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Diana Giglio  
“I’m not done in any way”:  
An Exploratory Study of College-  
Educated Women at Late Midlife

### **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study explores the commonalities in the life experiences of a small sample of women in late middle age. Twelve college-educated women, ages 55 to 68, from two northeastern states, responded to open-ended interview questions and produced narratives of their lives in relation to self, family, work, and significant relationships. Changes the women have perceived in themselves over the course of their adult lives were explored, including the influence of age-related physical changes. The narratives also show how social movements of the 1960s and early 1970s influenced these women’s lives. The findings suggest an increase in self-confidence and an increased sense of clarity in regard to self-definition. For the most part, the women were living and working according to their values and expressing parts of themselves not realized at earlier times of their lives. Many were also leading highly generative lives, and generativity was expressed in different ways. The findings also show that late midlife for women may be the period of the life span when moral purpose comes to fruition. Finally, life in late middle age has a sense of being unfinished; these women wanted to be or do much more.

**“I’M NOT DONE IN ANY WAY”:  
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF COLLEGE-EDUCATED WOMEN  
AT LATE MIDLIFE**

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2011

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

“Take a deep breath, and now figure out what you want to do, because look what you’ve done. . . . I’m not done in any way. I’m just not sure what the next step will be.”

–Deborah, 66

“I’ve never felt so good and been able to decide what works for me and make it work for me and not just allow things to happen with the flow. Those days are over.”

–Sara, 59

Human longevity was a hallmark of 20th-century America. In 1900, average life expectancy at birth was 47.3 years old, and it reached 76.9 in the year 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Older adults in the US, in general, are living longer and healthier lives than in the past. The increases in life expectancy have not simply added on years to the life span but have changed “the shape and meaning of a lifetime in ways” not entirely understood (Bateson, 2010, p. 11). Older adults like Deborah and Sara, both participants in this study, are finding new ways to “fit into society” and have entered a period of the life span that can bring growth, fulfillment, “new learning” and meaning (Bateson, 2010, p. 13; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2009, p. 8).

Moreover, baby boomers like Sara, born between 1946 and 1964, constitute about 30% of the U.S. population, and have been moving through middle age in unprecedented numbers, so much so that midlife has come to be identified as a period of human development deserving of study (Lachman, 2001). In fact, scholars have said the “vigor” of baby boomers seems to have

“stretched middle age toward something like the sixth or even the seventh decade” (Wahl & Kruse, 2005, p. 11).

The boundaries marking the beginning and end of middle age have been fluid, and are generally from 40 to 60, or 40 to 70 (Lachman, 2004; Dittmann-Kohli, 2005). In addition, scholars have divided midlife into early and late periods, 40 to 54, and 55 to 69 or perhaps 70, respectively (Kohli & Kunemund, 2005). Much of the research literature, however, has focused on the earlier rather than later period (Vandewater & Stewart, 2006). Yet, nowadays, roughly four out of five individuals in the US are expected reach their 65th year, and baby boomers are projected to lead healthier and more active lives as they age than today’s cohorts of older adults (Hooyman, 2006). Research on adults in late middle age, then, is needed, and this study is an attempt to contribute to closing the gap.

Furthermore, women’s percentage of the population of older adults increases with age (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Simply put, there are more older women than men in the US. In fact, women begin to outnumber men at about age 35; this has been attributed to male mortality rates, which are generally higher than those of females at every age (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). More research that focuses specifically on women in late midlife, then, is also needed.

In addition, research on midlife adults has contributed to the growing interest in successful, or optimal aging (Baltes & Smith, 2003; Lachman, 2004). A better understanding of the interactions among biological, psychological, and social factors in the life experiences of women in late middle age can assist researchers and clinicians in developing interventions that promote and support positive mental and physical health and well-being.

The purpose of this study is to explore commonalities in the life experiences of women at late midlife. The overarching research question is the following: What are the life experiences of

women between the ages of 55 and 70? This study used open-ended interview questions to obtain richly detailed narratives that provide insight into the experiences of a small sample of women ages 55 to 68. Significant events and experiences in participants' lives in relation to self, family, work, and relationships, and the influence of physical changes and sociohistorical context were explored. Also explored were how participants make meaning of these experiences and how they have perceived changes in themselves over the course of their adult lives.

The following chapters in this study, the Literature Review, Methodology, Findings, and Discussion and Conclusions, provide a framework for defining for women developmental aspects of the period of the life span identified as late middle age.



## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

“Adult development is still a mystery.”

–George Vaillant, *Aging Well*, 2002, p. 40

This literature review moves in the direction of defining a new stage or period in the life span, which has been identified as late middle age. To that end, it begins with a brief historical conceptualization of the life span, moves to conceptual and theoretical literature, and then to women’s development. It then turns to empirical literature focusing on women in late midlife. Finally, this review establishes the basis for further study, supporting this study’s exploration of the specific life experiences of women from age 55 to the late 60s.

#### **Historical Conceptualizations of the Life Span**

What is meant by stages in the life span or life cycle? Are stages of life integral to the belief systems of human beings, a way of making sense of the world? Bateson (2010), an anthropologist, linguist, and writer, said, “Every human society takes note of the recurrent patterns of maturation and development and weaves them into a shared system of meaning” (p. 65). This section touches on notions of the life cycle throughout history, in Western thought, and focuses on middle and older age.

Looking back centuries in the Western world, middle age became a normative event, both demographically and in people’s daily life experience, only when more and more people survived past age 40. In Europe this began to occur around the early 1800s, and thus people

began to prepare for an extended period of years after marriage (Wahl & Kruse, 2005). In the US, about one third of Americans born in 1830 survived to age 60 (Fischer, 1978).

For centuries, what is today termed middle age usually signaled the end of life. Nonetheless, regardless of the number of years the majority of people actually lived, notions of midlife and old age and conceptualizations of life stages have existed as far back as ancient Greece and Rome. The average life expectancy in those empires, however, was only 30 to 35 years old (Wahl & Kruse, 2005). Wahl and Kruse's (2005) review of lifespan models throughout history includes two-, three-, and four-stage conceptualizations based on the seasons of the year or the course of a day. The natural world served as a basis for making sense out of the life span. Five-, six-, seven-, and ten-stage historical models also existed. All of these models, except that of two stages, contain the middle years of adulthood, though the upper and lower age limits vary. Furthermore, lifespan models in general depicted women as reaching old age before men; menopause usually marked the end of the middle adult years (Wahl & Kruse, 2005). In addition, historical metaphors of the life span functioned as sources of knowledge for one's children and for society at large about expectations for behavior at each stage of life (Wahl & Kruse, 2005).

Colonial-era poet Anne Bradstreet (ca. 1612-1672) of Massachusetts Bay Colony was the earliest of American writers to put forth thoughts about the human life cycle (Kammen, 1979). Her 456-line poem, "Of the Four Ages of Man," was first published in London in 1650, then in Boston in 1678, in a version from which the lines below are taken; Bradstreet identified the four ages as Childhood, Youth, the Manly, and Old Age (1967/2010; Kammen, 1979). Youth, middle, and old ages are expressed in the voices of male speakers. According to Kammen, Bradstreet used persons from history to characterize her poem. Later American conceptualizations of the

life span, the life staircase, in particular, distinguished women's life span from that of men (Kammen, 1979).

Middle age, or the Manly, is presented as a time of hard work and ambition, as Kammen (1979) wrote. Bradstreet (1967/2010) also described this period as "perplexed Middle Age" (line 338); these notions are forerunners of the kinds of characterizations that appear in social science literature centuries later. In her poem, the middle-aged man appears as a leader and at the height of his powers: "The proud I crushed, th'oppressed I set free" (line 264) and "Was I a pastor, I my flock did feed / And gently lead the lambs, as they had need. / A captain I, with skill I trained my band, / And showed them how in face of foes to stand" (lines 266-269). Of note, in the above lines and those following, Bradstreet captured the notion of what Erikson (1950/1963) centuries later termed generativity, which Kammen also found in Bradstreet's poem: "A father I, for children must provide; / But if none, then for kindred near allied" (lines 250-251); and "If rich, I'm urged then to gather more, / To bear a port i' th' world and feed the poor" (lines 252-253). Generativity, according to Erikson, is "primarily the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation," and the concept applies beyond one's own children (1950/1963, p. 267). Bradstreet also described the middle-aged individual as vulnerable to conditions like "lame sciatica," palsy, lethargy, and gout (lines 326-328). Her words mirror an aspect of lifespan developmental theory, which posits that biological decline is at its beginning in midlife (Staudinger & Bluck, 2001).

Looking at historical models of the life span, if middle age did not signal the end of life, it marked the highest point before the onset of inevitable decline. An early 20th-century example of this latter trajectory is present in the work of G. Stanley Hall (1844-1924), a psychologist whose seminal work brought the stage of adolescence into existence (Kammen, 1979; Wahl & Kruse, 2005). Hall (1922), in the introduction to his book *Senescence: The Last Half of Life*, the

period he turned to in his later years, described five stages of the life span; the third was “middle life or the prime, when we are at the apex of our aggregate of powers” (p. vii). For Hall, middle age began at age 25 or 30 and lasted until age 40 or 45. The fourth stage was “senescence,” which began in the early 40s, or sooner for women; the last stage was “senectitude” or “old age proper” (p. vii). What Hall considered the beginning of senescence signals the start of what today is considered early middle age: “At forty old age is in its infancy,” Hall wrote, and “at seventy it attains its majority” (1922, p. 29).

Even today, scholars are not definitive about the span of years that marks middle age, but the period is generally considered to be between the ages of 40 and 60 (Lachman, 2001; Staudinger & Bluck, 2001), or 40 to 60 or 70 (Kohli & Kunemund, 2005), with retirement having traditionally marked the end of middle age (Wahl & Kruse, 2005). Scholars have also pointed out the importance of subjective perspectives on aging; for example, individuals in their 50s or 60s who have serious health conditions or declining health may perceive their middle years to be ending and old age beginning (Wahl & Kruse, 2005).

Years ago, Neugarten (1974) observed the “rise” of a group of adults in American society, roughly ages 55 to 75, and identified them as the young-old. She distinguished this group not only from the old-old, aged 75 and beyond, but by retirement as a marker event. She described the young-old, for the most part, as healthy, financially comfortable, well educated, active in politics, and as having more leisure time as family and work roles changed. The young-old, she wrote, were “likely to want a wide range of options and opportunities” regarding work, “self-enhancement,” and “community participation” (p. 196).

More recently, scholars have divided middle age into early and late periods, 40 to 54 and 55 to 69 or 70, respectively, the latter corresponding to the “transitional period between work

and retirement,” according to Kohli and Kunemund (2005, p. 38; Dittmann-Kohli, 2005). In addition, Stewart and Torges (2006), noting that it appears middle age is “long and not uniform,” have acknowledged “there is little research that makes a clear distinction between early and late middle age, but we suspect the need to do so will be increasingly recognized” (p. 30). Moreover, Vandewater and Stewart (2006) pointed out that most research has concentrated on the earlier period of middle age, when concerns about generativity, careers, and parenting tend to predominate, rather than the later period, when concerns about aging, caring for parents, and retirement may come to the forefront. This study is an attempt to contribute to needed research on late middle age.

This review now turns to conceptual and theoretical literature and looks at the work of some major early theorists who explored psychological changes in the second half of life.

### **Conceptual and Theoretical Literature**

This section begins with the works of Carl G. Jung (1875-1961), who has been deemed “the father of the modern study of adult development” (Levinson, 1978, p. 4), and Bernice L. Neugarten (1916-2001), whose seminal research examined the subjective awareness of middle age. Both Jung (1933) and Neugarten (1968a, 1968b) posited that psychological changes occur in the second half of life. Although they presented diverse ideas, both described increased self-reflection and the integration of what can be termed traditionally masculine aspects into a woman’s personality and more feminine aspects into a man’s.

Hall (1922) viewed the early 40s as the beginning of old age and decline, but Jung (1933) looked at middle age in a different light. He used the course of a day as a metaphor for the stages of life, echoing historical representations of the life span. Jung described the second half of life as life’s “afternoon,” which he suggested begins at around age 40, the time he termed life’s

“noon” (pp. 125, 122). Jung viewed the afternoon of life as a time of contraction, or turning inward to attend to one’s self. The “morning” of life is a time of “entrenchment in the outer world, the propagation of our kind and the care of our children,” and the afternoon brings about a shift in values and ideals, at a time when physical capacities begin to decline and the attainment of more money and social prestige, for example, is no longer enough (p. 126). In an oft-quoted passage, Jung said: “We cannot live the afternoon of life according to the programme of life’s morning—for what was great in the morning will be little at evening, and what in the morning was true will at evening have become a lie” (p. 125). The afternoon, therefore, necessitates a seeking of new “meaning and purpose” in life (p. 126), which Jung suggested could be found in culture; older people could be the keepers of cultural heritage, that is, the truths, mysteries, and wisdom of life.

According to Jung (1933), an inner change, a “deep-seated and peculiar” change, occurs in midlife, which he described as “an inexorable inner process that forces the contraction of life” (pp. 122, 125). It may not always take what could be termed a positive or ideal bend. What often happens, according to Jung (1933), as one reaches age 50, is that beliefs and sentiments one holds dear may harden and become rigid to the point of “intolerance and fanaticism,” as if one has to hold on to these convictions for dear life (p. 120). Furthermore, individuals may “shrink back” from the second half of life, fear the unknown tasks ahead and have difficulty accepting the sacrifices and losses that come with aging (p. 122).

When Neugarten (1968b) was researching and writing about the psychology of adulthood, there was evidence that personality changes occurred in adulthood. She and her colleagues began to investigate the issues and processes of change in middle and older age. In interviews with 100 “successful” women and men ages 45 to 55 —some were listed in *Who’s*

*Who in America*—Neugarten and her colleagues found salient what she termed “the executive processes of personality,” which include the following: “self-awareness, selectivity, manipulation and control of the environment, mastery, competence,” in addition to a number of cognitive strategies (1986a; 1968b, p. 139).

The 50s, however, are likely a “turning point” for most adults, she wrote, with “new perceptions of self, time, and death” (1986b, p. 140). According to Neugarten (1968a), middle age brings a shift in one’s perspective of time: “Life is restructured in terms of time-left-to-live rather time-since-birth” (p. 97). Neugarten (1968a) also described a turning inward in the second half of life, toward reflection and self-evaluation, as Jung (1933) had described. In general, this shift in the second half of life is toward what Neugarten (1968b) termed “increased ‘interiority’ of personality” (p. 140). Also, the second half of life brings a shift from an active to a more passive way of mastering the environment. For example, those in their 40s, at least the successful individuals she interviewed, appeared to view the environment as rewarding “boldness and risk-taking” and saw themselves as having the energy needed to grasp opportunities that arose (1968b, p. 140). Adults in their 60s, on the other hand, looked at the world as “complex and dangerous, no longer to be reformed in line with one’s wishes, and the individual as conforming and accommodating to outer-world demands” (p. 140). In general, older adults become more “self-preoccupied” and “attend increasingly to the control and satisfaction of personal needs,” according to Neugarten (p. 140).

Furthermore, regarding gender differences as women and men move from middle to older age, Neugarten wrote that men become more likely to express the “affiliative and nurturant” aspects of their personality, and women become “more responsive toward and less guilty about aggressive and egocentric impulses” (1968b, p. 140). Jung (1933) explained a similar notion,

comparing femininity and masculinity to a “store of substances” in the psyche (p. 123). In the first half of life, “a man consumes his large supply of masculine substance and has left over only the smaller amount of feminine substance which he must now put to use” (p. 123). A woman “allows her unused supply of masculinity to become active” (p. 124). He also mentioned women “who have developed in the second half of life an uncommon masculinity and an incisiveness which push the feelings and the heart aside” (p. 124).

This review now turns to traditional stage models of development across the life span. An enduring and popular model has been that of Erik Erikson (1902-1994), who conceptualized an eight-stage model of psychosocial development. Levinson’s (1978) theory of the life structure builds on and incorporates Erikson’s conception of development; Levinson also posited developmental tasks at each period of the adult life cycle. Peck (1968) took Erikson’s final stage involving ego integrity versus despair and, recognizing the concepts as a major life issue after age 30, further divided this stage. Moving ahead to the 21st century, Bateson (2010) has proposed that a new stage of adult development be inserted between Erikson’s seventh and eighth stages.

Daniel J. Levinson (1920-1994) posited an underlying structure to human development, termed the life structure, which develops over the course of an individual’s life. Levinson (1981), in his research, aimed to give “equal weight to personality, the sociocultural world, and the relationship of person and world” (p. 59). A life structure theory, according to Levinson (1986), conceptualizes answers to such questions as “What are the most important parts of my life, and how are they interrelated?” and “Are there some relationships—to spouse, lover, family, occupation, religion, leisure, or whatever—that I would like to make more satisfying or meaningful?” (p. 6). Levinson (1986) developed a research method of biographical interviewing



to collect data, and he said neither cross-sectional nor longitudinal study designs were as suited to the study of life structure development. In his 1978 work, Levinson explored the lives of a somewhat diverse sample of 40 men between the ages of 35 and 45. In his later research, conducted in the 1980s and published in 1996 after his death, he studied the lives of 45 women, also between 35 and 45. His theory, however, was fully explicated in the 1978 book and pertains to both men and women (Levinson, 1986).

Levinson (1978, 1986) used the historical metaphor of seasons in his theory of the life course. He conceptualized a sequence of four eras, or seasons, in the life cycle of men and women, with age-linked periods of stability and change within each. The eras of adulthood include *Early Adulthood*, ages 17-45, and *Middle Adulthood*, ages 40-65. *Late adulthood* was speculated to begin at around age 60. Within each era are periods that involve the building of a life structure and a time of transition or life structure change. Each transitional period involves a reappraisal of one's life and choices and an examination of the possibilities of changing one's self in relation to one's world. Commitment to new choices helps one move forward into a new life structure. Levinson (1978, 1986) identified the transitional periods of the adult life course as the *Midlife Transition*, ages 40-45; *Age 50 Transition*, ages 50-55; and *Late Adult Transition*, ages 60-65. Additional periods to age 85 were hypothesized. Levinson and his research associates (1978) examined the lives of subjects no older than their 40s, and he acknowledged being "on more speculative ground" when discussing later periods (p. 34).

According to Levinson (1986), the "character of living" changes considerably from early to middle adulthood (p. 5). The midlife transition, ages 40 to 45, involves the task of individuation, which he conceived as an individual's creating a stronger sense of who one is and what one wants, and a more realistic view of the world and what it offers and demands.

Individuation allows one to gain more independence from the world but also to become more “compassionate” of oneself and others, more “reflective,” and “less tyrannized by inner conflicts and external demands” (Levinson, 1986, p. 5). Without such changes, he said that an individual’s life becomes “increasingly trivial or stagnant” (p. 5). Levinson (1986) also conceived the era of middle adulthood, which lasts from about 40 to age 65, as a time when most men and women become “senior members” of their worlds, no matter how “grand” or “modest” (p. 6). This era is a time when individuals may be responsible for the work of others in addition to their own and may also have responsibility for the development of young adults “who will soon enter the dominant generation” (p. 6).

Levinson (1978, 1986), then, conceptualized middle adulthood, from about 40 to the mid-60s, as characterized by inner changes related to having a better sense of self and one’s priorities. He also described this phase in terms of productivity, obligations, responsibilities, and mentoring or guiding the younger generation, a task related to Erikson’s concept of generativity. In Levinson’s (1978) words, generativity refers to “drawing more fully upon one’s internal resources for generative purposes” (p. 323).

Levinson (1978) characterized late adulthood as having opportunities for development despite the inner and outer changes that intensify an individual’s feelings of aging and eventual death. He hypothesized the late adulthood transition to be from ages 60 to 65, and the era itself lasting to about 80 years old. A key developmental task of this era is to find a way to stay involved in society but still have time to devote to the self. He posited that wisdom could be gained by becoming more interested in using one’s inner resources and less interested in acquiring the rewards society offers. By wisdom, he meant coming to perceive “more profoundly our human contradictions, creativity, and destructiveness” (p. 36). He said that during late

adulthood, “the voices within the self” become “more audible” and “more worthy” of one’s attention but, at the same time, one remains engaged with the world (p. 36).

According to the literature, then, developmental changes related to late midlife may include becoming more reflective and more attuned to one’s self, living life according to one’s ideals and values, expressing those parts of the self that have yet to be expressed, focusing on generativity and leaving a legacy, becoming more aware of time left to live, having an increased focus on spirituality or religious faith, and looking back at one’s life and its meaning.

Finally, Levinson, like Erikson, posited a universal model of human development, a sequential—and for Levinson, age-linked—pattern of development. For example, Erikson’s sequence of stages assumes a maturational unfolding of “predetermined” aspects of “human personality” (1950/1963, p. 270; Dannefer, 1984). Likewise, Levinson proposed “an *underlying* order in the human life course, an order shaped by the eras and by the periods in life structure development” (1986, p. 11). According to Levinson, each individual life structure, however, “progresses through the successive periods in its own unique way, influenced by a multiplicity of specific biological, psychological, and social conditions” (1986, p. 13). Nonetheless, Levinson hypothesized: “This sequence of eras and periods exists in all societies, throughout the human species, at the present stage in human evolution” (1978, p. 322).

Stage theories and their universality have been challenged (e.g., Dannefer, 1984; Neugarten, 1979; Rossi, 1980). Dannefer (1984) noted the traditional, organismic paradigm of development underlying such theories, in which developmental change, in general, is defined as universal, sequential, unidirectional, irreversible, hierarchical, and characterized by qualitative or structural changes. According to Levinson (1978), however, his model of sequential periods and Erikson’s stage model are not hierarchical, as are the stage theories of Piaget, Kohlberg, and

Loevinger. “One period is not higher or better than the preceding ones,” Levinson wrote, and turned to his metaphor of the seasons: “Spring is not intrinsically a better season than winter, nor is summer better than spring” (1978, p. 319). Lachman (2004) also questioned the usefulness of stage models for “depicting the full midlife experience” because of the “irregularity and variability” of this period of life (p. 316).

Robert C. Peck (1968) appeared to recognize the irregularity and variability of middle and later adulthood. For Peck, Erikson’s psychosocial crisis of ego integrity versus despair appeared to “represent in a global, nonspecific way all of the psychological crises and crisis-solutions of the last forty or fifty years of life” (p. 88). Indeed, Peck recognized the concepts as a major life issue after age 30. He therefore conceptualized a major division of this stage of maturity into the periods of Middle Age and Old Age. He then subdivided these periods into four and three stages, respectively, each stage centered on a psychological task and the adjustments and learning involved for optimal development, or successful aging. According to Peck, the stages within each period can occur in different sequences, depending on the individual, and are not linked to specific ages, which suggest he was moving away from a unidirectional developmental model of later adulthood. There is more variability in regard to the age in which a psychological crisis comes about in adulthood, as compared to childhood.

The period of Middle Age, Peck (1968) wrote, involves the following tasks: shifting one’s values away from physical prowess or appearance toward defining the self in accordance with life experience, accomplishments, and capacity for wisdom; redefining relationships so that more importance is placed on individuality and companionship rather than sexuality; reinvesting emotions “in other people, other pursuits, or other life settings” (p. 90) as grown children leave home, friendships fade, and one experiences the deaths of parents and age mates; and developing

the capacity for mental flexibility in order to avoid becoming set in one's ways and "closed-minded" (p. 90), echoing Jung (1933).

According to Peck (1968), the period of Old Age involves adapting to role changes, finding self-worth and ways of defining the self after retirement or when adult children leave the home; finding enjoyment in life through relationships and creative endeavors despite physical decline; accepting the inevitability of death, or "the night of the ego," by active, "emotionally significant" involvement in making life "more secure, more meaningful, or happier for the people who will go on after one dies" (p. 91).

