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10.1080/07399332.2010.500753

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Health Care for Women International, on 11 Jan 2011: Dare, J. S. (2011). Transitions in midlife women's lives: Contemporary experiences. Health Care for Women International, 32(2), 111-133. available online: [here](#)

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Transitions in Midlife Women's Lives: Contemporary Experiences

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Abstract

This paper reports on a research project conducted with 40 women living in Perth, Western Australia, which considers how contemporary women experience midlife. Qualitative in-depth interviews provide rich insights into the challenges women face during this transitional period in their lives. In doing so, the research highlights the continuities and divergences which exist between existing literature on the key transitions associated with midlife, and women's own experiences. An overarching aim of this paper is to provide direction to health professionals and policy makers in framing healthy public policies designed to support women during this stage in their lives.

Transitions in Midlife Women's Lives

Introduction

Over the last 40 years many theoretical and psychological accounts of the midlife¹ experience have been published. Represented as a key developmental stage in women's lives, midlife has traditionally been constructed as a physically debilitating and emotionally traumatic stage of life, during which women must cope with multiple challenges including menopause and changes to family life as young adult children move out of home (Cowan, Warren, & Young, 1985, p. 10; Deeks, 2006, p. 70; Martin, 1997, p. 246). Likewise, western cultural accounts have tended to define midlife as a period of loss, despair and physical decline (Fodor & Franks, 1990, p. 445; Rostosky & Travis, 1996, p.

¹ Throughout this paper, 'midlife' is used to refer to the period in women's lives between 45 and 55 years of age. This time period has been chosen as the focus of my, as it is the age range during which Australian women are most likely to pass through menopause (Smith & Michalka, 2006, p. 3), and also experience several other key transitions such as the departure of young adult children from the family home and the ageing and death of parents.

285). What are often missing from these accounts are women's *own* perspectives, and an examination of the meanings women *themselves* make of the experience of midlife. In this paper I aim to contribute a more holistic account of women's experiences, by documenting my findings from a recently completed ethnographic research project conducted with 40 midlife women living in Perth, Western Australia. In this project the research participants identified four key transitions associated with the midlife period: menopause, children moving out of home, changes in intimate relationships, and the ageing and death of parents. Significantly, the qualitative methodological approach used in this project has provided an opportunity through which the participants can describe in their own words what these transitional experiences mean personally, and how they have negotiated the challenges such transitions may present. As such, my research provides rich insights into how the midlife period is experienced by contemporary western women, and provides direction to health professionals and policy makers in developing supportive environments to empower women to manage the more difficult challenges they may face during this period.

Methodology

Given that the aim throughout this research has been to understand the meanings women make of the midlife experience, an ethnographic methodological approach has been used. As Spradley indicates, the "essential core of ethnography is ... [the] concern with the meaning of actions and events to the people we seek to understand" (1979, p. 5). I conducted qualitative in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 40 Western Australian women aged between 45 and 55. The women were recruited predominantly through a process of 'snowball sampling'. This sampling technique relies upon initial participants identifying other women who meet the recruitment criteria – hence the "analogy of a snowball, which begins small but becomes bigger and bigger as it rolls downhill" (Bailey, 1982, p. 100). While this technique runs the risk of a sample group which is relatively homogenous in life experiences and background, in this instance the final group of participants represented a diversity of occupations, socio-economic backgrounds, educational levels and life experiences. This notwithstanding, I believe it important to note that the emphasis in small-scale qualitative projects such as this should be on "experience itself, not about its distribution in a population" (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 139). As Polkinghorne makes clear,

Participants and documents for a qualitative study are not selected because they fulfil the representative requirements of statistical inference but because they can provide

substantial contributions to filling out the structure and character of the experience under investigation. (2005, p. 139)

It should also be noted that as a midlife woman myself, I am very much a *participant/observer* within the ‘culture’ I have been studying. At the time the research project began, I was personally experiencing three of the four key transitions identified as characteristic of the midlife period in women’s lives. Such personal experiences acted as a ‘bridge’ during interviews, facilitating the development of rapport through the sharing of common experiences. The interviews, lasting on average one to two hours, were recorded digitally and then transcribed. The interview transcripts were coded thematically using NVivo qualitative research software.

Constructions of Midlife: An Overview of Theoretical, Clinical and Cultural Accounts of Midlife

This section provides a snapshot of the major issues associated with the midlife period in women’s lives, as identified in the literature, in order to provide some context for a more detailed study of the key themes which have emerged out of my own research into contemporary women’s experiences of midlife. In general, four main issues or transitions have been documented as occurring during women’s midlife years: menopause; role changes as young adult children leave the family home; difficulties in intimate relationships; and the ageing and death of parents. Of these transitional processes, perhaps the one most closely associated with the notion of midlife as a physically and emotionally fraught period in a woman’s life is menopause². Over half a century ago, the French author Simone De Beauvoir captured this notion of menopause as a process of irreversible and inevitable decline when she defined it as the first hint of the “fatal touch of death itself” (De Beauvoir, 1989, p. 576). Such graphic descriptions have in many ways come to be indicative of how this stage of life has tended to be represented in theoretical and clinical accounts, as well as in mainstream cultural

