

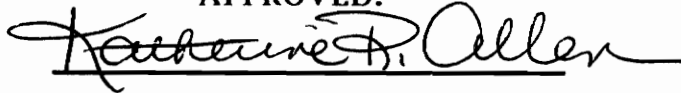
AFRICAN AMERICAN COUPLES AT MIDLIFE:
LIFE COURSE AND GENDER PERSPECTIVES

By

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
in
Family and Child Development

APPROVED:



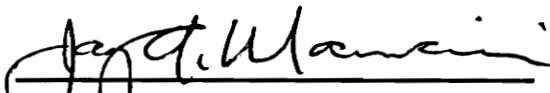
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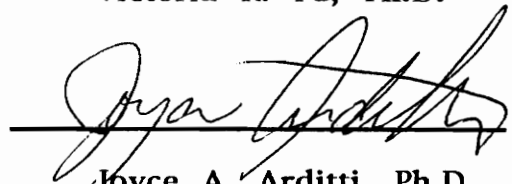
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By

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(ABSTRACT)

This study was designed to investigate the experiences of midlife and relationships of 20 African American individuals, aged 35-52, in 10 couples, married or cohabiting for 3-30 years. Basic to this study was the assumption that men and women are capable of and competent at intimate relationships. Guided by the theoretical perspectives of life course and gender, this research examined how men and women construct intimate relationships within the temporal circumstances of midlife and the interlocking cultural and social context of their lives.

The following research questions guided this study: (a) What aspects of couples' lives contribute to the maintenance of intimacy in romantic relationships? (b) How do gender constraints, from within and without the relationship, act as barriers to such intimacy? (c) How does membership in a particular ethnic group affect such intimacy? (d) How do life course circumstances, such as work and family responsibilities, contribute to or restrict the process of intimacy? (e) How do life course transitions unique to midlife, such as the sandwiching of caregiving and the physical and sexual changes of midlife, act as constraints or contributors to intimacy?

Qualitative in-depth interviewing was the method of data collection; participants were interviewed individually and conjointly. Individuals

identified themselves as middle aged members of the African American ethnic group who were participating in a committed married or cohabiting heterosexual relationship for at least three years.

The results of this study showed that African American couples were deeply devoted to their families and to their spiritual beliefs. The foundation of their intimate relationships was based on spiritual commitments as well as the capacity to be both friend and lover. Midlife emerged as a time of both change and stability, as a time of confidence for women, and as a time of maturity for men. Midlife was a busy time for couples, with competing demands of work and family. Strategies for successful management and coping were in abundant evidence.

To my best friend and partner
in life, Tom Carolan

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There is an African proverb that reminds us that it "takes a village to rear a child." Most important work that is done in the world is done as a collective or community effort. This is also true in terms of becoming a scholar and producing an effort such as a dissertation.

As a woman in midlife, I have had many years with many special people to help guide me towards this culminating effort. My family of origin watched in perpetual wonder as I persisted in my educational efforts to obtain the first graduate degree for a Lebanese American in our family community. My mother was the first woman that I learned from and her pride in me has been a prime motivating force.

Colleagues and friends who offered encouragement and assistance, Liz Farnsworth, Phyllis Greenberg, Virginia Jones, Mala NyaManda, Kathy Piercy, Jan Ramsey, T. J. Stone, Karen Wilcox, Georgie Winter, are thanked for their kindness and support. A special thanks is extended to Sharon Dwyer for all of those helpful long talks, thoughtful suggestions, and her caring friendship.

Grateful acknowledgments to those in the academic world of Virginia Tech who have been helpful in so many ways: Mike Sporakowski for keeping me in funds, Martha Moretz for watching out for me, Rosemary Blieszner for encouraging me towards my first submission, Laurie Shea for her guidance and supervision. I appreciate the assistance of my committee for their helpful suggestions and comments; Joyce Arditti, Rosemary Blieszner, Vicki Fu, and Jay Mancini. My committee chair, Katherine Allen, offered unwavering support and encouragement that buoyed me up and kept me riding high among the waves and tides of graduate education. Katherine has been a mentor and a friend from whom I have gained knowledge and confidence.

My children and husband supported me in countless ways and tolerated my preoccupations and negligence. I am grateful to my son Tristan for his remarkable computer skills, to my daughter Aliah for her insights and assistance with all the necessary tasks, and to my daughter Kelsi for those calming shoulder rubs after too many long hours at the computer. My husband Tom was all that a partner can be, and I am convinced that none of this could have happened without his belief in me and his emotional and instrumental support.

Finally, I wish to express my appreciation to the 20 individuals who allowed me access to their private lives. I am deeply thankful that they chose to share their stories, they were an inspiration to me and I expect to others who will read their words.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Study

During the middle years of the lifespan, lives generally expand and become more complex. Typically, midlife adults are engaged in a flurry of generative activities, including work and caregiving to children and/or elderly parents (Treas & Bengtson, 1982). At the same time, many midlife adults confront the developmental issues of becoming older. For many women and men, this includes physiological and socioemotional changes (Neugarten, 1968). For some women, this may represent the transitions associated with menopause (Dan & Bernhard, 1989).

The majority of middle aged men and women inhabit some form of committed romantic relationship (Brim, 1994; Skolnick, 1981). Some of these relationships achieve a level of intimacy that is considered satisfying to the individuals in the couple whereas others do not. The purpose of this study was to investigate how developmental and contextual factors act as enhancements or restrictors to intimate connections in middle age adults' romantic relationships. In particular, a central focus of this study was to examine how those events unique to the life course at midlife and how gender relations at midlife have an impact on the process of negotiating intimacy within couple relationships.

Rationale for the Study

At this point in history, the largest cohort of children born in America has entered midlife. The majority of these individuals are involved in

parenting or other caregiving relationships and work while also negotiating developmental challenges and changes (Brim, 1994). This baby boom generation has undergone many changes from previous generations in terms of family structure, division of labor, and division of parenting (Turner, 1994). Many of the individuals of this cohort have been influenced by the feminist, civil rights, and gay liberation movements during their adolescent and young adult years (Ehrenreich, 1983; Nichols, 1986). In turn, due to the strength in numbers of this group, the baby boom generation has influenced economic and social aspects of contemporary life.

As life expectancy continues to increase, the middle years of adulthood continue to be productive and transitional. Women become mothers at later ages and grandmothers at earlier ages (Hunter & Sundel, 1989; Huyck, 1989), men father at later ages, most mothers are employed outside of the home or entering the workforce at midlife, and many fathers have taken on more direct nurturant activities with their children (Pleck, 1990). In addition, most women begin to experience the transitional changes related to menopause (Dan & Bernhard, 1989), and men begin to experience transitional changes related to midlife and aging (Katchadourian, 1987). Transitional changes occur in areas of work and family life, in health, appearance, and sexuality, and in emotional and social aspects of life.

Research is needed that contributes to theoretical and applied knowledge of midlife relationships and midlife transitions. This research addressed how midlife couples negotiate the interweave of family and work demands while managing personal transitions and intimate relations. Knowledge about individual transitions at midlife and midlife couples' relationships can be used to broaden perspectives on the process of successful

aging, thereby facilitating the development of appropriate services and interventions for midlife and older populations.

Central to this study were the experiences of an ethnic sample of individuals and couples. Family research has been criticized for its "dearth of information on ethnic minority families" (Dilworth-Anderson, Burton, & Johnson, 1993, p. 627) and research on midlife has been criticized for being based primarily on a white middle class population (Hunter & Sundel, 1989). Little attention has been paid to the investigation of gender relations, marital relationships, and division of labor among older black adults (Taylor, Keith, & Tucker, 1993). In addition, the criticism has been leveled that "intimate black partnerships have remained unexamined by social science" (Engram & Lockery, 1993, p. 84).

Theory on families at midlife remains incomplete when there is little information available on ethnic minority families. Family research that is focused on broadening the definition of the "benchmark family" (Scanzoni, Polonko, Teachman, Thompson, 1989) is inclusive of ethnic populations and integrative of a wider spectrum of family life (Walker, 1993). Inclusive research focuses on diversity within an ethnic group as well as similarity with other ethnic groups and acknowledges racial privilege while representing underrepresented people. Inclusive research focuses on the competencies and strengths of underrepresented groups rather than the deficits. With these focuses, inclusive family research facilitates "new ways of thinking" about ethnic minority families (Dilworth-Anderson et al., 1993). To facilitate new ways of thinking, and in keeping with qualitative and feminist research approaches, the operational definitions that follow are purposefully fluid and loosely bound, albeit guided by the prevailing scholarly paradigms.

Operational Definitions/Sensitizing Concepts

In keeping with the traditions of qualitative research (Jacob, 1987), the following definitions reflect "just enough structure to suggest where the researcher should look" (Ritzer cited in Jacob, 1987, p. 108). These "sensitizing" concepts replace the standard use of operational definitions that generally prescribe what to see (Jacob, 1987).

For the purposes of this study, *middle age* is defined as a state of mind rather than a given time period (Neugarten & Datan, 1975). Individuals and couples responded to recruitment and defined the chronological span of middle age by their self-selection. The term midlife is used interchangeably with middle age (Brammer, Nolen, & Pratt, 1982). Developmental markers of midlife characterize this period as the zenith of generative activity, including childbearing, childrearing, career or work ascendancy, and caregiving to elderly relatives while still remaining pre-retirement for most individuals (Treas & Bengtson, 1982; Van Hoose, 1985).

Intimacy in close relationships has been defined in various ways by relationship scholars. Widely accepted definitions of intimacy include the aspects of commitment and reciprocity with patterns of interdependence (Reis & Shaver, 1988), and the sharing of information between partners in an open and expressive pattern of self-disclosure, including non-verbal and contextual ways (Montgomery, 1988). *Intimacy* in close relationships has also been defined as sharing of one another's innermost thoughts and feelings to gain acceptance of "one another's 'true' self" (Thompson & Walker, 1989, p.77) with the inclusion of sexual relations. *Intimacy* has been construed to be "a subjective relational experience in which the core components are trusting self-disclosure to which the response is communicated empathy" (Wynne &

Wynne, 1986, p.384). For the purposes of this study, *intimacy* was loosely defined, to allow for the emergence of subjective definitions of intimacy. However, it was expected that *intimacy* would include some degree of interdependence and shared commitment.

The term *committed* is defined subjectively by the participants. For this study, *committed* refers to couples who have cohabited--with or without the legal ritual of marriage--for a period of at least three years and consider themselves to be *committed*.

The term *couple or dyad* is used to represent two individuals involved in an ongoing romantic relationship who defined themselves as a couple, and who met the above criteria.

The term *ethnicity* was chosen to represent a characteristic of people from an African American heritage. In this study, ethnicity will include both notions of cultural collectivity (McAdoo, 1993) and notions of racial oppression (Taylor, 1994). There is considerable debate about the most appropriate term to identify or represent subordinated groups of people. McAdoo (1993) asserts that the use of the term "minority" is inaccurate in terms of numbers and connotes inferiority. McAdoo (1993) prefers the use of the term "family ethnic group" and uses this definition: "a collectivity of people who conceive of themselves as being alike by virtue of their presumed common ancestry and cultural heritage (race, religion, or national origin) and who are regarded by others to be a part of such a group" (Kumabe, cited in McAdoo, 1993, p. 5).

Taylor (1994) contests the use of the term "ethnicity." He argues that ethnicity obscures the fundamental disparities of the effects of racial discrimination. He suggests that the term "minority family" aptly captures the unequal access to the sources of economic and political power that oppressed

groups experience. He points out that racial ethnics have been at a considerable disadvantage due to the phenotypical differences of skin color, body, and facial characteristics.

The use of the term ethnicity does not obscure what Willie (1988) refers to as the "continuing significance of race" (p. 35). This term was chosen purposely for its synergy with the tone and spirit of this research study. This study was designed to focus on a normative, competency-based approach to the study of families. The researcher sought to recognize and acknowledge oppression while allowing for the emergence of a full range of issues .

In addition, the terms *African American* and *Black* are used interchangeably out of respect for the participants in this study who had equally divided preferences for both of these terms.

The research questions were constructed with the awareness of the subjectivity of these terms. The research questions are derived from life course and gender perspectives and address the areas of midlife, gender, ethnicity, and relationships.

Research Questions

Despite the large numbers of middle aged adults in the adult population, there appears to be little research investigating intimate, committed relationships of individuals and dyads at midlife. Although the literature on midlife appears to moving away from a crisis model of midlife (Brammer, Nolen, & Pratt, 1982; O'Connor & Wolfe, 1991; Wolf, 1991), most of this literature is concerned with individual developmental issues rather than the life course. The literature on intimate relationships, although extensive, is derived from research within university settings with young adults and is difficult to generalize to older populations. Research is needed that specifically addresses

middle aged adult romantic relationships incorporating the complexity of the life course at middle age as a time of competing demands as well as physiological and socioemotional transitions.

The life course perspective conceives of development as continuous and changing, multidirectional, and historically embedded and addresses aspects of time, normative and non-normative, as well as process (Bengtson & Allen, 1993; Hagestad and Neugarten, 1985; Rossi, 1989). This perspective incorporates the articulation of context, in terms of social location of experience, and in terms of individual and cultural meanings related to context and time. In addition, this perspective allows for the heterogeneity and diversity of experience.

The life course perspective was congruent with the methodological use of qualitative research traditions and with the study of an ethnic population in the contextual aspects of mainstream and sub-cultural experiences. This research study was designed to uncover how men and women construct intimate relationships within the temporal circumstances of midlife and the interlocking cultural and social context of their lives.

Gender, race, and ethnicity are socially constructed abstractions around which interpersonal relationships are organized (Walker, 1993). Power and presumption of credibility generally lay with the dominant gender and the dominant race. Unequal relations between men and women and between the White race and other races have been documented throughout the history of social relations (Dilworth et al., 1993; Edelman, 1988; Walker & Thompson, 1989). This study sought to allow the often invisible effects of gender and ethnicity to emerge and be recognized. Life within a family and within

society is affected by many factors, two very important ones are gender and ethnicity.

However, this research attempted to move away from an essentializing approach to either the study of gender or ethnicity. In terms of prior research on gender in relationships, the emphasis tended to be on essentializing, an approach that focuses on expected and socialized sex roles or promotes analyses that emphasize differences between men and women. Feminist scholars have urged that researchers move away from this level of inquiry and have encouraged the use of the social construction of gender perspective (Ferree, 1990; Flax, 1987; Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988; Stacey & Thorne, 1985; West & Zimmerman, 1987). This perspective proposes that gender is a product of sociocultural interaction rather than an innate or predetermined quality of human beings.