For Peck (1968), then, development in later adulthood means finding new ways to define the self as physical strength and youthful appearance decline; redefining and reinvesting in important relationships; remaining open to new ideas and endeavors, and staying actively involved with interpersonal connections and community.

Unlike stage theories based on an organismic model, lifespan developmental theory, a metatheoretical conceptualization of development, fits within an interactionist model of individual–environment influences (Whitbourne, 2008). The interactionist model assumes that "genetics and environments interact in complex ways," and the individual "actively participates in his or her development through reciprocal relations with the environment" (Whitbourne, 2008, p. 26). According to lifespan theory, development does not proceed in one direction but is multidirectional and involves both gains and losses throughout the life span (Staudinger & Bluck, 2001; Baltes, 1987). Middle age may signify "the breakeven point" in the relation of gains to losses; with increasing age, losses outbalance gains (Staudinger & Bluck, 2001, p. 30). Lifespan theory suggests that this breakeven point may be grounded in biological decline, which is at its beginning at midlife, and includes decreases in muscle strength, sensory functioning, and

an increase in prevalence of cardiovascular and other diseases (Staudinger & Bluck, 2001). Social and cultural assets abound in early middle age, for example, education, careers, relationships, and parenthood. In late middle age, however, biological and societal challenges begin to outbalance the assets; with increasing age, therefore, more resources are needed to support development (Staudinger & Bluck, 2001).

Lifespan theory is also characterized by three broad categories of influences on development: age-graded, nonnormative, and history-graded influences. Age-graded influences refer to predictable biological- and societal-related changes that occur over time and are linked to age, such as traditional-age college graduation, parenthood, menopause, or retirement (Staudinger & Bluck, 2001; Whitbourne, 2008). Nonnormative influences refer to unanticipated events that affect individual lives. These can include serious illnesses, accidents, loss of a loved one, divorce, or even hitting the jackpot (Whitbourne, 2008). Whereas nonnormative events affect individual lives, history-graded events affect cohorts who proceed through age-graded developmental changes within a historical time period, like war or societal shifts in “attitudes and values” (Whitbourne, 2008, p. 13; Staudinger & Bluck, 2001.) These three categories of “biological and contextual influence” together produce diverse developmental pathways with various challenges and opportunities along the way (Staudinger & Bluck, 2001, p. 30).

Dittmann-Kohli (2005) has identified globalization and the availability of extensive knowledge, including higher education, at this time in history, as factors that have helped render late middle age a new period in the life span. She also noted, however, that lack of resources enabling survival, because of war, climate, economy, or illnesses, can mean a brief period of middle age or a nonexistent one.

As Neugarten (1974) identified years earlier, late middle age appears to be a new period of the life span geared to the middle and upper classes, as do Lawrence-Lightfoot's (2009) *Third Chapter* and Bateson's (2010) *Adulthood II*. Both scholars have provided qualitative research focused on late middle age. Lawrence-Lightfoot, a sociologist, defined this period, the Third Chapter, with broad boundaries, from age 50 to 75. She noted the increase in population of older adults in the US living longer and healthier lives, who are better educated than past cohorts. These adults are "yearning for a productive and enjoyable alternative to retirement" (p. 9). She also said that women and men in the Third Chapter are redefining views about the "casualties and opportunities of aging" and are "challenging cultural definitions of strength, maturity, power, and sexiness" (p. 10).

Lawrence-Lightfoot (2009) interviewed 24 women and 16 men, of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, college educated, and living middle- to upper-class lives. Each had undertaken a journey of self-expression and new learning. She examined their motivations, goals, processes of learning and mastery, and their perceptions of themselves as learners. The participants in her study also had the time and resources to devote to learning, for example, to becoming a playwright, attending divinity school, or doing international relief work in a war zone. She characterized this period as one of growth and transformation for her participants. She also wrote empathically about their transitions into the Third Chapter as being "a time of great vulnerability—intense and difficult to navigate" (p. 29), and learning in the second half of life as "more complex and layered" than in earlier periods (p. 48).

Bateson (2010), like Peck (1968) and Levinson (1978), builds on the theoretical work of Erikson. She has proposed that a new stage, Adulthood II, be inserted between Erikson's seventh and final stages. The crisis to be resolved in the new stage is engagement versus withdrawal, and

the strength or virtue that emerges from its resolution is active wisdom. She has termed Erikson's seventh stage, with its psychosocial crisis of generativity versus stagnation, Adulthood I.

Adulthood II encompasses ages 55 to 70, though its boundaries are fluid. Entrance to this new stage is about "thinking differently and continuing to learn," according to Bateson (2010, p. 19). Active wisdom means drawing on years of experience and combining it with "energy and commitment" to a new beginning or renewed interests (p. 19). She described wisdom as a process rather than what one possesses, and further defined the concept as "the fruit of continuing reflection on encounters over time, a skill at drawing connections and finding similarities, looking for underlying patterns" (p. 234).

According to Bateson (2010), Adulthood II involves a recurrence of the challenges of Erikson's earlier stages related to identity, intimacy, and generativity. For example, later adulthood involves physiological changes, role shifts related to family and work, redefinition of intimate relationships or engagement in new ones, care for adult children, and contributions to the community. This new stage, then, involves the challenge of "discovering who, finally, I am, who and what I am able to commit to, how to sustain that commitment, and how to invest my energy and my caring" (p. 87).

Both Bateson (2010) and Lawrence-Lightfoot (2009) have proposed that late middle age is a period that can bring growth, fulfillment, new learning and meaning to life. For both, and also for Peck (1968) and Levinson (1978), development in later adulthood involves reappraising one's life, expressing new parts of the self, and making and committing to choices.

Bateson's (2010) book includes in-depth interviews with a small group of couples and individuals in the US, with some diversity in race, social class, and sexual orientation. Actress and philanthropist Jane Fonda is included in this group. Although Bateson has written eloquently



of Fonda's struggles, as she does of all her participants, she perpetuates the notion that optimal development in late midlife is for those who have the finances and volition, opportunities and resources, plus an attractive, youthful appearance.

As mentioned, the new stage Bateson (2010) has proposed, Adulthood II, appears geared to a certain kind of adult, in the middle and upper classes. Bateson, however, has inserted the stage into Erikson's model of human development, which implies that Adulthood II, with its psychosocial crisis of engagement versus withdrawal, is universal. Arnett (2000; Tanner & Arnett, 2009), too, proposed a new stage of the life span, termed emerging adulthood, a period from the late teens to the mid- to late 20s, characterized in general by "change and exploration of possible life directions" (p. 469), which sounds like a characterization of the period of late middle age. Arnett, however, specifically defined emerging adulthood as "culturally constructed" and "restricted to certain cultures and certain times," including certain cultures within the US (2000, p. 470, 477). Arnett (2007) has not inserted a new stage of development into Erikson's "timeless" model (p. 81). Nonetheless, Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood has been challenged. For example, Hendry and Kloep (2007) remarked that Arnett has proposed another age-linked stage that does not explain or advance understanding of development. The scholars said his theory "is merely a description limited to a certain age cohort in certain societies at a certain historical time with particular socioeconomic conditions" (p. 76). In addition, Hendry and Kloep put forth, in regard to "elevating" Arnett's ideas to the "status" of a theory: "We are now in danger of having a psychology of the affluent middle classes in Western societies, with other groups being seen as deviating from that norm"; in effect, "repeating an error psychology made decades ago when it regarded male behavior as the norm" (p. 76).

It is important, then, when conceptualizing the period of late middle age, to be aware not only of the “danger” Hendry and Kloep (2007) mentioned but also of linking chronological age with developmental change in adulthood, which has proven more useful for children’s development (Staudinger & Bluck, 2001). A major criticism of Levinson’s (1978) theory was his concept of age-linked stages (Levinson, 1986; Neugarten, 1979; Whitbourne, 2008). In addition, it is important to take note of scholars like Dittmann-Kohli (2005), who wrote that lack of resources enabling survival in places around the world could mean a brief period of middle age or a nonexistent one. Also, in regard to Erickson’s stage model, Sorell and Montgomery (2001) noted that for certain groups of individuals, for example, those who live in trying personal, economic, and political circumstances, “the story of ideal self-development that Erikson offered—of growing trust, autonomy, and a chosen personal and social identity, composed in a society that is itself trustworthy, autonomous, and generative—may be a bitter parody of their lived experience” (p. 123).

According to the literature, then, late middle age is a period that can bring growth, fulfillment, and new learning and meaning to certain groups of adults. This period may involve becoming more attuned to one’s self, living life according to one’s values, expressing new parts of the self, redefining and reinvesting in relationships, remaining open to new ideas and endeavors, and focusing on generativity and spirituality or religious faith. Biological and contextual influences on development continue to produce various challenges and opportunities during this period of the life span, and the sociocultural environment becomes more important with increasing age, when losses begin to outbalance gains.

The next section of this literature review focuses on women's development, and it addresses the "error psychology made decades ago" in regarding the behavior of males as "the norm," as Hendry and Kloep wrote (2007, p. 76).

### **Women's Development**

The conceptualization of models of women's adult development began as a challenge to traditional models that claimed to represent human development but were based largely on the experiences of males in Western, industrialized societies, or regarded male experiences as normative (Berzoff, 1989; Caffarella & Olson, 1993). Scholars of women's development have critiqued traditional models primarily along two interconnected lines: one, that development proceeds in a sequence of stages over the life span; and, two, that development progresses toward increasing autonomy of the self (Caffarella & Olson, 1993).

In addition to the critique of positing universal stages in his model, Levinson (1978) garnered criticism from scholars of women's development who took particular issue with references to individuation such as "Becoming One's Own Man," that is, "more independent and self-sufficient, and less subject to the control of others" (p. 144; Caffarella & Olson, 1993; Gilligan, 1982; Stiver, 1991). This individuated self in traditional models is also equated with the mature adult (Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976).

Levinson (1978) described individuation as a process involving the formation of a "clearer boundary between self and world" (p. 195). The process begins with the infant's realization of its separate existence from its mother and external world and continues with an individual's developing a stronger sense of self. "With greater individuation of the self, we have a clearer sense of who we are and what we want. We draw more fully on our inner resources," in addition to being more "autonomous, self-generating, and self-responsible" (Levinson, 1996, p.

32). Also, greater individuation gives a man “the confidence and understanding to have more intense attachments in the world and to feel more fully a part of it” (1978, p. 195). In his later work, Levinson (1996) noted that individuation is “*not* rugged individualism” but “involves a balancing of responsibility to and for others with responsibility to and for oneself” (p. 419), a definition that appears to have relational aspects.

The same critique, however, could be applied to Levinson’s developmental theory (1978) as was applied to that of Erikson (1950/63): “When the individual arrives at the stage called ‘intimacy,’ he is supposed to be able to be intimate with another person—having spent all of his prior development striving for something very different” (Miller, 1991, p. 12). Miller also questioned whether traditional models described adequately the lives of most men; few ever become as self-sufficient as the models propose.

Thus, by the late 1970s, a shift in thinking about the psychology of women had occurred, a shift away from separation–individuation as a goal of development toward the centrality of interpersonal connection and relational growth throughout women’s lives (Berzoff, 1989, 2008a; Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991; Peck, 1986).

Miller’s (1976) groundbreaking work on the psychology of women was central to this shift (Berzoff, 1989; Surrey, 1991). Miller (1976) examined the subordination of women, people of color and lower socioeconomic classes in the dominant male society and, in particular, gender differences in socialization that shape one’s sense of self. She examined from a perspective of strength qualities in women generally seen as deficiencies or weaknesses in the dominant society. Miller also proposed that a fundamental aspect of women’s development is that “women stay with, build on, and develop in a context of attachment and affiliation with others,” and the making and maintaining of relationships is key to how her sense of self is organized (p. 83). In

addition, Miller (1991), like Gilligan (1982) and Surrey (1991), proposed that examining women's experiences in their own terms could provide a deeper understanding of human development.

Miller (1991) used Erikson's (1950/1963) first five stages as a framework for conceptualizing a girl's developing sense of self within a relational model. In Erikson's first stage, an infant develops a sense of basic trust from the mutuality of being in relationship, which is also the beginning of a sense of self, in particular, an emotionally responsive self, according to Miller (1991). All psychological growth occurs "within emotional connections, not separate from them," she wrote (p. 15). In addition, a girl's sense of self-esteem begins to develop, as does her sense of competence; Miller said both capacities are based in emotional connections. Miller conceived Erikson's second stage as not characterized by autonomy or increasing separation but by acting within a community of others; that is, a girl has a "more developed sense of her own capacities" and is better able to "put her 'views' into effect" within the context of relationships (p. 17). In the Oedipal stage, the girl comes to recognize and possibly internalize how her society devalues her mother and all women while it upholds the status of her father and other men (Berzoff, 2008b). In latency, the girl is actively involved in her relationships with other girls, continuing to forge emotional connections. During adolescence, a girl seeks to use all her capacities in relationships with others; however, she has learned throughout her development that she has not been able to be the "active agent" she desires and instead is expected to yield to the wants and needs of others (p. 20). As a result, she encounters and has to learn to deal with conflicts.

According to Miller (1991), the "dominant culture" as yet makes aspects of this "being-in-relationship" model difficult to realize (p. 21). For the most part, the "old kind of relationship"

still exists, she said, “with the suppression of the full participation” of most women’s ways of “seeing and acting,” (p. 21). Although Miller (1991) did not conceptualize Erikson’s (1950/1963) stages of adulthood within this framework, she did say, for women, “the struggle continues into later life; but many more factors now complicate it” (p. 21).

Gilligan (1982), also a groundbreaking theorist in women’s psychology who examined moral development, found different ideologies in responses to moral dilemmas: one, more common in men, oriented toward a morality of individual rights and justice; and the other, more common in women, a morality of responsibility and care grounded in a relational context. In addition, Gilligan described the developmental process of an ethic of care as it evolves into the recognition of the interdependence of self and other, where self-care and consideration of one’s own needs are also acknowledged.

Surrey (1991) and other self-in-relation theorists and clinicians (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991) also proposed a new model of psychological development for women that moves away from greater individuation toward “a process of growth within relationship, where both or all people involved are encouraged and challenged to maintain connection and to foster, adapt to, and change with the growth of the other” (p. 60). In addition, parts of the self, such as autonomy, assertion, competence, and creativity develop within a relational context. Self-development also involves growth in the capacity for empathy, for others and one’s self, which the theorists emphasized as central to women’s development.

The early writings of Gilligan and self-in-relation theorists were subjected to criticism along the lines of their having presented limited views and essentialist notions of both women and men, and not having adequately accounted for diversity of race, ethnicity, social class, and sexual orientation (Berzoff, 2008a; Franz, Cole, Crosby, & Stewart, 1994; Hulbert, 1993; Reus,

MaloneBeach, & DeGenova, 2000). Berzoff (2008a) wrote: “As self-in-relation theorists tried to correct the devaluation of women, they also inadvertently tended to idealize women’s relational skills” (p. 237). The self-in-relation theory, however, has since evolved into relational-cultural theory. It is a developmental model and a model for psychotherapy, but it is also applicable to effecting change at the societal level, for healing the “chronic disconnection and marginalization” of subordinate groups in the dominant culture (Jordan, 2001, p. 96).

Scholars of women’s development, then, put forth the notion of a different developmental path for women, a relational one that is missing or has been unaccounted for in traditional models of development (Berzoff, 1989; Franz & White, 1985; Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1991; Surrey, 1991). As Caffarella and Olson (1993) wrote: “Developmental theory has identified the stages of growth toward autonomy, but has ignored the evolution and fostering of the human ability to care, share, and create community” (p. 136).

Erikson’s (1950/1963) developmental model is still referred to, criticized, and built upon in the research literature. Earlier, Franz and White (1985) argued that his model upholds one pathway to personality development: that of identity formation, in which an individual proceeds through a process of individuation, involving autonomy, initiative, and industry. According to both Franz and White (1985) and Sorell and Montgomery (2001), Erikson’s model provides an incomplete explanation of the developmental pathway of connectedness or attachment over the life span, a component of identity vital to both genders. In other words, Erikson’s theory does not sufficiently explain how an individual progresses “from the dependency of the trust/mistrust stage to the mature interdependence of the intimacy stage” (Franz & White, 1985, p. 234), especially since aspects of each stage exist “in some form” prior to their emergence at critical times (Erikson, 1950/1963, p. 271). Franz and White (1985), therefore, proposed a preliminary

two-path model of personality development that incorporates as the second pathway the development of interpersonal attachments across the life span. The interconnection of the pathways could be described as the “ways in which men and women construct a sense of themselves as simultaneously separated from and related to others” (Sorell & Montgomery, 2001, p. 121).

Sorell and Montgomery (2001) critiqued Erikson’s developmental theory from a feminist standpoint analysis. Within their discussion, the scholars addressed androcentrism, particularly in regard to his conceptualizations of stages involving identity, intimacy, and generativity. Also, the theorists, in their call for other standpoints on identity development, point to the fact that not everyone has opportunities and choices available to “compose” an identity (p. 123). Other scholars have noted how the stages of autonomy, initiative, industry, and identity reflect “the values of a Western, male-dominated, competitive, industrialized culture,” while also noting the sociohistorical context in which Erikson lived and wrote (Berzoff, 2008b, p. 118).

Sorell and Montgomery (2001) found other aspects of Erikson’s theory incomplete, such as the interplay of biological aging and psychosocial development in adulthood. Much earlier, Rossi (1980) also criticized theories of the life span in general for not taking into account physiological aging.

In addition to conceptualizing a relational pathway of development for women, theorists moved away from fitting women’s lives into a linear progression of stages. Teresa A. Peck (1986) formulated a creative developmental model of women’s adult self-definition, incorporating the thinking of Gilligan (1982), Miller (1976), and others. Peck described self-definition as “an ongoing process of self-awareness and -knowledge gained primarily through



relationships” and competence or “mastery” from work, and the influence of the sociohistorical context (p. 282).

It helps to imagine Peck’s (1986) developmental model for women as she depicted it in a diagram. The process of *self-definition* is represented as a spiraling, expanding funnel, rather than a linear progression of stages, and is explained further below. The wall surrounding self-definition is the dimension of *social-historical time*, which provides “the social, emotional, and political context within which a woman is allowed to define herself at any given point of time” (p. 278). This dimension also includes physiological aging. The wall, then, is flexible; it can constrain a woman’s self-definition, offering few opportunities and role variations, for example, as in the early 1950s, or it can become loose, offering a woman more choices, as in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The third component of Peck’s model is the *sphere of influence*, which includes her involvement in relationships and work. In regard to work, the satisfaction and sense of competence she receives from her efforts are the focus in this sphere. The sphere is also flexible; it can expand for new relationships or contract for losses, according to Peck. Turning back to the funnel of self-definition, Peck described it as a “force emerging through the sphere of influence” (p. 280). The funnel widens as a woman gains “increasing clarity of self-definition” over time (p. 280). How clear her self-definition becomes, however, depends on her “ability to both influence and change her web of relationships,” which also affects her capacity to define herself in her own terms (Caffarella & Olson, 1993, p. 136). Although a woman’s relationships are key to her development in this model, Peck also remarked that attachments should be tempered by a measure of separateness, so a woman does not become dependent on them as her only path to self-knowledge.

Caffarella and Olson (1993) remarked that Peck (1986), who had answered Gilligan's challenge to create new models of women's development, proposed the "most comprehensive" one (p. 136). Caffarella and Olson, in a critical review, looked at conceptual and empirical studies based on both traditional models of adult development and alternative models of women's psychosocial development. The scholars concluded that development for women does not follow the sequential patterns of traditional models, such as that of Erikson (1950/1963) and those who drew from his work, such as Levinson (1978). In general, women's development is characterized by diverse developmental patterns. In addition, the importance of relationships emerged as central to women's development, along with the capacity to adapt to discontinuities in social roles, and "a need to maintain a fluid sense of self" (p. 143). Caffarella and Olson concluded that women have a need to define their own sense of self and receive recognition not only for who they are but also for their abilities and competence. Of the 20 empirical studies reviewed by the scholars, however, it appears that only three had samples that included female participants 60 or older. In regard to all samples, middle-class White women predominate.

In her longitudinal study of identity development in women from college to midlife, that is, age 43, Josselson (1996), whose earlier studies were included in Caffarella and Olson's (1993) review, also concluded that development does not conform to a sequence of stages and instead, women make and remake their identities, or "revise" themselves throughout their lives, at least in the period of the life span she studied. Competence and connection emerged as central themes in her study.

Josselson (1996) followed the lives of 30 randomly selected, White, middle-class women, interviewing them at ages 21, 33, and 43. In addition to exploring identity development from what she termed "late adolescence" to adulthood, Josselson wanted to know how social changes

of the 1960s and early 1970s influenced her subjects' lives. The first interviews were in 1972, when the women were seniors in college. The author also noted that her sample of women was not selected from elite institutions of higher education nor were the women singled out as gifted, as have been the participants of other longitudinal studies of women (e.g., Stewart & Vandewater, 1993; Tomlinson-Keasey & Keasy, 1993; Schuster, Langland, & Smith, 1993).

Competence was tied to the world of work and other areas of these women's lives. Competence in relation to work came not only from a sense of mastery but also from doing work that affected others in a positive and meaningful way (Josselson, 1996). Among the most satisfying occupational experiences for these women were those related to interpersonal connections. Competence, then, was grounded in connection in these women's working lives. In addition, any identity crises in adulthood among these women "most often involved the struggle to keep the experience of competence and connection in balance" (p. 178).

The cohort of women in Josselson's (1996) study came of age amid feminist notions that having a career just might be the "Answer," in a way similar to generations of women who were raised to imagine that marriage would provide the "happily ever after," as Josselson wrote (p. 182). The message her subjects received was that with a college education, briefcase in hand, and an income, "*then* you will live happily ever after" (p. 182). Literary scholar Heilbrun (1988) aptly described this notion as "the dream of closure" (p. 130):

"If he notices me, if I marry him, if I get into college, if I get this work accepted, if I get that job"—there always seems to loom the possibility of something being over, settled, sweeping clear the way for contentment. (p. 130)

Many of Josselson's (1996) subjects, who worked in a wide variety of occupations, became "disillusioned" with work (p. 182). The women spoke of demotions, firings, being

overlooked for promotions, and lack of appreciation or validation from colleagues and supervisors. The women had other areas of their lives that provided a sense of competence, however, such as domestic and creative activities, which allowed for self-expression and relief from stress. Above all, though, the women most desired to feel competent in their relationships, as mothers, intimate partners, friends, and daughters. In fact, when the author asked each woman to imagine being an 80-year-old reviewing her life and accomplishments, the women spoke in terms of their relationships.

In addition, all of the women described in some way an increase in “consciousness” as they matured into midlife (Josselson, 1996, p. 245). They tried to grasp with words how they understood more, were more open, and had more confidence. They gained an expanded vision of the world. This meant, for example, reconciling to disappointments in the workplace, revising goals or dreams as they recognized what could be accomplished, recognizing new possibilities, and becoming more aware of themselves in relationships. All of the women, whose paths followed diverse trajectories after college, by midlife had forged or found a path that made space for many parts of themselves, and interwoven along the way were both competence and connection (Josselson, 1996).