² According to the Council of Affiliated Menopause Societies (CAMS), the term *menopause* is defined as the “permanent cessation of menstruation resulting from the loss of ovarian follicular activity. Natural menopause is recognized to have occurred after 12 consecutive months of amenorrhea, for which there is no other obvious pathological or physiological cause. Menopause occurs with the final menstrual period (FMP) which is known with certainty only in retrospect a year or more after the event. An adequate biological marker for the event does not exist” (cited in Australasian Menopause Society, 2008). The term *climacteric* might more appropriately describe the *period of transition* accompanying menopause. CAMS describes the climacteric as “[t]he phase in the ageing of women marking the transition from the reproductive phase to the non-reproductive state” (cited in Australasian Menopause Society, 2008). In this paper I have elected to use the term *menopause* holistically to describe the broad period of transition leading up to and after cessation of menstruation, as this term is more commonly used than *climacteric*.

representations (Cowan et al., 1985, p. 10; Gergin, 1990, p. 477; Martin, 1997, p. 246; Rostosky & Travis, 1996, p. 285).

Despite this seemingly entrenched cultural stereotype of the menopausal woman as physically in decline, irritable or even depressed, there is strong evidence to suggest that such a portrayal has never accurately represented *most* women's experiences of midlife and the postmenopausal years. Indeed, a consistent theme in empirical studies over the last 40 years is the lack of emphasis postmenopausal women place on menopause as a significant life transition (Gullette, 1997, p. 180; Leonard & Burns, 2006, p. 29; Neugarten, 1979, p. 889; Reincke, Ellicott, Harris, & Hancock, 1985, p. 269). Moreover, clinical studies indicate that while up to 20% of women do suffer severe physical and/or emotional difficulties during menopause, 60% of women experience much milder symptoms, and the remaining 20% of women report no symptoms at all (The Jean Hailes Foundation for Women's Health, 2007).

Apart from menopause, the issue that has come to be almost synonymous with midlife women is the 'empty nest', commonly used to describe the sense of loss that women may experience as their children become independent and leave the family home. Embedded deeply within the notion of the 'empty nest' is the image of a lonely and depressed woman who, after the departure of her children, no longer has a useful role in life (Viney, 1980, p. 134). As Rubin noted some 30 years ago, theories of psychological development often attributed depression in midlife women to children moving out of the family home. Such theories postulated "that it is the loss of the mothering role that *produces* [italics added] the sadness and despair" (Rubin, p. 14). In contrast to these theoretical accounts, a significant body of empirical research has built up over the last 20 years which indicates that women overwhelmingly welcome their grown children moving out, viewing it as an opportunity for growth for both themselves and their children (Daly, 1997, p. 168; Guthrie, Dennerstein, Taffe, Lehert, & Burger, 2004, p. 382; Mercer, Nichols, & Doyle, 1989). Despite this evidence, the notion of the 'empty nest' as challenging women's coping skills continues to be reflected in the literature³. Moreover, a review of recent literature on psychological aspects of midlife reveals a continuing tendency to orient the adjustments needed of women during this period around the normative model of 'women as mothers'. Within this model of development, changes in family structure can trigger major psychological adjustments in midlife women by directly impacting upon their roles and responsibilities as mothers (Apter, 1996, p. 557).

Just as children's departure may represent challenges to women as they adjust to changes in family

³ See King, Hunter and Harris (2005, p. 25) for an example of this perspective.

dynamics, so too can the midlife period trigger a reappraisal of intimate relationships in women's lives (Howell, 2001, p. 61; Sakraida, 2005, p. 82). Trends in both Australia and the United States indicate an increasing number of women in midlife are either divorced, or going through the divorce process, with women more often initiating divorce than men (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003, p. 57; Sakraida, 2005, p. 70). These statistics may in part reflect the reality of midlife as a time that draws together a range of stressful life-changing events, and may challenge many adults' coping strategies and lead to marital difficulties (Sakraida, 2005, p. 70). Midlife can also induce a period of introspection for some women, triggering a review of their marriage (Sakraida, 2005, p. 82). It is often during this period, as Smith and Michalka note somewhat graphically, that "prior years of neglect, unspoken hurt and resentment, and lack of understanding or appreciation, become like a boil that bursts" (2006, p. 200).

Given that women in midlife may have invested many years in their relationship, it is not surprising that women in this age group, regardless of whether they have initiated the divorce or not, appear to suffer higher rates of distress and loneliness post-divorce than younger divorced women (McDaniel & Coleman, 2003, p. 126; Sakraida, 2005, p. 70). Moreover, the divorce process inevitably results in further changes to women's lives. Adjusting to single parenthood, living alone, becoming economically independent, and managing on reduced finances are among the challenges newly divorced women must cope with (Sakraida, 2005, p. 82). Compounding this are changes to an individual's social support network. As Bohannon notes, individuals involved in relationship breakdowns may be said to experience a "community divorce", whereby ties with friends and community are inevitably, and perhaps irrevocably, altered (cited in Wilcox, 1986, p. 116). As a result, the networks of social support which women would normally rely on as they adjust to changing circumstances may not be as readily available when they are most needed.