The gender perspective proposes that knowledge and experience is a social product, and that gender is a product of social exchanges and ongoing multi-layered social interactions (West & Zimmerman, 1987). The gender perspective as conceived by Thompson (1993) is a competency-based approach that includes the assumption that men and women are capable of and competent at intimate relationships. Instead of focusing on the inequities or differences between women and men, this study uses the gender perspective to ask what conditions are necessary for women and men to be intimate.

In terms of prior research on African Americans, family scholars point to the tendency of promoting a deficit approach in the study of ethnic minority families (Dilworth et al., 1993; Edleman, 1988; Taylor, 1994). Few studies have been conducted that combine competency-based and qualitative

approaches. By combining these approaches, difference as well as similarity can emerge, strength and achievements can be highlighted.

Research on romantic or intimate relationships is abundant; those relevant to the research focus of this study are included in the review of literature in Chapter Two. However, research focusing on a midlife population and on ethnic populations is scarce. Research is needed that focuses on the intricacies of couples' lives, both the everyday and the practical as well as the long-term and ideological. Couples in committed relationships construct strategies for maintaining these relationships (Cahn, 1990). This study looked for aspects that contributed to or detracted from maintaining intimacy and how these aspects were related to midlife, ethnicity, or gender. Moreover, this study was designed specifically to examine the intersection of ethnicity, gender, and time of life within the dyadic romantic relationship.

The following research questions reflect this agenda for inquiry:

1. What aspects of couples' lives contribute to the maintenance of intimacy in romantic relationships?
2. How do gender constraints, from within and without the relationship, act as barriers to such intimacy?
3. How does membership in a particular ethnic group affect such intimacy?
4. How do life course circumstances, such as work and family responsibilities, contribute to or restrict the process of intimacy?
5. How do life course transitions unique to midlife, such as the sandwiching of caregiving and the physical and sexual changes of midlife, act as constraints or contributors to intimacy?

Summary

This study investigated developmental and contextual factors as they act as enhancements or restrictors to intimate connections in middle aged adults' romantic relationships. This research was designed to illuminate how midlife couples negotiate the interweave of family and work demands while managing personal transitions and intimate relations. Understanding this negotiation and the management of personal and intimate functions at midlife facilitates the development of appropriate services and interventions for midlife and older populations.

Essential to this study were the experiences of an ethnic sample of individuals and couples. This research focused on an ethnic group of individuals of African American heritage with the intention of expanding definitions of the family to be more inclusive of ethnic families. The research questions were constructed with the awareness of the subjectivity of operational terms, allowing for subjective interpretations by the participants.

The research questions were derived from life course and gender perspectives and addressed the areas of midlife, gender, ethnicity, and relationships. In Chapter Two, the literature is reviewed across these broad areas and grouped according to the major perspectives of life course and gender.

CHAPTER TWO

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this research, individuals and couples were analyzed in the process of maintaining intimate relationships with a focus on the contextual, sociohistorical, and interactional aspects of midlife and of gender. The literature is reviewed within the conceptual framework of the life course and the gender perspective. Both perspectives focus on the contextual and sociohistorical, and the gender perspective additionally focuses on the interactional. Contextual and sociohistorical aspects describe the broad background within which a group's or individual's experiences are embedded and include the wide spectrum of past and present circumstances. Interactional aspects include processes in which individuals interact with each other and focus primarily on communication and early influential messages from families.

Contextual and sociohistorical aspects of the life course perspective overlap and include everyday and socioeconomic circumstances as well as physiological and socioemotional midlife transitions. Contextual aspects of the gender perspective include social expectations, practical demands, and power tactics. Contextual and sociohistorical aspects of the gender perspective also overlap to include cultural myths and metaphors, economic and historical conditions and changes, government policy and services, gender ideology, and emotional and psychological health. Furthermore, both the life course and gender perspectives focus on the broader cultural context of race and class.

The gender perspective also addresses the interactional aspect of dyadic relationships. Interactional aspects are located primarily within the

communication aspects of couple life but also include the discrete level of family of origin messages as they influence present day interactions.

In the sections that follow, the life course perspective, specifically as it pertains to midlife, is reviewed with citations of relevant literature. The gender perspective is then reviewed with relevant literature. Literature on African American families was included under relevant categories for an integrated treatment of ethnic families.

The Life Course Perspective at Midlife

The life course perspective applied to midlife would conceive midlife as a place in historical time that is both continuous and changing, and multidirectional (Bengtson & Allen, 1992; Elder, 1985; Hagestad & Neugarten, 1985; Rossi, 1980). The life course perspective addresses the contextual and transitional aspects of midlife as they are delineated in the section above. An important dimension of the life course perspective is in its recognition of the heterogeneity and diversity of experience. (Bengtson, Rosenthal, & Burton, 1990). All of these aspects are essential to the understanding and experience of midlife and of ethnicity.

The life course perspective provides a vehicle for examining “age-related transitions that are socially created, socially recognized, and shared” (Hagestad & Neugarten, 1985, p. 35). Midlife is, in fact, an age-related transition that has emerged as a socially recognized structure. Individuals, and to some extent, dyads, participate in the social creation of their midlife years. Subsequently, ontogenetic events, individual and relational transitions may be experienced similarly by individuals in historical time (Hareven, 1980).

The life course perspective has been cited as a promising conceptual framework for studying the lives of ethnic minority families, as it includes the themes of time, process, interdependence and context, considered essential to an understanding of ethnic minority families (Dilworth-Anderson et al., 1993). The contextual aspect of the life course perspective allows for the nuances of ethnic family life to emerge and allows for the social location of cultural and individual experience. The aspects of time and process similarly allow for the subtleties of ethnic life that may not be apparent without particular attention to these aspects. In addition, recognition of the diversity of experience is integral to the study of ethnic families.

There are differing descriptions of midlife. Jung (1933) called midlife "the afternoon of life" (p.108) implying that midlife was a quiet and settled period. More recently, midlife is conceived as a time of transitions and changes, albeit with "afternoon" periods of relative stability (Levinson & Gooden, 1985; Neugarten, 1968; Neugarten & Neugarten, 1986). There is little support for retaining the crisis definition of midlife (Nichols, 1986) but midlife is viewed as a time of inevitable changes, both internal and external (Brammer, Nolen & Pratt, 1982; George, 1982; O'Connor & Wolfe, 1990).

Midlife may be viewed as a time of personal growth, but personal growth is not a necessary outcome of midlife. More inevitable to midlife are changes in or stress from family caregiving, changes or stressors in socioeconomic circumstances, and physical and sexual transitions. The life course perspective provides a conceptual framework from which to include and articulate these transitions and changes.

Family Caregiving

Midlife is a busy time for most couples and families. Many families are balancing work with family obligations such that couple time may become less and less of a priority. Intimate relationships may suffer from the stresses and strains of managing children, households, and occupational demands.

Although midlife is generally a time of relative stability in marital status (Brim, 1994), it is often a time of change in terms of caregiving relationships. Many midlife couples are confronting the challenges of bearing and rearing children, remarriage and stepparenting. Some couples may be launching children, whereas others may be challenged by caregiving to grandchildren or elderly parents.

African American families are likely to be involved in exchanges of help across or between generations and in extensive kinship networks (Chatters & Taylor, 1993). Within the household, African American couples are likely to share housework and childcare responsibilities (Blee & Tickamyer, 1995).

At midlife, most women are involved with caregiving, either to children or to the elderly (Rossi, 1980). Increasingly, men are involved in caregiving, particularly for children, although this change is gradual (Pleck, 1990; Tatum, 1987). Adults at midlife, especially women, may be involved in caregiving to both children and elderly relatives and experience the stress of sandwiched caregiving (Brody, 1981). These nurturant and instrumental tasks of caregiving could contribute to or constrain intimate relationships.

Socioeconomic Circumstances

At midlife, most women and men are employed outside of the home. For some, midlife may be a time of career tranquillity but for many, it includes periods of tranquillity and periods of stress (Turner, 1994). Occupational activity is associated with increases in well-being for African American middle aged women (Clausen, 1981; Coleman, Antonucci, Adelman, & Crohan, 1987; Stroud, 1981). Occupational inactivity, whether due to loss of employment, career immobility, inadequate resources or race/class restrictions can have a negative effect on an intimate relationship. Economic security may allow for more stability and comfort within the dyadic relationship.

Economic conditions can strain intimate relationships between men and women, especially in oppressed classes and races. The inability of African-American men to secure employment has made it difficult for Black men and women to maintain their households (Staples, 1991). High levels of unemployment and incarceration for young African-American men (Edelman, 1991) have necessitated diverse arrangements for coupling. This can produce economic disadvantages for women and children, and contribute to strained or inaccessible levels of intimacy for both men and women of lower socioeconomic standing.

Physical and Sexual Changes

One of the inevitable tasks of middle age is to confront the physical and sexual changes that may accompany an aging anatomy (Katchadourian, 1987; Mancini & Bird, 1985). Internal physical changes associated with the aging process are systemic and include a decline in immune capacity, diminished

lung capacity, decreases in cardiac output, and changes in metabolism, sensory organs, and the central nervous system (Hubbs-Tait, 1989).

Both women and men experience hormonal changes that begin in midlife. Women experience dramatic changes in their estrogen and progesterone levels, often beginning in their 40s and concluding at an average age of 50 in menopause (Dan & Bernhard, 1989). Most women experience the changes of menopause with very few symptoms other than hot flashes (Strickland, 1988). Men experience gradual decreases in testosterone that affect sexual response but there is no evidence for an event similar to menopause (Walz & Blum, 1987). The rate of physical and sexual changes is related to many factors, primarily environment, heredity, and lifestyle.

Changes in appearance or external physical changes are more conspicuous, primary ones include graying and thinning of hair and changes in the elastin and collagen of the skin, resulting in wrinkling of the skin (Pearson & Beck, 1989). Other changes in physical appearance are the alterations in the distribution of body fat, and musculoskeletal changes which result in decreased height (Pearson & Beck, 1989).

Although both men and women experience physical changes in their appearance and abilities, aging women appear to be more vulnerable to negative sociocultural attitudes and are more likely to become invisible after age 40 (Gergen, 1990; Van Hoose, 1985). Changes in health and appearance may provoke a sense of anxiety about aging or a sense of time running out (Hunter & Sundel, 1989). Men and women may react to these changes differently as women may experience a decrease in status or value from the larger social structure. Health concerns, concerns with physical appearance, or loss of perceived value can affect the intimate relationship.

Physical changes in sexuality for women are generally precipitated by the hormonal changes of aging. For women, a decline in estrogen can produce symptoms that affect sexual comfort, urinary systems, and moods (Dan & Bernhard, 1989). Decreased levels of testosterone in men can delay the erectile process, and cause longer refractory periods between orgasms (Weg, 1989).

Hormonal changes can contribute to sexual difficulties in the midlife years. Leiblum (1990) cited an increase in sexual difficulties for women in the menopausal and postmenopausal years. This increase is attributed to several physical factors which include the hormonal effects of decreased vaginal lubrication, but also include cultural factors such as the inflexibility of sexual scripts in traditional couples. Weg (1989) noted that men experience difficulties in erectile functioning that also might require changes in traditional sexual scripts. Women and men may need to renegotiate their sexual behaviors at midlife in order to maintain a satisfying sexual relationship.

African Americans have higher rates of chronic health problems and a shorter life expectancy than the general population with a greater chance for disability in their middle and later years (Jackson, Antonucci, & Gibson, 1990). These factors could influence the expectations and meanings attached to the aging process by individuals from this ethnic heritage. Changes in health and appearance may have special significance, especially for the African American male, who experiences a significantly shorter lifespan than the African American female and the general population (Kain, 1993).

Individuals and families display considerable diversity over time and differ in the meaning that they give to their individual experiences of midlife

and to their individual and relational experiences of intimacy. Differences in meaning may derive from ethnic culture, transitions and changes that are experienced, family circumstances, or other contextual or sociohistorical aspects of the life course perspective.

The Gender Perspective

The gender perspective addresses gender as a product of social interaction rather than an innate characteristic (Ferree, 1990; Thompson, 1993). Gender is acquired and reinforced through social interaction, both in the broader culture and in the confines of family and relational life. Ferree (1990) and Thompson (1993) suggest using this perspective to analyze gender in relationships at multiple levels. Thompson (1993) conceived four essential levels of analysis for understanding and conceptualizing process and change in families using this perspective: the broader sociohistorical context, the immediate context, interactional processes, and individual outcomes. Each of these areas is explained and developed in the sections that follow. The gender perspective conceptualizes women and men as active enactants in “doing gender” (West & Zimmerman, 1987) throughout historical and present time and context. The gender perspective is used in this study to aid in discussing and developing what conditions are necessary for women and men to be intimate, including the race and class issues of heterosexual coupling.

Thompson (1993) suggested that partners in relationships establish intimate relationships in spite of the constraints and barriers to intimacy that abound within and without the dyadic relationship. Using the multiple levels of analysis in the gender perspective, the literature on intimate relationships is reviewed in the following sections to examine many of these constraints and barriers.

Broader Sociohistorical Context

The broader sociohistorical context is the term that Thompson (1993) used to describe contextual factors that derive from macrological aspects of mainstream culture combined with social and economic factors that have developed over time. These factors influence the perception and construction of gender and gendered interactions. The factors that are developed in the following section are cultural myths and metaphors, historical and economic changes and conditions, race and class diversity issues, and government policies and services.

Cultural myths and metaphors. Cultural myths and metaphors reinforce dominant images and notions of gendered intimate capabilities. Women are denoted as primarily relational with ultimate responsibility for maintaining intimate relationships whereas men are perceived as primarily autonomous-seeking (Cancian, 1987). Popular media, such as films and television, sometimes perpetuate this dichotomizing of men and women just as pornographic portrayals distort and objectify men and women in intimate sexual encounters. Even youthful images of girls and boys are stratified through the animated images of Disney princesses and heroes, beauties and beasts, while music television (MTV) for adolescents and young adults promotes images of women as sexual objects and images of men as aggressive and dominating sexual victors (Sommers-Flanagan, Sommers-Flanagan, & Davis, 1992).

Cultural scripts for romantic intimacy are reflected in these popular images and in romantic ideals. Males are acculturated to avoid intimacy by being in control whereas women are acculturated towards being controlled

(Hatfield, 1984). These popular depictions can contribute to gendered struggles with distance and closeness as couples approach intimate romantic relationships. Research on romanticism, based on a sample of 730 undergraduates, indicates that men are more likely to believe in romanticized notions of relationships as are women who score higher on traditional measures of femininity (Sprecher & Metts, 1989).