Josselson (1996) studied the lives of women to age 43; in contrast, Melia (1999), in her qualitative study, looked at the lives of 39 Catholic women religious, ages 68 to 98. More than half of the religious sisters had advanced college degrees, and most were working in some capacity; many were active volunteers. From life review interviews with the women, Melia concluded that identity development does not conform to sequential stages but centers on recurring themes that provide continuity and meaning to one’s sense of self, especially during times of change and as one ages. The themes that recurred throughout the sisters’ life stories

were faith, family, education, friends, community, service to others, and prayer. “You age as you were when you were younger,” the sisters believed (p. 186). Melia also found that most of the women, in late midlife, were living with ego integrity and that generativity was central to their life stories. Integrity was continually re-established as the women adapted to internal and external changes in their lives, and life themes continued to serve as a foundation for identity and as providers of meaning.

Franz, Cole, Crosby and Stewart (1994) looked at the lives of women diverse in race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and social class and concluded, in their summary chapter of case histories, that identity is grounded in both individuation and connection and is created within a particular social context, at a particular time in history. Unlike Josselson (1996), Franz et al. emphasized power dynamics within personal relationships, families, social groups, and societies, whether this power is expressed as oppression or empowerment. Lives are created, then, “in relation to others and to circumstance” (p. 333), but resistance and resilience were also at the forefront of these women’s lives. They met and overcame challenges and obstacles in their personal lives and in society. Franz et al. (1994) also noted that these case studies, in which “women’s lives emerge as wholly contextualized,” allow for a discussion of the importance of relationships “without essentializing women as having ‘a different voice’ or exiling women to some imaginary ‘private’ world, immune from social/political forces” (p. 328), a feminist critique of Gilligan and self-in-relation theorists of women’s development.

Explorations of the life experiences of women in late middle age, in their mid-50s to late 60s, however, are not included among the case studies Franz et al. (1994) described above. Ceballo’s (1994) case history, for example, stops short of a study of those decades. Ceballo interviewed Mary, a 76-year-old African American social worker and presented a retrospective

study of identity development at the intersection of race, gender, and social class, illustrating the interplay of individual agency and connection/communion (Franz et al., 1994). Ceballo followed Mary's growing consciousness of racial oppression and injustice, which finally led to her return to the South, where she had grown up, to participate in the civil rights movement at age 51. Mary had followed her desire as a young woman for independence and a professional career; she did not marry or have children, and she expressed no regrets about her choices in life.

This brief review of research literature on women's development has yielded a number of themes salient in women's lives. These include the importance of relationships, competence, and community; the capacity for resistance and resilience; and increasing consciousness of self, others, and world. There is a move away from linear stage models to diverse developmental pathways for women, where a sense of self is fluid and is revised throughout a woman's life. In addition, recurring themes in individual lives provide continuity and meaning to one's sense of self. The next section, after exploring the notion of a prime of life for women, summarizes a small number of recent studies that include as participants women in late middle age.

### **Empirical Literature**

In her study of identity development in women from their last year of college to age 43, Josselson (1996) concluded:

Revision is always possible. As these women look to the future, they do so with optimism, with hope of having more leisure to pursue the neglected parts of themselves, to deepen their relationships, and to forge new ones. They regard the future, as they look toward age 50 and beyond, as being less fettered, less hectic. Self-realization, never finally attained, continues to beckon on the horizon. (p. 258)

What does the literature say about women beyond 50, women in late middle age? Have they more time to pursue the neglected parts of themselves, deepen their relationships, and forge new ones? And, as Josselson (1996) asked: “How does a woman come to be who she is—with what consideration, what anguish, what commitment, and what regret?” (p. 33).

First, this section turns to a question Mitchell and Helson (1990) asked: Does a prime of life exist for women? The scholars suggested the early 50s, which was considered “radical” at the time; it challenged the notion that the high point of a woman’s life was most likely earlier (Torges, Stewart, & Miner-Rubino, 2005, p. 148). Mitchell and Helson (1990) defined a prime as “a time of fruition, fulfillment, and high quality of life” (p. 451). The scholars searched for a period of time when a significant proportion of a sample of 700 Mills College alumnae, ages 26 to 80, and a longitudinal sample of 118 alumnae in their 40s and 50s, viewed their lives “very positively” and provided evidence of “life lived well” (p. 452). The early 50s were identified as this period of time, an “early post-parental” period characterized by “living with a partner only,” good health, comfortable finances, and concern for aging parents (p. 466). Women in their prime remained engaged with life, with family, friends, community, and careers. They cared for others as well as themselves, exemplifying Gilligan’s (1982) notion of a mature ethic of care. Intimate relationships were associated with a high quality of life but, at the same time, a sense of autonomy or agency was also important. In addition, quality of life was associated with a personality characterized by a balance of traditional female and male aspects. Philosophical and spiritual issues, however, were of less concern to the women in their prime as compared to both younger and older women. The early 50s, then, according Mitchell and Helson, are “an opportunity for autonomy, androgyny, and generativity in a specifically feminine lifespan context” (p. 468).

The 50s for many women may be the prime of life, but what about the lives of women in later midlife? What Mitchell and Helson (1990) found also characterizes the lives of many adults in late middle age who have the time, finances, and volition to lead lives of high quality. Women in late midlife may also remain engaged with life, with family, friends, community, and careers, but careers may have ended, be winding down or have taken a different turn. In addition, parents may be deceased and generative aspects of their lives may not necessarily include community service.

The following three empirical studies show evidence of positive experiences associated with “middle aging”; two include participants into their mid-60s (Miner-Rubino, Winter, & Stewart, 2004, p. 1608; Stewart, Ostrove, & Helson, 2001; Zucker, Ostrove, & Stewart, 2002). All researchers examined four aspects of personality development associated with aging and considered important in middle age: *identity certainty*, *confident power*, *generativity*, and *concern about aging*. Identity certainty comes from Erikson’s notion of identity as an “affirmed sense of self and of one’s place in the world” (Miner-Rubino et al., 2004, p. 1599). Confident power is related to feelings of confidence, competence, mastery, and power, and is associated with Neugarten (1968a) and her research findings on executive processes of personality in middle-aged men and women (Zucker, et al., 2002). Generativity was derived from Erikson’s conceptualization. Finally, concern about aging assesses “preoccupation with ‘time left,’ the approach of death,” and concerns about physical strength and attractiveness (Miner-Rubino et al., 2004, p. 1599). Zucker et al. (2002) added a fifth aspect, that of *personal distress*, which assesses such notions as disillusion, isolation, and feelings of incompetence. In all three studies, participants’ perceived changes in personality were examined, and the majority of participants in all three studies identified as White.



Stewart et al. (2001) examined middle-aged women's feelings about their lives in their 30s, 40s, and 50s. Zucker et al. (2002) looked at perceived personality changes in women in their 60s, in addition to women in their 20s and 40s. In both studies, participants were graduates of prestigious colleges and were from the middle and upper classes. In contrast to those of Stewart et al. and Zucker et al., Miner-Rubino et al.'s (2004) sample was diverse in social class and gender; the researchers examined the subjective experience of aging in a sample of 259 college- and non-college-educated women and men in their 60s, who graduated from an urban public high school in the Midwest.

All three studies reported similar results. Miner-Rubino et al. (2004) found that levels of identity certainty, confident power, and concern about aging continued to increase from the 20s to the 40s to the 60s. In regard to generativity, participants recalled feeling more generative in their 40s than in their 20s, but generativity leveled off from the 40s to the 60s. These findings are consistent with those of Zucker et al. (2002) and Stewart et al. (2001), though the latter researchers looked at women's lives only to the 50s and found that all four aspects of personality increased from the 30s to the 40s and from the 40s to the 50s, except that of generativity, which decreased from the 40s to the 50s. Stewart et al. (2001) suggested that generativity might vary in relation to a shift in parenting responsibilities. In addition, Zucker et al. (2002) found that women in their 40s and 60s rated themselves lower in personal distress than women in their 20s. No differences were found in the levels of personal distress in women in their 40s and 60s.

Furthermore, Miner-Rubino et al. (2004) found the highest levels of concern about aging, at each age, were reported by non-college-educated men, and college-educated women reported the lowest levels of concern in their 20s and 40s. The researchers found a "sharp increase" in all participants' concerns about aging from the 40s to the 60s, however (p. 1605).

In a different study, Torges, Stewart, and Miner-Rubino (2005) examined a specific component of personality development in late adulthood, “coming to terms with regrets about past life choices” (p. 149), in a cross-sectional sample of 259 women and men, ages 60 to 65, the same sample from Miner-Rubino et al. (2004) above. Coming to terms with regrets is associated with Erikson’s notions of ego integrity and despair (Torges et al., 2005). With more adults living longer, healthier lives in the US, study of this concept is beneficial not only for better understanding personality development in late adulthood but for facilitating positive aging (Torges et al., 2005; James & Zarrett, 2005). According to Erikson, reviewing one’s life and coming to terms with regrets lead to growth and development in late adulthood (Torges et al., 2005).

Torges et al. (2005) examined two kinds of regrets: the first, *missed opportunities*, was assessed by the question: “Were there any attractive opportunities for career or other long-range activities that you did not pursue?” (p. 155). For the second kind of regret, *lifestyle change*, the researchers asked participants: “If you had it to do over again, would you choose the same lifestyle pattern with respect to your home versus career decision(s)?” (p. 155).

Overall, Torges and colleagues (2005) found that adults in late midlife who acknowledged having one or both kinds of regrets, slightly more than half of the sample, had lower scores on well-being than those who reported neither of the two kinds. Those who had come to terms with or “put the best face on” their regrets, however, had significantly higher scores in life satisfaction and recent positive mood than those who had not come to terms with their regrets. In addition, those who had put the best face on regrets scored higher in physical health than those who had not come to terms.

The study's results provide "strong evidence" that regrets are related to well-being for adults in their 60s, and how regrets are interpreted affects well-being, according to Torges et al. (2005, p. 163). The researchers also wondered whether they assessed participants too early in the process; less than 15% of those who reported having one or both kinds of regrets were coded as having come to terms with those regrets (Torges et al. 2005). The process of coming to terms with regrets, then, may continue into later adulthood, echoing Melia's (1999) finding that ego integrity involves a continuous process across late midlife and older age.

Norman, McCluskey-Fawcett, and Ashcraft (2002) compared the developmental experiences of 21 women in their 60s to 20 women in their 80s, using a quantitative measure of psychosocial development based on Erikson's eight-stage model. The participants were from the Midwest and all identified as White. The researchers found, in general, more similarities in development than differences between the two groups, with both groups showing "comparable resolution" of all but two of Erikson's eight tasks or crises: trust and identity. In regard to trust/mistrust, the women in their 60s saw themselves as "positive, calm, and optimistic" and believed their "physical and emotional needs would be met" (p. 36). On the other hand, the women in their 80s "felt more threatened, suspicious, and unsafe," doubted their needs would be met, and questioned their coping abilities (p. 36). In regard to identity/role confusion, the results showed that women in their 60s were able to integrate their multiple roles into "a consistent sense of themselves that continues over time" (p. 36). They also identified with positive elements of Erikson's stages, including fidelity and wisdom, and "satisfaction with their life, work and accomplishments" (pp. 37-38). The older women, however, had more negative views of themselves and experienced "a disparity between who they are and who they want to be, or perhaps were in the past" (p. 36). The researchers also pointed out that there were more widows

in the group of women in their 80s, 13 compared to 6, which may have resulted in the older women's revisiting issues related to trust and identity. Loss of relationships and social roles, and physical challenges among the older women likely contributed to the findings. The researchers did not mention differences in socioeconomic class or educational levels of the two groups of women, which may have also contributed to the findings.

According to Norman, McCluskey-Fawcett, and Ashcraft (2002), their findings support previous research on women's development: the importance of relationships and multiple roles to one's identity, and the necessity of re-establishing or revising one's identity as one ages, all of which promote positive aging. Their findings also support Peck's (1986) developmental model in regard to the capacity to adjust to role changes, and Melia's (1999) research, in relation to continuity in identity and the recurrence of themes in the lives of older women.

The findings from this small number of studies support, in general, positive experiences for women in late middle age, though concerns about aging increased throughout adulthood. Levels of identity certainty and confident power, however, also continued to increase from the 20s to the mid-60s. Women in late middle age also reported satisfaction with their lives, work, and accomplishments. Other findings continue to support the importance of relationships, the capacity to adjust to role changes, and the necessity of revising one's identity as one ages. In addition, how regrets are interpreted appears important to well-being.

Overall, according to the literature in this review, there has been a move away from linear stage models to diverse developmental pathways for women. The importance of competence, community, and the capacity for resistance and resilience have also emerged as themes in women's lives, in addition to increasing consciousness of self, others, and world. Late middle age, in general, can be a period of fulfillment, growth, and learning for adults, though biology

and sociocultural environment continue to influence development, and sociocultural factors become more important with increasing age, when losses begin to outbalance gains. Although the literature to date is comprehensive, further study will contribute greater understanding of this period of women's lives, especially since there are several theoretical conceptions.

The next chapter of this study will discuss methodology, which includes research method and design and information about the sample, data collection methods, and data analysis.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

This exploratory, qualitative study used semi-structured, open-ended interview questions to obtain narratives with rich descriptions and contextual detail in order to gain insight into women's experiences of the period of the life span identified as late middle age (Rubin & Babbie, 2010, p. 36). This study design was selected in order to examine the overarching research question: What are the life experiences of women between the ages of 55 and 70? To that end, significant experiences in participants' lives in relation to self, family, work, and relationships, and the influence of age-related physical changes and sociohistorical context were explored. Also explored were how participants make meaning of these experiences and perceived changes in themselves over the course of their adult lives. Face-to-face interviews allowed participants to share their experiences in their own words, and the meaning of this period emerged from participants' subjective accounts. This study also builds on previous qualitative and quantitative research with women in late middle age and provides deeper understanding of subjective phenomena. The study, therefore, contributes to defining for women the period of late middle age, particularly the life years of 55 to 68.

The study proposal was reviewed and approved by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee (HSRC). No data collection occurred until approval from the HSRC was granted (Appendix A). The HSRC approval ensures that the rights of human subjects have been adequately addressed for study participants.

## **Sample**

The sample included 12 women between the ages of 55 and 68, residing in two northeastern states. In order to protect the privacy of participants, the states have not been identified. Inclusion criteria for participation in the study were few; in addition to fitting the age range, which was 55 to 70, a participant had to have fluency in the English language, curiosity about the research focus, and willingness to explore her life and share personal information.

Eleven of the women identified as White, of European heritage; one woman identified as African American. The women, in general, were living middle- to upper-middle-class lives. All were college educated and most had degrees beyond a bachelor's; one woman had a doctorate. Two of the women identified as bisexual, one as a lesbian, and the majority identified as heterosexual. In addition, four of the women were married, two had longtime partners, and nine had adult children.

## **Data Collection**

A convenience, nonprobability sampling method was used to access study participants, which included snowball sampling techniques (Rubin & Babbie, 2010). The rationale for using the sampling method and techniques was related to logistical concerns in the community in which I was residing at the time. The snowball sampling approach included contacting two persons I knew, residing in two northeastern communities, who likely knew women in the age range desired. I sent a flier to these two persons via e-mail and asked them to send the flier to any women they knew who fit, or might fit, the age range of the study. Women who were interested in the study then contacted me directly via e-mail. I also received the names and e-mail addresses of women who might be interested from one of the above two persons and contacted them via e-mail. All interested women received information about the study and

criteria, and the procedure for data collection. An attachment of content prompts, which included the questions to be asked and demographic information to be collected, was also sent to each interested woman (Appendix B). The majority of contact with the women before the interviews was conducted via e-mail. Four of the women interviewed provided me with contact information for additional women who might be interested.

I conducted face-to-face interviews with participants at mutually convenient locations that afforded privacy, including public libraries and participants' workplaces and homes. Before beginning the interview, each woman signed an Informed Consent (Appendix C), which met HSRB guidelines for ethical treatment of human subjects. Referral sources for mental health support were also available if necessary; most of the women, however, either had worked in fields related to human services or had their own means of such support.

Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. One interview, however, was about 35 minutes and another about 90. A small, portable, digital recorder was used to audio record each interview. I listened and asked additional questions for clarity or deeper understanding but, in general, participants were encouraged to speak freely, and I did not provide much guidance. I occasionally had to intervene to move ahead to other questions, however. In addition, if the participant did not mention any social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, I made a point to ask about any involvement or influence, in order to place the women's earlier lives within a sociohistorical context. In general, I did not take notes during the interviews, except at the end in regard to demographic information. Brief, general impressions of the interviews were noted in a small journal afterward. In appreciation of her time, I gave each woman a gift card for \$15 for use at Barnes and Nobles bookstores; the cards were paid for from my own financial resources.



## **Data Analysis**

All interviews but one, the longest, were transcribed by a professional transcriber, who signed a letter of confidentiality before beginning her work (Appendix D). I checked the accuracy of the transcriptions by listening to each audio recording concurrently with a hard copy of the transcript. Two of the women requested a copy of their recorded interviews, which were sent in the form of a CD.

I performed all data analysis. A thematic analysis was performed, based on a coding system that emerged from the words and phrases across transcription materials. The resulting themes that emerged came from the commonalities of responses to each interview question. The interviews generated pages of responses for each question, which were put in charts. The questions and each participant who responded to them were organized in charts so that responses were clearly displayed by each heading. For example, for Question 3 related to physical changes, there were five pages of responses, with headings like “Afraid of falling,” “Muscle, Joint Aches,” “Exercises: gym, pool” correlated to each participant's responses. These responses were further consolidated to create broader themes.

In a qualitative study, issues of reliability and validity are related to trustworthiness, the extent to which the study can be regarded as unbiased and an accurate representation of the participants' lives (Rubin & Babbie, 2010). The use of longer quotations throughout the Findings chapter allows readers to make their own judgments about the extent to which the women's own words and meaning making have been represented. Relevant research literature informed the nature of the interview questions and the presentation of the findings (e.g., Elder, 1998; Helson, 1992; Levinson, 1978; Miner-Rubino, Winter, & Stewart, 2004; Stewart, Ostrove, & Helson, 2001; Torges, Stewart, & Miner-Rubino, 2005; Whitbourne, 2008; Zucker, Ostrove, & Stewart,

2002). My education and training in clinical social work further influenced the presentation of the findings and informed the division of that chapter into the biopsychosocial categories.

Trustworthiness was also enhanced through engagement with the data. I read and reread the transcripts numerous times, and listened again to sections of the audio recordings in preparation for and while working on the findings of the data. An audit trail was maintained, which consists of the transcripts and audio recordings, any brief notes about the interviews, and coding schemes and their categorizations (Rubin & Babbie, 2010).

This study now turns to the next chapter, which consists of the findings. The chapter summarizes the purpose of the study, the demographics of participants, and presents the findings of the data collected from the interviews with participants.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **FINDINGS**

This chapter of the research study summarizes the purpose of the study, the demographics of participants, and presents the findings of the data collected from interviews with participants.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore commonalities in the life experiences of women ages 55 to 68, a period of the life span identified as late middle age. This study builds on previous qualitative and quantitative research with women in late middle age and provides deeper understanding of subjective phenomena. The study, therefore, contributes to defining this period of the life span for women, particularly the years of 55 to 68.

#### **Summary of Demographics**

The 12 women who participated in this study were born between 1942 and 1956, and their ages ranged from 55 to 68, with two of the participants in their 50s, at the time of the interviews in 2011. All of the women were residing in two northeastern states, though several had grown up outside of the region. They were living in urban and suburban areas and smaller towns. One woman grew up in Canada and came to the US to attend college. Eleven of the women identified as White, of European heritage; one woman identified as African American. In addition, two women identified as bisexual, one woman as a lesbian, and the majority as heterosexual. The majority of women had been married at least once; three had never married, including two women with longtime partners. Three of the women had no children, and one woman had adopted a child from Latin America when she was in her early 40s and single. All of

the participants had attended college and all except one had at least a bachelor's degree; one woman was one semester short of credits for her undergraduate degree. Most of the women also had a master's degree, one had a doctorate, and another woman had completed coursework toward a doctorate. Work outside the home was or still is a part of each woman's life; five of the women described themselves as currently retired. Finally, seven participants identified religious or spiritual affiliations; four identified as nonpracticing and one as agnostic. Also, more than half no longer followed the religious tradition of their upbringing. One woman identified Buddhism as spiritual practice, and one as inspiration; one woman identified her way of being as closest to Taoism. One woman identified as Jewish and one as Catholic. In addition, one woman attended a Methodist church and two identified as Unitarian Universalists.

### **Findings**

“We can never grasp other people in their entirety.”

–Ruthellen Josselson, *Revising Herself*, 1996, p. viii

This chapter now turns to the findings of the data collected from interviews. The interviews focused on six questions, developed to answer the overarching research question: What are the life experiences of women between the ages of 55 and 70? The questions included the following content: significant events and experiences in the woman's life, concerns about aging, sense of self, relationships, a dream or vision of how she may have imagined her adult life, and regrets. Themes were derived from the participants' commonalities of responses to interview questions, and themes representing outlying responses have also been identified. The findings have been categorized below according to a biopsychosocial perspective of development, which reflects the complex interactions among “biological, psychological, and social processes” (Whitbourne, 2008, p. 2). This perspective fits within the interactionist model

of development, as described in the literature review (Whitbourne, 2008). It also reflects the person-in-environment approach to social work practice. Whitbourne's terms of "biological processes," "psychological processes," and "social processes" have been used as categories (p. 2). Although the findings have been placed into one of three processes, responses cross categories, illustrating how these processes interact in a woman's life. Finally, responses to the first interview question are woven throughout the three sections, showing again how the processes interact; that question is as follows: *What do you identify as the significant events and experiences in your life, in the past and currently, and what meaning do they hold for you? Significant experiences or events might be related to family, work, relationships, avocations, historical and political events, religion or spirituality, race/ethnicity, and physical health.*

Direct quotations have been incorporated into the findings, allowing the women to speak in their own voices and the reader to come to know the women as individuals. Each woman has been given a fictitious name to protect her privacy. In the interest of clarity and smoothness of speech, most vocal fillers such as *um, you know, like, I mean*, and word repetition, for example, "it's—it's my body," have been removed from quotations, without changing the meaning or accuracy of the statements. There have also been minor grammatical changes to some quotations.

Finally, the findings are presented in a straightforward manner as possible, without my opinions or interpretations. The responses included in the findings, however, have been chosen from a wealth of material, and the manner of presentation was carefully considered. Both the responses chosen and their presentation, then, reflect the subjectivity of the researcher. It is the following chapter, the Discussion and Conclusions, which looks at the findings and presents an analysis.

## Biological Processes

“I’ll be 65 this summer. And that feels kind of like a shock, too [laughs]. I don’t know how that happened!”

–Elizabeth, Teacher

Elizabeth’s sentiments are a suitable beginning for this section, which looks at biological processes within the larger biopsychosocial perspective. The interview questions related to this section are the following: *How have physical changes associated with aging affected you? What are your concerns about aging?* Core themes to emerge from the responses were Physical Changes and Concerns about Dementia/Loss of Cognitive Functions.

### Theme: Physical Changes

All of the women discussed dealing with various physical changes associated with aging, and some explained how these have affected their day-to-day lives. The youngest participant, Adela, 55, who identifies as African American, described an awareness of how her body was changing and associated this with her sense of self:

Part of what I’ve been aware of in being 55 is my body’s talking to me in ways that it hasn’t been talking to me before. . . . I feel creakier when I get out of bed in the morning. And I’ve always had this sort of very active thought of myself. . . . I can swim and bike because we did that as a kid. We were very active. . . . Now, it’s like [exhales], when I do that three-mile hike, I feel a little winded at the end [laughs].