The other key issue associated with women's midlife years is the ageing and death of parents. While transitional markers such menopause⁴ or the 'empty nest' aren't necessarily an automatic part of the midlife experience for *all* women, it is far more likely that most women *will* experience during their midlife years the ageing and death of one or both of their parents (Noack & Buhl, 2004, p. 54; Perrig-Chiello & Hopflinger, 2005, p. 184). In the past the concept of the 'sandwich generation' has been proposed to describe the phenomenon of midlife women who find themselves caring for their ageing

⁴ Some women may experience surgically induced menopause as a result of a hysterectomy well before their midlife years.

parents⁵ whilst also responsible for their own dependent children (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008, p. 65; Perrig-Chiello & Hopflinger, 2005, p. 183). However, there is some evidence that a new dynamic is emerging which sees midlife women juggling the responsibilities involved in caring for ageing parents, whilst at the same time coping with the demands of fulltime paid employment (Perrig-Chiello & Hopflinger, 2005, p. 186; Poole, 2009, p. 320). Contributing to this phenomenon are longer life expectancies for both men and women, which mean that the period when ageing parents are likely to need the most care is not until they are very elderly⁶ (Poole, 2009, p. 310), and by this stage their children's offspring are mostly older and therefore likely to be independent. The changing nature of midlife women's care-giving responsibilities is exemplified in Perrig-Chiello and Hopflinger's research in Switzerland, which demonstrates that the "double burden" of caring for ageing parents and dealing with fulltime employment is most intense for women aged 50-54 (2005, p. 186).

While the physical and psychological challenges in caring for an ageing parent can be daunting for both parties, there is strong evidence that a parent's death has a profound effect on women's lives (Leonard & Burns, 2006, p. 35; Perrig-Chiello & Hopflinger, 2005, p. 184), and is a significant life event for many women (Leonard & Burns, 2006, p. 31; Perrig-Chiello & Hopflinger, 2005, p. 184; Waskel & Phelps, 1995, p. 1212). It may well be that it is not until midlife that women experience the loss of a loved one, and must deal with feelings of grief and loss just as they are also managing all the other transitions this period can bring (Hunter & Coope, 1993, p. 20).

Contemporary Experiences: Research Findings

In the interviews with the 40 women who participated in my research, continuities and divergences emerged between existing research on women's experiences of midlife, and the participants' reflections on this period in their life. The following sections provides a more detailed account of how the participants are negotiating the key midlife transitions identified during the interviews, and in doing so documents the dynamic nature of contemporary midlife women's lives.

Women's Experiences of Menopause

⁵ Both Australian and international research indicates that overwhelmingly it is women who carry the burden of caring for their elderly and frail parents (Apter, 1995, p. 294; Baker, 2001, p. 239; Cahill, 1999; King, Hunter, & Harris, 2005, p. 25; Leonard & Burns, 2006, p. 35; Millward, 1998, p. 21; Perrig-Chiello & Hopflinger, 2005, p. 188; Poole, 2009, p. 320).

⁶ While ageing parents usually don't need high levels of care until they are very elderly (85+) (Poole, 2009, p. 310), it's likely that their adult daughters will also be responsible for providing episodic and terminal care for their parents should they require it.

Just as with previous empirical research, most of the women interviewed who experienced menopausal symptoms described them as irritating, rather than as difficult, unmanageable, or as representing a major emotional watershed in their life. Echoing clinical evidence, hot flushes⁷ appeared to be the most common physical symptom of menopause (Freeman & Sherif, 2007, p. 197; Guthrie et al., 2004, p. 381), with just over 60% of participants having experienced them to varying degrees. Most appeared to be coping well with them, viewing the hot flushes as an inconvenience and a discomfort, rather than as particularly distressing. This perspective is reflected in 53 year old Lois's reflections:

You know, I don't consider it [menopause] as any sort of particularly significant time in my life, it's just [that] I get irritated with the symptoms. But in much the same way as I would be irritated by a bad back or hay fever, as I've had over the years. I look at it in the same sort of light. That at the moment I'm having these rather irritating symptoms that are interfering with my day-to-day life and bugging me, but not particularly that they're significant as a... you know, as a marker as it were, particularly. (Lois)

Nevertheless, several women did find these menopausal symptoms particularly uncomfortable, and at times distressing. Of particular concern were sleep disruptions caused by frequent night sweats. Most of the women who had experienced hot flushes had also had night sweats, although the extent to which these seriously interrupted sleep patterns varied. Raelene, a 52 year old administrative assistant and active volunteer in a local community group, has found the most difficult aspect of menopause is the hot flushes and associated tiredness:

*Do you get hot flushes?*⁸

Yes. And sometimes that can wake you up. 'Cause I go to sleep fine, then two or three in the morning, that's what will wake me up, and I'm wringing wet. And even though I'm on [hormone replacement] treatment, I still get them. It's embarrassing because you get so hot you're wet. I hate that.....See I never got depression from, it... it's the sleep. I go to sleep, and then you wake up two hours later, and then you're wide awake. So for three months I did that, and in the end I went to the doctor and said "Look, I'm depressed." She said, "No you're not, you're sleep deprived." Because you're working, well you do start crying, because you're exhausted. And then you start having little

⁷ Also known as hot flashes.

