in an intimate relationship, all but one of the women claimed that they did not experience any deep longing to raise children. In fact, the women in this study may have been unique in their lack of emphasis on the subject of children during the interviews. Future research might explore the life structures of never-married childless women who maintain a preference for being married and raising children. Yet another study might examine mid-life women, for example, who have elected parenting roles while deliberately not engaging in marriage.

Finally, this research, utilizing an in-depth qualitative interview methodology, examined the lives of seven never-married women. The inclusion of a larger number of participants and further refinement of themes may offer deeper insights into

the lives of this group of women, and/or may confirm the findings and contribute to the development of theory in this area.

### **Implications for Counselling**

As a practitioner specializing in counselling and therapy with women, the opportunity to conduct this research was especially rewarding. Never-married childless women, by virtue of their gender, share experiences common to the lives of many women. However, their unique life structures, values, perspectives and experiences enabled me to recognize that these women require their counsellors to possess an added awareness of the issues salient to never-married childless women. Such an awareness would allow helping professionals to more effectively support never-married childless women with their particular life challenges and needs.

The never-married childless women in this study did not conform to the traditional life paths and roles ascribed to by most women. As the discussion section illustrated, these women dealt with different life issues at different points in their life courses than did more traditionally oriented women. Hence the needs of never-married women can vary quite dramatically from women conforming to the roles of mother and wife. In spite of the fact that the women in this study regarded themselves as satisfied with their lives, several had called upon the support of counselling professionals at various times. These never-married women described dealing with issues of work-related stress and

relational problems. These issues took on a different meaning given the unique nature of these women's work lives and the differing structure of their relationships.

As counsellors we may find ourselves called upon to support younger women who are considering the never-married childless lifestyle. Honest exploration of alternatives and their consequences relies on our ability to recognize our own biases and negative beliefs regarding the never-married childless lifestyle. Younger women may also be grappling with their feelings of being different or struggling with familial and social pressures which are demanding them to conform. Helping young women to adjust to a lifestyle they may or may not be equipped to enter successfully will require that we understand the experiences of other never-married childless women who have successfully negotiated this path before.

Never-married childless women in mid-life can find themselves called upon to participate in caretaking roles. This added responsibility, as was evidenced by the women in this study, may result in the need for counselling support. Never-married childless women are frequently expected to provide parental care because they do not have the responsibilities of managing a family home. Hence, the common perception may be that they must have a lot of available time. Although some women do take on the support of parents willingly, it can mean that an already taxing career or busy personal life becomes neglected.

Feelings of resentment or the possibility of emotional and physical "burnout" were outcomes the women in this study described having experienced. Counsellors providing support to mid-life never-married childless woman may therefore benefit from an understanding of the factors involved in maintaining life balance for women of this group.

Never-married childless women in early mid-life may be facing the "final" decision regarding whether to parent a child or to forfeit the opportunity. While the option to engage in a committed relationship without marriage remains available to women at every stage of life, the ability to bear children becomes limited with age. Raising a child without marriage has become a viable alternative for many women today, however, it may be accompanied by economic and social challenges. The counsellor of never-married women considering single parenting should be prepared to openly examine options and obstacles, and to also support the informed decision to parent among ever-single women.

Never-married childless women in later-life are inevitably faced with different life challenges. Due to the centrality of relationships in their lives a counsellor can almost be assured that later-life women will be faced with the difficulty of maintaining or loosening relational connections with family and friends. As one participant stated, never-married women are "the end of the line". With the death of parents and mothers

particularly, never-married childless women may need support through a particularly difficult and unique grieving process. The loss of friends who have been central to the life structures of such women may also be experienced as particularly traumatic.

In summary, the life paths of the never-married childless women in this study were described as having "just evolved". Such an evolution is certain to be full of challenges and questions given that the never-married childless status is, at this time, not well understood or accepted as a meaningful life path for women. As counsellors we can, by increasing our awareness, assist never-married childless women to further value their elected life styles and perhaps find increased life satisfaction.

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## **Appendix A**

### **A Study Exploring**

# **Never-married Childless Women & Careers**

Many women today, either by choice or by chance, are living satisfying lives as single childless women. At present, little is known about this increasingly popular life style. In an effort to set aside the myths and stereotypes of past generations and to aid in developing career theory which supports the lives and careers of women choosing this lifestyle, a unique research study is taking place.

### **You can contribute . . .**

. . . . if you are a single childless woman who has never been married - are not presently living with a partner in an intimate relationship - are between the ages of 39 and 60 years - and feel satisfied with your life.