She described the changes in her body as “subtle”: “It’s not like it’s major. It’s not suddenly I can’t walk or anything. And this is certainly concerning, but I think I’ll be able to deal with it.” She also compared the changes to an earlier period of the life span: “When your body

starts to change, you can't get around it. It's like changing—going into adolescence; that's one side of it.” Adela also related bodily changes to other changes in her life:

It's my body, it's my age, but it's also my life change, that I'm now in this situation where I have some more emotional space because the job situation I left, by the time I left it, was really consuming of me. And not just in time and effort, but in just the struggles with that work situation. . . . Now it's like I have so much more emotional space in just organizing my time . . . and so I think that also I'm able to have those awarenesses.

Other participants described physical changes in a more brief and direct manner. Donna, 62, mentioned “slowing down” and “just having things achy, achy joints or things like that.” Deborah, 66, said, “The physical changes do put a damper, and I'm fighting them.” She added, “I've gained 20 pounds, and I'm walking, and I'm back exercising.” Nancy, 68, a recently retired plumber, described how the physical activity related to her occupation affected her body: “I've worked hard and abused my body working.” She mentioned that she did “a lot of heavy lifting,” but said, “I also did yoga at the same time, so I don't have the problems that other people, particularly men, at my age have.” In fact, eight of the women mentioned having made exercise a part of their lives, and the activities they engage in include going to the gym, swimming, walking, hiking, yoga, Pilates, and dance. “I'm working very hard to be more healthy, to exercise regularly, and I'm becoming an exercise freak. I love it. And I love yoga,” Nancy said. Mary, 67, said, “My muscles just won't do what they used to do,” and she also described her exercise routine of going to the gym once or twice a week, where she uses the pool. “I aqua jog . . . and I do that for about 15, sometimes 20 minutes if it's a good day.”

Participants mentioned other physical problems and concerns. Three women mentioned sleep. Elizabeth, 64, said she “spends more time sleeping” than she used to; similarly, Eleanor,

64, said, “I used to be able to go, go, go, go, go; and at the end of the week, now, I’ve got to sleep.” Joan, 62, mentioned she would like to be able to sleep through the night without having to get up and go to the bathroom two or three times. Since she cannot get back to sleep, she said, she uses the middle of the night as a time to read. “So, that’s not so bad,” she said. Claire, 66, mentioned how she is “more afraid of falling now,” and said this fear has “inhibited” her activities. She and her husband recently traveled overseas, and she had told him: “I want to do it now because, well, these are sort of strenuous trips. . . . Who knows what lies around the corner, physically or medically?”

Catherine, 65, a retired psychiatric hospital administrator, was the only participant who mentioned having had cancer. She described her diagnosis at age 53 as “like these shocks that come into your life, whether it’s an external condition, like a war or a tsunami, or your own physical health.”

I didn’t have any symptoms. It was a rare cancer. And the first person that talked to me about it said that it was an aggressive cancer, and that’s all I could remember was the word “aggressive” cancer, and I was going to be dead. And for me, now, it’s what? Eleven years. I’m still here. I didn’t think I was going to be here.

Catherine described further how the diagnosis affected her:

That got me thinking . . . what do I want to do? . . . I really toyed with that. I ended up doing early retirement. . . . I thought, well, the thing that was most important was not—I liked what I was doing—so it wasn’t kind of moving away from that. But I really wanted to have more control over my time.

Retiring early enabled Catherine to spend more time with her mother, who passed away four years ago, at age 94.



Elizabeth and Pauline, who are both 64, remarked on their overall good health. Elizabeth said, “Luckily my physical health has been really, really good just about my whole life. Different things happened. I got pneumonia a couple years ago and missed work. . . . It was awful, but I’m really quite well.” She expressed concern about “illness and ill health in older age,” and said, “I hope I don’t have to deal with it.” Otherwise, she said, “My physical changes of getting older I don’t think are too bad. And I do work out and that kind of thing.” Pauline said, “Other than looking older, I haven’t really—I have a little twinge here or there. . . . I have high blood pressure; I do have medication for that. But I really haven’t had that many physical problems associated with aging.” Pauline also added that she has been “very lucky, very, very, very lucky.” As for exercise, she said that since retiring, she has gone to the gym almost every day. She uses the treadmill, works out with weights, and takes yoga, Pilates, or dance classes.

In addition, one woman, Sara, 59, and an artist, said she feels at her physical peak at this time in her life: “Physically, I feel like I’m at my peak now. I feel really strongly, solidly at my peak because I’m emotionally stable for the first time in my life.”

In contrast, Donna spoke about the negative impact aging has had on her; she was the only participant who openly discussed “being invisible” in a social context:

I was a flight attendant in the era when we wore the heels and the hats and the gloves, and would walk down the concourse and turn heads. As superficial as that seems now to me, because my life has so much more meaning now . . . it’s hard. It’s hard to just be invisible. And all of the things, I guess it’s just the aches, muscle aches, joint aches that I’m experiencing now. But that’s the hardest.

Donna described being invisible “everywhere,” whether walking down the street, shopping, when in airports or at conferences. “It’s not just a beauty thing or a—I don’t know, it’s just a

dismissive kind of thing,” which she started noticing “maybe the last five years.” She continued, “Once I’ve made a connection, then everything is interesting and meaningful, but it’s harder to break into a group of strangers. And I never had that before.”

In addition to Donna, five other participants spoke about their appearance in relation to age-related physical changes. Elizabeth said, “I haven’t liked getting wrinkles and stuff because I’ve had a lot of attention from men my whole life, and now I don’t particularly, and it’s a little bit difficult.” She also said, “I’m kind of getting used to it and find that other values are important.” Eleanor, 64, described herself as being in “denial” regarding aspects of aging:

I see age spots on my face, and . . . I write to my sister . . . because she’s into all that stuff and says, “Get retinol A,” or whatever. And I go, “No, I don’t think so.” I think I’m going to have to put up with it . . . I have a lot of friends who keep saying, “I’m getting old. I’m an old lady.” And I keep saying, “Stop it. Stop it.” I think denial is a good thing. You keep talking like that, you’re going to end up feeling like that.

In regard to aging and appearance, Nancy said, “It’s funny that a lot of friends who are very good looking, they are facing losing their looks, and it’s like I never had looks to lose.” She continued, “But if I were not physically capable of doing what I wanted to do, I would be very upset, so that’s why I’m stressing exercise.”

Sara, who said she feels at her physical peak, also described her appearance in a positive light. “I realize it’s just a pleasure not to be at an age when your looks are so important, but you’re pleasing enough looking or happy enough.” She explained that how she feels about her appearance is related to her happiness and confidence at this stage of her life:

I feel like the physicalness of my being happy has made me look prettier, the prettiest I've ever looked in my life, not that I feel like I'm so great [laughs] . . . but I was never as good looking as I feel that I am now, and it has to do with the confidence, the happiness.

Looking back, she said, "I started noticing that the people, the women I thought were most beautiful were older, but they had a happy face. They had happiness set into their faces." She continued, "What was more striking to me was when I would see 60- or 70-year-old women who looked beautiful to me, and I realized it's all because their faces were going happy; they weren't frowning." And regarding herself and her appearance in relation to others, she said:

I hate seeing the wrinkles . . . but I also feel like for the first time in my life, I feel like people stare at me, they look at me. I feel like they think I'm pretty because they don't know what age I am. I'm at this indeterminate age, my hair's too long, and I think they think, well, she looks sort of older . . . and she's looking sort of pretty.

### **Theme: Concerns about Dementia/Loss of Cognitive Functions**

Five of the women spoke of their concerns about dementia or loss of cognitive functions. Four women specifically mentioned Alzheimer's disease. For example, Pauline spoke about her mother who had passed away, and how she and her siblings cared for her. Pauline, who acknowledged above how "lucky" she has been in regard to her health, expressed her concerns:

I watched my mother go through all the stages of Alzheimer's. And fortunately, I think her quality of life, up until the last few months, was not that bad. It was pretty good. She knew us; she was really happy when we were there. She just kept doing as much as she possibly could for as long as she could. I certainly hope I don't get Alzheimer's.

She added, "I've met a lot of the people who lived in her community. And I've seen all the different variations of decline."

Catherine also brought up Alzheimer's disease, in addition to physical disability, when discussing her concerns about aging:

You cannot turn on the TV, or pick up a magazine where Alzheimer's is not there. So, we joke, we freak out about things, the memory, is this the early stages? . . . . And the physical disability—I like to get around, and we like to see the [grand] kids. . . . It was good to be able to get on the floor and get up and move around and change diapers and lift them up. . . . I wonder, five years, am I'm going to be able to do that? Ten years, am I going to be able to do this? I try to stay active in terms of walking and going to the gym and bending so that those muscles and joints stay there.

The main concern about aging for Eleanor is memory loss. "I have never had a good memory," she said. "I'm going to try to combat it with being active . . . making sure that I'm stimulated a lot and that I've got a lot going on." She had also spent time with a person whom she saw "just diminish because of their dementia." She added, "I'm sure maybe it's inevitable, but I want to prolong it as long as I can."

Donna also expressed concern about cognitive functioning. "It's not so much the physical for me as the mental, losing my mental capacities because it's my great joy in life."

I've done a lot of brain research, and I just refuse to believe that I'm getting old so it's okay to forget, or I'm getting old so we excuse each other. I don't believe that. And there are supplements. There are . . . ways to keep our minds alert.

Donna added, "I just don't want to sink into my friends talking about their 'senior moments' as if it's okay because I know that it's not."

Turning to some final reflections on aging, Joan, who currently works as a caregiver/companion to elders, said, "I accept that life has a beginning and an end, and a middle.

And I accept that. And it doesn't worry me. I'm not scared, and it's like I know growing old is going to happen.”

All of the study's participants are dealing with age-related physical changes at this time, and dementia and issues related to cognitive functioning emerged as major concerns. In addition, more than half of the women are engaged in a physical exercise program of some kind. Also, the women are dealing with changes in appearance in different ways. One woman described feeling her prettiest at this time and being at her physical peak.

### **Psychological Processes**

“After 50 maybe, I think you realize that hey, your life is limited. Don't just mope around all the time wishing for it to be different. Grab what is good and enjoy it. You can't do very much about the aging process. You give up a little bit on that.”

–Elizabeth, 64

This section of the research findings, as the first section, begins with a quotation from Elizabeth, whose thoughts echo those of Joan described above. Elizabeth's words are an appropriate ending to the previous section and a suitable beginning for the next section, which turns to psychological processes within a biopsychosocial perspective. The focus in this section is on how each woman has come to understand herself and the challenges she has faced in life. The changes a woman has perceived in herself over time are also identified. During the interviews, the women were asked the following questions related to this section: *What is your sense of who you are now in relation to confidence, competence, values, potential, and goals? What kind of changes have you perceived in yourself over the adult years?* It was difficult to pull out themes for this section because the concepts in the questions above were interwoven in responses that appear in the previous section and in the next on social processes. Nonetheless, a

core theme to emerge was Confidence, which some of the women associated with competence and clarity. In addition, interwoven throughout are responses related to a woman's developing sense of self, including spiritual journeys. A significant theme also included is Difficult Times, a term from Helson (1992). Outlying themes to emerge were Happiness and Personal Philosophy. The final theme in this section is Regrets.

### **Theme: Confidence**

All of the women but two spoke directly about feeling more confident at this time of their lives; the other two women spoke more indirectly but also conveyed a sense of having more confidence. Confidence was associated with increased self-awareness and feeling comfortable with oneself. For example, Elizabeth said, "I think one nice thing about being older is I do have more confidence. I'm more comfortable with myself than I ever was. I'm not so worried about what people think." Competence and clarity were also associated with confidence.

Donna could speak for many of the women when she said the following: "Confidence is increasing, interestingly. The patchwork of everything I've done, and been, and seen, and known . . . it's all coming together in a really interesting, intriguing way. And I'm fascinated with that." More specifically, her confidence, in part, is a reflection of increased awareness and knowledge of self and others and where she belongs in her world:

Sharing information with friends—I don't have colleagues anymore because I'm retired—but sharing information with friends and being open and trusting, more aware of who's safe and who's not, what's safe and what's not—so to know where I belong much more so than before. But, it's mostly the confidence that my personal learning, my hobbies, as well as education, that kind of got it together in that regard.

Donna also attributed her increasing confidence to her spiritual growth. “I’m really on that kind of path, not religious but spiritual.” Her spirituality has always been “simmering,” she said, and has always been a “curiosity, the mystery of it all and a deep sense of wondering what it’s all about, but I was too busy being young and didn’t know what to read.” She found that metaphysical bookshops were not for her. “I wanted something—I don’t know how to say it—more meaningful, deeper because I knew it was there, I just didn’t know where to find it.” She described what happened at about the time of her divorce in 1999:

I think that’s when I started getting the books, getting the things, thinking, This isn’t who I am and I’m not who you think I am. I am so much more than what you know. And that’s not your problem. That’s not your fault. That’s my fault because my outside didn’t match my inside, and because I hadn’t really brought out my inside yet. I just knew there was so much more. And the fact that I hadn’t been expressing that or being that wasn’t anybody’s fault but my own. And I don’t even—it’s not about fault. It’s just about a process. So, I think that’s when I just said, darn it, you know what? I’m just going to learn to be more honestly me, whatever that is.

Donna acknowledged that she is still on the path of bringing out those parts of herself that have not yet been realized, which is part of her spiritual journey.

For Deborah, also, confidence is related to increased self-awareness; specifically, her confidence has come by way of “much more clarity” in her life. “Things are much more in perspective,” she said. “Clarity gives you confidence. Without [clarity], we’re running around not knowing what to do because we’re not sure, but when you’re more sure, it’s easier.”

My daughter has a wonderful expression: “Don’t make room in your brain for that one.” It’s sort of don’t clutter your head with too much of stuff you don’t need to dwell on

because it doesn't work. . . . The issue is there; it's going to be there whether you let it get you or not. That's what I've learned. That's there. I can't do anything about it. I'm going to go for a walk. I'm going to make myself a cup of tea.

More clarity, "in all aspects of life," is a significant change Deborah has perceived in herself over her adult years. "When I was married the first time, I knew there was something wrong. And I kept thinking, no, it's okay. This is the way it's supposed to be," she said. "Now, I don't hold back. My voice is clearer . . . my speech and what I say and what I'm thinking, and I think that's the biggest gift of my age."

Sara's confidence is at its peak at this time of her life: "This is the first time in my life when there isn't anybody that could walk in this room right now and I wouldn't feel comfortable with. I'm absolutely at the peak of my confidence." She also said, "And I never felt that my whole life. I always felt like I wasn't deserving, I needed approval." Sara's confidence and ease with who she is and with others have come after much pain and struggle:

I think it was just life's experiences being very difficult and having a lot of emotional instability, seeking or striving for more stability. . . . It's sort of in my personality to say I'm going to pull myself up from this. . . . I'm going to take care of this myself. So, three times I got myself to the point where I just said, okay, now I have to take a big break. I have to change my life entirely. And in some cases it meant being in such poor health . . . that I had ulcers and hypoglycemia and all kinds of problems, but I just think striving to be healthier, better, moving beyond it; I would say that from a very early age I thought of myself as a survivor.

Like Donna, Sara has been on a spiritual path and attributes not only "maturity" but also prayer to her feeling more confident and comfortable:



As I faced stronger difficulties . . . prayer became the option that seemed most important to me. . . . And then it became sort of a discipline about 15 years ago, and it became part of a healing process for me. So, daily meditation and prayer and seeking understanding and insight about all that became very important to me. . . . It's not a religious thing, but it is a path to God. . . . It's maybe Taoist, if I'm going to compare it to a philosophy.

Sara added, "Essentially, I think of prayer as talking to your higher being, which is within yourself, and then meditation being listening." She also described having "a better handle" on her own life and her own experiences at this stage of her life. She wants to use what she has learned and share it with others:

I used to be embarrassed to say I want to teach people how to pray, and then of course, you open yourself up to all kinds of mockery, possibly. Now, it's like I feel that's a badge of honor. I know how to pray. I feel good enough about my ability to do that; I could share that with anybody. So, I have come to this supreme kind of place of confidence and feeling very inspired and hopeful that my expression will be worthwhile and will help somebody, or not.

Confidence was also associated with work for women in this study. In addition, for Nancy, Joan, and Catherine, confidence and competence are interwoven. Nancy, a recently retired plumber, said, "I didn't feel competent and confident when I was a kid. Over the years I've become much more confident. And work has made me feel confident because I do something that's hard to do and people appreciate it." Joan said, "I gained confidence and competence throughout my life by taking responsibility for myself." For Catherine, confidence and competence come "over a period of time of working in your profession." A former social

worker, with a master's degree in public health, Catherine retired as a psychiatric hospital administrator. She explained her thoughts by describing her own career:

I wasn't thinking I wanted to be an administrator . . . but as you gain confidence and you see who's around you, and the kind of decisions you make, I think you become competent. Anyway, I felt that I could do as well if not better than somebody else who would be in that position. . . . A number of people in the department, after the person who was there retired, said, "You ought to think about this position because you would be good at it in terms of administration."

When asked about her perception of herself growing up, in relation to confidence, Catherine said, "I think I always could find a niche for myself. And within that I was comfortable. I don't remember agonizing about major events in my life. . . . I was very active in high school." In addition, Catherine acknowledged that she always had the support of her parents and had been a good student. "No matter what I did, I ended up doing okay with it. I've been just very lucky, being in the right place at the right time." Although Catherine mentioned luck in relation to her career success, she also said, "I don't think I came across as somebody who was hesitant or not sure of what I was doing, or had anxiety about it." Also, in looking at changes she has perceived in herself, she viewed herself in relation to her career:

I think that when you start out . . . you're looking for approval, whether it's from your boss, maybe it goes back right from your early stages of your parents, or whatever. But I think that changes, too, from approval to recognition for competence. When I was making decisions and doing my job, I don't think I was wearing the hat of, are they going to like this? . . . I wanted to be recognized for what I did because it was good work. . . .

And that I think comes with age, competence, comfort—[with] who you are and what your position is.

For women in this study, then, confidence and competence are interwoven and are associated with working over a period of time and taking responsibility for oneself. In addition, increasing confidence comes with growing awareness and knowledge of self and others and with finding one's niche or place in the world. Increasing clarity in one's life can also bring more confidence.

### **Theme: Difficult Times**

All of the women spoke about challenges they have faced, obstacles they have met and overcome, struggles in their lives, and the emotional distress, whether related to the loss of loved ones, illnesses, marriages, difficulties with parenting, or existential issues. Some women spoke more about these difficult times than others, and responses appear in the previous section, on biological processes, and more appear in the next section. The responses in this study, of course, cannot tell the whole story.

Mary, 67, was diagnosed with a mood disorder in the early 1970s, the year after her daughter was born. "There was something going on. I didn't know exactly what it was, but I knew that things were not right with me," she said. "The depression was awful. I would be depressed almost every year. It was just something I couldn't shake, until 93 . . . so 20 years. Yeah, it's pretty—that's a lot of wreckage there."

In answering a question about her sense of self at this time, Mary described how, for the first time in her life, she has an identity as a worker, though she has had jobs in the past. "Well, I have become a worker. I never was a worker." She has been employed at a small company, where she has attained a position in management. "I'm quite happy there. So, work finally came

through.” She also expressed the following: “That’s a great joy, to be overcoming the wreckage and just being able to deal with stuff.”

Eleanor, 64, also faced challenges related to mental health. She spoke about experiencing “bouts of depression.” “I have developed a life—what can I say about it? It’s amazing. It’s an amazing life that I’ve had,” she said. “It’s also been extremely difficult at times because of that abandonment issue.” The “abandonment issue” is what she described as the most significant event in her life. When Eleanor was a child, her mother entered a psychiatric hospital after her brother was born:

My father told us that she was going away for a rest. And that had a profound, obviously a profound effect on our family and me because she was in the hospital for two years, and she had come home a couple of times, but it was extremely traumatic when she came home. And, of course, being that age, we didn’t know what was going on.

About her mother, Eleanor said, “I think that she was extremely depressed. And it could have been a postpartum thing going into extreme depression.”

Eleanor spoke about how she has lived her life in the face of her challenges. “The other side of it is that I think I’ve never taken anything for granted, so when I do things, when I experience things, I have the most incredible joy sometimes about these things.” She described darker times and how she never gave up on herself:

I’ve spent years with a black cloud hanging over my head. . . . I don’t have it anymore.

And the only reason I don’t have it anymore is that I never gave up on trying to have my own life. And I don’t mean to be melodramatic because this is the truth for me.

In regard to when the black cloud started to lift, Eleanor said, “I’d say it started getting better when I was 50. But that’s not really true because . . . I was moving toward it. I didn’t know it

sometimes.” Eleanor credits psychotherapy with helping her to reach the place she is in her life. “I can’t imagine it being done another way,” she added.

I was determined that I was going to work it out, and that I was not just going to be a survivor of this really difficult childhood in many ways, but not altogether, but that I was going to make a life for myself that was going to be good. And, in fact, that’s what happened. Of course, I regret that it took me that long to do this. But, you get to a certain age, and you accept things more. . . . I am at that age and because of how much I’ve worked through, it’s basically, what are you going to do? That’s what happened. This was my life, and that’s what I was meant to do, I guess, to work through that stuff.

As a result of the work she has done on herself, Eleanor said, “I can honor myself and feel fine about how I experience the world.” And she added, “I’m very grateful for my life, and I think it’s because it’s been hard to get here.”

Adela, 55, also spoke of especially difficult times when she was in her 30s. In beginning to speak about her sense of self in the world, she said, “I certainly anticipate and have experienced challenges and problems and upsets and really hard times.”

I remember there was a period of time where I went through incredible, just emotional, despair. And it was in my early 30s. It wasn’t something I expected, but it was at a time [when] where I was going in my work world and in my personal life, didn’t have meaning for me anymore. And so I quit everything. I quit my job. I moved. . . . I quit my previous relationships and then basically started over again.

Adela described her sense of self during that period:

I was doubtful of myself. I didn’t have my own stamp. I wouldn’t describe myself as a confident person. . . . I was smart. I knew stuff. I was interested, but I was also—I think

the word depressed is so overused and unclear—I was withdrawn. I was not excited with life. I was unsure of myself in the world.

About her emotional journey, she said, “That process, that journey of kind of starting over again at a time in one’s life when one is supposed to be relatively settled, I think in many ways was such a gift for me, because it was hard as hell.” It was also at this time that Adela entered the field of human services and “realized that this is really what’s important” to her, and not the business-related work she had been doing. She also sought psychotherapy and expressed the process like this: “I felt like I was remaking myself. I mean, there were days where I felt it viscerally in a way I can’t describe so easily in words. It was a process of literally sort of stripping away and then reforming.”

More than half of the women spoke about having been helped by psychotherapy at some point in their lives. Moreover, in addition to Adela, three other participants mentioned going through hard times in their 30s, though they did not provide details. For example, Elizabeth, 64, who spoke about how she has more confidence and is more comfortable with herself, said, “I think people are unhappy in their 30s, which I certainly was.” In regard to her 20s and 30s, Pauline, also 64, said, “I certainly wasn’t all that happy during a lot of it.” In contrast, she described herself at about age 40: “I knew sort of who I was, and what I wanted, and what I didn’t want. And all my major decisions seemed to have been the right decisions for me.”

Women in this study have faced difficult times that were, in Adela’s words, “hard as hell.” Many have sought psychotherapy to help them through these times. A few have described the joy they have since found in their lives or the gift of a more assured sense of self.

## **Themes: Happiness and Personal Philosophy**

In regard to the changes she has perceived in herself over the years, Joan credited two lessons she learned. She described the first: “As soon as I learned the lesson that happiness is an inside job, my life changed for the better.” She noted: “I started to forgive [my partner], stop blaming him because I felt miserable. We’ve been together 41 years, and we’ve had major challenges but are now reaping the rewards of a pleasant life together.”