⁸ Throughout this paper, when material from the interviews is included, italicised text is used to distinguish my questions or comments to the participants from the participants' comments. Participants' responses are in plain text.

panic attacks because you're trying to go back to sleep and you can't. And I'd say that's one of the worst things about menopause is that, and the hot flushes. (Raelene)

For others, the relief of being freed from monthly periods overshadowed the discomfort of hot flushes. Fifty three year old Vicki, who began to experience hot flushes seven years ago, felt at first that she was too young to be menopausal, and so initially dismissed the symptoms. As the realisation dawned on her that she was indeed in the throes of menopause, her initial reaction was "I'm too young for this, it only happens to old ladies. You come to the realisation that perhaps you are an old lady [laughs]." However, such feelings were quickly replaced by relief at no longer having to endure debilitating periods:

I didn't have a lot of time to focus on it, but I think I was relieved that my periods had stopped, 'cause I used to get painful periods. So that was a relief! You just start to think about the positives. No more periods – great! (Vicki)

Only one woman described the menopausal stage as deeply distressing both physically and emotionally. For 48 year old Gillian, severe menopausal symptoms set in after undergoing a hysterectomy when she was 43. As Gillian describes it, she experienced

huge sweats and flushes and panic attacks. Panic attacks around about when I was 45, so probably a couple of years after the hysterectomy, and huge sweats, and huge emotional swings. Moody, and the other thing that would happen to me is that I would be completely blank in the mind. Brain, whatever, couldn't recall things at all. Horrible feeling, when you've been so switched on. You know, professional woman. It's quite scary because when you go blank, and you just don't know the word... it's sort of, it's sitting there, but you just can't verbalise it. It's extremely scary. (Gillian)

However, as Gillian explained during the interview, a subsequent diagnosis of a thyroid disorder had most likely contributed to, or at least exacerbated many of the emotional problems she experienced during this period, as well as compounding many of the physical symptoms. Likewise, Vicki attributes many of the anxiety and panic attacks she experienced during menopause to the fact that during this period she was living in an abusive relationship, rather than her physical symptoms being directly related to menopause. The role that other stressors may play during the menopausal period is also highlighted by 51 year old Katherine's reflections on difficulties she had experienced in both her personal and professional life several months before her interview took place:

Mmm, I think that's when I ended up going to the doctor, when I was just about to go back to work ... I said, I can't turn this anxiety off, I think I'm, you know, peri-

menopausal, I think I'm going into menopause. Dad's just gone into a home [with dementia], and I'm about to go back to work in this horrible situation, and she [doctor] just said, you need help. There was something else as well, all these things, all at once....So the menopause was kind of just the icing on the cake. (Katherine)

As these women's stories suggest, at least some of the difficulties commonly attributed to menopause may in fact be influenced by a range of other problems in women's lives. This finding echoes previous research, which has consistently found that "women who experienced difficulties with menopause had concurrent personal life crises" (Mercer et al., 1989, p. 26). As noted previously, during their midlife years women are not only managing menopause, but are also likely to be experiencing a number of other changes in their lives which may extend far beyond just physiological changes, and which may stretch their coping capacities. The following section highlights other key transitions identified by the participants during their interviews.

Women and the 'Empty Nest'

In their discussions on children moving out of home, the women expressed a complex mix of emotions that not only spoke of their hopes for the future, but at times a sense of ambivalence at the inevitable changes their children's departure would bring to their own lives. The interviews also highlighted the dynamic nature of the family during this period, and the diversity of the women's personal situations. Of the 36 mothers in the sample group, 17 could be considered 'empty nesters', as all their children had left home permanently. Another seven still had all their children at home on a permanent basis, while the remaining 12 either had some of their children still at home, or had children who were living at home on a part-time or temporary basis. Overwhelmingly children's departure from the family home was viewed by their mothers as a natural stage in their children's move to full independence. This is not to diminish the fact that for some women the process of children moving out of home brings with it a certain degree of concern about this change in their lives. Such a dynamic is evident in 49 year old Joy's thoughts on the prospect of her last and youngest child moving out of home: "Yeah, I mean I'll miss [son] like heck when he goes. But it'll be good when he goes as well, but he just can't afford it [at the moment] [laughs]."

Many of the mothers who were experiencing an 'empty nest' were not only enjoying their freedom, but also recognised and welcomed this period as a new and potentially exciting stage in their own lives. This notion of a new found freedom is summed up by Gillian, whose second child had recently moved out of home:

I'm looking forward to this, 'cause it's quite exciting, 'cause I can choose to do what it is *I* want to do now. And you haven't got that consideration of... I mean, you still consider others, you consider your family, but it's like being free again [laughs].