### **Participating in this study involves . . .**

. . . . discussing with a female researcher how you feel your experience as a never-married childless working woman is related to your career development and progress, your personal development and your relationships with others.

The study is completely confidential and would require approximately two hours of your time on two separate occasions. The results of the study will be shared with you upon completion.

If you, or someone you know, would like to participate in this study or would like further information regarding this research, please call me at the following numbers.

**Barbara Borycki - Counselling Psychology (Candidate)**  
**(H) 737-7037 or (W) 666-0163**

## **Appendix B**

### **Recruitment Notice - Advertisement**

#### **Never-Married Childless Women's Study**

Research participants needed. Aged 39 to 60 years and satisfied with your life. Call Barbara Borycki, Counselling Psychology at 737-7037 or 666-0163.

## **Appendix C**

### **Consent Form**

A Masters Thesis research study on the  
**Career & Personal Development  
of Never-Married, Childless Women**

#### **Description of the Research:**

The investigator will meet with you on two separate occasions for a total of approximately four hours, for the purpose of hearing and documenting your perceptions of how remaining single and childless has impacted upon your career development and progress, your personal development and relationships with others.

Each meeting will be audio-taped and the results transcribed. All identifying information will be deleted from the study, and your name changed as a means of ensuring absolute confidentiality. You may wish to offer a pseudonym for your own name to be used in any oral or written accounts of the material. Upon completion of the transcription you will be contacted and asked to read the description and to indicate, if upon reflection, it accurately portrays your perceptions of your career and personal experiences. Any concerns or disagreements you have regarding the material will be taken into account and all necessary adjustments made. All audio tapes will be erased following transcription and at no time will any identifying

information be made available to anyone other than the investigator and her research supervisor.

If any aspect of the outlined procedures remains unclear, you are encouraged to contact me at 737-7037, or to call my research supervisor, Dr. Judith Daniluk at 822-5768. This study is completely voluntary and if at any time you wish to withdraw from the study your right to do so will be respected.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in the study described under the conditions outlined and acknowledge receipt of a copy of this consent form. I may be reached at the following address and phone number:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Pseudonym requested

\_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Investigator:**

Barbara Borycki, B.A.

Department of Counselling Psychology

Faculty of Education, U.of B.C.

737-7037 (Res) or 666-0163 (Bus)

\_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix D

### Orienting statements:

Before we begin the interview I would like to give you some background on this research study so you will have a sense of what kinds of things I am particularly interested in learning about you and your life as a never-married, childless woman.

For the most part, women today have a greater range of options or life roles available to them than ever before - they can choose to work, to marry, to have children, to remain single or to participate in any combination of these roles at various points in their lives. Never-the-less, in our culture, the vast majority of women marry and raise children, and increasingly, most remain in or return to work.

Research studies have helped us to learn a great deal about women's natural development and about how their lives and careers unfold. However, because the majority of women assume the traditional roles of wife and mother, these women have been studied most frequently, and it is these women that we know most about.

Very few studies have looked at the lives of women who are unmarried and childless, so consequently we know very little about how their life-styles have evolved, what is important or

meaningful to them, or about their careers, relationships with others and their personal development.

In this study I'm hoping to learn about how never-married childless women experience and view their careers, their relationships and their personal development. Or, to phrase it another way, I'm asking the question: How do never-married childless women experience their career progress, their personal development and their relationships with others?

Does my question sound clear to you? Is there anything you would like to ask?

Keeping these three themes in mind - career, relationships and personal development - I would like you to tell me a bit about yourself and your lifestyle. Sometimes people find it easier to talk about themselves "like a story" - with a beginning, a middle and an end. Would this be a comfortable way for you?

## Appendix E

### Sample Questions

- 1) Most women of your generation were raised with the expectation that they would marry and have children, perhaps working periodically during that time. How might this be similar or different to the expectations you and your family had for you as you were growing up?
- 2) How did your childless single life-style evolve? At what age did you first consider yourself as a woman who might remain single? Childless?
- 3) Would you tell me about your work as a \_\_\_\_\_? When you look at your whole life, how important or central is your work to you and to your feelings of satisfaction? How do you see your marital and parental status as affecting your career satisfaction and progress?
- 4) Could you tell me something about the important people or relationships in your life? When you look at your whole life, how important or central are relationships to you and to your feelings of satisfaction? How do you see your marital and parental status as affecting your relationships with other people?
- 5) What suggestions might you have to give to younger women who may choose to remain unmarried and childless?