Joan spoke about how she had started on her journey to self-awareness, which included much reading and questioning. In her late 30s, she returned to school for a master’s degree in human services administration. In addition, after she retired from her work in social services, she attended a program of personal development seminars. Joan credited the seminars, where she “started studying about unconditional love and really got an understanding of what that really is,” with especially helping her to improve her relationship with her partner. The second important lesson she learned, then, “has to do with unconditional love, for myself and others.” She learned to appreciate her partner “for the spirit that he is within himself” and loves him “for the person that he is, not who I wish he would be.” She also said, “There’s a lot of things about him that I used to wish were different, but I don’t do that anymore.”

Elizabeth also spoke about happiness and how it comes “from within.” She said, “You’re not going to be happy if you look to another person, relationship, any specific activity or person to make you completely happy, that’s for sure.” She believes happiness also “has to do with how you feel towards your activities or the people in your life.”

I think people get bogged down by either wanting their lives to be perfect, over fear of looking silly if they try something, over insecurity about what folks think about them, and that kind of thing. And just after a while you just have to stop worrying about all that, I

think, and realize that you're not the happiest person in the world, and you're not the most miserable either.

Elizabeth is a teacher and longtime traveler to Latin America, where she adopted her son as a toddler. To her, happiness also comes from giving of oneself:

I think people find happiness when they accept what their life has given them, really appreciate how much that is. And that's so easy to do if you just turn on the news. . . .

They always say giving makes people happy. And it does. It does. When you're giving of yourself, and you're just out there in the world and being useful, that's a good feeling.

Elizabeth continued, speaking about aging and values: "And I do think age helps you solidify what your values are." In regard to how she has changed, she said, "And so, I would say, I have changed a lot in my adult years, from thinking about men way too much, or clothes and shopping. And now my values are a little more in line with what I approve of [laughs]."

Donna shared her "personal philosophy of prices and prizes": "For everything we do, whether it's a job or a relationship . . . or whatever, there are prices we pay to have the prize. And nothing escapes that." She continued: "But when the prices we pay become too dear for the prize, then it's time to look for another prize." In regard to a relationship, for example, she said, "The prize was safety and security. . . . He had four kids, he had the grand kids, and yet, we don't have a meaningful conversation about anything."

Development of the self, for Joan, Elizabeth, and Donna, and other participants, too, includes living according to one's values and beliefs, learned over the course of their lives.

### **Theme: Regrets**

The final interview question was the following: *Is there anything you would have liked to do differently in your life?* Participants' responses were diverse but related to the self and



relationships, which form the core subthemes. In addition, half of the women said that if their lives had been different, they would not have learned what they did, or met their current partners, or similar sentiments.

### **Subtheme: Self**

In regard to what they would have done differently, Claire, Elizabeth, Nancy, Sara, Catherine, and Donna spoke in relation to development of the self.

Claire said, “I would have liked to have focused more on my skills, my strengths, to build up a body of work that I haven’t had, that I haven’t done, to take myself more seriously.”

Elizabeth said she would not have taken her life for granted so much and “maybe become more spiritual at a younger age.” She started meditating in her 30s, she said. “And then I really prayed, and wished, and dreamed to become a mom. So when that was fulfilled for me, that made me feel, become, more spiritual.”

Nancy said, “I would have liked to have been more self-aware.” She explained further: “I see young people today—my son, he’s growing up in the city. It took me a long time to be self-aware.” It did not take her very long to become politically aware, however. She recalled her time in Paris in 1963: “The French kids were so political. They were saying, ‘What do you think about Diem? . . . I didn’t even know who they were talking about. I was so totally unaware of politics and what was going on in Vietnam in 1963.’” She also would have liked more self-confidence. “I just didn’t have exposure. And I felt like I was too much of a country bumpkin . . . I wish I had had more sophistication at home.” She ended her thoughts with this:

What I got was good, and hey, I’m glad I wasn’t born in a struggling country. There’s a world out there where people don’t have the choices that I had. . . . I’ve been very, very

privileged. I'm not going to . . . moan about the things I didn't have growing up. That's ridiculous, because I had my needs met to the best of my parents' abilities.

Sara spoke about wishing she had developed "personal goals": "I feel like I was always going with the flow, being directed by others, being an extension of a man." She continued:

At almost 60, I'm looking at . . . who's going to be directing this portion of my life. Am I going to let a man direct my life? . . . No, I'm going to choose my own goals . . . I've been feeling like a lot of people have been trying to hold me back, for whatever reason. She also said, "The fact that I've made this conscious choice . . . to take direction of my own life and make my own choices is hugely empowering."

In regard to her "regrets," Catherine would have liked to develop her "musical or artistic side." She said, "I had the opportunities there, and I didn't want to do it. . . . I think I lasted two weeks at piano lessons." She has a piano now and "dabbles with it." In addition, she has started taking painting classes. "I'm working on a set of flowers that actually I am very pleased with." She added, "I don't have any talent in it, but I don't know." She also wished she had started studying Spanish earlier, so she could be fluent in the language. In addition, she had always wanted to be in the Peace Corps, particularly after college, but she could not commit to two years. "It was very popular, and I was going to do it . . . [but] again and again, I was offered this job, so I figured, I'll take this, and then I'll do that."

Finally, only Donna mentioned formal education in her response as to whether she would have done anything differently: "I'm torn because I want to say yes. I would have my PhD and gone deeper rather than broader, because my life experiences are very, very broad, not necessarily that deep." She continued, "Not too narrow but more narrow and deeper simply so

that I could be earning a good living because for my long-term care, finances are an issue.” She then turned to her way of being in the world:

Everything is always as it should have been. You were supposed to learn these things and these are the only ways you could have learned them. If you had your PhD in English or in education, you wouldn’t have had all of these other experiences that have brought you to this place of who you are right now. So, I choose to trust that and not live in regret.

### **Subtheme: Relationships**

Six of the women spoke directly about marriage or partners or children in response to whether they would have done anything differently in their lives.

Elizabeth said, “I guess sometimes, now, at this point, I’m sad I haven’t had a 35-year marriage.” She continued, “I was really immature when I got married. But I’ve learned so much, and I’ve become so independent and strong.” In addition, Elizabeth has been drawn to the West coast and said, “I think, why didn’t I move out there in the 80s when I was free, and my dad was going to help me get settled? . . . But then I wouldn’t have my adopted son.” She added, “I think my life is nice, interesting [laughs]. It is what it is, too. I mean, you can’t go back and re-do things, that’s for sure.”

Deborah said she “probably should have left” her first husband earlier. “I didn’t feel confident financially. I didn’t feel confident on my own, I guess.” She added, “I guess there was a part of me that thought, people can change and then they don’t. Now I’ve sort of understood people don’t change. Or you can’t change them.”

Mary said she would not have married. She referred to the “double standard” in her marriage: “I had a child. And I had a job. And I had no help.”

Pauline's response as to whether she would have done anything differently was, "I don't really think so." She said, "I suppose if I had met someone else and decided to get married and have children, maybe that would have been also a very happy life for me." She continued: "I always wanted to have a boyfriend, but I never really wanted a husband [laughs]." She added, "I was very, very, very lucky that I met [my partner] when I did. He was the perfect person at the perfect time . . . and he didn't want kids."

Adela said, "I guess, sure I could always find things I would like to do differently, but then my life would be different." Adela gave an example: "If I had chosen to take that job working for the photo gallery instead of going to work for the newspaper, would my life have been different? Yeah, maybe. But then I may not have met [my partner]."

Eleanor and Joan's regrets are specifically related to children. Eleanor said, "I have to say, I regret not having children. . . . Most women I've talked to who haven't had children, they made a choice. I didn't make the choice." She said, "I wasn't in the position to find somebody that I thought I could have children with. And at the time I didn't think I could handle having them on my own. . . . So, I'm sorry about that." Eleanor said that in the near future, when she is working part time, she hopes to be involved in some way with children. She added, "I'm a kid at heart. . . . I wouldn't want to get to the end of my life and say, 'I guess I really feel this way, that I didn't have my time with children.'"

One of Joan's "biggest regrets" is that she did not "appreciate" her son's talents. "I didn't make him feel worthy and special." Both Joan and her partner have master's degrees; her son, however, "would rather work with his hands." She wished she had "played more games" with him and "appreciated his talents instead of wishing he liked school more." She also wished she had a better relationship with him, in general.

Key findings related to regrets include the subthemes of self and relationships. Half of the women in this study would have focused more on developing the self, including skills, strengths, spirituality, personal goals, self-awareness, confidence, and artistic or musical talents. One woman had considered obtaining a doctorate. In regard to relationships, one woman was sad she did not have a long-term marriage at this time, one would have liked to have ended her first marriage sooner, another would have never married. In addition, one woman regretted not having had children and another not having appreciated her son's talents.

### **Social Processes**

A significant sociohistorical-political event changed Donna's life: "Even more so than my divorce, 9/11 was the end of my world as I knew it." She was the only participant who spoke about the personal impact of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Donna was a flight attendant at the time. "I didn't know anyone personally, but I was so affected by it," she said. "And I didn't want to go to work anymore." She retired in 2003, after more than 30 years of flying:

Emotionally, I never thought of my job as safe again. And I was a mother . . . and every time I went to work I had resentment, so much resentment, saying, this is not what I signed up for. I did not sign up to think that I may not return home from work today. And I also became compulsive about cleaning up the house before I left, and thinking, in my mind thinking, okay, if I don't come back from this one, will my sister know where to find the—and I did that for almost two years after that. Every single time I left the house to go flying, I was preparing to die, and not in a morbid way, but in a responsible way. And I couldn't do that anymore, so I retired early. And now, if I could go back, being

single now, and if I could go back to the way the world was, and have my flights and my friendships, I would consider it. But the world's changed.

Donna also spoke about how the attacks on September 11th affected a cohort of flight attendants:

I wasn't directly involved, but so many of us . . . for some reason, I don't know why it was then, maybe it took us long to sort of realize . . . whether it was PTSD [posttraumatic stress disorder] that I haven't acknowledged, or whatever it was, there were hundreds of us out of [airport] who retired the same day I did.

Donna's description of how the events of September 11, 2001 interacted with and influenced other factors in her life and the lives of a cohort of flight attendants leads to the third and final section of the research findings, that of social processes. Social processes are associated with the social context or environment and include a woman's social roles in family, groups, the workplace, and community. This section also includes sociocultural and historical influences on the course of a woman's life. The first interview question regarding significant events or experiences is related to this section, as well as the question on a dream or vision of one's life, described below. In addition, the following questions asked during the interviews relate to this section: *What is the quality of your significant relationships, and how have they changed? What kind of connections do you have with younger and older generations?* Core themes to emerge from interview responses include Family of Origin, Marriage or Life Partner, Work, Lifelong Learning, Community, and Political Activism/Social Justice.

### **Theme: Family of Origin**

All of the women spoke about how either the family in which they grew up or particular family members shaped their lives in significant ways. For Joan, it was both. The most

significant event in her life was growing up in a family of 10 children. Her mother was a nurse who worked nights and was also active in the community. “Our house was clean. We had healthy meals. I don’t know how she did it. . . . We had no money.” Joan also learned to be independent at an early age. “If I wanted to buy a record or something, I knew I had to earn the money myself,” she said. “I definitely got the message that anything I want to do in life, if I set my mind to it, I am capable of doing it.” She also identified another aspect of her family she found significant:

We always talked. We had discussions about events and things like that, so always intellectual questions, just questioning things together. I had an aunt . . . she’s in her 80s, and she would come up with her six kids, and we’d all sit around the table, talking about life and answering the difficult questions, that kind of stuff.

She associated the openness her family displayed during these discussions with her choice of a life partner, a man who identifies as biracial. Joan, 62, who is of Irish and English heritage, met him when she was 20 years old. In explaining why she and her longtime partner never married, she said, “Probably my independence and my need to take care of myself had a lot to do with it. . . . My mother always told us, you need to be able to take care of yourself. Don’t depend on a guy.” Joan’s grandmother likely held values similar to those of her mother: “My aunt . . . tells me that their mother instilled the same kinds of things in her. . . . I hear [my grandmother] was quite a woman. She went to college, and she was born in the 1800s, so unusual for that time.”

Education was strongly valued in Pauline’s family of origin. Pauline, born in 1947 and the oldest of five children, said, “Being born into the family that I was born in was very important.” She said, “It was the post-World World II era, and my parents also had gone through

the Depression, so all of those things . . . certainly played a role in our lives as young children.” She spoke about how the Great Depression had shaped the life of her father, a college professor, and, in turn, those of his children. “Our father was [chuckles] notoriously thrifty. . . . We each grumbled about it when we were children, but it certainly worked out very well for our family.” Many members of Pauline’s family were teachers, including her mother and grandmothers. Pauline herself is a retired schoolteacher. She attributed their having been in the field of education as helping her parents’ families of origin to weather the Great Depression. “They didn’t suffer as much as other people did because their families were always in education, so they always had some kind of job.” She added, “But, it was like, always, you’d better appreciate what you have now because—I think I always had that sense of you’ve got to just be careful and plan ahead.” She described further her parents’ values:

They felt paying for a good education was really worthwhile, and travel. And it was pretty unusual when I was a child, but the seven of us went all over the world together, and all over the country together. That was not the common thing in the 50s, 60s.

In addition, she said, “I think that my father’s interest in history was maybe part of the reason why I have maintained that interest too, up until now even.” Discussions were also part of Pauline’s family life:

We would talk a lot about political events. . . . Of course, during the 60s and 70s, there was a lot going on that he didn’t approve of, so there were lots of discussions about those things. . . . He just thought that things were getting too extreme, and so do I in some ways, but there were a lot of arguments about things during that time with him.

Despite the arguments mentioned above, Pauline described her family as having been similar to the family on the television series *Father Knows Best*. “I have to say I really feel like I



was very, very, very lucky to be born into that family because I know a lot of people do not have those kinds of experiences with their parents and/or their siblings.” When asked when she became aware of how fortunate she was in regard to her family, she described a time while at college when she went home with a friend for Thanksgiving, and her friend’s stepfather and brother were “just screaming at each other.” Pauline was “totally shocked.” “I couldn’t believe that any family was like that. My family was like *Father Knows Best*, so I thought everybody’s family was *Father Knows Best*” [laughs].

Elizabeth described “growing up in a really loving household” but with parents both “having some psychological and emotional issues that were kept hidden, as they were in those days.” She grew up, therefore, with “some anxiety” but despite that, she said, “We had a really good family life.” She acknowledged that coming from a loving home helped to provide a foundation for her life:

It made me want to give back for one thing. I used to have this image of our house as a golden ring of kind of security but also almost a rooming house where five strangers lived together and got along so well. We were all so different, but it felt safe and protective. I knew that when I grew up, I wanted to work with people and help their situations a little bit because I’ve had such a good one.

The women in Adela’s family have provided a foundation for her and continue to shape her present. Adela, who identifies as African American, has become a “little bit of a story collector,” collecting stories of her family, like her grandmother before her:

I think of the women in my life who really stand out because they were so foundational for me: my mother who was a teacher; my aunt who’s still alive, who was a teacher; my grandmother, who died at 101, who was not a formal teacher but a teacher in many other

ways. This was a woman who came to this country when she was 14 . . . by herself, to come and be with her father . . . and she built a whole new life here, in a different country with a different language and a different culture . . . and she was so genuine and so big in the world. And she would tell stories.

Adela began collecting family stories in her mid-30s, as part of an assignment in graduate school, and she has since been “so appreciative of all of those different threads that have come together” in learning about her family. Her grandmother has given her “the constancy of her spirit,” Adela said. “And what she passed on to us and shared with us is something that I feel is a gift and a legacy . . . her life and her being in the world.”

It is through stories that Adela believes that she will be able to connect with her father, who recently turned 90. “We don’t have a good relationship. In fact, for many, many years, it’s been very painful. And now I find myself very aware of his mortality.” She characterized her father as acting “almost like the historian of the family.” He “would spend time with all kinds of people, listening to stories. And so he collects all these stories, but he doesn’t share them [laughs].” She wants to “try to pull some of that out of him, to have that exchange, because, she said, “I think that’s what I’m so aware of now, that the generations are changing. And how do we hold on to that?” The way to connect with him is through the past, and she has come to realize “just how present the past is for all of us.”

Six of the participants, including Adela, spoke about fathers who were emotionally distant or detached, or described a difficult relationship in some way. Four of the six women spoke about becoming closer with their fathers in later life.

Donna said her father was not emotionally available to his family. He had served in the military during World War II. “He kind of shut down. We could never talk about the war, ever,”

she said. “He was in Normandy. And he was in the Navy. And he was clearly traumatized by that, but we didn’t know that until he was probably in his 80s.”

Eleanor, Deborah, Mary, and Joan spoke about developing closer relationships with their fathers. Eleanor said, “I decided after my mother died that I was going to work on my relationship with my father. And between the two of us, we worked on our relationship.” By the time he died, they were “very close.” Deborah also became “very close” to her father “in the last years of his life,” she said. He lived into his 90s. “It was wonderful. I mean, close that he could actually call me just to tell me he loves me, which was just the most wonderful thing.” Mary “made up later” with her father. “He lived into his 90s, so there was time there for us to get together.” Joan did not see her father very much growing up because he was working. “But, he was very proud of us,” she said. “And, later in life, of course, we got to be closer. He was kind of in the background of my life, kind of detached, but he was always working.”

The past is present in the lives of women in this study, to use Adela’s words. Their families of origin instilled values and shaped who they are in various ways. Also, a significant finding to emerge was the role of fathers and the development of the father-daughter relationship.

### **Theme: Marriage or Life Partner**

All of the women spoke about relationships with marriage or life partners, or the desire for a long-term relationship. Half of the women mentioned directly that while growing up, marriage was an expectation.

In regard to her family’s expectations, Elizabeth said, “The message was more or less you go to college, you meet someone to marry in college, and you get married, and then you live happily ever after.” Elizabeth went off to college and married when she was 21, “way too soon

and way too young.” The marriage lasted five years, and then she was divorced. “And I just never found another partner.” When she was in her early 40s, she adopted a child from a Latin American country, one of the few countries that allowed single women over 40 to adopt. In regard to parenting her son, she said:

I was pretty protective of him from different guys who might want to play around with fatherhood, so I essentially decided I didn’t want anyone else influencing him besides me. But that also was a downside because he hasn’t had a male role model either.

Elizabeth also spoke about her desire to be a parent: “It’s like the parent thing was more important to me than the male-female relationship.” Her own parents had been “such loving parents” and had provided her with role models. “Because my parents’ relationship was friendly, but it wasn’t in love . . . I didn’t have a role model for a couple too much, but I did for parenting.” Elizabeth also said she would like to be in a close relationship with a man again.

Nancy had also seen her life “as one of being married and having children.” She and the man she married were together five years before he was diagnosed with terminal cancer in 1980:

So that was the worst part of my life, just to have a two-year-old—and he was a very active kid—and a husband that we knew would not survive . . . and so it was a big struggle. And he died 18 months after he was diagnosed. . . . My son was three and a half. And I had never wanted to be a single parent. I waited to marry until I found someone who wanted to share in parenting and was into my values, equality of the sexes and everything. And so, I was left a—what is it? —a canoe with no paddle, or whatever.

After her husband’s death, Nancy had difficulty finding suitable men for relationships: “If I had sat and imagined my life, I, for the longest time, imagined myself being in a long-term

relationship, and tried really hard, particularly after [my husband] died, to find someone, and it just didn't work out."

I tried Parents without Partners and different things, and I was just not the first one to be asked to dance, let's put it that way. And I felt like it was an uphill struggle trying to find men. And the men I found were not really good partners.

Nancy spoke about how her difficulty with finding suitable men has affected her: "I've grieved it. I've grieved in my life, that that's not to be," she said. "I sort of grieved that I probably wouldn't have any more children." She also said, "I thought about . . . women in many parts of the world that don't have partners or whose life is much more difficult than mine is. I know what I've missed, but I don't dwell on it that much." She has female friendships she finds fulfilling. "At this point, it's fun hanging out with my women friends. And I've always been sort [of], I think, woman centered." She added, however, "That's not fair . . . I have several close male friends." In regard to relationships with men, though, she said:

I find that men my age require so much more attention, and I've done a lot of caregiving in my day, but I'm not ready to take it on. And also, I don't trust men for being equal partners where it really counts. I can see that they have other values, other attributes, but I find it very annoying when I have a close male friend that doesn't understand that when I cook dinner, he has to help clean up. I don't want to fight the old fights anymore.

Marriage was expected of Deborah, and she also said, "Those years . . . you wanted to have all your children before you were 30." She was married shortly after graduating from college in 1966 and had her first child at age 26. She was divorced from her husband in the 1990s:

At 50 years old, I looked in the mirror when I knew I was getting divorced. I hadn't done it yet. I hadn't filed yet, and I just looked at myself, and I said, "Okay, today's the day. Look at yourself. You can choose to be happy, or choose to be sad. This is your choice." That's it. I think I saw some pictures of myself at my birthday when I was 50 . . . and I just looked so sad.

After her divorce, Deborah was single for about 13 years. When she passed age 60, she was thinking, "Am I going to live the rest of my life without having felt that—you know, from a male—and did I want to really live alone?" She also said, "And did I want to go live where my children were even though I knew they could move anytime? Nothing in life is that stable."

Although Deborah tried dating websites, she "fell in love with no one." She turned to what she had learned from a man who spoke to her about dating in the Orthodox Jewish world. Deborah described what he had taught her:

You start out with a goal. In the Orthodox Jewish world, the goal is to get married . . . . Then you have to examine your values. Are they on the same level? Do you have the same values? Then trust. Is this person trustable? And then personality, can you laugh together? Is it good? Right? And then chemistry. And I said, "Oh my gosh, I've been doing it upside down: chemistry, personality, trust." And when you get to values and goals, you no longer have the same values and goals. You want to get married and he doesn't. Done. Why are you together? . . . Or he wants to get married and you don't.

Deborah clarified her goals, and when she met the man who would become her second husband, she used what she had learned.

Claire was 19 when she married. Her first pregnancy was a stillborn child. She was 24. "That was the first time anything bad had ever happened to me. And I was shocked. And it

wasn't expected. . . . It certainly has reverberations throughout my life." It made her realize that "nothing is certain, and so you always live with this 'what if' scenario." In addition, she said, "It means, for me, that you can't count on anything until it's signed, sealed, and delivered. I lost the baby in my eighth month. And we had just decided to order the baby furniture and move."

Eighteen months later, Claire was pregnant again and had a "wonderful daughter." She then had another child. Claire expressed concern in relation to her daughter: "And so, for example, when my daughter got pregnant, I was nervous. She was much older than I was when I had my first pregnancy, but I just was worried."

Another significant event occurred when Claire was in her early 30s. Her husband died suddenly. Claire said, "I will say, on the other side, I am now happily married, not to the second husband [laughs], but my third husband." She added, "I finally found love. It took me a long time." Claire, 66, married her current husband when she was in her early 60s. She met him by way of a dating website. "I think it's the way to go—when it works," she said of the technology.

Claire was married to her second husband for more than 20 years: "And I spent 20 years agonizing over how could I leave this wonderful man. But it wasn't quite so wonderful." She was in her late 50s at the time of her divorce and had "no career, no nothing, no money," she said. "My whole life was us. And it was very, very scary, but I did manage to get a job." She also obtained a master's degree.

Unlike the women above, marriage had not been on Pauline's mind. "I think that I really knew from a very, very early age that I did not want to get married at a young [age]." And, she said, "At that time, that wasn't necessarily what people thought." She had many friends who married soon after college. "I knew that I really wanted to spend a very long time on my own getting to know all kinds of people, traveling a lot." Pauline, who is 64, met her current partner

about 20 years ago. She had been looking for the right person for about 10 years. Although she did not want children, she said, “I was about 40 when I started thinking well, maybe I would like to have a kid. I felt that, but very briefly.”