(Gillian)

Several women expressed pride in the fact that their children had grown into independent young people, and highlighted the important role they, as mothers, have played in helping develop this independence. In an interview with Lois, a married woman with two young adult children who have both lived away from home for some time, she stressed that the natural and healthy process is for children to "grow up and ... go." In Lois's words, "That's what you bring them up for." Such a response casts a different light on theoretical accounts of the 'empty nest syndrome' as representing a "pathological ... inability to separate from their children" (Rubin, 1979, p. 13), and suggests that at least for some mothers, psychological development and personal fulfilment is instead instrumentally linked to their children's successful transition to independence. During Lois's interview, she suggested that some women seem to experience their children leaving home as something that 'happens to them'. In contrast, Lois explained to me that she didn't view her children's departure as something that was 'happening' to her at all. From her comments, it is apparent that Lois doesn't construct herself as a passive agent in this transitional process, but rather as someone who has played an active role in supporting her children's move to independence and self-determination

The initial period following children's departure can be characterised as a transitional phase, during which family members readjust to new interpersonal and relational dynamics. This transitional process is summed up by Diane, a 51 year old secondary school teacher, whose last child recently left home:

You mentioned at the beginning of the interview that you could see that you were going to go through a lot of changes with [younger daughter] moving out? What did you mean by that?

I guess because she's been the last one at home, and she's been much more intense about her study, that her being at home has impacted a lot on the sorts of things that I might do at home....when she was at home, if she was in the study studying, if we got involved with, oh... "I better not do that, 'cause it will distract her, or it will annoy her"....And it was only when she actually went last week that I suddenly realised just how different it was going to make things. And mostly I like that idea [laughs], but

there's this part of me that sort of feels a bit....And I'm thinking, this is my own daughter, but the relationship, it's just changed. (Diane)

Diane's comments also hint at changes in relational dynamics during this process, as parents adjust to living together as a couple for the first time in many years, and mothers and children negotiate new sets of 'relationship rules' as independent adults. As Gillian noted, her daughter's departure required that she and her husband "work through that [couple] relationship again." Similarly, the notion of redefining relationships with young adult children, and particularly daughters, is a common theme among the 'empty nesters' in this research project. As Lyn explained, "I guess it's become less mother/daughter, more friendship thing, which is really nice." Similarly, Diane described the adjustments required during the period immediately following her daughter moving out of home:

Like her [daughter] and her partner - I have to call him her partner now that they're living together I've been told - they came home for dinner, and it was really weird. It was like I was waiting for these guests to arrive. (Diane)

While traditional psychological theory suggests that women often have a difficult time adjusting to the role changes that the 'empty nest' brings, my findings lend support to more recent research which suggests midlife women actually anticipate changes in their relationships with their young adult children, and thus are more easily able to make the transition to a relationship based on a more equitable footing, in contrast to fathers, who may not have seen the changes coming, and are as a consequence less prepared to make the required adjustments (deVries, Kerrick, & Oetinger, 2007, p. 14). Such a dynamic is implied in other comments Diane made about the impact of her daughter moving out of home:

She really has gone! This really is it. And her coming home with [partner] for dinner, and then 9.30 saying "Well we're going home now" [reinforced it]. And she'd had an argument with her father about something, and I didn't buy into it. But I wanted to say something, and I'm thinking, no, she's an adult, she's got to deal with her father differently. I mean, he's probably going through, well he hasn't really talked about it much, but I'm sure the reason [for the argument was], she was not going to do something he said she should do, and it actually wasn't anything to do with him, it was do with a new job she's been offered. And I'm thinking, well it is actually her decision; just leave her alone, for heaven's sake. Yeah, lots of changes, I guess. Some good, some not so good, but you have to accept them. (Diane)

Only 2 of the 17 women whose children had left home indicated their children's departure had precipitated feelings of distress that might be construed as classic responses to the 'empty nest'. However, it is important to place these women's experiences within the wider context of their social situation; to characterise their distress as simply a response to their children's departure ignores other circumstances in these women's lives. For Gillian, her last child's departure to study at a university several thousand kilometres from home rekindled emotions that had been long buried:

How did you feel when [younger daughter] moved out?

Oh well, that was huge....Oh my word. I suffered....I can remember going with her, with all her belongings, and going and finding the apartment and everything, and it wasn't until it came to leaving her there, and me going in the taxi to the airport, I was so choked up. I can feel it now....so choked up. And I couldn't work out where that came from. Because I'd encouraged [daughter's move], you know? I think what it was, was maybe my own personal fears coming to the surface....Because I'd been left when I was 11, when my parents separated, I can remember being on my own and being miserable, and I think that's probably....having to leave her [daughter] there, I think it brought back feelings that I had when my mother left me. (Gillian)

As Gillian's comments suggest, her daughter's departure rekindled deeply buried feelings about her own mother's 'abandonment' of her as a girl. Such a dynamic has been noted in previous research, which has found that women's midlife years can "revive unresolved and unsettled issues of adolescence" (Scarf, cited in Mercer et al., 1989, p. 80). On the other hand, Berenice's reaction to her son's departure seems to reflect co-existing issues. For Berenice the desire to protect her emotionally vulnerable son overshadows the tension that exists between her son and his stepfather:

[Younger son] has had a lot of issues, mainly because of step-father. That's why the kids moved out, because of issues with the step-father. They just don't get on with him, and a lot of emotional issues, so that when my son moved out of home, I was so worried about how he was going to cope, and then that caused arguments between us [Berenice and husband] because you know, he was so glad that they were gone, and I was so worried about him....and [younger son] came back unwillingly....But I'm happier, I feel happier knowing I can keep an eye on him. (Berenice)

Berenice's feelings towards her son's departure are also complicated by her reliance on her sons for emotional support and companionship. Her relationship with her second husband has not been easy, and she acknowledges that this has led her to 'cling' to her children:

When you said the empty nest, is it more for you just concern for your son's welfare, rather than you feel that you just don't want him to go full stop?