These socially constructed images and socialized expectations can constrain intimacy. Rubin (1983) notes that being able to allow oneself to be intimately close with another can be a major developmental challenge for adult men, whereas for adult women being able to separate themselves from their male partner can become a major developmental challenge. The importance of connection in the developmental experience of women has been highlighted (Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1991) whereas the importance of autonomy has been equated with optimal developmental maturity for males. Engaging in and maintaining intimate relationships may present a challenge for men who have been socially oriented towards a nonintimate, self-centered position with romanticized notions of women.

Just as women's independence can be obscured by the dominant cultural myths so can men's relational interdependence. Cultural myths obscure the reality that most men seek connections throughout their lives whereas many women seek a path to independence in their lives. A study of 130 young adults (Cochran & Peplau, 1990) suggests that both men and women equally value intimacy and independence although women may experience more difficulty in reconciling desires for intimacy with individual development.

In interviews with 10 White heterosexual married couples who self-identified as feminists, Blaisure (1992) found that both partners were vigilant about recognizing inequities for women within the broader social culture. Both partners invested time and energy to establish a relationship that was mutually accommodating to the emotional and career needs of both partners, refusing to accommodate only the male partner as the broader culture dictates. Gendered awareness combined with conscious strategies for maintenance of intimate relations were necessary to maintain both intimacy and equity for both members of the dyad. As self-identified feminists, these men and women considered that equity was necessary and important to their relationship. Thompson (1989; 1993) suggests that equity is necessary to the establishment of intimacy or the perception of equity. In relationships where there are serious external inequities from racial and class oppression, equity within the relationship may be less important.

Socialized expectations for men and women may affect ethnic minority relationships and influence marital relationships towards divorce. Staples and Johnson (1993) describe several contributing influences that place African-American marriages at risk for divorce. These risk factors include higher income and educational levels for the women than the men, often creating situations in which men are unable to meet the "normative responsibilities of husband and father" (Staples & Johnson, 1993, p. 232). Yet middle-class married Black adults cite their families as the greatest source of satisfaction (Staples & Johnson, 1993) indicating that the tension between economic inequities between women and men and loyalty to traditional family structures is somehow being negotiated.

Historical and economic changes and conditions. Historical changes from agrarian to industrialized societies contributed to the establishment of separate spheres for White middle class heterosexual women and men (Bernard, 1972). Women and men were separated on a daily basis by industrialized patterns of employment. Economic hardship was a more significant constraint to intimacy for working class men and women while women and men of color were further constrained by the dual hardships of poverty and racism (McAdoo, 1991). African-American women, in particular, carried the multiple burdens of marginalized mothering and poverty.

Evolving historical changes such as the availability of birth control and accessible public education made it possible for women to access economic achievement (Vannoy, 1990). Less controlled by the fear of pregnancy, young women could begin to form an image of the future as less scripted by relational demands. Limiting the number of children in a family also opened the doors to the possibility for more economic affluence and more time for adult intimacy maintenance.

However, gender-linked economic inequities ranging from unequal pay levels for women to economic effects of no-fault divorces have perpetuated women's continuing economic dependence on men (Coontz, 1992). Economic conditions may contribute to women and men staying in intimate relationships that are no longer sustaining of intimacy, which may be emotionally or physically harmful to women. In contrast, economic conditions may make it necessary for men and women to coexist in separate households, for example to collect Aid to Families with Dependent Children

benefits, in most states. As a result, intimate relationships between men and women on welfare may be victim to these divisive influences.

Government policies and services. Just as race and class can intersect to constrain intimate options for men and women, so can the policies and services inherent in government organizations. This intersection of constraints is often potent in the lives of couples with young children. The lack of available and affordable child care necessitates various arrangements that constrain the intimate partnerships of couples of all races and classes by necessitating split work shifts or withdrawal from the workforce (Powell, 1989). Working class couples often cope with child care shortfalls by working alternate shifts during weekdays or long hours on the weekends to allow for one member of the dyad to perform child care functions. The practical result of these arrangements is to replace potential opportunities for intimacy that might emerge from sharing time at home with nonoverlapping schedules that might foster distance between partners.

Middle-class couples may cope with child care costs by withdrawal from the work force, primarily by the female partner. Not only is this the socially expected behavior for the female nurturer in a heterosexual partnership but it is also affected by the disparity of incomes that generally emerge between men and women. This withdrawal from the work force often places economic pressures on the couple and family as well as having the potential of psychological and emotional costs for the woman, again leading potentially to constrained intimate relations.

For lower socioeconomic status women trapped in the government system of welfare, services are aimed at maintaining women and children on subsistence levels while actively discouraging women from accessing intimate

male partners by a threatened loss of benefits should they become partnered. Dill (1994) and Zinn (1994) point out that throughout U. S. history, women of color have been forced to adapt their reproductive and family patterns as they have been without the legal, economic, and social supports of White women.

The absence of an accessible health care system and the absence of social security benefits to women who work within their own homes also act as constraints on relationships. Low wages, part-time employment, and the absence of benefits may have an impact on both women and men in lower income brackets. Women may be more dependent on male partners with benefits to maintain health care for themselves and children or may be dependent on male partners with long-term histories of employment for social security benefits at retirement age (Scanzoni et al., 1989). Workers with benefits may be unable to leave difficult employment situations when loss of benefits may ensue for their families.

The broader sociohistorical context includes conditions that can become socially constructed barriers to intimacy between men and women. The contemporary context of men and women's lives clearly is more conducive to and demanding of gendered changes as economic conditions and contemporary cultural values encourage women to participate in the workforce and men to participate in relational activities (Demo & Acock, 1993; Pleck, 1990). Although change is gradual, awareness of the diverse needs of a complex social system and more family-friendly policies from the government would facilitate the changes needed to support intimate partnerships for all.

The Immediate Context

The second level of analysis in the gender perspective is the immediate context. This section includes social expectations in the everyday and

immediate environment, power as a contextual issue, and practical demands as constraints on intimate relationships.

Social expectations. Whereas women are expected to be the relationship tenders, men are expected to tend to the sexual aspects of relationships. This expectation places a burden on women to be responsible for an exhaustive array of relational maintenance and on men to be responsible for sexual initiation and sexual pleasuring. Women are discouraged from understanding their own sexuality (Barbach, 1982) and may be reluctant or unable to express their sexual desires and needs. Women may resist the expression of sexuality for fear of offending their male partner's social expectations (Baber & Allen, 1992). In turn, men may feel pressured to be the all knowing experts and initiators in sexual relations (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). These social expectations often interfere with the formation of intimacy by preventing women from acting on their sexuality and by discouraging men from contribution to relational maintenance.

Practical demands. As relationship tenders, women are often exhausted by the conflicting demands of children, partners, and work within and outside of the home (Hochschild, 1989). In addition, women must deal with issues of birth control, childbirth, menses, and menopause, which may or may not constrain intimate relationships, but can be additionally stressful without the understanding and support of their partners. As men become involved in the everyday activities of family life, the benefits to both partners may be to heighten potential levels of intimacy.

Perhaps due to the long history of African-American women's paid employment, African-American men in dual-earner households share responsibility for child-care and housework (J. McAdoo, 1993; Scanzoni, 1971;

Taylor et al., 1993). Some research indicates that women still perform the majority of household tasks (Ball, 1993; Taylor et al., 1993).

Tatum (1987) found that children are an important factor in the marital happiness of middle-class African Americans, and that the majority of Black fathers were heavily involved in the day-to-day activities of their families. Ball (1993) found that marital happiness is higher for Black fathers than Black mothers in families with teenage children. Ball asks "As older children can accomplish more, do fathers take pride while mothers are left with the continuing work and worry that has burdened them before?" (p. 215). In a society that devalues motherhood, mothering as an ethnic minority woman (Baber & Allen, 1992) epitomizes the intersection of social expectations and practical demands without the personal and societal levels of support and power.

Power issues and influence tactics. Power is defined as the ability to enforce one's will, even against resistance (Max Weber cited in Komter, 1989). Howard, Blumstein, and Schwartz (1986) found that intimate partners of men (gay or heterosexual) use more manipulation and supplication than heterosexual men. Manipulation and supplication are considered "weak" strategies--thereby illustrating the less powerful and more secondary status of one partner. Often the person earning less income, generally but not always a woman, uses these "weak" strategies of manipulation and supplication. Male intimate partners of women would more often use "strong" tactics such as bullying and autocracy.

Komter (1989) asserts that tacit rules of interaction between women and men originate in patriarchal laws and legally permitted gender discrimination. Institutionalized gender hierarchies determine rules of

interaction and allow men to maintain and reinforce elevated levels of power over women. In addition, gendered power imbalances have traditionally restricted women's access to institutional resources (Lipman-Blumen, 1984), thereby perpetuating inequities in interpersonal and external dimensions of power. Cultural dictums for men and women define gendered positions on the power continuum, often connecting love and intimacy, with "mastery over" for males and "being mastered" for women (Gavey, 1993).

Some research suggests that Black women are more powerful in their families than White women (Scanzoni, 1971). Other research suggests that power is an important issue in Black families for Black men as it is a status issue for them in the society at large (Pinderhughes, 1988). Some Black feminist scholars argue that Black women have traditionally had less power in intimate relationships as they have experienced oppression from both White men, in the form of sexual slavery, and from Black men, in the sentimentalized image of the matriarch (Collins, 1990). Power may be a complex issue for Black men and women in their relationships as there are the complicating factors of external social oppression and lowered status for Black men.

As women gain more economic and political power, and men perceive the benefits of equitable relationships with their partners, social expectations, practical demands and power issues have begun to shift. A particularly salient shift involves altering the traditional provider roles of males to incorporate time and energy for nurturance of their families. The concomitant shift for women is in being able to provide a contribution to the economic security of the family. A more subtle shift for women will occur when women can become more agentic about their sexuality (Baber & Allen, 1992), an undertaking that is complex and multidimensional as women's sexuality is

connected not only to the family but to the larger institutions of religion and government. Further power issues are concealed in the range of communicative behaviors that are explored in the following section.

Interactional Processes

The third level of analysis of the gender perspective is interactional processes. Interactional processes focuses on dyadic communication issues such as everyday conversation and self-disclosure and on family of origin issues. These issues will be examined as contributors to barriers in intimate couple relationships.

Communication issues. Through communication intimate partners create a relational identity and construct a shared reality of their coupling (Burrell & Fitzpatrick, 1990). This relational reality emerges from the mutual sense of a shared history that arises out of everyday conversations.

There is ample evidence that gender has an impact on many aspects of communicative behavior (Pearson, 1985). Based on a sample of 432 individuals, research on strategies for dyadic communication revealed gendered patterns with women taking more responsibility for relational communications and men seeking to keep communications brief (Shea & Pearson, 1986). Tannen (1990) argued that communication between men and women is a continual balancing act in which the conflicting needs for intimacy and independence are negotiated. Men and women are socialized into different worlds or cultures and thus have differing world views or expectations about everyday conversations. According to Tannen, most research shows that men are competitive and prone to verbal conflict whereas females are cooperative and given to verbal affiliation. She also points out that being in conflict

predicates being involved with another, if not in a positive way then in a negative way.

Communication scholars have noted that men are less interested in and less communicative about relationships whereas talking about relationships is common practice among women (Acitelli, 1992). In her interviews with 42 young married couples, Acitelli found that wives are happiest when the conventional relational roles are reversed, and the husband is attending more to the relationship or doing some of the relationship work, work most often culturally and interactionally assigned to women.

Information from these communication researchers suggests that both men and women seek intimacy and independence in their relationships but that each gender has acquired varying socialized relational skills. These skills govern how to communicate and assign gendered responsibility for interactional communications.

Citing Goldner's (1985) seminal work on gender and family therapy, White (1989) asserts that gendered hierarchical communication patterns--with men in demonstrative and autonomous patterns and women in passive and affiliative patterns--reflect the reality of the modern family. White describes the modern family as a family in which women have traditionally less economic power and are therefore dependent on their marital partners for survival. Communication patterns are a result of a social structure in which economic necessity rather than inherent human predispositions dictates couple interactions.

Developmentalists (Gutmann, 1987) have illustrated that as men and women age, men acquire more affiliative skills whereas women acquire more autonomous skills. Perhaps these are skills that can be acquired through the

aging process, when the social system allows for and supports these skills to be accessed. The ability to speak freely or self-disclose to an intimate partner is a skill that may also be acquired over time, or with age, but is generally required for closeness between intimate partners.

Self-disclosure is defined as a type of communication associated with intimate, intentional, verbal revelations about the self (Chelune, Robison, & Kommor, 1984). Self-disclosure is sharing information about oneself with openness and expressiveness and is equated with and essential to intimate relationships (Montgomery, 1986; 1988). Mutual self-disclosure within the context of a close relationships leads to a merging of two private inner selves (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1992).

Cultural norms traditionally support these qualities in females while frowning upon expressiveness and openness in males thereby reinforcing gendered differences (Davidson & Duberman, 1982). In heterosexual relationships, women are most likely to be responsible for expressing and maintaining intimacy. Two competing ideals may operate on gender: for females, full disclosure with openness and expressiveness; for males, restricted expression and reserve (Rubin, 1983). "If a man is reluctant to make himself known to another person, even to his spouse - because it is not manly thus to be psychologically naked then it follows that *men will be difficult to love. . .*" (Jourard cited in Derlega, 1984, p.39). However, making oneself known to another person does not necessarily depend on verbal acuity, nor should it be assumed that every woman is skilled at openness and expressiveness.

Some evidence suggests that African-American couples have a tolerance for disclosure that is not distinct along gender demarcations. There is an acceptance of free communication, an encouragement of openness and a

respect for verbal abilities (Aschenbrenner, 1975). Based on a study of 199 Black newlywed couples, the gender gap in perceived inclinations towards self-disclosure is absent from Black couples' perceptions: "Black men feel they are in highly personal relationships with their wives--relationships that are not dictated by role requirements but by exchanges of feelings" (Oggins, Veroff, & Leber, 1993, p. 505).

Avoiding disclosure is a tactic sometimes used by men to maintain control and exert power (Welch Cline, 1989). It may also be a tactic of self-protection, to avoid appearing vulnerable or inadequate to their partners.

Family of origin issues. Definitions of intimacy vary not only by culture, gender and by the characteristics of the individuals involved in the intimate relationships. Lerner (1990) views intimacy as a "dance" in which individuals must learn about the rhythm of their own steps as they learn the rhythm of their partners steps. Often these rhythms originate in early gendered and/or ethnic messages from the family of origin and are developed in experiences with subsequent dyadic partners. Family of origin messages to females more often promote sacrificing and silencing their inner needs and desire for separateness while family of origin messages to males promote silencing their emotions (with the exception of anger, which is often permitted) and suppressing feelings of sadness, helplessness, and dependence.