Adela spoke about a significant event in her life: “The more recent is my current partnership, actually my marriage with a woman who had unexpectedly come into my life at a time when I didn’t anticipate that I would have such a deep relationship with anyone.”

We . . . were married . . . once they changed the laws so that could happen. And we’re also in the process of planning to relocate to another country because federal law doesn’t allow us to be here because she’s not a U.S. citizen. So, it’s these two very different kinds of—the politics and the personal come together in very particular ways.

Adela spoke about her relationship as if “a door opened into a whole new life,” and one that was not in her “personal view” of what her “life plan” and experience would be. “So this major change will happen when we move to [city]. . . . We’re just so in love with that city. We have to figure out the immigration stuff. . . . Now, for me, it’s not something that is so negative or overwhelming.” She added, “In some ways, what a fabulous detour I took when I met [my partner].”

In summary, events have come unexpectedly into the lives of these women, including losses, but also new loves. And life has not fit neatly into a package of marriage, children, and happily ever after, an ideal with which so many of these women grew up.

### **Theme: Work**

Five of the women in this study described themselves as currently retired. Although Deborah was not employed at the time of the interview, she did not use the word “retired” to describe herself and, therefore, was not included among the five. She spoke about her situation:



This is kind of the first time in my life when I'm no longer employed. I'm sort of out of the range where you want to start a new career, although I've never felt old at all, and . . . I could run a small country if given to me.

Pauline and Claire, both retired, described looking for their place in the world of work at this time of their lives. For Pauline, a retired teacher, it will be volunteer work. "I would like to get back into some kind of more regular volunteer work in teaching, and/or helping kids in schools or something like that. And I've done a little since I've retired, but I'd like to do more." The voluntary work included teaching in a Caribbean country. In addition, she mentioned an organization that has "been doing a lot of eviction blockings, and leadership development, and education for low income homeowners." She has not found "exactly the right thing yet."

Claire, 66, said, "I'm at an interesting place in my life, not a fun place because I'm retired." She continued, "At the age of 62, I got what I thought was my dream job." For reasons unrelated to her performance, and which could be described as political, the job did not work out. "The recession came in very handy because my position was eliminated," she said. "So, there I was, at the age of 65, and I had really hoped to work at least until I was 70, or until something happened to me because I really enjoyed it."

Claire spoke about the ageism she believed she encountered when she tried to look for another job. She was the only participant who mentioned ageism in relation to work:

I think there was also the issue of age because, of course, I tried to get another job. And I really do think that there is an age thing. . . . Everybody tells me I don't look my age, but I'm not 40 anymore, and even though I'm energetic, and I'm in good health, and I know how to work, I guess there's too many other people out of jobs. . . . When I went for other

interviews, I could tell that they were just being kind, that, no, they were going to get someone younger.

Claire also said, “It’s very, very hard for me to be retired. I don’t like it. I don’t want it. I don’t know what I want to do. I don’t want to work for someone else.” She mentioned that on a recent overseas trip, she and her husband were joined by tourists around their age. “Their lives are all trips, cruises and trips and stuff. And I thought to myself, that’s sort of like daycare for seniors. I wouldn’t want that. I want to continue traveling, but that’s not my life.” When asked what she saw herself doing, Claire said, “I’m writing a memoir.” She has been in a writing workshop for a few years, and she would like to have the book published. “That would fulfill a goal, to have a book written and published, and then, please God, sold [chuckles].”

In regard to careers, looking back at her younger years, Claire said she never had career goals and attributed that, in part, to the sociohistorical context. “I think that’s partly my generation; I really was sort of on the cusp of women’s liberation.” She added, “My career goal, growing up as a kid, was to marry a successful man. I have to say that in, what is this, 2011, that is still many young women’s career goal, which is shocking to me.” She said, “It implies a dependency on someone else instead of on yourself.”

Seven of the women did not have specific career goals in their earlier lives, including Adela, the youngest participant, and Catherine, the retired psychiatric hospital administrator. Catherine had been active in journalism in high school, received “good feedback” and “recognition,” and entered a college with a strong journalism program. She said, however, that writing was “natural” and “felt comfortable” but that she did not “sit and explore” a career. “I don’t know if people do that,” she said.

Elizabeth's family expected her to go to college. "But then there was nothing beyond that, no career information." She did not have "dreams of being an astronaut, or a doctor, or anything," she said. "I know I wrote in some third grade essay, 'I want to be a teacher when I grow up,' a teacher or a nurse, but those were what women did."

Half of the women in the study have been or are classroom teachers, like Elizabeth, in K-12 schools, colleges, or adult education programs. Deborah's mother told her she was going to be a teacher. And Deborah said, "I was going to be the best teacher I could be." She started out teaching elementary school. "And then . . . I had my kids, and in those days you weren't teaching if you were pregnant, so I couldn't go back to school." She tutored when her daughters were very young and also obtained a master's degree. She then taught at a college for 10 years, teaching aspiring teachers. While at the college, she also became a consultant to schools, wrote grants, and ran summer programs, though she was "never a full-time professor." After teaching, she worked in business in various capacities. "It was in the money world. . . . It was not brain surgery, and it was so easy to do. Teaching of seven-year-olds is a lot harder. Or teaching teachers to teach them."

Nancy, 68, described her career path, from growing up in a rural area, to doctoral studies in French and, finally, to becoming a plumber. She recalled what happened when she spoke to her high school guidance counselor about going to college: "Let's see, your highest score on the aptitude test was mechanical. Oh, that's bizarre. Your next highest score is social work, or social something—social services. What would you like to be, a teacher or a nurse?" Nancy recalled. "I swear that's exactly what he said. And I said, 'I know I don't want to be a teacher. My mother's a teacher, so maybe a nurse.'" She also said, "I don't remember thinking I should be in

mechanics at all. And also, those were the days when girls had to take home ec and boys took shop. Girls did not take shop, period. It wasn't even thought of."

Nancy entered college intending to study nursing but then found out what she had been missing. "There was no life of the mind in that town" where she grew up. She spent her undergraduate years at a university in the South in the early 1960s, taking courses in ancient Greek philosophy, French, and linguistics. "It was an awakening, an intellectual awakening. And it was very exciting times, and I had a few other friends that also were from the backwoods and were excited to be there."

She studied French and then went to graduate school, intending to get a PhD. "I had all the credits, and I started studying for the exam in 1969, and I realized it's not what I wanted to do." She eventually turned to her interest in cars. "My father fixed all our cars. And even though I didn't participate, because my brother did, it made me feel entitled to take apart my car." At the time she was looking for work, garages were renting space, so she connected with a garage and began working on her car. She recalled scenes from the distant and more recent past:

I can remember my father and other men hanging over the hood of a car trying to figure out what it was. And it was a collective job. And 40 years later, I was hanging over the hood of a car with my father's friends that were all not able to change brake pads. And I was there changing the brake pads . . . with all these elderly men around me. I felt like I had reached something.

Nancy obtained a job in the garage in the early 1970s. Two men and two women worked there, and one of the women was leaving. "They wanted to have a balance of sexes," she said. "And so, when they saw that I successfully rebuilt my carburetor and was doing other things on the car, they asked if I wanted a job." After her husband's death from cancer, however, she

decided not to continue at the garage: “I had to give all my energies to fending for myself and for my son.” She then began working “informally” with a neighbor who did construction work and plumbing. “After a while he had so much confidence in me, he said, ‘Here, you take the plumbing customers. I’m going to do carpentry.’ And here I am, a single mom, no formal training in plumbing.” A woman she knew who was a master plumber was looking for an apprentice, and Nancy then spent three years in an apprenticeship. She continued plumbing and retired in 2010, though she is now helping her son to “get the business going.” “We have an emergency business,” she said. “And people don’t have heat, their hot water heater’s leaking. That’s been the focus of my life until now. I’m still with one foot in it and one foot out of it.”

In regard to work, Sara said, “I had always thought of myself as wanting to be an artist.” She majored in painting at college but described how the art market started changing and what that meant for her. “The art market really did change significantly about 30-some years ago, and curators, collectors, writers, everybody was looking for a new art to feed this big machine, this big industry, and it was contemporary art, and what [that] meant was conceptual art.” She described how the training of artists began to change:

There was a lot of interest in training artists to think conceptually and produce and create conceptually for this big art market . . . so up until then it wasn’t necessary to go to college and have a degree to be an artist. . . . But suddenly they started opening graduate programs for fine artists. . . . I quite honestly felt that while I was going to [college] and studying painting and all, I felt like I was right in there with everybody else, probably more of a conceptual thinker, so classes really came pretty easily to me.

She continued, “But I also felt like a big gender thing was going on.” Her art partner, “who was a guy, he was being encouraged to go through graduate programs.” About herself, she

said, “Basically, still at that time, the expectation was that yes, I would go to college, but I would just get married.”

I think [my family] felt like it was an unbelievably good thing to be able to go, and it was. My mother had not finished college. She had gone to [university] and had to drop out because of World War II and getting married, so it was something that she felt pretty strongly about. . . . It wasn’t about developing a profession or skill or anything, it was really just about the process.

Sara, however, left college without getting a degree, got married, and went with her husband to Africa. He had joined the Peace Corps, and she was considered a “non-matriculated spouse”; she had not been trained to do a specific job. It was 1971 and she was 20 years old. The Peace Corps was “a huge, life-changing event,” she said. (Some of her thoughts are expressed within the theme that follows.) She was 22 when she returned to the US with her husband. She started working as a buyer for a high-end department store and worked in retail for 15 years. During this time, she was divorced from her first husband and married again. She had her daughter in her late 30s and decided she would return to painting while raising her child. Her stepmother worked in a creative profession, and how she had balanced her life made “a huge impression” on Sara:

I was always really intrigued with the idea of being able to do something from the home because I’d watched my stepmother. She was a fashion illustrator; sometimes she went to an office or a studio, or an advertising department, sometimes she stayed home. . . . I liked the flexibility of that. I saw how my half brother was raised by her, not in a day care.

Sara said, “That was sort of my goal: to be able to learn how to paint or become a professional painter while I was raising my daughter.”

The process of painting has been more important to her than “selling and making a name” for herself. “I’m a fairly academic painter. I paint what I see. But I believe that to be very successful financially at painting that you have to have gone the route that a contemporary artist would have gone.” She never expected that she would be “horribly successful” with her painting. “That hasn’t been what’s driven me. It would be nice, and maybe at this point going forward in my career that is an open possibility.”

Sara has created a small body of work and has sold paintings over the past four years. “It’s hard to make a big body of work. I’m not a prolific painter. It takes a long time to paint.” She is currently part of a cooperative gallery. In fact, Sara’s interview took place at the gallery, and nearby two of her still life paintings were displayed. “I felt being part of a co-op made sense to me because I could paint and show what I wanted, and I could say this is where my paintings are without having to go out and sell myself to galleries and whatnot.”

To summarize the theme of work, more than half of the women in this study did not have specific career goals in their earlier lives. They also spoke of times when girls could not take shop and pregnant women could not teach in the classroom. Also, at this time, the women in this study are “not done in any way,” to echo Deborah’s sentiments, but a few are not sure what their next step will be.

### **Theme: Lifelong Learning**

The high level of formal education represented in this sample of women was a surprise; women with advanced degrees were not intentionally sought out for the study. Eight of the women have a master’s degree, and one, Adela, has a doctorate. The women returned to school

for graduate study at diverse ages, including in their 30s and their 50s. In addition, most of the women spoke about continuing to engage in informal or formal learning in their later adult years. Seven of the women, including Sara, spoke about their involvement in creative endeavors involving art, music, photography, and writing.

When Deborah was working, she always wanted to be “innovative,” she said. “I wanted to learn everything new. I still do. That hasn’t left me.” She misses “the excitement of having a job and doing something fun and learning.” Painting provides some of that. She has taken some classes over the past couple of years, and she has just painted a picture of her house. She had thought, “Oh, that’s so hard, but I did it, and people came and said, ‘That’s good.’ ” Her husband asked her if she would like him to frame it. “Frameable?” she thought at the time. Deborah conveyed her thoughts about learning: “The clicking of the learning of something new is a great feeling, and being able to master something new. I always felt like you got that from a job or whatever, but . . . it doesn’t have to be from a job.”

Adela is also involved in creative expression. “I love to do photography,” she said, but does not describe herself as a photographer. “I went through this phase of years of having the camera with all the different lenses and all that stuff,” she said. “But now I’m really into simplifying, so I got this really nice—and the most money I ever paid for a camera—Leica camera, with this fabulous lens. It’s small, and that’s what I use.”

Elizabeth would like to “produce something artistic that would have a little bit of value to it.” She has taken classes in collage and “used to do a lot of writing,” but does not do as much anymore. “I do believe in lifelong learning and development,” she said. “I like crafts, but I don’t get around to stuff, so there’s sort of an empty place that I’d like to fill with a little more artistic and productive activity.” Regarding what may be holding her back, she said, “Cleaning the



house, or getting involved in a novel and not wanting to stop, or just a little inertia. I don't know exactly." She did say at a later point in the interview that she was "a little insecure about the quality of what" her work might be.

Sara, the professional artist, described her process of learning painting when she returned to art in her 30s. "There was progress. I always had the sense of getting better, and feeling better about it and learning." It was a slow process, however. "It took years," she said. "I painted with one particular teacher . . . off and on for probably . . . 18 years." In addition, she said, "I probably had the look and ability to paint well 15 years ago, but in the past five years, my paintings are stronger because the design quality is better." In regard to those who view her painting, she said, "Whatever people feel about it, whatever emotional attachment people have to it, seems to be more sophisticated."

What people tend to say about my still lifes is that there's a deep tranquility about them, that there's deep peacefulness, and I think that's sort of what I would strive for. . . . My creative expression is almost prayer like. It tends to always be seeking the quietness.

Sara's spirituality is essential to her sense of self. "I really became fascinated by how people find peace or tranquility; how do they find peace of mind?" she said. "Part of it was going through the process myself. How have I found peace of mind, and how could I turn that around? She would like to write a book for teenagers on how to pray, a writing task she has been trying to do for 15 years, about the same length of time she has been studying comparative religion. "I'm trying to develop some workshops and maybe through the workshops develop the prayer book."

I started out feeling I had to be very academic about it. I had to understand all world religions before I could presume to tell somebody how to pray. But then over these years,

I've realized that all I'm trying to do really is teach people they have their own voice and to trust in that voice.

Turning back to her earlier years, from age 20 to 22, Sara lived in Africa with her husband, during his assignment in the Peace Corps. The experience "opened up a huge awareness." She had been "one of those people trapped in all the trees, couldn't see the big picture, couldn't see the forest, was just overwhelmed by whatever was going on," dealing with her "emotional stuff." She conveyed her experience like this:

That was sort of like lifting a veil of sort and saying, you're just one of all of this. This is the universe. There's a spiritual oneness. This woman who lives next door to you and is sitting on your front stoop, and you can't talk to one another because you don't share a language, you're still one with that person.

The experience, she said, "broke down a lot of my feelings of separateness," and she returned home "realizing that not everybody lived such an entitled life."

Donna, who is also on a spiritual path, is learning to still her mind. She obtained her master's degree in integrative medicine at age 54. She had always been "fascinated with medicine" but never went to medical school. "So, in a sense, it was the medicine I believed in anyway because I don't trust traditional medicine." In regard to lifelong learning, Donna said, "For me, school is my place to hide . . . I could go to school right now and work on my doctorate because it's the safest place I know, because it's all mind, a place for my active mind." She expressed her changing sentiments, however: "But my heart's too big now, especially with the Buddhist things. I'm learning to still my mind and not be so driven with my head, and come from my heart." Returning to school would be "an escape" for her. "Right now, for me to come from my heart is a more important learning. And it's still learning; it's just not a university."

Most of the women in this study have embraced lifelong learning, whether in classrooms, art studios, the workplace, the wide world, or one's heart. The "clicking" of learning something new, as Deborah said, "is a great feeling."

### **Theme: Community**

Ten of the women in this study spoke about the importance of community and what it brings to their lives. Community may be a religious or spiritual group, an urban living environment, or a group of women friends living in one's building, as Mary has found. Two of the women, however, had previously lived in more urban areas and have found it difficult to adjust to their more isolated living environments.

Since taking early retirement, Catherine has been actively involved in her community, especially that of the Unitarian Universalist Church. "I left work, but I was always doing something and I've continued. I sit on a number of boards," she said. She has been focusing more on international immigration, and the boards she is a part of are those involved with immigration, refugees, and "grants that go to programs that support community services or programs that will enhance cultural understanding."

Elizabeth finds the "community aspect" of the Unitarian Universalist Church important. "Because I live alone, I think it's important to have different communities of people where you can feel comfortable." Elizabeth grew up Presbyterian, and her grandfather was a minister. "There was a little bit of compulsion to go to church . . . and then resistance, of course, to those rules." She continued, "I went to the UU because they're very nondenominational, and they do a lot of social causes and social justice work." She has become involved in the church's prison justice work.

Nancy loves the urban community where she has been living for about 40 years. “I have my friends in the community. . . and we all sort of take care of each other, too. We took care of an elderly woman down here until she died.” Nancy grew up in a rural area and said, “It’s a more humane environment in the city, believe it or not. . . . I have a fear of the country. I have a fear of alienation from growing up; I like it in small doses, but I don’t want the loneliness.” There is another aspect she likes about her community: “We don’t have to be consumers here. . . . We have so many thrift shops . . . and that’s unusual too, to be able to get by on so little money in the city.”

Pauline has lived in her urban community since the 1970s. “There’s not a lot of big commercial development. It’s just very small scale, lots of community spirit and community celebrations.” Pauline also appreciates the diversity of the population. She has been able to maintain long-term friendships and, overall, feels very lucky to have found a place where she feels “so much at home.” She did say, however, “It is expensive, so it’s harder for some people to move in than it used to be.”

Mary’s living space, a large apartment complex, is where she enjoys friendships with many women. She also expressed concern about aging and being alone, however. “If I can stay in this place, I’ll be okay. . . . There are a few women here . . . who are in their 90s and living alone, but with the support of the rest of us.” In addition, she expressed her thoughts about whether her only adult child, a daughter, would be able to care for her and, at the same time, she expressed reservations about expecting her to take on the responsibility.

Both Deborah and Claire expressed difficulties with finding new friends in the relatively isolated areas they moved to after their recent marriages. Both had lived in more urban areas. “I wound up here without my friends and family, and other supports,” Deborah said. “It was a

much harder adjustment” than she thought it would be. “At this age, you don’t make friends as easily.” She continued, “People are a little more standoffish. . . . They have their children and grandchildren with whom they spend a great deal of time.” She mentioned her efforts to meet people: “I do extend myself. I’ve gone to lots of things alone, and met lots of people.” She also said she has met “a few really great people. And you don’t need a lot.”

Claire has also had difficulty making friends. “I have some friends now that I’ve made recently here . . . that are my age, and we’re having a great time together, but . . . the hardest thing I’m finding in my life now is making new friends because of where I live.” She added, “It’s very hard, very, very, and . . . you think, Oh, my God, what am I doing wrong, or what am I not doing? And apparently that’s not it. It’s just the way your life is here.”

The provision of comfort, care, and connection, and a sense of belonging are some of the aspects of community that are important to women in this study.

### **Theme: Political Activism/Social Justice**

Seven of the women described taking part in the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, including the civil rights, antiwar, and second-wave women’s movements. Some have described their involvement at that time, however, as safe, lacking courage, or as not radical. For example, in regard to the women’s movement, Elizabeth said, “I wasn’t in a core group of women who really did radical things, but I did participate.” In addition, five of the research participants took part in women’s consciousness-raising groups, and some of the women spoke about the importance of friendships with women at this time of their lives. Six of the women spoke about their current activism, like Nancy.

Since retiring in 2010, Nancy has made trips to New Orleans to help with rebuilding efforts in the wake of 2005’s Hurricane Katrina. She organized the first trip with her son. “We

went down and worked in three different communities doing plumbing. We've gotten three families out of their FEMA trailers into houses." For the second trip, she went with a group of plumbers, electricians, a general contractor, and others. "We worked in the Lower Ninth Ward, a house that had been gutted. And we did all the plumbing, wiring, and construction on that house." Nancy returned a third time to continue working on the same house. She had a "nice budget" to do the work. "I was able to finance a lot of these trips because I asked for donations from my customers. And I have a big customer base." She is currently planning another trip, and she described how she would like to "connect kids in the trade schools." "For instance, in the Lower Ninth Ward, I didn't see Black people doing plumbing. Why are there not Black plumbers? What's happening with the kids? And there's this trade school right in the Lower Ninth Ward." Nancy said she is making contacts in New Orleans. "Maybe I can find what's holding them back, what needs to happen for them to get into an apprenticeship program."

Nancy's activism can be traced back to her undergraduate years in the South, in the early 1960s, a period of time she described as her "awakening to the whole issue of race." She became involved in the civil rights movement and recalled "significant" moments from that time: "walking down the street in [town] and having a Black man approaching me and then getting off the sidewalk and tipping his hat . . . the way they had to degrade themselves to survive." She started becoming politically active but was involved "in a very safe way." She described an example: "I was with a group of students and got arrested once in [town] where there were too many students to get into the jailhouse, so we were outside, strumming guitars and whatever. I never was in jeopardy." She was also a member of CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality. "For a while the Whites were sort of dominating the hierarchy of the civil rights movement," and

CORE later became a focus for Black students, she said. She described herself as “not very courageous” in regard to student activism:

I know people who went to a Ku Klux Klan meeting where they were threatened and in danger. I don't remember being invited to that event [chuckles], but I was always—as you will see from my story—I was always in the back line. And I don't think it was a coincidence. I think I was rather fearful. And when I look at *Eyes on the Prize* [PBS documentary series], it was really scary to see. I don't know if I would have had the courage to march across a bridge, and knowing that the police were on the other side ready to beat . . . you.

“I still care very much about my politics,” Nancy said. “The hardest thing right now is I just feel so cynical. And I feel like the planet probably won't be here, or the planet will be here but we won't be on the planet because of the degradation.”

Elizabeth, who graduated from high school in 1964, also described an awakening, in regard to the activism of the 1960s and 1970s. “My college had *in loco parentis* as a rule, so it was really kind of strict. My senior year we had one antiwar rally and one sort of be-in.” She described a “be-in” as “like a peace and love, sitting on the grass with kites, that kind of thing.” She continued, “And we had one march against Dow Chemical; so this is 1968, a lot of people.” She added, “I really didn't know what was going on.” She explained further:

The summer of 67, I went to Europe, and all these kids in Europe said, “What about Vietnam? What are you guys doing about it?” And I was embarrassed that I knew very little about it. So I came back from Europe with a little more interest in the bigger world and knowing stuff. And I did get involved then in the antiwar movement. I went to some

protests and demonstrations. And I had a sociology professor that talked pretty strongly once about privilege and how can you help.

Elizabeth said, “I did become politicized at the end of the 60s and got into a women’s group, several of them, but early on in the 70s.” She continued, “So, suddenly in the late 60s, all through the 70s, I’m going to protests all the time, I’m dating Black men after I get divorced, I’m traveling all over Latin America, and I’m working in poor communities.”