Oh, I love them being home. It's probably because our relationship [Berenice and second husband] has been very rocky that I probably cling to them [children] a little bit. That's why I enjoy having them around. They probably keep me sane, in a way, yeah. So I probably cling to them more than I should for company, I guess. (Berenice)

When looked at in this light, it would appear that both Berenice's and Gillian's distress at their children's departure says more about other unresolved issues in their lives, than as offering evidence of their inability to adjust to the role changes associated with the 'empty nest'. As is evident, the classic 'empty nest syndrome' does little justice in describing the mix of emotions women feel as their children leave home. While this transitional period is most often welcomed with open arms, and sometimes even encouraged wholeheartedly, there is no doubt that some women find their children's departure an emotionally challenging process. Nevertheless, for the majority of the women who participated in this research, the positive benefits vastly outweigh any temporary distress or adjustment associated with their children's departure.

Women and the 'Empty Bed'

Of course, it should be noted here that discussions on the impact of the 'empty nest' fail to take into account midlife developmental paths for those women who for whatever reason have not had children. This issue is of growing significance to any study of midlife women, given that an increasing proportion of women are choosing to remain childless. Indeed, there is evidence that the blueprint for many contemporary western women's lives has changed over the last three decades, as more women delay marrying and having children until their 30s (Deeks, 2006, p. 75), or indeed choose to remain childless, a trend evident in most developed countries (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002; Boddington & Didham, 2009; Department of Families Housing Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), 2009, para. Population characteristics; Hakim, 2005, para. Background). For non-mothers, notions of the 'empty nest' are likely to be completely irrelevant, as they negotiate other transitional experiences more pertinent to their own personal situation during their midlife years⁹. One such issue which came through strongly in interviews with some of the women is the impact of divorce, and concerns women have about their financial security. These fears are not without substance; divorce has been consistently identified as one of the key factors

⁹ It may be the case for some non-mothers that this period in their lives evokes feelings of regret or pain at their childlessness, although this issue was not raised by the four women in my research who had not had children.

associated with women's reduced financial situation (Baker, 2001, p. 192; Headey & Warren, 2007, p. 68; Rubin, 1979, p. 132). Perhaps even more disturbing, Australian research highlights the "long-standing, disadvantaged post-divorce financial position of many women" (Olsberg, 2005, para Why are women disadvantaged?)¹⁰.

Not surprisingly, the reduced economic situation for women after divorce has been found to contribute directly to increased levels of stress, and to negatively impact on women's "psychological wellbeing" (Stewart & Clarke, 1995, p. 165). An awareness of the financial risk associated with divorce, as well as the underlying stress ensuing as a result is highlighted in 53 year old Vicki's comments. Five years after divorcing, Vicki is still struggling with the economic consequences of having to divide up property and assets. Exacerbating her financial situation is the fact that her income had only ever been viewed as a supplement during her marriage, and now that she's divorced, her part-time business just manages to keep her going from week to week:

We'd gone through some really tough times financially, and so there wasn't much happening in the way of money, and what little was left we just divided and, I mean, he was able to get back into the real estate market straight away, whereas I wasn't. I had spasmodic income, you know, still getting on my feet.

So he was able to purchase another house?

Yeah, yeah. He got sort of straight back into it again. And he had a pulling income, you know, he had that. I didn't have that. My work has always been part-time....So I didn't have full-time work, and yeah, I just had to get on my feet....And in the meantime, you know, the real estate market has gone through the roof, and I doubt... who would lend me money at my age? I mean, I've probably got what, 15 years working life left if I'm lucky, and a loan would probably take me 70 years to pay off. (Vicki)

Moreover, the knowledge that she has minimal superannuation or assets, or the 'catch up time' needed to improve her financial situation before she retires, is the cause of further concern for Vicki:

...my constant stress now is surviving financially....I have often wondered how many other women are caught up in similar circumstances. We often have nothing financial behind us in the way of superannuation or assets. How many of us got left behind in the real estate boom and now have no chance of buying our own home? Renting is new to

¹⁰ See Olsberg (2005) for a detailed discussion on the factors which undermine women's ability to accumulate sufficient savings for their old age.

me and I have no certainty as to the rental being available long term or that the rent will not skyrocket. We have a very small financial future and doubt we have the catch up time needed to change it with any impact. (Vicki)

Divorce may also coincide with or be triggered by other unforeseen events, such as illness or injury, which may limit opportunities to work. Such a situation is exemplified in one particular participant's story. For Pippa, a 52 year old mother of three teenage children, life took a dramatic turn six years ago when she was seriously injured in a car accident. Pippa's marriage did not survive the stresses that accompany such a trauma, and she now lives alone, supporting herself on a disability pension. While Pippa looks forward to her future with optimism, she acknowledges that life in the six years since the accident hasn't been easy, and in her interview she made frequent references to the need to be disciplined in keeping her expenses down. With restricted options for full-time employment, Pippa's future financial security is uncertain.