Yet Lerner (1990) maintains that successful intimate relationships between men and women require competency in both of the ability to connect and the ability to separate. The ability to balance the need for connection with the need for separateness promotes a fluid and smooth dyadic "dance." One task is for families to provide opportunities for female and male children to experience and exercise the full range of behaviors associated with

separateness and autonomy. Perhaps a renegotiation of separating and connective behaviors and the experiencing of new behaviors would promote increased intimacy between men and women in close relationships.

Without the risk of disclosure, it is difficult to know one another's needs (Thompson, 1993). Self-disclosure involves relational as well as personal risks (Welch Cline, 1989), risks which both men and women have to be willing to take to establish intimacy. Recent research with young adults indicates has movement in the direction of tolerance for nonstereotypical behavior for both men and women (Hatch & Leighton, 1986; Montgomery, 1986). As the social climate allows for greater gender flexibility in men and women, couples' intimate communication patterns are responding with greater flexibility.

Individual Outcomes

As suggested by the gender perspective (Thompson, 1993), the fourth level of analysis, individual outcomes, are snapshots of men and women at a moment in time. At each moment in time, individuals have an established gender ideology that in concert with many other factors, affects their overall health and well-being. The contextual and process variables of intimacy previously examined capture the ongoing nature of men and women moving socially and interactionally through time. Embedded within this contextual frame is the individual actor and reactor, in possession of his or her own behaviors and attitudes related to gender ideology and consciousness. First gender ideology and then emotional and psychological health issues are discussed.

Gender ideology. As men and women approach intimate commitment, they progress through a courtship process, that specifically creates and maintains gender differentiation (Silberstein, 1988). Silberstein studied three

generations of white middle class couples and noted that the women's stories changed in each generation as the women accommodated evolving perspectives on the contemporary roles of women. Men's stories remained primarily static and did not incorporate women's changing roles. Women's stories centered around relational decisions that were necessitated in order to accommodate the relationship. The stories demonstrated that the women, though not passive, were the reactors rather than initiators of relational life. The men's stories of their couple histories, on the other hand, were full of orchestration and taking initiative in the relational history; they were actors rather than reactors.

In The Second Shift, Hochschild (1989) makes the point that "the set of ideas a person has about gender are often fractured and incoherent" (p. 190). Two of her interview participants responded to viewing their mother's oppression by determining not to have that experience in their lives. In the first case, a woman who observed the difficulties of her single mother, resolved to find male protection for her mothering. In the second case, a woman who had observed her mother as a passive doormat type, resolved that her husband would share the housework and child care, 50-50, despite his continued resistance. Both women recounted the sufferings of their mothers in their assigned situations yet each chose a distinctly differing solution.

Hochschild observed that gender ideology is mainly derived from one's biographical and life history experiences. Gender ideology is subject to idiosyncratic inconsistencies but is primarily socially derived, as a response to social opportunities, both personal and professional. In essence, individuals construct personal ideologies based on a complex interaction of personal

factors, which are then acted upon and become part of the individual's public and private self.

Blee and Tickamyer (1995) describe contradictory findings regarding gender role attitudes of African American men. They speculate that such findings may be due to the "multidimensionality of masculine gender roles and attitudes among African American men" (p. 22). Contributing to this multidimensionality is the dual positioning of African American men in society. Male status accords certain hierarchical rights which being of ethnic status may minimize. Analyzing data from the National Survey of Black Americans, Engram and Lockery (1993) conclude that both men and women placed a high value on dual earner partnerships and considered financial security to be a very important dimension of an intimate partnership. Thus contributors to gender ideology can emerge from the practical and historical necessities of economic hardship.

Emotional and psychological health. It has been asserted that "the intimacy process facilitates psychological health" (Reis & Shaver, 1988, p. 387). Yet a review of research on couples notes that the husband's personality and experience of the relationship is a greater factor in a happy marriage than the wife's personality and experience of the relationship (Cahn, 1990). It is sometimes the case that the price of maintaining a satisfactory intimate relationship for male partners may be at the cost of a woman's emotional or psychological health. The cost of this marginalization, this silencing of the self, is paid in the price of depression, substance abuse, and general mental illnesses for women.

In a sample of 197 primarily White middle class couples, young happily-married women reported more frequent experience and expression of both

positive and negative emotions than their husbands (Sprecher & Sedikides, 1993). Both men and women perceived themselves to be the more emotional partner in their relationship, yet both men and women agreed that women experienced more negative emotions, in particular, hate, insecurity, fear, depression, hurt, jealousy, sadness, and loneliness. The only negative emotion that men perceived themselves as experiencing more was ambivalence, and the only positive emotion they reported experiencing more was sexual excitement.

Are women inherently more emotional as the broader culture promotes or is emotionality a reaction to gender ideologies and power differences? Is women's emotionality necessary to the ongoing process of intimate relationships? It is difficult to conceive of a satisfactory relationship that is not driven at some level by emotion, whether negative or positive. However, based on the gender perspective, intimacy can best be realized by the recognition and awareness of the connections between social context and personal experience. There is no doubt that gendered relations between men and women are changing, as women stabilize in the employment sector, and as men become more involved in the day to day care of children and households.

Summary

The literature was reviewed to examine the sociohistorical, contextual, and interactional aspects of relationships as they may contribute to or may constrain intimacy. The life course perspective was used to highlight individual, family, and socioeconomic circumstances and changes at midlife. The gender perspective was used to highlight social, individual, and interactional gender ideologies, policies, and situations. The research questions were designed to reflect these areas of concern.

Research questions one and two are concerned with contributors and constraints to intimacy respectively. Every aspect of couple life has the potential to influence intimacy and act in either a contributing or constraining manner on their relationship. For example, socioeconomic circumstances have the potential to enhance relational life as well as constrain relational life. Socioeconomic circumstances are influenced by both the life course, in terms of age and situation, and by gender, as women often receive less wages than men and are affected by reproductive and childbearing circumstances. For the purposes of clarity, aspects of individual and relational life that might influence intimacy were grouped into contributors or constraints based on the information available in the scholarly literature.

Research question one was concerned with contributors to maintenance of intimacy. Contributors to intimacy would include socioeconomic circumstances, communication aspects including self-disclosure, and family of origin messages.

Research question two was concerned with constraints to intimacy arising from gender. Gender constraints would include contextual ones such as cultural myths, economic changes, government policies and services, social expectations, practical demands, and power issues; interactional ones, such as communication and family of origin issues, and individual factors, such as gender ideology and psychoemotional health.

Research question three is concerned with how membership in a particular ethnic group affects intimacy. Membership affects would include diversity issues integrated throughout the review of literature, socioeconomic circumstances, the full range of contextual issues listed above under gender

constraints, and interactional issues such as communication, self-disclosure, and family of origin issues.

Research question four is concerned with work and family responsibilities and is addressed under the sections on socioeconomic circumstances and the section on family caregiving. Research question five is concerned with caregiving and physical and sexual changes and is addressed under the section on changes in family caregiving patterns, and the section on physical and sexual changes.

Table 2.1 delineates the relationship between the research questions, the conceptual framework, and the influences of midlife and gender on relationships as illustrated in the review of literature. The influences listed in Table 2.1 reflect the areas of questioning generated by the literature review that are incorporated into the research design.

The life course and gender perspectives combine to provide a full and complementary agenda for inquiry into the sociohistorical, contextual and interactional aspects of midlife and gender. Figure 2.1 illustrates the overlapping and complementary interrelationship of the temporal and contextual aspects of the life course at midlife with the ideological and practical aspects of the gender perspective. The following chapter articulates a methodology that has emerged from and is compatible with these perspectives.

Table 2.1

Research Questions, Conceptual Framework, and the Influences of Midlife and Gender on Intimate Relationships

Research Questions	Conceptual Framework	Influences*
1. Contributors to intimacy	Life Course at Midlife	Socioeconomic circumstances
	Gender	Communication (includes self-disclosure) Family of origin messages
2. Gender constraints to intimacy	Gender	Cultural myths and metaphors
		Economic conditions
		Government policy and services
		Social expectations
		Practical demands
		Power issues
		Communications issues (includes self-disclosure) Gender ideology
3. Effects of ethnicity	Life Course at Midlife	Full range of influences listed in #1 and #2 above
	Gender	
4. Work and family constraints	Life Course at Midlife	Socioeconomic circumstances
		Family Caregiving
5. Stresses and Transitions	Life Course at Midlife	Family Caregiving
		Physical and Sexual Changes

*Note. Influences are subject to the sociocultural effects of gender, race, and class.

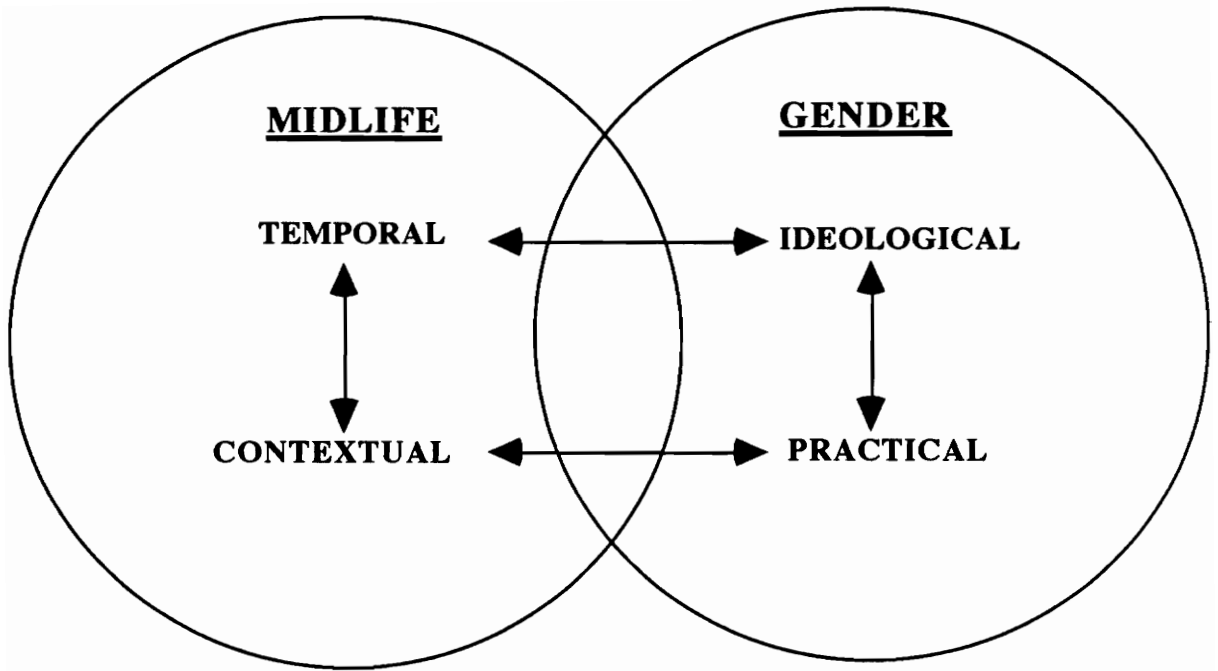


Figure 2.1: Interrelationships of Midlife and Gender

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Rationale for Qualitative Research

Qualitative methods are well suited to studying social interactions within family groupings (Daly, 1992), and they are appropriate to pursuing an understanding of process components in couple interactions (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Qualitative research is utilized to clarify the meanings of naturally occurring events from the perspective of the participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Qualitative research lends itself to an exploration of meanings, in this case, into the meaning of aging and intimacy--information that is useful for education and practice with an aging population (Wolf, 1991).

The research consists of in-depth interviews with 10 African American couples. The interviews were conducted both individually and conjoint, for the purpose of understanding the process of maintaining intimacy or building intimacy at the juncture of midlife. In-depth interviews, a feature of qualitative research, are especially appropriate for providing a comprehensive description of the intricacies and complexities of relationships and of developmental transitions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Marshall & Rossman, 1989).

Feminist and social construction of gender theory--combined in the gender perspective presented in Chapter Two--have been noted to be particularly suited to qualitative analysis (Baber & Allen, 1992; Gilgun, 1992). The life course perspective has also been identified as well matched for qualitative study (Bengtson & Allen, 1993). Both perspectives value the diversity of experience, which is made accessible by the contributions of qualitative methods.

Intrinsic to the qualitative research process is the use of the self (McCracken, 1990; Nespore, 1994). Undertaking qualitative research begins with a reflection of the self (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) and an understanding of the relationship between the researcher and the subject of research. The personal narrative is a tool that is used in qualitative research to explain the researcher's interest or orientation to a subject. The personal narrative explains my interest in this subject and also addresses my status as an outsider. One of the goals of qualitative research is to "better understand human behavior and experience" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p.49). In qualitative research, the researcher is an intricate part of the total process, thus it is considered important to understand the relationship between the researcher and the research. The following personal narrative is included in this section for this purpose.

This narrative is a reflection on ethnicity in the personal experience of the researcher. Johnson (1995) defines ethnic group membership as claiming membership in a particular group as a basis of individual identity, sharing norms and values with this group, and having one's ethnicity as an organizing principle of social life.

Personal Narrative

My interest in an ethnic population stems from early experience. Raised in a traditional Middle-Eastern Lebanese family, I was surrounded by others from my family and friends from similar cultural backgrounds. Both sets of grandparents emigrated through Ellis Island in the early part of this century from Lebanon. Both learned a modicum of English but spoke primarily in Arabic, and lived according to traditional customs. Their

offspring acculturated to American life in various ways, but most ethnic customs were maintained.

In our household, we ate traditional ethnic foods, Arabic was the spoken language of adults, and many traditional ethnic rituals and customs were observed including those regarding gender. Men were unquestioned as head of the household and made all of the important decisions, including financial management. Women were considered to be less intelligent and had lower status, a status that required male protection and dominance. Women were responsible for nurturant and household activities, and men were responsible for providing financial resources. Men were allowed full participation in the external world. Women's participation in the outside world was limited to the accrual of household necessities. In social situations, women were accompanied by a protective male relative.

Our churches, Melkite Catholic and Eastern Orthodox, were attended only by Syrian, Arabic, and Lebanese people, the liturgy was partly in Arabic, and the pastor spoke Arabic only. Each year, thousands of Arabic people came together to our town for a traditional four day celebration called a Mahrajan, complete with traditional costumes, foods, and dances. We celebrated our differences there and in other ways from the mainstream culture and our ethnicity within the context of family and society.