In regard to the student activism of the late 1960s, Pauline described herself as “holding back a lot.” She said, “I felt like I needed to be shown that these things were worth going out and demonstrating.” She spent her first two years of college at a “small, conservative school” and then transferred to a large university, which she said was an “amazing experience.” “I just felt like I was exposed to so much, and yet I felt like it was a place where you could be yourself; whoever you were, there was a place for you there.” While she was at the university, there was a protest against the Dow Chemical Company, whose representatives came to recruit on campus. “And I didn’t participate in that because I just felt like, okay, well, we see what the point is, and now let’s go back to class [chuckles].” She added, “I don’t think I would feel that way now.” Pauline also said, “There was a lot about racism on campus, the treatment of athletes who were recruited to the campus. So there were strikes about that.” In her senior year, the whole campus was shut down for a while; there was a “huge riot,” she said. “The cops went in and started beating the students, and even people who were just walking down the street.”

Similar to Elizabeth, it was after college, when Pauline moved to the Northeast, that she became politically active, beginning in the 1970s. She worked with a political group involved in tenant and welfare organizing, education, and eventually in workplace organizing. Pauline’s role was working on the Spanish language section of the group’s newspaper. She was an active



member of the group for 15 years. She also experienced group living; the most important was living with 12 persons, which she described as “just as important as going to [university], in terms of really exposing me to a lot of different ideas and just having very intense relationships with these people. It was only 10 months that we lived together.” It was “pretty amazing,” she said. The group has had reunions in recent years.

Eleanor was involved in civil rights in college. She was on a students’ committee against racism and has always been “passionate” about civil rights but said, “I can’t say I’m doing much now.” She continued: “I stand in awe of the Freedom Riders. And, in fact, I got a chance to go down to Mississippi for the 40th reunion [in 2001] . . . and I got a chance to interview some.” She said, “And my God, it was like, I can’t believe this; I’m doing this.”

I remember when there were Freedom Riders . . . and I kept thinking, Oh, my God, I’d love to do that, but I don’t have the nerve. And I met a couple of women who had done it, a couple of White women, but they were in high school, and they’d tried to join. And they got on the busses and everything. And their parents called Martin Luther King and said, “You’ve got to bring those kids back.” So they actually talked to Martin Luther King. And he went to the kids and said, “Sorry, you’ve got to go back to your parents.”

Eleanor traveled to Jackson, Mississippi on her own for the reunion. “It was right after the attacks on the World Trade Center, and they were thinking of canceling it, but they didn’t. I paid my own way and everything, and I was just thrilled to be there.”

For Catherine, the events of the 1960s, including the Robert F. Kennedy and King assassinations, and the Vietnam War, gave her “a different kind of a perspective in terms of the meaning of what’s important in life.” Although she entered college intending to study journalism, her volunteer work started her on a career path oriented toward human services,

“working with people and being a change agent.” She had never thought about a career in social work until she met people in the field. In addition, she started volunteering when “the whole area of mental health was changing. It was just very early on in the whole de-institutionalization, and the program I ended up volunteering with was really with people who had been in the psychiatric hospitals for many, many years.” Catherine also said, in regard to her career, “I’ve seen the whole trajectory from the de-institutionalization to community based and more a focus on recovery and working with people’s strengths, and the role of employment in people’s lives.”

Adela, who was born in 1956, and identifies as African American, said she was grateful to be born at that time. “Because my political consciousness at least had some umph to it [laughs]! If I had been born 20 years later, forget about it!” Turning to her college years in the 1970s, she said, “My freshman year in college I was part of a group of Black and Latino students, and we took over the administration building.” She added, “And to me, that’s education.” In expressing her thoughts about recent times, she said:

We’ve entered a period of passivity and, I think, people talk about political corruption, and they talk about lobbyists, but to me political corruption is about the corruption of the individual. And it’s happening throughout our society. And what that means is that people don’t participate in politics anymore, and I think that’s a real problem. And I think that there’s an enormous fear of the consciousness and the level of engagement that happened in the 50s, 60s, and 70s.

More recently, Adela attended a demonstration after the Iraq War had begun: “I was so struck by the number of people who had gray hair . . . and it’s like, wow, where are the protesters of today?”

Adela also spoke about her family history in relation to the civil rights movement. Her grandmother was “a fierce civil rights advocate” who believed that it had to be done “through the system.” A cousin of hers, on the other hand, “was a fierce, you got to blow up the system. And so when the Black Panthers were big, [my cousin] was right there. And so we would have these incredible fights in our family between Nana and [my cousin].” Adela said, “But they were both right, and that’s what has been kind of beaten out of—and I don’t mean with sticks—by economic pressures and health pressures, beaten out of people. And it’s not been nurtured.”

In addition to involvement in the civil rights, antiwar, and women’s movements in the 1960s and 1970s, five of the study’s participants belonged to women’s consciousness-raising groups. Also, half of the women spoke about the importance of female friendships at this time of their lives.

Catherine belongs to a women’s group that has been meeting for about 10 years. “We’re all in different stages,” she said. “Some people are still working, a couple of us are retired.” They meet once a month and talk about “whatever’s going on.” They are also “supportive around difficult times: death of a parent, a sibling, divorce, surgery.” The group is an outgrowth of women’s consciousness-raising groups and was started after members’ grown children moved out of their homes. “I think women friends are really critical, not only in terms of a support system, but to help to reflect on what you’re thinking and to talk about what’s going on in the world, and hopes and dreams,” Catherine said.

Mary also was part of a women’s consciousness-raising group in 1969 or 1970. She said about her first group, “The women were very—I was just amazed. One was an artist. One was a director at a museum. . . . It opened up a lot of things to me.” In addition, Mary said her

“significant relationships have definitely changed from men to women.” Her female friends at this time range from younger than she is to much older—in their 90s.

Elizabeth, who was involved in women’s groups in the 1970s, also recalled attending a “feminist encounter” held at a college; by this time, “all of the -isms” started coming into her awareness:

Women of color started talking about, “Now you’re interested in us, you White women, but why do you think we should be interested in you? You’ve got a lot more to learn from us than we have to learn from you.” And it was really true. And among my group of friends in 1978, there were two African American women and about five or six White women. And the Black women dated White men, and the White women dated Black men. And we had this really tight group of women, and we were happy to be together across racial lines.

In regard to friendships with women at this time of her life, Elizabeth said, “My women friends have always been important to me. . . . I’ve maintained a closeness with several women that will always be true.”

Eleanor described her introduction into women’s consciousness-raising groups:

I had a friend who was going to a consciousness-raising group back in 69 or 70, and I laughed at her and I said . . . “I don’t get that. You must hate men” or something like that. And then maybe two years later or something, it wasn’t that much later that I joined a consciousness-raising group myself. And it was like, wow! It’s like night and day. It just totally opened up my eyes about how women are treated and how, my God, that’s wrong. . . . It just started to get into my brain that women were not being treated well. I was not being treated well.

Eleanor, who identifies as bisexual, said the women's movement eventually led to her involvement in the gay rights movement. It was in the early 1970s "that I met . . . the first lesbians I'd ever known, but that I knew were lesbians," she said.

When Nancy was growing up, she did "typical things that girls did back then," including reading "romance comic books." "I was pretty unformed," she said. "I didn't feel outraged about the way we were treated. I don't remember feeling outraged that we were given limited career choices." Then she became part of the feminist movement. "It was like Gloria Steinem said, you have those 'aha' moments where suddenly it clicks. I think she called it clicks, and then you suddenly see that you're not a full human being." Nancy had many aha moments in the 1960s. "There was so much unfairness that was so blatant, but I guess I hadn't noticed it." In 1968, while in graduate school, she went to France. "I arrived in February, and then there was a mini-revolution in May of 68, so I was right in the middle of it, again, in the back row" [chuckles]. Nancy worked in France for a while. "I was very much being a feminist . . . and the French students, I found, weren't, the French women that I was hanging out with."

Nancy returned to the US, left her doctoral program, and moved to the Northeast, where she became part of a women's consciousness-raising group. "And it was incredible to be with other women and to think of something that you thought is your personal failing, finding out that other women were in the same situation, and how could we handle it differently."

In the late 1960s, Deborah got married. She did not mention consciousness-raising groups but, in regard to the notion of women and work, she said, "I thought I could do it all. I'm not sure you can do it all. I don't think you can, even today." She described her own working life: "I used to say if I didn't work, what would I tell people when they said, 'And what do you do?' And my daughters are so happy to be mommies right now, so incredibly happy to have that job." Deborah

left school teaching but was tutoring when her two children were very young. She said, “I remember sometimes taking my daughter with me, the little one, when she didn’t want to go to school. I said, ‘Come with me.’ The girl I was tutoring could read to her, and it was fine.” In regard to working and raising her daughters, she said:

I think I did a fabulous job with them. Their memories are that I didn’t leave them, that I was home. They don’t remember me being out and working all the time. They don’t. I had a great presence there always, even though I would say, “I’ve got to read papers,” or I would take them to their ballet lessons and grade papers, but I was there.

Although Joan was not involved in consciousness-raising groups, she did participate in the antiwar movement in college but did not describe her involvement. In regard to the women’s movement, she referred to her family: “We definitely have a lot of women in our family, definitely dominated by females, and my mother was the stronger of my parents.”

Sara attended a university on the West coast, during years of “extreme activism” at the school. “Like everything in my early years . . . everything was a challenge, even going to college,” where “a student was shot” and students were “on a seven o’clock curfew.” She was not involved in any of the activism. “I don’t think I was even mature enough,” she said. She described an incident from the first few weeks of her arrival, while living in off-campus student housing: “I guess some kids were on my roof throwing rocks at National Guardsmen. And so [the Guard] stormed the building, and I can remember shutting off the lights, locking the door, drawing the drapes, and hiding in the closet, underneath clothes.”

Sara also said, in regard to the women’s movement, “I was not so really even conscious of it.” Again, she did not feel “mature enough” or that she “knew enough.” “That was too big a concept for me. I wasn’t even thinking about having equal pay or equal opportunity. I was

getting married. That was sort of what was designated as being my role.” In addition, she said that it seemed to her as though the women’s movement was “something that was happening on the East coast.”

The level of involvement in the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s varied among the women in this study. Those who were involved described an awakening of social or political consciousness, which has had an impact on the course of the rest of their lives.

### **Theme: The Dream**

The final part of the section on social processes includes responses to the following interview question, which is loosely based on the work of Levinson (1978): *Did you have a dream about how your life would unfold? This dream can be described as a vision of how you imagined your adult life, or it may be a direction to which you felt drawn. This dream perhaps originated in childhood, developed and was transformed over the adult years. The dream either became part of your adult life or faded away.*

In response to this question, four women could say they had a dream that originated in childhood. Sara always thought of being an artist. Eleanor, at age seven or eight, had a dream to travel all around the world and “make people happy.” Ten years ago she joined a chorus that travels to different countries to “break down barriers between people through music.” Claire’s dream was to be a writer. Donna, at age 10, began dreaming of a home life she described as like that of the Walton family on the television series, *The Waltons*.

Claire has always loved to read, and the dream of writing a book has been part of her life since she was a little girl. She recalled a time in sixth grade, when she went into the library’s stacks, as she often did, and found *Please Don’t Eat the Daisies* by Jean Kerr. She started

reading and “laughing hysterically.” She said, “I just thought to myself, if I could only do that, just make somebody happy for a few minutes and write a book, that would be great.”

In her junior year of high school, Claire won third prize in a national writing contest. She had written about her experience at a department store, working in women’s shoes. “I saw all these gorgeous shoes. And people would try on shoes, and I never wanted to touch anybody’s feet.” After she won, she thought to herself, “I guess I can write.” The writing “wasn’t hard to do,” and she did not “struggle over it,” she said. “I thought, yeah, it’ll be fun some day to write something. But my purpose in life, my mission, was to marry and marry well.”

Years later, she mentioned to her mother that she would like to write a book, and her mother responded, “What do you have to say that hasn’t already been said?” Claire said, “That slowed me down for a long time. And it still makes me put the breaks on things.” She added, “But still . . . what have I got to say? . . . I live basically a pretty normal life. Who cares about what I have to say? But I’m doing it anyway.” She said it has been hard to shut off the critic in her head, but she is trying. “I guess I’ve been held hostage to the inner me.” She also said, “I’m 66. I’m feeling my age. I know that I don’t have a whole lot of years left. I mean, who knows how many?”

At about age 10, Donna started dreaming of the day when she would have her own life: “When I get my own house, and when I get my own life, when I can make my own decisions, and choose my own friends . . . things will be better.” She continued, “All I ever wanted was a Walton Mountain state of mind. I wanted eight kids. I wanted mom peeling potatoes over here, and the little ones running around here, and the men doing their thing, and then everyone coming together.” Donna has not had that “to this day.” “And I don’t know why because I really do believe that our thoughts create our reality. And if we set an intention for something, and if I’ve



dreamed about it that much, why couldn't I have that?" She continued, "And not from a victim's standpoint, but why haven't I created that if that's what I said I wanted so much? So maybe I didn't want it so much because I kept choosing other things."

Mary spoke of a dream that originated in adolescence: to attend college and be independent. Although she did attend college, it took longer to become independent. She said of her younger years, "I couldn't leave the house unless I was getting married, so I got married." She was 24. "It wasn't in my mind to get married. It was just in mind to be out in the world and on my own." Mary had a child, was diagnosed with a mood disorder, and then was divorced, which led to some dependence on her parents. "I always wanted to be independent, which didn't happen for the longest time. . . . Just lately I would say I'm independent."

When asked whether she had a dream about how her life would unfold, Deborah, at first, said, "The hardest part of my life right now is I don't have the next dream." She continued: "I can dream about the next generation, what will that be like?. . . . But I myself don't say, I want to be doing X in three years." When prompted as to whether she had a dream as a child or teenager, however, Deborah said, "Of course, yeah. You marry—the prince comes, takes you off, and you live happily ever after." She also said, "I can remember thinking I was going to adopt all these kids. I never did. I was going to be mother of the year. I never was. My kids say, 'You should run for Mrs. America.' " Finally, she said, "I didn't do all of the things I wanted to do, but a lot of the things I did I was very proud of, and I was really happy that I did them."

Marriage was a dream of one's own or a family expectation for at least half of the women. Elizabeth, in response, said, "I get kind of sad about that because I think a lot of women have had an interest or a drive from a young age." She described herself as having been "very social," and she is still "quite extroverted," she said. "But people who didn't have that social

compulsion and success at it [laughs] developed strong interests and talents. I think that would have been nice, to become a scientist or something like that. But that wasn't in the cards for me." She also said, "As my life was not unfolding into having the children in my marriage, and my marriage was not lasting very long, I had to think, Oh, dear, what [chuckles], what do I want my life to be?"

Nancy never thought about becoming a mechanic or anything else when she was growing up. "I think, as women, we really still cling to the idea that finding a partner is going to be the answer," she said. "We think that there is that person, or an event, or a town, or whatever that's going to make it all right. And I don't. I'm an existentialist. I don't believe that in general." She continued, "But also, as women, we don't see our potential, I think, because of focusing so much on being acceptable to the male sex." When asked if she thinks she has realized her potential, she said, "No, there's so many things that I'd like to do." She would like to get more involved in New Orleans. She would also like to go to Haiti. "I speak French and toyed with the idea of learning Creole, which is a different language really, and figuring out if there is a role I could play. The country's so devastated."

Adela, who identifies as a lesbian and is now married, said, "I never expected to marry... I didn't worry about it." Also, she "didn't start out" with a vision of who she wanted to be. She did mention a couple of dreams she had. "I once thought I would be a scuba diver." That was one of her "little fantasies" while spending childhood summers by the ocean. And then, she said, "I dreamt of myself as a professional photographer." She said about life, "It's kind of funny, because it's always been like a little bit of a surprise, and that's always how it's been for me."

Pauline said, "I don't think I ever really very seriously thought about doing anything other than teaching because of the family I grew up in." Pauline also recalled a time in her life

when she was about 12 and met a woman, likely her father's colleague, whose lifestyle appealed to her: "She was I think a single woman that had traveled a lot, and going to her house, and seeing—she had all these cool different things around her house—and I thought . . . this is who I'm going to be."

Catherine said, "I can't remember starting out having this big picture dream about what I was going to do." She said, "The only goal I could think about was I wanted to live in a big city"; she does not live in one. "And it's not like I feel like I've given up a dream. Things kind of fell into place, and one thing led to the other."

Joan had similar sentiments. "It's like life kind of unfolded. Whatever the opportunity was, I just took it at the moment. . . . I didn't have any aspirations." She added, "I never knew what I wanted to be when I grew up [chuckles]. I still don't know what I want to be when I [chuckles] grow up."

"What do I want my life to be?" Elizabeth asked herself. It seems that for many of the women, "life kind of unfolded," as Joan said, and they made choices and took advantage of opportunities along the way. Some did speak of early dreams. Eleanor's dream has been realized along her difficult life journey. Donna's dream of Walton Mountain has been transformed over her adult years. Mary's dream of independence has finally been realized. Claire is still working toward realizing hers. It appears that Sara is living her dream at this time of her life.

In summary, key findings among participants' responses in this chapter, according to the biopsychosocial perspective, are as follows: Findings related to biological processes include concerns about age-related physical changes, dementia, and cognitive functioning, and the importance of physical exercise. Findings related to psychological processes include increasing confidence, the importance of development of the self, including spirituality for two women in

particular, and living according to one's values and beliefs. Regrets were associated with development of the self and relationships. Findings related to social processes include the importance of lifelong learning, connection, and community. The development of the father-daughter relationship emerged as important to some women. A developing political consciousness also impacted the lives of many of the women. Overall, life has not fit neatly into the ideal of marriage, children, and happily ever after. More than half of the women did not have specific career goals, and it seems that for many of the women, life unfolded, with choices and opportunities along the way. Finally, at this time, it appears that all of the women would agree that they are not done in any way.

The next chapter of this study discusses some of the findings in terms of the literature reviewed and in combination with some theoretical points raised.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This final chapter includes a discussion of the findings in terms of the literature reviewed, and in combination with some theoretical points raised, in order to answer the overarching research question: What are the life experiences of women between the ages of 55 and 70? The focus is on key themes that emerged from this study in reference to sociohistorical context and psychological processes. These themes form the basis for the discussion because of their fundamental value in answering the overarching question that initiated this study. The second part of this chapter discusses the limitations of the study, recommendations for further research, and implications for clinical social work practice.

Lifespan developmental theory emphasizes the importance of contextual influences on human development. If lives are “best understood in the context of the times in which they were lived” (Schuster, 1993, p. 3), the extent to which these 12 women have been able to forge their own paths and make their own choices has been dependent on “the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstances” (Elder, 1998, p. 4). Teresa Peck’s (1986) model of women’s adult development also aptly illustrates the influence of the social-historical dimension of time. Most of the women in this study were born in the 1940s, both during and after World War II. The two younger participants, Sara and Adela, were born in the early and mid-50s, respectively. These women lived their college and immediate post-college years amid the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The level of social and political involvement varied among the women, however, and included those who did not participate in organized ways. Nonetheless, the

women's movement had an effect on the lives of these women, even if only "subtle and indirect" at times (Josselson, 1996, p. 253).

More than half of the women in this study entered college in the period of 1960 to 1965, which scholars have termed the "era of transition" (Schuster, 1993). Claire described her generation in a similar manner: "sort of on the cusp of women's liberation." They grew up in a time when White middle-class women in general were socialized for traditional roles of wife and mother and, in regard to work, were encouraged to become teachers and nurses or work in social services, as both Nancy and Elizabeth mentioned (Schuster, 1993). Women of this era diverged from traditional expectations by combining both family and career, and they were also entering nontraditional career fields (Giele, 1993; Schuster, 1993). Deborah's remark illustrates this trend: "You wanted to get married, you wanted to have your 2.2 children, and you wanted to have a great career and do something meaningful." In addition, women born in the 1940s were moving into early adulthood when increasing job opportunities for women were available while, at the same time, the women's movement was advocating for equal opportunities and a broader range of social roles for women, and greater freedom of choice (Giele, 1993; Josselson, 1996; Stewart & Healy, 1989).

By the 1960s and 1970s, combining work and family life had become common for college-educated women (Giele, 1993). Women in this study who entered college after 1965 were part of what has been termed the "era of liberation," a time when attending college was increasingly viewed as laying the groundwork for a career (Schuster, 1993). In addition, how historical and social circumstances impact a woman depends on her life stage or period in the life span at the time (Elder, 1998; Stewart & Healy, 1989). For example, Nancy's attending college in the South during the civil rights era and her involvement in feminism in her late adolescence

and early adulthood were self-defining experiences, which later influenced her career choices and social activism. Also, in terms of identity development, Sara's experiences with the Peace Corps in Africa changed her perception of herself in relation to the world, and she continued on a path of spiritual development. The women's movement offered young women, at least White middle-class women, opportunities for identity formation, self-development, and occupational choice (Stewart & Healy, 1989).

Deborah said that in early adulthood women of her generation wanted work that was meaningful. The women in Josselson's (1996) study also wanted their work to impact others in a positive and meaningful way. Bateson (2010) wrote that adults in late middle age are wondering how they can continue to make their lives meaningful. One way is through being generative. Although the majority of the women in this study have had generative careers throughout their adult lives, in teaching and social services, more than half of the women described current lives that are still highly generative, and their involvement shows no signs of ending soon. These women remain actively engaged with the world and continue to learn, echoing the notions of Bateson (2010), Lawrence-Lightfoot (2009), Levinson (1978), and Peck (1968). The highly generative women are teaching, mentoring, and guiding others, and creating works of art. For those who have worked as or still are teachers, like Pauline and Elizabeth, and Catherine, who trained as a social worker, generativity continues, often in new and different ways. Catherine has been involved in her faith community's mentoring programs for teens and new adult members, and Elizabeth is involved in prison justice work. Moreover, Nancy reminds her son and those of his generation that "people fought and died for a five-day work week—we are on their shoulders." Donna sees her son's world as "moving so fast and as "sometimes so meaningless." The world really needs those who have experienced life "in a different way, in a more gentle"

way and can offer “the old lessons, the old stories” that “can’t get lost,” she said. Eleanor, in her work as an oral historian, is leaving a legacy to her city: “I value the story that is in every person. So the reason I’m doing my work is to celebrate people’s lives. And there’s the little bit of social worker in me that says ordinary people have the most extraordinary lives.”

Continuing along the lines of generativity, many of the women in this study exemplify what Josselson (1996) described as moral purpose. In her study of women from college to midlife, Josselson said that although almost all of the women emphasized their moral values or beliefs, few of them led lives of moral purpose, or action, and, for those few who did, it was not until their late 30s that their lives were oriented that way. According to Josselson, moral purpose involves a “larger ethicality and breadth of vision,” in addition to commitment to a cause, which still awaited many of her research participants (p. 251). Late middle age may be the time of life when moral purpose comes to fruition. Although one can be generative through teaching, mentoring, and creating without a larger purpose, many women in this study have expressed a larger vision, a moral good, something larger than themselves. This may be, in part, what Bateson (2010) has described as active wisdom, or “ways of engaging with the world, which have been developed and honed over time” (p. 238). Catherine’s life exemplifies moral purpose, as does Sara’s. Sara, whose spiritual development continues, creates art imbued with the tranquility she has striven for in her life. And Eleanor said, “If we have a purpose in this world, it’s basically to care and love each other.” Her work as an oral historian, in a city that “honors famous people,” honors those who are “just regular folks.” Eleanor has struggled long and hard to create a life of her own that she can honor, and she translates this into her work: “I want to be a witness to other people in their lives. . . . I give them the space to say who they are, where they’ve come from, and to celebrate who they are.”