In line with previous research, the interviews also highlight the negative impact divorce can have on women's networks of social support. As a result, the supportive relationships which women would normally rely on as they adjust to changing circumstances may not be as readily available when they are most needed. As Hilary explained, her divorce not only entailed major changes in her personal life, but also involved a fundamental shift in her social networks as well:

So the friends that we had jointly actually were mostly his friends, because he is a very strong character, and the friends were... the bunch of guys were the friends, you know, it was not the females. Where the females are friends, you would stay friends, but all our best friends, like the four guys and four families, and it's the guys who are the main friends, so we did all guy stuff....So having to like make new friends. (Hillary)

Even where a couple's friends reflect a combination of both partners' interests, there is no guarantee that friendships will be unaffected by the divorce process (Rubin, 1979, p. 137), even if only in the short-term (Wilcox, 1986, p. 117). Vicki has found that many of the friendships she had during her marriage have fallen by the wayside since her divorce. While she partly attributes this to having to relocate out of the area after the divorce, Vicki also indicated that sometimes maintaining friendships during and after a divorce can become too 'awkward' for all concerned:

I don't know, I seem to have lost a few friends along the way, during different processes that have been going on....Yeah, they come and go, yeah....But also, the marriage, you know, the long term marriage, lots of people... I don't think I've got any friends left from our friends out of that relationship.

Why do you think that is?

I don't know. People just, I moved away from [them]....But yes, certainly you lose a lot of friends when you split up from a long term relationship. You lose a lot of friends along the wayside, because they don't know what to say. You don't know what to say to them, and it's just easier just to [drift apart]....I mean we still have contact, rare contact, but not that same sort of friendship you used to have with people, yeah. (Vicki)

It's perhaps not surprising that the availability of supportive relationships and strong networks of social support have been found to be critical to women's wellbeing during transitions such as divorce. Stewart and Clarke's study of the role of social support in alleviating stress following divorce found that "a higher self-concept and a greater sense of wellbeing was found in women whose social network had changed little" (1995, p. 168).

The Impact of the Ageing and Death of Parents¹¹

The other issue which was raised frequently by participants during the interviews related to parents' becoming older and often more dependent, and the extra demands this placed on many of the women. Women who had lost one or both parents also spoke of the sense of loss associated with their bereavement, and several spoke candidly of the intense grief they felt at the loss of a much loved parent. For 45 year old Corinne, the death of her father after a long and difficult illness left her feeling emotionally drained, and somewhat perturbed that grief has no culturally sanctioned outlet in western society:

It's just incredible I reckon that there's no gnashing of teeth or wailing or anything. I mean, I'm just horrified really [laughter]. After having gone through it....And hearing people say, "Oh she's doing really well." Which meant I wasn't publicly crying and that sort of thing. (Corinne)

While dealing with the loss of a parent can represent a serious challenge to women's coping capacities, the ongoing responsibilities associated with caring for an ageing parent can also be confronting. While none of the women interviewed in this research project could be classified as the primary care-giver for their parents, many were nonetheless involved in helping their parents continue to live independently. Indeed, a sense of obligation towards elderly parents came through quite strongly in the interviews, and manifested in several women expressing guilt at not making

¹¹ In my study, 6 women had no parents living, while 14 still had both parents living. Of the remainder, 19 had only a mother living, while one woman had only her father left.

more of an effort to see their parents. Raelene's feelings of guilt at not being able to see her mother as often as she feels she should are to some extent minimised by the fact that her mother is not alone: "And I think because Dad is still there, you don't tend to worry as much. 'Cause they're doing their own thing." A different perspective is offered by Ellie, a 51 year old mother of three young adult children. Ellie's parents' "very fiery relationship" consumes much of Ellie's emotional energy, and expectations that Ellie will 'be there' for her mother compete with other demands on Ellie's time, creating frustration and resentment:

And I have to be really mindful of my mother because she doesn't drive and she relies a lot on me. We don't get along overly great. A lot of the time she expects me to be there, but you know, during this time in my life I can't keep up with everybody. I'm trying to keep up with my own kids as well, plus do something for myself and keep my marriage ticking along as well, you know? (Ellie)

However, a sense of obligation or responsibility, whether happily accepted or grudgingly tolerated, is often accentuated when a parent, most often a mother, is left widowed, or as a result of divorce is living alone. For 52 year old Merryn, the demands of juggling fulltime work as a single parent, as well as managing her own chronic health condition, leave her with little time to spare. Her widowed mother's recent relinquishment of her driver's licence has placed further pressure on Merryn, and exacerbated her feelings of guilt at not 'being there' enough for her mother:

What about your mother - do you see her a lot?