Ethnic identity was a clearly articulated phenomenon within our family and was noticed by my parents and older relatives regarding other peoples' identities. My parents and other adult relations described people in terms of their ethnic affiliation and ascribed characteristics to them based on this affiliation, positive for some ethnic groups, especially ours, and negative for many others. Therefore, children and adolescents were encouraged to

associate with people from their own ethnicity, and it was hoped that they would marry people from Lebanese, Syrian, or Arabic ethnicity. Stories were told of the dire consequences that had befallen one maternal aunt who had married a man from another ethnic group, a man who had become unfaithful and eventually abandoned the mother and children. A value that was communicated as imperative in our ethnic group was that of family and ethnic loyalty.

For the most part, we were accepted by people with whom we worked and went to school. However, we were a dark-skinned and ethnic looking family. Each of us had experiences, as children and adolescents, in which we were ridiculed and insulted regarding our physical characteristics. I recall a particularly crushing period as a new student in a parochial seventh grade, where schoolyard experiences for several weeks contained taunts and insults regarding my coloring. In recent years, as Arab terrorism has emerged, there have been more public statements of prejudice and bias directed at the Arabic population.

Despite early infrequent but hurtful experiences, I primarily maintained a pride in and identification with my ethnic background. Although my parents were proud and loyal to our ethnic status, they were also eager to be a part of what they saw as the American melting pot, and socialized us to value our American customs and values. Still, I cherish the identification with ethnicity and have encouraged ethnic identification in my children. In fact, I always considered myself to be a person of color, as I observed that the skin color of my people was not like the other White and shades of White of people around us. I was surprised to learn upon entering graduate school that middle Eastern people had demographically been redistributed into the

category of white based on socioeconomic mobility rather than skin coloration, and that there was no category for people from the middle East.

In a sense, this dual consciousness, being considered of the "White" race while clearly having darker skin than any other White people, left me feeling that I was neither insider nor outsider to any group, not White but also clearly not black or Asian. Perhaps this insider/outsider status gives me a sensitivity to be respectful in my investigations of ethnic groups, having had experiences that tie me to many groups. I believe that I am especially attuned to issues relating to ethnicity, with a unique respect for culture, rituals, and customs while also being sensitive to the dominant culture and the interweave of ethnicity and mainstream culture.

My history as a woman raised within an ethnically defined family has influenced my perceptions on gender and competency. I was reared in a two-parent household where the gender ideology was very traditional, and power and influence clearly remained with my father. Nonetheless I could observe and recognize the competencies of my mother. By the time I came to make a commitment to an intimate relationship, my gender ideology had evolved to a more progressive ideology in which men and women could share power and influence. In order to establish an equitable marriage, it was necessary for my partner and I to develop competency in a full range of gendered behaviors. Through our lived experience, I have seen that men and women can be competent at both relational and instrumental tasks. As I trained and grew in the role of a family therapist, I maintained and nurtured this belief with client families, and maintained a respect for and sensitivity to cultural influences. My lived experience and my work experience have influenced my

approach to families. My research also reflects this competency-based belief system.

My concerns in doing this research follow. I am clearly not an insider to the African-American culture yet my research was seeking to explore midlife relationships accessing this ethnic population. One fear was that I would not be trusted or accepted and would therefore not be privy to the authenticity of my participants. My second concern was that my research would not be considered appropriate by colleagues as I am not an insider to the population I study. My struggle became how to address these concerns. Should I raise these issues with my participants or address them as they arose? I chose to adopt the latter. How do I justify my intrusion into an ethnicity to which I do not belong? In addition to what I have just explained, my justification is that I consider it vitally important to represent underrepresented voices wherever it is possible to do so.

How do these concerns influence the ongoing methodology? The interview questions I originally constructed were supplemented and altered by the focus on ethnicity that arose spontaneously from my interviews with the first two couples. It is clear that I was moved and affected by the research process, and that I became more in fluid motion with the process, rather than trying to be in charge of it, allowing it to take on more life of its own. Flexibility and fluidity in the research process allows for spontaneity and naturalness from the research participants. Perhaps that is how I am addressing these concerns, by being as authentic in the research process as I possibly can and allowing myself the freedom to act as an instrument of research.

Reflections on Use of Self

Acting as an instrument of research includes ongoing critical reflection. This took the form of incorporating field notes and theoretical memos into the data analysis process and utilizing the field notes as an additional way of deriving meaning from the data (Jacob, 1987). Theoretical memos (Miles & Huberman, 1994) helped to deepen and develop the interview process, noting when questioning seemed less successful or where the questioning could be altered to be more naturalistic and productive for subsequent interviews.

Successful qualitative research also requires care and reflection within the process of doing the interviews. The researcher should be able to build trust and connection with the research participants. Setting up an interview situation to encourage comfort and sharing is essential, and even more critical with participants for whom you are an outsider. Building a connection begins with the first contact, generally over the telephone, and sets the tone for future interactions. Clearly presenting the research objectives, stressing the value of their participation, and stating one's intentions as an interviewer begins to build trust. I continued to create a safe and trusting interview by being positive, respectful, and non-judgmental in my responses, by carefully expressing curiosity, and by offering thoughtful reflections on the content of responses.

Research with couples also requires the ability to be sensitive to relational dynamics that operate both overtly and covertly. In order to capture the tensions, the humor, the discomforts, the compassion of loving and caring moments, it is necessary to carefully attune to gestures, nuances, and subtleties of expressions, glances, and responses. Observing and recording

these interactions between the partners of an intimate relationship provides added insight and information that enriches the qualitative data. Designing questions in which couples are asked to describe aspects of mutuality in their relationship such as decision-making provides an opportunity to observe the interactions between them as well. These process components were recorded first as field notes, and later incorporated into the theoretical memos. General impressions of the relational dynamics between each couple were noted after couple interviews and this information was incorporated into the theoretical memos.

The personal narrative, qualitative methods, and carefully chosen theoretical perspectives contributed to the ongoing process of this research. The greatest contribution arose from the participants who generously gave of their time and their stories. Information on the sample participants follows in the next sections.

Site and Sample Selection

Choices for sampling were theoretically driven, to fit Glaser and Strauss's (1967) notion of theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling guides choices of participants, just as interactions with participants guides the conceptual questions. In this sample, there was a select focus on the diversity of an African-American sample.

To facilitate connecting with interview participants and to minimize the expert role that might be thrust upon the researcher, individual and conjoint interviews were conducted in the homes of the participants. In one case, the couple requested an alternate site, as they felt their four children would be intrusive. This interview was conducted in a conference room at a university.

The sample consisted of 10 African-American couples, a total of 20 individuals, who have identified themselves as middle-aged and as participating in a committed relationship. Diversity in age, occupation, income levels, and length of years together was important to this study, so considerable efforts were made to recruit individuals by using personal and professional contacts in the community in addition to advertising. Members of the dyads did not need to be legally married, but needed to have lived together for a period of at least three years.

The method of recruitment was through announcements posted throughout the community in locations such as churches and community and campus organizations (see Appendix C). In an effort to recruit a diverse sample, the use of “snowballing” and networking with colleagues and friends was incorporated into the recruitment process. Snowballing is a procedure which involves requesting that current participants recommend future participants for the study (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). After the completion of scheduled interviews, I asked participants to consider other couples who might be appropriate for the study. I made follow-up telephone calls to ascertain if participants knew of any other appropriate couples for the study. In two cases, one couple referred another couple. I secured all other couples through extensive networking that began with colleagues from the local community and reached into public agencies, service organizations, and community groups around southwestern Virginia.

All 10 couples were recruited from snowballing or networking. The advertisements yielded no inquiries except for one woman who responded to advertisements at a women's week conference. However, she and her partner did not meet the criteria for inclusion in the study. It seemed that someone

known to the couples had to speak for the researcher in order to gain entry into their lives, explained perhaps by the researcher's status as an outsider to their ethnic group. In order to create diversity within the sample, recruitment from within the academic community was avoided. As a consequence, only one male participant was an employee of the university, although a number of female participants were involved as students in several local universities.

Each member of the couple was asked to participate in an individual interview for approximately one hour as well as a conjoint interview lasting for about two hours. The individual interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes, whereas the couple interviews ranged from 90 to 150 minutes. Couples who agreed to both sets of interviews were invited to be participants in the study. In the individual interview, each individual was also asked the questions for the demographic worksheet (see Appendix A). At the end of the individual session, each individual was asked to complete a one day diary of a typical day (see Appendix B) and bring this diary to the subsequent conjoint interview. In several cases, the diary was filled out verbally during the interview.

Using my skills as a family therapist, couples were debriefed at the end of the conjoint interview. The debriefing consisted of clarifying potential areas of misunderstandings or conflicts that may have arisen in the interviews. During an interview with one couple, a rather heated argument necessitated brief intervention and recommendations for professional referrals. Follow-up telephone calls were made to these individuals to ascertain that adequate professional consultation had been secured.

Procedures for obtaining consent for the interviews were initially verbal when contact was made by telephone, followed by written consent (see

Appendix D) with specific consent to be tape-recorded. Respondents were advised of both the confidentiality and anonymity of the interviews.

Description of the Sample

The sample consisted of 10 couples whose members ranged in age from 35 to 52, with an average age of 44.5 (See Table 3.2). In response to the question, "What do you consider your racial, cultural, or ethnic identification?", the 20 individuals identified themselves as either Black or African-American in equal numbers, with some individuals stating a decided preference for one term over the other. In addition to identifying as primarily Black or African-American, one male reported having some Jamaican and West Indian heritage. Two females reported having Native American grandparents or great-grandparents, one male identified as having Middle-Eastern and Hispanic ancestry, and one male and one female identified as Jewish, with ancestral roots dating back to the Diaspora in Africa. The diversity of ancestral roots contributed to the diversity of the sample.

Places of birth included 12 states, with three individuals from coastal Virginia, and two from southwest Virginia. More than half of the sample had been born and reared in larger Eastern and Midwestern cities such as Chicago, Miami, and Philadelphia. Two individuals grew up locally, and two individuals grew up in a rural environment. All but one of the individuals had lived in other areas of the country or world. The 10 couples presently reside in five different towns and cities in southwestern and central Virginia.

Nine of the couples were legally married, one couple was cohabiting with plans to marry in the future. Four of the females were in second marriages, and four of the males were in a second marriage or significant cohabiting relationship, affecting five of the 10 couples. The remaining five

couples were in first marriages for both spouses. Length of current marriages spanned from 3 years to 30 years, with 7 of the 10 couples having 14 years or more together. All of the households with the exception of the cohabiting couple included children: biological children, stepchildren, grandchildren, foster children, nieces, or nephews. Biological or stepchildren ranged in age from 5 years to 36 years. Children residing presently in the household (including grandchildren) ranged from 1 year to 29 years of age. None of the households had older adult relatives presently residing with them.

The educational background of the sample ranged from three years of high school to doctoral degrees. One individual did not complete high school; five individuals had high school degrees (many had one to two years of college); four had bachelors degrees; eight had masters degrees in various areas, including clinical, pastoral counseling, and business; and two had Ph.D.s (see Table 3.3). Occupational activity included two blue collar occupations, five homemaker/students (four of the five had been previously employed as clericals or professionals), five paraprofessionals, and eight professionals. To protect the anonymity of the participants, all of the names and some of the occupations of the sample have been altered, substituting a similar occupation.

Table 3.2**Ages of Sample by Gender**

AGE	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-55
Male	2	2	5	1
Female	3	1	4	2
Total	5	3	9	3

Table 3.3**Educational Background of Sample by Gender**

EDUCATION	Completed 7-11 years	High School Graduate	Bachelors	Masters	Ph.D.
Male	0	3	1	4	2
Female	1	2	3	4	0
Total	1	5	4	8	2

Data Collection

The primary method of data collection was through in-depth interviews, conducted with a semi-structured format (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). The individual interviews were occasionally conducted first but most couples preferred to begin with the conjoint interview. Individual interviews included questions covering certain topic areas as those found in Appendix E.

The conjoint interviews included background questions about the history of the relationship and included questions covering certain topic areas as those found in Appendix E.

Certain questions were influenced by topic areas in the review of literature under the conceptual framework of the gender perspective. In the individual interview, participants were asked about their views on men and women and where these beliefs came from, to ascertain ideological and family of origin beliefs. Each participant was also queried about ways in which they created or maintained closeness with their partners. In the conjoint interview, couples were asked to tell how they met and decided to make a commitment. They were also asked questions about decision-making and money management, and then asked to describe the last big decision that they made together. The daily diaries were designed to ascertain division of family responsibilities, but these were also areas of questioning in the interviews. These questions were designed to look for power issues, communication issues, gender ideology, and practical demands.

Other questions were influenced by topic areas in the review of literature under the life course perspective at midlife. In the individual interview, specific questions about the meaning of middle age was asked, and questions were asked about physical and personal changes. Conjoint questions

about practical demands, decision-making, and money management were designed to reveal not only information about gender but also information about the life course. These questions were designed to look for personal transitions, caregiving responsibilities, and socioeconomic circumstances.

A pilot study was conducted first to refine the data collection materials. As a result of the pilot study, questions were adjusted accordingly, several questions were eliminated and several questions were added (see Revised Interview questions in Appendix E). However, the questions were used as a guide and when the opportunity for exploration of relevant areas emerged, appropriate extemporaneous questions were offered (McCracken, 1989).

In the individual interview, demographic information was secured (see Appendix A). A daily diary (see Appendix B) was provided to the individual to complete and return to me at a later time. In several cases, the individual requested that the diary be done as part of the interview rather than as a separate activity. This information was then inserted into the interview data.

Snyder (1992) suggests that broad questions such as those in Appendix E, are best followed by clarifying and reflective comments by the researcher. These comments would serve the purpose of clearing up misunderstandings or misrepresentations and also serve the purpose of maintaining the conversational aspects of the interview. Clarifying and reflective comments were inserted throughout the interviews to broaden and enrich the interview material whenever necessary.

Data Analysis

Tape-recorded interviews were transcribed by both the researcher and a paid transcriptionist. These were then converted into use for manual and computer-assisted coding (Tesch, 1990). Analysis of data included a synthesis

of various procedures established by Allen (1989) and Bogdan & Biklen (1982) for managing qualitative data. Copies of each transcript were maintained on disks for back-up safety. All written and transcribed data were identified only by a code number, with related code numbers for individual and couple dyads. Each transcript was read several times before analysis began. The qualitative research program NUD•IST was utilized for coding purposes and data management .