These are women who are living and working according to their values at this time in their lives and expressing those parts of themselves not recognized earlier or held in abeyance. Catherine said, “At this point, you think about wanting to de-clutter your life, thinking about what your values are. What do you pass on to your kids?” For Donna, learning to be “more honestly” who she is, is a process. She often used the word “gentle” to describe herself and her ways of being: “Whatever happens today is fine. Let’s be gentle about it. Life is hard enough without making this be something else to think about.” Mary has struggled to overcome the “wreckage” in her life and now values her work with a small company. She also spent many difficult years trying to gain the independence she so long valued and desired from both her family of origin and a “domineering” husband, and she has finally claimed a life of her own. Claire is working to put her life into words and give to others what she has so enjoyed and valued from reading, and perhaps reclaim the writer she was in adolescence, when writing came almost effortlessly. But life is much more complex, and she remains determined to complete the difficult task of writing a memoir. She would do well to heed Eleanor’s words and celebrate who she is and allow her life to be honored. Joan values compassion and “honesty, ethical behavior, love, and giving” of herself. Her current work has been oriented toward elders, whose lives she helps make more comfortable and from whom she has learned much about the life cycle. And Deborah finds her values in the lives of her adult children: “Life is fascinating, having watched children grow up, having them birth children on their own. . . . Whatever it is I’ve instilled anywhere in my children will continue. . . . I really did it! They’re having children; here’s my legacy.”

The pathways of Deborah’s and Joan’s lives, and those of Eleanor, Claire, Mary, Donna, Catherine, Elizabeth, Adela, Pauline, Nancy, and Sara have been diverse, though their lives have

been similar in that they have been partially planned, partially improvised (Bateson, 2010; Josselson, 1996). Bateson thinks of individuals as “artists of their own lives, working with what comes to hand through accident or talent to compose and re-compose a pattern in time that expresses who they are and what they believe in” (p. 24). For women, no matter what words are used, whether they compose and re-compose, or revise or re-establish who they are, through both planning and improvisation, there appears, then, the possibility of bringing oneself closer to one’s ideal self, though that ideal is likely never realized (Josselson, 1996; Melia, 1999). Adela spoke to the notion of self-realization: She once worked for a state senator, the “only woman and the only person of color in the state senate at the time,” whom Adela described as the opposite of how she perceived herself to be: “She was definite and strong and committed, and she was very clear.” Adela sees herself as closer to being that kind of woman, though she is not yet there: “I don’t think I’ll ever reach it. . . . Part of the appeal is to never reach it, but to always have a vision.” There is so much more these women want to do and be. “I still feel like I have an amazing amount of potential,” Donna said, and other women in the study have expressed similar sentiments. Life in late middle age for these women has a sense of being unfinished.

Also, according to Bateson (2010), adults in late midlife face the challenge of developing “a new consciousness” and freeing their imaginations as they learn “to discover and affirm who they are,” what they need, and what they have to offer (p. 22). Bateson speaks of a shift in consciousness as seeing one’s position in the world differently, or as “transformational learning,” and she describes this discovery process as similar to what women confronted in the consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s and 1970s (p. 41). Bateson’s notions are reflected in statements from the women interviewed. For instance, Nancy described such shifts as “aha moments where suddenly it clicks.” The discovery process in late middle age involves “learning,

reflection, and conversation, leading to engaged action,” according to Bateson (p. 22), a process in which the women in this study are engaged.

The women in Josselson’s (1996) study also described an increase in consciousness as they matured into midlife. These are the revisions in one’s sense of self, the central theme running through Josselson’s research; her participants tried to grasp with words how they understood more, were more open, and had more confidence. The same could be said for the women in this study. This consciousness, then, appears to continue to mature into a greater sense of self in later midlife. Several participants spoke to this. Donna and Sara both expressed a growing sense of awareness of who they are. Adela spoke about a “different awareness” she has at this time, not only of physical changes but an internal shift:

This is a time where I also can think about meaning, what my meaning is in a more intentional way than what I’ve done. You sort of make job decisions, and people go to this job and then that job, and you have your friends and you do stuff, and you just sort of live. And now there’s another layer that’s coming into it for me that wasn’t so conscious before. . . . Life, capital L, what’s my stamp? How do I want to be in the world?

Adela also seems to be describing a sense of clarity that is coming into being, similar to what Deborah described as the “biggest gift of age,” the notion of things being “much more in perspective” and having a “tidier mind, in a way.” Clarity, then, is related to a stronger sense of self. In addition, according to Peck’s (1986) model of women’s development, a woman gains “increasing clarity of self-definition” over time, but how clear her self-definition becomes depends very much on the “extent and quality of her involvement in relationships” and how that affects her capacity to define herself in her own terms (p. 280). For example, Claire has been having difficulty writing her memoir; she acknowledged that her mother’s comment many years

ago, “What do you have to say that hasn’t already been said?” slowed her down for a long time. Rather than perceiving herself as a woman with a valuable story to tell, from which others could learn, Claire still wonders, “What have I got to say?”; in effect, to some extent she appears to have accepted her mother’s definition of her, according to Peck’s model. It would be important, then, for Claire to have friends, family, or instructors who could have a positive influence on her writing in order to counterbalance her mother’s impact, according to the model.

Clarity of self-definition is similar to identity certainty. And Deborah associated increased clarity with feeling more confident. Moreover, researchers found that feelings of identity certainty and confident power increased from the 20s to the 40s into the 60s (Miner-Rubino et al., 2004; Stewart et al., 2001; Zucker et al., 2002). All the women interviewed for this study, either directly or indirectly, spoke about feeling more confident at this time of their lives. Self-confidence has grown through increased self-awareness, knowledge of self and others, and a more secure sense of where one belongs in the world; spirituality; more emotional stability; general life experience; and formal education and work experience. Increased confidence, then, for the participants in this study, is related to a stronger sense of self.

Women in this study also associated confidence with competence. The women spoke about competence in relation to work and being effective and responsible in their lives. In relation to her study, Josselson (1996) said, “All women want a sense of competence and a sense of connection” (p. 241). Bateson (2010) also said that adults in late midlife “need to articulate the meanings of love and work in their lives, what they would like to extend and what they would like to leave behind” (p. 23). Competence, however, includes a woman’s sense of “having meaningful import in others’ lives,” and “connection embraces skill in making deep and abiding ties” beyond intimate partners and children (p. 179). What both Bateson and Josselson said

appears to hold up for women in late midlife in this study. Moreover, intimacy concerns may take different forms and relevancy in late middle age (Newton & Stewart, 2010).

The women interviewed in this study stressed the importance of relationships not only with intimate partners and adult children but also with women friends; connections to neighbors and community groups were important, too. Relationships are not the sole means to continued growth and development, however; the women have also been invested in development of the self. For instance, Joan had to work on her inner self before her relationship with her partner could change for the better. The spiritual paths of Donna and Sara have contributed much to their growth. Levinson's (1978) words in regard to late adulthood seem to capture what is happening in these women's lives: "The voices within the self" become "more audible" and "more worthy" of one's attention (p. 36). The development of self, however, is often within a community, whether that is a faith or spiritual community, a group of activists, or co-op of artists, for example. Furthermore, not all of the women had an intimate partner when interviewed, and not all have adult children. Important connections take a variety of forms. Some of the women spoke about forging better relationships with fathers later in their lives. Catherine spoke about her role of grandmother: "I was very close to my grandparents, as were our daughters close to their grandparents. . . . That role with the grandchild is really significant."

In addition, in regard to growth and development, Hendry and Kloep (2007), who have criticized stage theories, also acknowledged their "significant" contribution: "to pinpoint that without challenges, conflicts, and crises, there is no developmental change" (p. 76). The notion that hard times can lead to growth and change is apparent in the lives of women in this study. Adela, Eleanor, and Sara spoke about how their difficult journeys led to their becoming who they are. Mary has found joy at this point in her life. Claire and Nancy endured devastating losses

whose effects reverberate to this day. These women have struggled to overcome internal and external obstacles along their paths. Their lives exemplify resilience.

“The past is active in the present,” Bateson (2010) said, “both as it occurred and as it might have occurred, whether as a source of strength or as a focus of regret” (p. 76). In regard to regrets, two themes emerged in this study: regrets related to self and those associated with close relationships or lack thereof. Unlike in Torges et al.’s (2005) study, the question asked in this study was open-ended. Also, in this study, most of the women did not use the term “regrets” in their responses. There is a sense, however, that some of the women have come to terms with regrets and “integrated” them into their “self-understanding”; some appear to be putting “the best face on things” (Torges et al., 2005, pp. 154, 156). Not enough information exists to explore these notions in more depth. For example, Donna’s apparent coming to terms with her life choice of not studying for a doctoral degree is related to her way of being in the world, yet the issue of financial security has also come to the forefront at this time of life. Elizabeth seems to be putting the best face on things in relation to having given up an opportunity to move to the West coast; one perhaps wonders why she did not try moving there with her son at a different time.

It appears likely, however, that in late midlife there is time for making changes in regard to the self and relationships. Sara is adamant about taking hold of the direction in which her life is going. Catherine is taking time to develop her artistic side. There is time for Claire to use her skills and strengths in writing a memoir. Nancy continues to develop her self-awareness in addition to her already strong political consciousness. In regard to relationships, however, changes are likely more difficult. Joan, it appears, has time to create a better relationship with her son. Eleanor, when she retires, will likely have opportunities to engage in educational or other

activities with children; that may not make up for her desire to have had children of her own, however.

According to Josselson (1996), “Revision of the self is most often revision of desire, the recognition that what one seemed to want at an earlier stage of life was a false desire...[and] now seems to have belonged to someone else,” or was dictated by “fear, passivity, impulsivity, unconscious wishes, or external pressure” (p. 242). These notions also seem to be related to Heilbrun’s (1988) “dream of closure,” which Nancy spoke to: “We think that there is that person, or an event, or a town, or whatever that’s going to make it all right.” And that, according to Heilbrun, is “the delusion of a passive life” (p. 130). “Recognition of desire is what impels a woman outward into the world,” Josselson said (1996, p. 242). “The course of revision for women, then, is learning, as we grow, more about the nature of our own desiring and more firmly grasping the reins” (p. 242). Sara’s determination to direct the course of the rest of her life speaks to this notion, as does Donna’s personal philosophy of prizes and prizes, Catherine’s retiring early, Mary’s work finally coming through, Pauline’s desire not to marry or have children, Deborah’s and Claire’s decisions to divorce, Elizabeth’s adopting her son, Nancy’s commitment to social justice, Adela’s marrying and collecting her family’s stories, Joan’s learning that “happiness is an inside job,” and Eleanor’s never giving up on having her own life.

The developmental paths of these women are diverse but have themes in common. Each woman has a sense of her effectiveness and having made a meaningful impact on others and her world while creating important connections beyond those of family members. To use both Josselson’s (1996) and Bateson’s (2010) words, composing and revising are a writer’s work, and the work is never really finished. And adult lives are like stories—with characters and themes, conflicts, unpredictable events, resolutions—and always, there is revising.

The findings of this study both confirm important theoretical aspects of women's lives covered in the literature review and add new insights. The findings show that in late middle age, there appears to be an increased sense of clarity in terms of self-definition or self-awareness, and an increase in self-confidence. Women are likely to be living and working according to their values and expressing parts of themselves not realized at earlier times of their lives. Late midlife is also a time when women may be leading highly generative lives, and generativity may be expressed in new and different ways. This may also be the period of the life span when women's lives exemplify moral purpose. Women's lives also show much resilience by late midlife. There may also be a sense of having come to terms with regrets, or at least putting the best face on things. Finally, life in late middle age has a sense of being unfinished.

Finally, then, a question remains: Is late middle age a "stage" in the life span? Increases in life expectancy and in the quality of life for aging adults in the past decades, allowing late middle age to come into existence, so to speak, "is not the result of genetic improvement, but of contemporary social and cultural forces," according to Baltes (2003, p. 126). Baltes identified "better material environments, more advanced medical practice, the improved economic situation of older persons, [and] more effective educational and media systems" as only some of the factors related to increasing numbers of older persons living longer lives with vitality and good health (p. 126). Late middle age, then, as a distinct period of time in the life span, like emerging adulthood, is "historically embedded and culturally constructed" (Arnett, 2009, p. 39). Also, late midlife can be identified as a period of time in the lives of adults, perhaps more so in the middle and upper classes, in industrialized and "post-industrial, information- and technology-based" societies that not only allow for a time of freedom, growth, fulfillment, and active societal involvement but also provide the sociocultural-environmental factors that continue to challenge



and support development as the mind and body age (Arnett, 2007, p. 81; Baltes, 2003; Staudinger & Bluck, 2001). If the period of late middle age is to be termed a stage, then, that word should be used as a category of convenience and not as a concept denoting something universal and timeless that is predetermined in all adults.

Why, then, differentiate a stage, or period of the life span and designate it late middle age? It appears that the biopsychosocial challenges and concerns of this period can be differentiated from those of the early midlife period and later life, that is, around 70 or 75 years old and older (Baltes & Smith, 2003; Staudinger & Bluck, 2001; Vandewater & Stewart, 2006). Furthermore, by examining the characteristics or aspects of late midlife, researchers can come to a more comprehensive understanding of human development across the life span. A deeper understanding of aspects relevant to this period is also helpful to clinicians who work with women nearing or already at late midlife, and to the women themselves. Knowledge of the challenges and concerns can serve as a guide for navigating this period, and can help validate or “normalize” a woman’s feelings and concerns. Finally, in a youth-oriented society, recognition of the period of late midlife can offer a positive view of aging, a time of growth and fulfillment, when new ventures, learning, and meaning are possible.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This is an exploratory, qualitative study of a small sample of women who live in two northeastern states. The qualitative design and small sample size render the study non-generalizable. Also, the vast majority of the study’s participants identified as White, all are college educated and, although there is some diversity in regard to ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation, the women are largely from the middle- to upper-middle classes, creating additional limits. Other limitations include a sample that is from one geographic region

of the US and limited time in which to do the study. There is also bias in relation to the use of a convenience sampling method and snowball sampling techniques; the women were self-selected and, although some were more forthcoming than others, they were by and large a self-reflective group. Finally, the findings may not be representative of women in the larger population who may not have access to adequate or suitable medical and mental health care, jobs or financial resources, familial or other social supports, and additional resources that can help a woman to navigate her life, face challenges, make choices, and meet goals.

In regard to recommendations for further research, there is a need for larger and more diverse samples of women. In addition, quantitative research that is survey-based to gain larger samples and study specific questions should be considered. Also, more accounts of women who have remained single their whole lives and do not have children are needed. What are the developmental challenges specific to these women, especially as they move into late middle age? Other directions for future research include focus on the development of the father-daughter relationship in later life, and the relationship to aging parents in general. The spiritual development of women in late midlife is another topic to explore. In addition, Miner-Rubino, Winter, and Stewart (2005) noted the need for research with individuals from “non-Western, nonindustrialized societies” in order to gain different perspectives on the “subjective experience of aging” in various cultures (p. 1608); diverse developmental pathways in general should also be explored.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

Throughout the years spanning adulthood, what all women share is this: “We change and we stay the same,” Josselson wrote (1996, p. 256; Mitchell, 2009). Social workers and other clinicians are the change agents that can help women navigate the biological, psychological,

social role and other changes brought about by aging (Mitchell, 2009). And they are guides that can help with coping during the inevitable losses (Gergen, 2009).

According to Mitchell (2009), a scholar and psychotherapist, “As they approach or live within late adulthood [age 60 and beyond], some of our clients feel lost, bewildered, at sea”; when a woman asks, “ ‘what now?’ she may become frightened” (p. 300). Although other reasons may exist for such feelings, Mitchell noted, a “developmental diagnosis” can allow clinicians to “recognize patterns, possible causes, directions for treatment” (p. 300).

Mitchell (2009) has written about her use of developmental stage models in psychotherapy sessions with women in later adulthood. For example, she has used Levinson’s (1978) conceptualization of eras, and the notion of stability and transition, to help women understand better what they may be experiencing in this period of their lives. She helps women to reappraise their lives and explore what they would like to keep, change, or add.

Mitchell (2009) also suggests incorporating Gilligan’s (1982) developmental model of the ethic of care in therapeutic work. For example, according to Mitchell, many women who have been the primary caretakers of children or aging parents or who work in the helping professions, may come to a point in their lives when they want to include themselves in “the circle of care,” but they struggle with how to do this without feeling conflicted in some way (p. 305). Mitchell encourages clinicians to “help clients ask themselves about why they do not see themselves as worthy of their care” (p. 305). She said “a new self-regard” comes about when women recognize the “illogic of the inequality between self and other,” in Gilligan’s words (p. 74; Mitchell, 2009, p. 305).

On a different note, Gergen (2009) stressed the “multiple potentials” and diverse pathways taken in later adulthood and in the post-retirement years (p. 256), in line with Bateson

(2010) and Lawrence-Lightfoot (2009). Gergen mentioned, however, a lifestyle option oriented toward “leisure and relaxation,” in addition to those lifestyles geared toward new challenges and careers or a life of service (p. 256). Moreover, Mitchell and Bruns (2009) added a note of caution to the notion that later adulthood should be filled with productivity, activity, and contribution, and said this needs to be examined for “patriarchal assumptions about what is worthwhile activity” (p. 120).

Jordan (2009), a clinician and theorist, recalled what her colleague and mentor Irene Stiver once told her: “Aging isn’t for the weak” (p. 245). Social workers and other clinicians need to be aware of the issues women face as they age, and the societal factors that impact these issues (Mitchell & Bruns, 2009; Saucier, 2004). Furthermore, clinicians need to examine their own assumptions about aging and what constitutes “successful” aging, their beliefs about women at midlife and beyond, and their own internalized ageism, in addition to helping clients to do the same (Mitchell & Bruns, 2009; Saucier, 2004).

Ageism in the US negatively impacts women more so than men (Mitchell & Bruns, 2009; Saucier, 2004). One reason for this, as Mitchell and Bruns noted, is that “as age increases, the percentage of women increases”; simply put, there are more aging women than men (p. 115). In addition, ageism interacts with sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, and ableism, further contributing to women’s vulnerability (Mitchell & Bruns, 2009). Moreover, women have to navigate societal messages and images that uphold productivity, vibrancy, and a youthful appearance in later adulthood, all of which can impact a woman’s sense of self and value, in addition to her day-to-day functioning (Saucier, 2004). Feminist clinicians, according to Mitchell and Bruns, can help women to understand and examine the “social construction of power” and

identify “sources of oppression and privilege” in their own lives, so that they “can learn to problematize the context rather than themselves” (p. 122).

Although more is needed, a rich source of developmental research already exists to inform clinicians on how best to work with their women clients in late middle age. Moreover, these women have rich sources of strengths, life experiences, competencies, connections, capacities, and resilience from which to draw. “In therapy there are two fallible human beings and two wise people,” Jordan wrote (2009, p. 247). “And there is such a thing as ‘fluid expertise,’ where the understanding, the growth, moves back and forth” (p. 247). The findings of this study will serve to enhance that fluid clinical process through greater understanding of women in late middle age.

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## Appendix A: HSRC Approval Letter

January 3, 2011

Diana Giglio  
[address removed]

Dear Diana,

Your revised materials have been reviewed and they are fine. We are happy to approve your interesting study. There is, however, one omission which is very small but crucial! You fail to say anywhere that the participants will sign the Consents. Please add the signing to your **Informed Consent Procedures** and send that corrected page to Laurie so that your permanent file will be correct.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project and don't forget to send the corrected page in. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.  
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Elaine Kersten, Research Advisor

## **Appendix B: Interview Guide**

### **Content Prompts and Demographic Information**

Dear Participant,

I want to thank you again for your interest in my study, and I am providing you with a list of questions I expect to ask. It might be helpful to start thinking about your answers ahead of time. Please feel free to contact me if anything is unclear to you.

Sincerely,

Diana Giglio

[contact information removed]

1. What do you identify as the significant events and experiences in your life, in the past and currently, and what meaning do they hold for you? Significant experiences or events might be related to family, work, relationships, avocations, historical and political events, religion or spirituality, race/ethnicity, and physical health.
2. What is your sense of who you are now in relation to confidence, competence, values, potential, and goals? What kind of changes have you perceived in yourself over the adult years?
3. How have physical changes associated with aging affected you? What are your concerns about aging?
4. What is the quality of your significant relationships, and how have they changed? What kind of connections do you have with younger and older generations?



5. Did you have a dream about how your life would unfold?

This dream can be described as a vision of how you imagined your adult life, or it may be a direction to which you felt drawn. This dream perhaps originated in childhood, developed and was transformed over the adult years. The dream either became part of your adult life or faded away.

6. Is there anything you would have liked to do differently in your life?

I would also like to know the following demographic information for my research:

-Race/cultural identification

-Sexual orientation

-Marital status

-Children/no children, how many, ages

-Type of work or occupation

-Educational background

-Religious affiliation

## Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Dear Participant,

I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work, and I am researching the life experiences of women ages 55 to 70. In particular, I am exploring how you feel about yourself, family and significant others, work, and personal interests. The research will be used for a master's thesis and possibly for presentations or publication.

Your involvement will entail a face-to-face interview of approximately one hour. I have enclosed a list of questions I will ask. The interview will be audiotaped using a digital recorder and will then be transcribed, either by myself, or a volunteer or professional transcriber, who will sign a statement of confidentiality.

Possible risks to your participation include the following: You may feel anxious about disclosing information about your life, and questions may evoke emotional distress. If you would like to speak to a mental health clinician, a list of resources has been provided.

In regard to the benefits of participation, in addition to gaining self-knowledge, you will participate in the development of knowledge that may contribute to promoting positive mental health in the larger population of women. In appreciation of your participation, you will receive a \$15.00 gift card for use at Barnes and Nobles bookstores.

No names or identifying information will be included in the research paper, and identifying information will be disguised in illustrative vignettes and quoted materials. Signed Informed Consent forms will be locked separately from data materials, including audiotapes. My research advisor will have access to the data after identifying information has been removed. All data and tapes will be kept secure for three years as required by federal regulations and after that time, they will be destroyed. If they are needed for a longer period, they will be kept secure for as long as needed and then will be destroyed.

Participation is voluntary and you may refuse to answer any question. You may withdraw from the study at any time but no later than March 1, 2011, and you must contact me in writing or in person. I will immediately destroy all materials related to a participant who withdraws. If you have any concerns about your rights or about any aspect of the study, please feel free to contact me or the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) 585-7974.

**YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.**

Participant's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Please keep a copy of this form for your records. Thank you again for your participation.

Sincerely,

Diana Giglio [contact information removed]

## Appendix D: Transcriber's Research Confidentiality Statement

### Volunteer or Professional Transcriber's Assurance of Research Confidentiality

This thesis project is firmly committed to the principle that research confidentiality must be protected and to all of the ethics, values, and practical requirements for participant protection laid down by federal guidelines and by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee. In the service of this commitment:

- All volunteer and professional transcribers for this project shall sign this assurance of confidentiality.
- A volunteer or professional transcriber should be aware that the identity of participants in research studies is confidential information, as are identifying information about participants and individual responses to questions. The organizations participating in the study, the geographical location of the study, the method of participant recruitment, the subject matter of the study, and the hypotheses being tested are also confidential information. Specific research findings and conclusions are also usually confidential until they have been published or presented in public.
- The researcher for this project, Diana Giglio, shall be responsible for ensuring that all volunteer or professional transcribers handling data are instructed on procedures for keeping the data secure and maintaining all of the information in and about the study in confidence, and that that they have signed this pledge. At the end of the project, all materials shall be returned to the investigator for secure storage in accordance with federal guidelines.

### PLEDGE

I hereby certify that I will maintain the confidentiality of all of the information from all studies with which I have involvement. I will not discuss, disclose, disseminate, or provide access to such information, except directly to the researcher, Diana Giglio, for this project. I understand that violation of this pledge is sufficient grounds for disciplinary action, including termination of professional or volunteer services with the project, and may make me subject to criminal or civil penalties. I give my personal pledge that I shall abide by this assurance of confidentiality.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Diana Giglio

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date