Mmm... no, probably not, not often enough. She's just actually given up her car, so that's one of the things that I'm hoping to do is try and take her shopping once a week. Great intentions, but it lasts for a couple of weeks, and then the last couple of weeks we've been really busy ... sometime this week we'll try and catch up. (Merryn)

The burden of care may be intensified even further when a parent's health deteriorates, or when they develop debilitating conditions such as dementia. This situation is exemplified in my research by one woman's experiences of supervising the care of a mother with dementia. As the only daughter of an only child, and with her brother living interstate, the responsibility for arranging her mother's recent move in to a nursing home, and organising the sale of her mother's home has fallen almost singlehandedly to Rita, a 53 year old divorced woman. As well as working full time, and managing the process of admitting her mother to the nursing home, Rita also assumed the responsibility for emptying and cleaning her mother's house, a process which consumed every night and weekend over several months. Echoing Perrig-Chiello and Hopflinger's research on contemporary midlife women's

changing care-giving responsibilities (Perrig-Chiello & Hopflinger, 2005, p. 190), Rita's experiences provide evidence of the strain of managing the double burden of dealing with a parent with dementia, while also working full time. Although Rita's mother is now in full time care, she is often called upon to take her mother to appointments with medical specialists. In this she is not alone; research indicates that even when women are not the primary care-givers for their parents, they most often carry the responsibility for supervising formal care arrangements (Baker, 2001, p. 239). In Rita's case, although volunteers are available to drive her mother to appointments, she feels an obligation to accompany her mother and ensure medical staff are fully informed about her mother's medical history, much of which her mother has now forgotten. But the apparently simple task of taking her mother to a doctor's appointment is itself challenging:

I mean like last week I took Monday off. Took her to [hospital] for a six monthly pain clinic appointment... and that was one of the reasons for changing jobs - by the time you get back to work, half a day's gone. You pick her up at 8.30, and you're not back till lunch time, and then you're absolutely shattered, because she argues with you every step of the way.

Rita's experiences represent a classic example of the juggling act many midlife women perform as they balance their care-giving responsibilities with workplace demands. For Rita, fitting in her mother's appointments during work hours inevitably means making up the time later: "but that's it, you're taking her out to the doctor's for, you know, half a day for a battery check-up for the pacemaker. It took five minutes but it's a half a day off work and then it's every night you've got to work back to make that time up" (Rita).

Exacerbating Rita's situation is the emotional challenge of dealing with someone suffering dementia. As Stull, Bowman and Smerglia note, the unpredictable and disruptive behaviour displayed by many sufferers of dementia inevitably compound care-givers' emotional and physical stresses (1994, p. 323). As Rita's comments suggest, not only can dementia 'rob' a woman of a loving parent, and perhaps a source of support that has been a constant in their lives, but adult children must also deal with personality changes that often accompany dementia:

Just the last couple of months you can really see it [dementia] taking a hold. Yeah, so it's been a fairly trying time, and understanding how the dementia's going, and the forms it takes, and the things it does to her mind, and the things that she does in response to it. Being the worst daughter in the world [laughs] and all that involves....Really, last year I didn't like the person I was becoming. And work was

really pressured as well, but I found myself just going on with the frustration, not necessarily seeing the funny side of it but just the anger ... you know, I felt that ... and even now I can talk about it and laugh about it, but catch me in a quiet time and I've got to deal with that anger. (Rita)

As these women's stories suggest, the ageing and death of parents present as major transition points in many women's lives. The psychological challenges in caring for ageing parents can be as daunting for both parties as are the physical and practical difficulties; elderly parents must adjust to a loss of independence and ability to direct their own lives, and midlife women must come to terms with the loss of someone who is likely to have played a formative role in their lives (King et al., 2005, pp. 25-26).

Suggestions for Future Research

While a great deal has been written about the adjustments women are required to make as their children become independent and leave the family home, comparatively little research has considered how women manage other challenges associated with midlife, such as divorce and the ageing and death of parents. This is despite the fact that both events have the potential to negatively impact on women's financial security and emotional and physical wellbeing, both in the immediate period and also well into their later years (Olsberg, 2005). As the individuals who are most likely to continue to be called on to provide care for older generations, it is imperative that a clearer understanding of the full implications of such responsibilities is developed, so that supportive policies can be planned to ensure care-givers aren't left to carry the burden of care single-handedly. Additionally, as many western countries move towards an ageing population, it is important to ensure that future generations of elderly women have the financial resources to enjoy their latter years in relative comfort and security. Further research into the economic and social impact of divorce on midlife women will provide a platform for more equitable housing, workplace and economic policies to emerge.

Conclusion

When considering key transitions in women's midlife years, it is apparent that particular experiences that in the past have been seen as pivotal markers, such as menopause and the departure of adult children, are not necessarily identified by women themselves as being highly significant when considered over the entire life span. For the most part, such transitions are, if not always welcomed

wholeheartedly, at least managed relatively well, and with a good degree of equanimity. As my research suggests, more daunting challenges facing women in midlife are likely to be associated with divorce and the ageing and death of parents. Both these transitional events have the potential to impact on women financially, physically and emotionally, both during their midlife years, and as they move into the next stage of their life. If we are to ensure that the current generation of midlife women have the resources and support needed to help them manage these transitions successfully, it is critical that more nuanced and reflective accounts of contemporary women's midlife experiences are used to frame more responsive policies in the future. I believe this research project makes a valuable contribution to such accounts.

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