NUD•IST stands for Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing (Richards & Richards, 1992). It is structured on coding procedures as described by Strauss and Corbin (1990) for grounded theory development to include open and axial coding. In addition, NUD•IST provides a tree diagram format in which categories termed nodes can be coded in relation to one another on hierarchical levels. For example, a node such as male gender beliefs could include sub-categories such as beliefs derived from family of origin, beliefs about male/female roles, and changes in beliefs. These categories and sub-categories are depicted (diagrammatically) in a tree diagram as parent/child hierarchies. These diagrams are the initial step into the realm of theory-building. The use of the hierarchies and theoretical memos on-line allows for the building of interrelationships.

In the first stage of coding, open coding began with an examination of the data for identification of themes. Tesch (1990) describes this process as deconstructing (open coding) then reconstructing (axial coding) the data. Initial coding was done with nodes assigned by text units, which in NUD•IST is the text between carriage returns. Often passages were coded with multiple nodes. Initial coding then built gradually into clusters. Subsequent memos aided in the process of connecting clusters. A list of coding categories (nodes)

and clusters (parent/child on the tree diagram hierarchy) was established for the females, for the males, and for couples separately. The 100 initial nodes were clustered and reduced to 30, eliminating the overlap and duplication, including five codes that were maintained to record demographic information (see Appendix F).

Finally, using hard copies of reports of the 30 clusters of nodes generated by the NUD•IST program, selective coding was used to verify and identify emergent dominant themes and coding categories. At this point the demarcation between females, males, and couples in the final codes was collapsed. Generally, couples' data were utilized for addressing the sections under relationships whereas individual data was primarily utilized under the sections for midlife. However, there was some rotation of data back and forth between these areas--as there was overlap in areas of questioning and in responses. For example, questions about gender were asked during both individual and couple interviews as were questions about intimacy. Reports generated by NUD•IST provided a record of who (which individual) and when (individual or couple interview) the response emerged so that results could be articulated with this additional information.

The 25 final categories were then grouped under eight dominant themes. The eight dominant themes were Family Matters, Friends and Lovers, Walking with God, A Time of Change, A Time of Stability, Time is Running Out, Diversity Within, and Living with Racism. The first three themes are reported in the research domain of relationships. The second three themes are reported in the research domain of midlife. The last two themes are reported in the research domain of ethnicity. Data analysis was guided by the

theoretical perspectives of the study, the research questions, the participants' responses, and ongoing interpretation of these responses.

Quality Control/Reliability

Quality control was guided by the tenets outlined by McCracken (1989). McCracken requires that in order to assure quality control in the analysis of qualitative data, the researcher's explanations of the data should strive to be exact, economical, consistent, unified, powerful, and fertile.

Miles and Huberman (1994) consider reliability in qualitative research to be synonymous with quality control and suggest various procedures for insuring reliability. One of those utilized was to ascertain that every aspect of the interactions with people from the community and with the participants was conducted with care and respect. Another way of ascertaining reliability was to collect data across a full range of settings, times, and diversity of respondents (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Finally, quality control was assured through the capacities of NUD•IST such as key word search, which verified the pervasiveness and density of key words and concepts. In fact, NUD•IST generated reports with information on the density of nodes, clusters of nodes, patterns and themes, by listing percentages of occurrence, number of documents involved, and number of individuals involved. These pieces of numerical information helped to justify and verify results.

Internal Validity/Authenticity

Guidelines for ascertaining internal validity in qualitative research are linked to the content and theory of the study. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that findings be examined to ascertain that they make sense, are internally coherent, and context-rich. In addition, they suggest that findings should be linked to prior theory. Main themes were examined and re-

examined for fit and authenticity, using the language of the participants to verify these qualities. In Chapter Five, the findings are confirmed as elaborating prior theory and research in these areas.

External Validity

Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that findings be verified with participants, members of the population being studied, and colleagues. They also suggest that sampling be theoretically diverse. Although a formal process of verification was not undertaken with participants, informal confirmation was incorporated by reflexive statements in subsequent individual or conjoint interviews, depending on which came first. For example, a brief summary statement of a response to a question in an earlier interview would preface a similar area of questioning in the current interview. In many cases, questions were repeated in individual interviews and a summary was offered of the respondents' responses in the joint interviews, or vice versa if the order of interview was reversed. Outcomes were also discussed with colleagues at length, in particular, with colleagues of African American descent. Sampling was theoretically diverse, drawing from a variety of occupations and areas of residence. Age range and length of marriage also provided a broad spectrum of diversity.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

This study is based upon in-depth interviews with 20 individuals, 10 couples, who are in the temporal period of midlife and in committed relationships. The research was designed to solicit information from these couples and individuals that would inform scholarly comprehension of contributors and detractors to intimacy, and information about their responses to midlife. Central to this study was the focus on ethnicity with the incorporation of a sample that was comprised of African American couples.

Locating and being allowed admittance to the private lives of these couples was sometimes challenging. Once admitted, however, all of the couples were open and forthcoming in sharing their individual and collective stories. Individuals described personal and emotional responses to one another and to the changes of midlife, and they shared their feelings and thoughts, plans and visions. Couples shared their histories, their challenges, their struggles, and their triumphs, usually with a sense of fun and delight in the unfolding of their lives together.

As I listened to the participants' stories, intimations of themes began to emerge. These women and men were clearly focused in their commitments to family and in their commitments to a higher power. In terms of life course transitions, the language of time emerged as dominant. Analysis of data, computer-assisted and manual, not surprisingly, revealed these commitments and the themes of time. Eight dominant themes were subsequently identified.

The eight dominant themes were grouped into three research domains: relationships, midlife, and ethnicity. The three themes under relationships were titled Family Matters, Friends and Lovers, and Walking with God. The

three themes identified for midlife were centered around a theme of time; A Time of Change, A Time of Stability, and Time is Running Out. The two themes concerned with ethnicity were Diversity Within and Living with Racism.

The three sections that follow contain the identified eight themes and were grouped under the three research domains of relationships, midlife, and ethnicity. Within each of the eight themes, the related categories are described. Table 4.4 is included here with the pseudonyms of the couples as they are used in the results and the number of years they have been married or cohabiting.

Table 4.4

Names of Individuals in Couples, Years Together, and Description of Relationship

<u>Names</u>	<u>Years Together</u>	<u>Description of Relationship</u>
Bella and Daniel	3	Cohabiting
Thelma and Ken	3	Second Marriage
Rea and Stephen	7	Second Marriage
Elizabeth and Ronald	14	First Marriage
Lucille and John	15	Second Marriage
Geneva and Victor	15	First Marriage
Lena and Richard	25	First Marriage
Sharon and Carl	25	First Marriage
Pamela and Peter	27	Second Marriage
Delores and Joseph	30	First Marriage

Relationships

Family Matters

The women and men in this study, individually and as couples, had lives that were focused and centered around their families: family of procreation, family of origin, extended family, fictive kin. Family matters were of prominent concern and family was what mattered.

The importance of family. All but one of the couples had children presently residing in the home. All of the couples discussed their lives as intertwined with biological children, stepchildren, foster children, nieces, nephews, and grandchildren. During the interviews, children of all ages came in and out of the household. Peter and Pamela, a couple in their early 50s, raised a daughter from her first marriage, and later adopted a nephew as their legal son. Presently, they were supporting a very young child and his adult mother, their niece. Peter expressed this theme succinctly:

I think what is important and what has always been important to me is my family. The one that I grew up in and now the one that I'm a part of.

Pamela observes that she has had a hard time adjusting to living in this new area, as she is now so far from her two grandchildren, with whom she was highly involved:

You know, holidays and birthdays, we were always together. We were a close family.

Sharon, mother of two, and grandmother of one, married for 25 years to Carl talks about the importance of children in their lives:

We have been a child centered family. We put them first. We gave up our social lives to be parents and our daughter used to say we were the most boring people in the world. . . we have always been a child centered family and supportive of the kids in whatever activities they were involved in.

Stephen and Rea, the youngest couple in the sample at 35, moved to this area to help Rea's sister extricate herself from a violent marriage. Stephen's career suffered, as did Rea's community and social involvement, but both were unwaveringly committed to the sister and her children's well-being. Stephen contemplates the decision:

I felt the main thing was when this guy comes over to see another man there, just having another man present. . . Secondly, my wife could support her sister, shore her up, my son would have his cousins. . .

Rea describes her surprise at her sister's predicament and describes their closeness:

None of us knew what he was like . . . my sister was taken by storm. We (my sister and I are very close). We went through our pregnancies together, we nursed each other's babies. Her children are my children, there is no distinction.

Of the 20 individuals, 19 described life in their family of origin as closeknit, although not perfect nor always easy. All 19 individuals grew up with both parents present in the household. Only one individual did not, and he attributed his difficulties with drugs and delinquencies to the absence of his father's support. Ken, a 41-year-old former athlete, a paraprofessional now in his second marriage, had strong opinions about the cause of his youthful difficulties:

What's important? Family structure. I would say out of 10 guys I knew who did well, they had both parents in the house. The support of those parents, and they are still together . . . in our neighborhood.

Carl explains how he strives to be supportive of his wife Sharon in any way that he sees he may be helpful to her career. However, he always struggles to protect what he considers to be most important in their lives:

I may not be supportive in everything she wants to do but I try to be. But I also try to make sure that we never forget the family commitment. That job is the number one thing in our lives, our family. I'm always trying to uphold that.

Joseph, at 52 the oldest male in the sample, reflects on his priorities and wonders at others:

My family is important. My family here at home, my church family. I think at one time my work was more important than it seemed other things were. Now it is shifted. I think my family has always been first. I'm family oriented. I don't have time for other things and I never feel like I needed other things. I can't understand men my age wanting those things.

Family of origin role models. Most of the couples expressed pride in and respect for their elderly parents. All but two had parents who were still together--celebrating 40th and 50th anniversaries--or had stayed together until they died. It should be noted that eight of the 20 participants in this study, in five of the couples, were in second marriages or long-term cohabiting relationships at the present time. Many expressed admiration for the way their parents related to one another. John, a paraprofessional in his early 40s, was discussing himself in comparison to his father:

I watched my Mom and Dad make joint decisions. My dad is probably more traditional than I, but he and Mom have always made joint decisions and really worked as a team.

Joseph recalls his childhood where he first learned to do a range of work. Although he saw his parents as more hierarchical, he believes that they did not encourage traditional behaviors in their children:

My father didn't dictate traditional roles to us. I remember quite vividly our chores around the house like washing dishes and stuff like that, not just my sister would. All of the guys did that too. We grew up cooking, we would come in and cook things for ourselves. We would go out and fish and clean and cook them.

Lena, in her mid-40s and a longtime schoolteacher, talked about how close she still was to her parents and how much she admired them:

I saw them show lots of respect for each other. They never argued in front of us when we were children and were very supportive of each other. For a long time when I was growing up, they even worked together in the same place. They were always very concerned about us

and always in agreement about what should be done about my brother and I.

Thelma, a 37-year-old law enforcement officer, observed that she had probably gone into the profession out of admiration for her father. She regretted that she had not heeded her parents' advice when she was younger and was grateful for their assistance through some difficult times. She hoped that her marriage of only three years duration would become like theirs:

They are like best pals. Sure, they get on each other's nerves sometimes. When my father retired, and he was around all the time, mother thought it would drive her crazy. But they are really good pals. Mom has a history (of emotional problems). . . My Dad has been real supportive.

On the eve of Geneva's wedding, her mother told her that she knew that she would have a wonderful life. Geneva, a 45-year-old graduate student and former professional, responded with curiosity to her mother's claim:

Why? She said 'I can tell by the way Victor's father cares for his mother that Victor will care for you the same way.' And I'm telling you, she was right because I thank his Dad for that. You should see the way he treats his father, and the way his Dad treats his Mom.

Mothers and grandmothers were also identified as strong role models.

Sharon, a 48-year-old grandmother herself, talked about the tradition of strong women in her family:

I had a grandmother who was very strong about having the female grandchildren in the family finish college before they got married. She was a women's libber from way back. My sister and I had promised her that we would not get married until we had finished college.

Bella, 41 and in her second long-term cohabiting relationship, felt more certain that this would be a more successful one because of her partner's qualities and his role models:

He had a good role model as well. I looked into his story telling about his mother and father. His mom, through his stories, was a very strong woman and very much a part of the decision making process in the family, so Daniel has that role model. I think she blazed the trail for me.

Men as nurturers. All the men were intensely involved in the daily lives and care of the children in the household. One couple, in their early 50s, easygoing and soft-spoken, had all of their five adult children and two grandchildren residing in the household with them. Each was asked individually about how they felt about this situation, and they both reported that they would miss the children if they were gone. Joseph, a 52-year-old counselor, reflects on his household:

I guess I never really knew what it was like to be without children in the household. . . I came right out of the service into marriage and children. Even now, when all of the children are away, I miss them. . . . It's all I know.

Stephen spoke with admiration about Rea's family, and how he was more similar to the men in her family than those in his own. Rea discusses the men in her family:

In my family, the men are very nurturant, my father, my grandfather, my uncles. . . your husband is the worrier. Even now if there is something my mother wants to communicate, he (father) is the placater, the one who does it.

Daniel and Bella, cohabiting with plans to marry, also plan to have or adopt children. They have agreed that Daniel will retire early and care for the children while Bella pursues her career. Daniel has had his Ph.D. for many years and works as a high level administrator in a state university. Daniel, divorced from his first wife, reports that he was also highly involved with his adult daughter throughout her infancy and childhood:

I don't have a problem with that (taking care of the children), because raising my daughter I took a big part in raising her even as a baby. I was there feeding her and changing her diaper so I have no problem with that, but I would like a break now and then!

Despite the positive nature of most family of origin descriptions and stories, many of the participants also talked about ways that they had evolved

and changed from the styles or roles that their parents had defined, as revealed in the final category for this section.

Family of origin/making changes. All of the individuals and eight of the couples in the individual and conjoint interviews, talked about ways they had evolved and changed in their relationship in various ways. One of the ways in which they noticed they had changed was that they had made changes that were different from their parents. The men especially noted that they were often similar to but different from their fathers. John reflects on how he is different from his father in his relationship with Lucille:

I think the other thing that helps is that she really supports who I am and my beliefs. That part of me that grew up with well defined roles, there are still vestiges of that, that have come a long way. I think she still respects the fact that I'm a man and she's a woman, and there are differences between us. I just think that she respects all of those facets of me.

Stephen reflects on how different he is from his father and what the legacy of his father has left for him:

I have two conflicting worlds in my mind. On my father's side, it was very stratified, genderwise, his mother cooked from scratch, was given nine dollars a week to run the house, and had an unhappy marriage. But divorce was never an option, it was an arranged marriage. My grandfather ran a very strict household, my father came up under that. To an extent he carried that on, even though he was talking about being more compassionate and liberal than his father. . . . My mother in her household, it was a very gentle household, in so far as how they deal with people. . . . My mother's father is a very gentle man, he is very much like a mystic.

Richard, a 48-year-old laborer, recalls that his stepfather would not allow his mother to work or leave the home unaccompanied. Richard and Lena have one child, and Lena has maintained steady employment as an educator in the 25 years of their marriage:

My mother was basically dependent upon my father. It seemed as if he really wanted to control things. . . . She became independent after he died. She went to work . . . She seemed happy about it. I believe my wife

wants to pursue things to enjoy life, you know to have a home like this.

The males appeared to be trying to be more equitable in their relationships with their wives than they saw their fathers had been with their mothers or stepmothers. Sometimes this required the effort of shrugging off some of the traditional gender values of their fathers' world. Sometimes it required the effort of their wives, as Delores described:

My parents were totally different and my husband's side is totally different. When we first were married, it was almost a problem between him and I. . . His father did all the shopping, his mother didn't leave the home. My mother was the one that did everything in my house. . . We had to work it out.

Friends and Lovers

In this section, issues of equity and gender values emerged throughout the discussion of the couple's intimate relationship. The operative word for this second theme would be sharing; sharing confidences and responsibilities as friends do, sharing time and commitments as intimates do. An often expressed maxim was the recognition that being friends with one another was important to the intimate relationship. Rea talks about the importance of friendship:

A part of the relationship is, we have to be able to love each other enough, to be friends enough. You know, the way I love my women friends, I love my women friends, we have very intimate relationships together. . . My basic opinion was I didn't want to get married again, but I found a friend that is the right person to marry, you should always marry your friends, my parents are very good friends. His parents are very good friends, too, they could entertain each other, I mean they love having children, but if they didn't have any, they could be happy.

Lena agrees that being friends is essential to a good marriage:

I'd probably say before you marry someone, make sure he is your friend first. That you are able to talk to this person, trust this person, share your deep feelings with a satisfactory response.

Bella recalls the caution she felt in becoming involved with Daniel and the strong feelings of friendship that evolved:

I was careful in letting myself say yes, I am going to be involved with this man, and I was careful in the labels that I placed on the relationship. For a while, it started to occur to me, because I have some very good long-term female relationships, those are my models. So I was careful, if the thought occurred to me, that this man was becoming a friend to me, and it took a long time before I verbalized that. I can pretty well say that Daniel is my best friend . . . More than loving him I like him. I like who he is.

Marriage as a partnership. As part of the theme of friendship, the idea of relationships as partnerships emerged. For some of the men this again represented a change from either their father's behavior and attitudes, or a change in their own behavior and attitudes over the course of a long period of marriage. Peter, married to Pamela for 27 years, makes this observation:

Well, I think it's more of a partnership. . . I don't believe in that big he-man or prince on a white horse anymore. To me I think it's more egalitarian, and it's especially, in the life we've lived together, because when we first started off the military wasn't paying that much where she could afford to stay home. So that helped the relationship to grow that way. She had equal power and all.

Stephen contemplates his parents' marriage and recognizes that he and his wife have more equitable standards:

I do not feel that I carry the same traditional stuff, in that I very much view my marriage as a partnership, in fact I value my wife's decisions incredibly. I believe oftentimes, in fact, most times, I believe that her instincts on decision making are better than mine. . . I think where my strengths come in has to do with trying to budget out what we can do. So we complement each other.

Central to the partnership was making decisions together and sharing in all major and minor decisions, especially about purchases or things related to the children. Interestingly, 7 of the 10 women managed the money for the household and in the three other couples, money was managed jointly, down to

the division of the payment of certain utilities and bills. Thelma explains her system with Ken:

The way it works is, I take care of the rent and he takes care of the utility bills, only because of the way our pay schedules are, I guess. Basically I get paid once a month, the last working day. Rent is due on the first so I take care of that and a few other bills. he gets paid every two weeks, so he does the electric and cable and phone, water and car insurance. I take care of the food. I do the main shopping, and Ken picks up when we need things.

Carl explains that Sharon keeps all of the books. Before any major purchases, most recently a lawn mower which he is the only user of, they discussed their options extensively. Carl explains their process with little light humor thrown in:

I'd like to think we made the decision as a couple . . . we discussed it. We talked about it a lot. She knows I don't go out and buy anything like that and walk in and say here it is. I talked about all the different options. I looked at mulching and riding, horsepower, width of blade, and I bombarded her with it enough that I knew she was bored and she was wondering when I was going to buy this dumb thing.

Bella, thoughtful and articulate on matters of the heart, describes the process of decision making that she and Daniel have carefully worked out:

Decision making is something that we both recognize is very necessary to be considerate of others. So that little mechanism of having key days is one we worked out early in our relationship. Daniel is an administrator, and accustomed to making decisions . . . he does it easily. My personality and work, I was also accustomed to being very decisive, so to be respectful of each other we decided we would have alternative days for decision making, but we also recognize that it is very important for the health of our relationship to respect one another, to talk and communicate. We do that without any sacrifice to the relationship. It is always important.

In addition to sharing in decision making, part of living with another person in a family and household is sharing in the tasks of daily living. Inherent in the contract between partners is the willingness and ability to work together and to take on the work that needs to be done. This requires

that both partners be open to the tasks that evolve in the daily workings of an active household.

Flexibility and sharing responsibilities. Sharing the housework, child care, lawn care, and other occurrences of family life requires that partners attend to the tasks that need to be done, and then follow through in completing these tasks. This requires the willingness and competency to do a range of chores. Most of the men reported doing daily housework and child care, both in their daily journals and in their interviews. The one chore that most men seemed to defer to their female partners was cooking. The notable exception was in the case of one couple where the woman's employment involved food preparation all day--she was relieved from cooking responsibilities by mutual agreement.

The women discussed the housework as if it was primarily their responsibility, but the orchestration of the tasks was shared. However, in at least half of these couples, the female partner was a student and not presently in the work force. Many of them had many years of full-time employment before this, so it was difficult to know whether their non-paid employment status influenced the present situation. John works full-time in a stressful position while his wife completes a health certificate program. He and his wife report that he does most of the household cleaning. He believes that this dates back to his early experiences and reflects on the ability to shift roles in his family:

I just found that my family, especially my grandparents, have always had the ability to shift roles, however, some of that rubbed off on me. I think it also helped to be more adaptable. My mother always went ahead and taught us how to do everything from cooking to cleaning to ironing, and basic housework. She told us that we should never be dependent upon anybody else, we should be able to do it. Of course the

other side of the coin was that once we did learn, we were bound to do some of those things around the house.

Rea and Bella express similar sentiments in believing that women and men can exchange and have a lot of fluidity in their activities. Both observed men and women in their families being able to do a variety of things. Rea talked about the multiple abilities of her father:

My father sews, he cooks, he used to do our hair, and my mother did all of these things, too, but my father could, he is in a continuum of men doing such things.

Bella recalls growing up in a farm community to which she attributes her beliefs:

I believe in an egalitarian relationship, where you trade off roles, based upon situation, and based upon your field. That has a lot to do with family of origin . . . we were a farm family, and did a lot of work together. Everyone did every kind of chore.

Although the men often participate in the household tasks, there was also a sense that this is an evolving process for some of them. Richard believes that a man should support his wife when she works outside of the home. He admits at the same time that he may not be as regular about his contributions as he could be:

Men's and women's roles would vary, in the marriage situation where you have the husband and wife working. You have to have a certain amount of flexibility in there, you have to consider the fact that your wife is working and she doesn't have a lot of time to be cooking and doing the household chores. I should assist with that, which I do, not on a real frequent basis, that is the only way I know of to look at, as a working family.

In her individual interview, Lena had made this comment about how she and Richard worked out the household responsibilities:

Shared the housework, and when my daughter was little, my Mom took care of her when I worked. Richard and I set down and agreed again, we discussed what part he would do, and what was going to be my responsibility and then how we would do some things together.

Carl expresses a similar conviction to Richard but also reveals his ambivalence and what the consequences to him are:

My bias on that is to say that Sharon has a similar role to my mother, and that is doing a lot, taking care of the children. At the same time I try to be more realistic and think that is a very dated type of notion about the woman's role. What I try to do is do a lot more than I saw my father do to support her. I also realize that Sharon, early on, wanted a career and has worked at it, and I've supported that, but also worried about how that would affect things in our children's development. Willing to support, but worried. . . what dual careers make it difficult to do is stay attune to kids in a very emotional and spiritual sense. . . I struggle with that because if it doesn't happen from Sharon, it has to happen a little more from me.

Later, in her turn in an individual interview, Carl's wife Sharon made this response when asked a similar question about household work:

I'd like to have seen a Saturday morning with everyone pitching in for two hours and cleaning the house, but it didn't happen, and it still hasn't happened and partially because I guess I didn't engineer it successfully or early enough or whatever. I have always said that I would never have a housekeeper come in, we always wanted our children to be able to clean for themselves. . . Eventually I will, but I would like to see more of a family effort to do it.

John, sharing a household with six other adults and two children, describes himself as the neater one in the family. He also indicates his limitations:

I guess I am probably the neater one. Well, pickiest one. . . I love to have every little thing that I own in a special place and have it all folded, but other people go through my things and I can't keep it like that. I have to fix things. I kind of do the surface thing, but my wife decides when it is done all the way complete. Like cleaning out the refrigerator, I'll take out the things that need out, and maybe wipe a shelf, but she goes in and everything comes out, shelves and all. . . I do as many dishes as anybody. . . Make the beds, vacuum, everything.

Delores, mother of five and married to John for 30 years, agrees that chores should be shared:

I guess I have always believed that men and women should do things together. There is nothing that I shouldn't do I guess. . . He likes to do that, cut the grass. I have done it, but it is his job. I think it should be equal.

Ronald and Elizabeth, whose sense of fun and humor was notable throughout the interviews, bantered with each other on the subject of housework and child care. Each claimed that they did more of the work, until Ronald made this classic comment about the difference in approaches:

Elizabeth probably does most of the work, but Elizabeth has a certain way she does it. I think the first time we experienced it after we first got married, we were in the washroom together and she said "why are you folding that towel that way?" What do you mean? "Why are you folding the shirt that way? Why did you leave that chair away from under the cabinet?" Who cares! But Elizabeth is real particular about where it goes.

Some of the ambiguity or ambivalence around the distribution of labor may be more easily understood in the context of spiritual or ethnic values which will be discussed later. Victor's words offer a partial explanation of this discrepancy:

I think that me, spiritually, I'm the head of my home, but don't take that out of context. All that means is that the ultimate responsibility of how well things go and the quality and the peace, etc. is ultimately my responsibility, but that responsibility and the process in terms of how that plays itself out is a joint relationship. I don't dictate to my wife, I don't demand that she does this or that, I don't set rules and say you follow them because I'm the head of the house or anything like that. Everything we do is a joint decision.

Sharing responsibilities and making decisions together are acts of friendship and love. These acts include the necessary activities of daily life in sustaining a household and a family. Necessary also to the sustenance and maintenance of a relationship is the nurturance of the intimate connection. Clearly articulated in the interviews with these couples was the importance of creating opportunities to be together, sharing a variety of activities for leisure and enjoyment but also creating the opportunities for talking with one another. The remaining categories of this section are thus entitled Being Together and Talking Together.

Being together. Essential to the maintenance of any relationship is the chance to be with the other person, sharing activities or moments of leisure in some capacity. Favorite activities included walking together, traveling together, and watching movies. Most of the couples admitted that they had little opportunity to have large amounts of time away from the home together, with the demands of children, schooling, and work. They did, however, strive to be with one another in intimate moments whenever possible. Delores, a soft-spoken mother of five points out that spending time with a person whenever you can is a clear way of showing your regard:

I know that he cares. He spends all of his time with me. He tries to please me. He always tells me that he loves me, and the things he does. He's always here for me.

Elizabeth says it with characteristic humor:

Ronald always says of course, I love you, I come home every night after work, don't I? I'm here with you and the kids all the time. . . That must be love.

The only couple who managed longer times together on a regular basis was Daniel and Bella who had no children in the household. Daniel explains the importance of these trips away from the stresses of their careers:

We take long trips together. We spend time, . . .even with her schedule, she would set aside time to take 3 or 4 days off, whether it was the beach or the mountains, we spend quality time together. That time is very important to the relationship.

Joseph and Delores have their adult children and grandchildren residing with them, but seldom take time away for themselves. In the last few years, they have begun to focus on trips alone together:

One of the things we are trying to do now is spend more time and money on getting away on vacations.

Couples with the competing demands of children and jobs spend time together in anyway that becomes available. Elizabeth and Ronald, with four young children, schooling and jobs, explain:

I feel like we will spend more time together again, . . . this has been a real full semester. I spend a lot of time studying, working. . .Although, Sundays is the day, after church, we try to spend time together, that's kind of our personal private time.

Many couples incorporate time to be together into the rhythm of daily activities. Geneva explains some of the ways that she and Victor maximize time together:

We spend time together in the mornings planning our days. . .About the time that the boys leave for school and we have some private time, we talk and organize things. We usually talk by phone a couple times of day. When I come in from classes at night, we spend a little time just us talking...We both study upstairs, I know that's not exactly time together.

Several couples are committed to regular exercise, especially walking together. They satisfy both the need to be together and the need to take care of their health and their partner's at the same time. Carl and Sharon, Geneva and Victor, Lucille and John all enjoy regular physical activity together:

We are pretty regimented about walking at least three times a week. . . It's 5:30 a. m. and we are the only ones out there, and there are times we don't say anything and there are times we talk about things, and times we argue too!. . . The only time we don't do that is when we are lazy and don't get out of bed . . . In a lot of cases we miss both, we don't get the exercise and there are stresses and tensions that build up if we don't get to talk through a lot of things.

We walk together, and we'll have weekend outings now and then.

We walk and exercise together. We walk or bike ride. In the summer, we go camping.

While the couples enjoyed spending time together in various activities, they appeared to derive the greatest pleasure from the act of communication and self-disclosure. Being able to talk to one another was a pleasure that they all indulged in.

Talking together. Through talking and listening to one another, the couples derive a number of benefits to their relationship. Bella describes one of the profound benefits of talking with Daniel:

Early in our relationship we spent a lot of time telling each other stories about our lives, so that is how we got to really know each other. A lot of stories were told about our childhoods, our families, we really painted pictures. In an earlier question I thought of that, when we knew we wanted to be involved with each other, it was in the story telling that I saw his soul and he saw mine.

Sharon also refers to the process of talking and communicating as a means of staying connected and a way to facilitate searching their souls:

We like to think that we keep the lines of communication open, and I guess we have done a lot more the past year than we have ever done. Just to be in touch with one another, I guess more soul searching, and more in depth conversations than we have ever had. I guess for me to let him know how I really feel about a particular thing. With those morning walks we have had a chance to talk about those things.

John and Lucille remark on the significance of talking in their relationship. Both of them had been previously married and were wary of new commitments. They were both surprised at the amount of time that they spent talking their first night together. Lucille begins:

The night that we met we spent three or four hours just talking. We talked about everything from A to Z. We talked about all different kinds of things.

John adds:

I'm a Vietnam veteran, and I talked to her about things I hadn't told anybody in a long period of time. . . There is absolutely nothing that I feel I can't share with her. Absolutely nothing. There are two people that I can talk to when it's something personal, that's God and my wife.

Stephen and Rea attribute the strength of their relationship to their sharing of intellectual interests and genuine appreciation of one another's conversational value. Stephen comments on the unending supply of subjects for discussion:

We love to go to Books a Million, and show each other books, and talk about what we see. . . There is always more to talk about.

Rea laughingly agrees:

We love to talk to one another. In fact we over talk, we talk so much, we have to talk fast, to get it all in.

Thelma and Ken also spend a lot of time in conversation. Talking to one another has helped both of them to cope with difficulties in their lives:

If he's had a rough day he'll call me on the phone and say look these people are getting on my nerves and such and such. Sometimes I'll just sit there cause he can talk! I might do a lot of talking now, but this man can talk and he will start going into the psychology of things, and all of a sudden I'm lost. He can come home and share things with me about work, because I think he needs to get it off of his chest. I can talk to him about things at work. . .

Peter is convinced that being able to talk about things has helped him to release the pent-up feelings that would sometimes have negative consequences for their relationship:

So a lot of things I would keep in and not talk about, just go on. Instead of dealing with the problem, it would only come up when I got angry or something. I've learned to talk about it before I do get angry. . . So, we've learned to talk more, to see what the other one is thinking. How what I want to do goes with what she wants to do. Sometimes that doesn't work out the way we hope it would. Sometimes we have to sit down and iron out the differences as far as what I want to do compared to what she wants to do.

Walking with God

In this theme, another source of comfort and safety will be addressed, a spiritual rather than human source. The presence of religion and spirituality and the language of a higher power was strikingly evident throughout the interviews. Religiosity permeated every aspect of the participants' lives, their commitment to one another, their attitudes about men and women, and their regard for their families and communities.

Personalizing the spiritual. The nature of spiritual relationships was intensely personal. Individuals discussed their relationships with God as deeply intimate. Geneva describes it this way:

I guess I have to say that because I have walked with God for so many years, that there is a comfort and a peace that everything is going to be alright. . . Just more relaxed about how things are going to be, or how things are going to turn out, because I talk with Victor about them and pray about them.. . That my relationship with the Lord is very important.

Elizabeth talks about developing her relationship with God and wishes that she put more time into it:

I guess my major one would be coming to a personal knowledge and awareness of God and what he can do for me and the things I can do for Him. Sometimes I wish I were a lot more diligent in learning things. Reading beyond the little books I have in my house, looking at certain programs. . . He has made a difference in the way I do things, the way I feel about things. . . I said "okay God, I want you to be first in my life." That is basically the way I began. I said "I want you to be the center of my life and learn about you, and if this is the way my life is going to be going then it's going to happen." I started focusing on Him, and received the Lord.

Although most of the couples were of the Christian faith, two individuals professed the Jewish faith. Stephen, a psychotherapist, and Rea, an artist, both are presently engaged in studying to be rabbis. Rea explains that this is not a professional but more of a personal mission that is undertaken for full development:

So the rabbinical studies contribute to the wholeness of a man or a woman in our family, you have to have that ministry, that is it. . . Some of my relatives are wealthy, and I don't care how much money you have, it is developing your ministry, that call aspect, you have to get that spiritual thing worked out.

Ronald talked about the two most important experiences in his life, finding his way to God and getting married:

The first one would be when I established a relationship with God. That was a series of events, and then getting married was the second. It is

one thing to make decisions for one person and it doesn't affect many people, but it affects people more greatly when you are married to someone. . . There is no other source or foundation that can take the place of God and family relationships. That is the most important thing, my source of strength. The more I understand about God, the more I know how to deal with circumstances.

Joseph shares the sense of peace and joy that has permeated his life as he has allowed religion into his life:

My focus has changed. I'm happier than I've ever been. I'm satisfied and peaceful. My religion is one of the things that helps. I feel comfortable now I am doing the right thing, the Lord's pleased with me. It feels good when you are doing the right thing, that's a source of joy.

Head of the household. Despite the sharing of household tasks and child care by many couples, many of the individuals in the study professed traditional beliefs about the roles or positions of men and women, particularly those individuals who had deep religious convictions. In addition to the two individuals who were studying to be rabbis, there were two individuals who are ordained ministers and married to each other. These individuals would be easily identifiable in a small community so their identity has been camouflaged throughout the reporting of results. However, the following quotes are more intriguing with the knowledge that they are a married couple that are both ordained ministers.

The husband offers this opinion about his beliefs:

I think it's unfair. Some of the ideas that men have, even coming here, some of the other ministers and all still have the same view, that women should be seen and not heard in the church. Especially not to preach, if she wants to preach then she stands down. So, my wife and I sit back and laugh. . . That's why I asked her to be my co-pastor cause we feel that there are such people. Well, even in town, and it's amazing, sometimes it crosses over the lines.

The wife offers a contrasting opinion:

I've always thought from a child, of men's and women's relationships, that it should be togetherness, a oneness thing. . . I think a women's

role is to be the caretaker of the home. To be in subjection to her husband of course, cause I'm a Christian. The same way a man is supposed to be the head of the home and make sure his family is taken care of. With these two working in their proper areas, then this makes for a happy home. They have a healthy relationship between a man and a woman. I also think that a woman, because she is a woman, that she's the one that gives the most. She gives more than the man does a lot of times.

As in the above, there was an ambiguous mixture of traditional attitudes and beliefs about gender woven throughout the interviews with more progressive or egalitarian attitudes within the same individuals and couple. There were no clear demarcations of certain couples as traditional or liberal, all had aspects of a continuum of beliefs and attitudes. This may be partly explained by the religious convictions that they embraced. Again, Victor is most useful in trying to explain this seeming paradox, as noted, in part, before:

My views in terms of gender, I think that me, spiritually, I'm head of the home. All that means is that the ultimate responsibility of how well things go and the quality and the peace, etc. is ultimately my responsibility, and the process in terms of how that plays itself out is a joint relationship. . . I view gender from that context, that men that serve Jesus Christ are the spiritual heads of their homes, but that in no way means that women are lesser of an entity, lesser in terms of responsibility, lesser in terms of importance, etc.

Ronald offers an explanation of how he interprets the notion of male and female positions. It should be noted that Ronald's wife Elizabeth is presently a student but has worked full-time for most of their 14 years together, during which she bore four children:

I guess I have traditional values, that I believe the husband is the breadwinner and the wife is responsible for the home. I don't believe that one position is higher than the other. I see him as the authority in the home yes, but that doesn't mean that he usurps authority by having it all. I see it as having the authority, but giving direction. That doesn't mean the woman doesn't hold authority. . . I always thought that even before I read it in the Bible.

Earlier, Sharon talked about how her grandmother was a "women's libber" and insisted that she and her sister complete their college education before they consider marriage, which they did. Sharon, mother of two, grandmother of one, and married to Carl, is presently completing a doctoral degree. Before these last few years, she worked full-time while her children were growing up. She is fastidious about her home and a regular churchgoer but does not describe herself as highly involved in church activities, as many of the other women are. She articulated her views:

He (Carl) is the head of our household. He is the breadwinner. He is the one we go to with our problems. . . He is the head of our family, and we bounce things off of him.

Lena and Richard have been married 25 years. Lena is a longtime educator with a masters degree, Richard is a laborer with a high school degree. Lena articulated her religious and gender beliefs:

I like what God says about it. The man is the head of the household, and the wife his helper, and they support one another. They also encourage each other, and they have respect for each other. And there is lots of love. When you get married you make vows, sincere promises that are supposed to be lasting, not the kind that you have with your fingers crossed. The man says that I promise to love, honor and cherish, usually. And the woman says I promise to love, honor, and obey. I used to think they are different, why am I supposed to be obedient. They have that in the Bible, as you obey him, he's obeying God. So as long as he is doing right, why shouldn't I go along?

Lena indicates that as long as she is aligned with the spiritual direction of her husband, she can accept the named difference in authority. In the next section, the participants discuss how their faith, either new or old, helped them to withstand life's tribulations.

Faith keeps us together. Individuals establish a working relationship with God, and at the same time they establish a relationship with one another in the context of their religious beliefs. This includes what they consider

their positions are to one another, in terms of power and hierarchy. This also includes their general views towards the relationship, and the extent to which they are committed to the stability or longevity of the relationship. An emergent theme within the dialogues about religious beliefs was that these beliefs, and the quality of their personal relationships with God, helped to solidify and strengthen their relationships.

Victor and Geneva discuss how they attribute the success of their marriage to their spiritual beliefs:

Victor - I think one thing that had an enduring impact on us was our relationship with the Lord. It really did give us a lot of stability. It gave us a lot of hope. It really secured our relationship. I attribute that solely to our relationship with Jesus Christ.

Geneva - So many of my cousins. . . they were not in happy marriages. I wanted to have a happy marriage. . . So I felt like I'm going to give my life to the Lord. . . I began to pray, so I felt like if we could see Christ as the number one focus in our marriage, in our life, it would have to be a good one.

Victor - Because we both believe in Jesus Christ and because He is number one in our lives, and because of his love towards us, we are able to have the good kind of love between each other. So it's like because He loves me and I love Him, I can love her and she can love me and it can be a very tight bond. One that's laced in happiness, joy, security, peace. There is a very strong element of trust. . . That kind of security and trust in everything I do.

Ronald and Elizabeth share their views on their relationship and how they believe that their faith kept them together:

Ronald - When we would come to disagree, if we didn't have a foundation or something to lean on we would have to split.

Elizabeth - When we first got married, I remember thinking if it doesn't work out, we can just divorce. But then I thought this is from God, we have to work it out. If we don't do anything, we can look at each other and say get out of my face for a while. There was a struggle there, and I've told friends before that if it hadn't been for God we would have split because there were some petty little things, that's how marriages split. But that wasn't what God wants for us. I know it continues to help us through times now.

Victor and Geneva, and Ronald and Elizabeth describe ways in which they have either avoided major conflict or learned to peacefully manage conflict between them. Peter and Pamela have been married 27 years, and have had their share of personal and familial tragedies. Peter's use of alcohol led to conflicts that may have been insurmountable. They attribute the survival of their marriage to their faith and belief in God:

Peter- She got saved and came to know the Lord. I liked to drink a lot and that created some problems between us. So after she became closer to the Lord than I, a few months later I also gave my life to the Lord again too and gave up alcohol and smoking and all that. It kept our family together.

Pamela- It was really hard. . . It would have destroyed us if it wasn't for our faith. It actually made us a lot stronger. . . We still had our same marital conflicts you know. Just that we were able to deal with it differently, in a better way. Just because you are Christian and with the Lord you are not exempt from having problems. You just deal with them differently.

Peter- We'd come to the point that knowing no matter what happens we were going to be together anyway, because it wasn't in God's plan for us to be separated. . . We realized too that conflict was part of growth. So with the help of the Lord we were able to work that out.

Stephen and Rea prayed individually over the decision to commit to one another which required some special time in prayer to determine whether it was the right thing for them to do. Stephen recalls:

Stephen - I can say for me, it took a lot of thought and a lot of prayer, to make a serious commitment, I wanted to go ahead, and I decided we were either going to be good friends or it is going to be a marriage, but I lived with someone for two years, and it was not satisfactory, it just didn't work well.

Rea - We were praying and praying about it.

Now, seven years later, Stephen and Rea are still together and both have begun their rabbinical studies. They are both very active in the synagogue and also in the African American community of a larger city nearby.

With God's help. As illustrated in Stephen and Rea's story, prayer was a useful and purposeful act that individuals and couples would resort to whenever they felt the need. Sometimes there would be regularity and routine to it, other times it would be for the purpose of seeking help or intervention from God. In most cases, prayer and faith were powerful allies.

Many of the couples had experienced challenging times in their lives. There were stories of multiple miscarriages and stillbirths, premature deaths of siblings, and for two men, early struggles with alcohol abuse. Pamela and Peter experienced a very difficult and tragic occurrence in their life, one which ended up destroying Peter's sight. Over and over again throughout the long and sad tale of this tragedy, Pamela and Peter reiterate that the power of prayer and their belief in God saw them through it:

It was a terrible ordeal. But the Lord brought us through it. . .
We still live with the adjustment every day. But the Lord saw us through.

Lena had her own miracle, purchasing a dream house in a "white" neighborhood. Again she attributes it to the power of God:

Because we are black in basically a white neighborhood, it is not typically expected in this area. The ability to financially afford it. It all came together for us, exactly where I want to be, the exact kind of house, all the way down to the trees down the side and the interstate miraculously worked that out in accordance with what the Bible has to say. It is so peaceful here. My husband likes quiet and where we used to live it was hard for him to sleep and he has shift work and just the noise and the heat. We have central air here. Fifty percent of the tension comes from the lifestyle, so being able to sleep.

Geneva describes the worry and concern surrounding the serious illness of her father and the solace of prayer:

When he came home from the hospital, we were able to stay a couple of days after his recovery. It was pretty difficult for him. I think it would have been better if one of his sons could have been there to do the

things Victor had to do, because of the nature of his surgery. That was very difficult, but prayer again was the thing that got us through it.

Sharon believes in the importance of religion in bringing up her children. She makes an effort to involve her children in regular churchgoing and regular prayer:

I think it is important for kids to have a religious upbringing. Our son, I pray with him in the mornings. I used to do it every morning except for weekends, and now I just try to get him out of bed, we have fallen off the wagon, I think this past week we only prayed two times. But sometimes he would do it on his own. I think it is important.

Elizabeth also prays with her children but feels each of them must use prayer and with God's help, they will forge their own relationships with Him:

So by reading and talking and praying for myself. . just like praying for my children. I am praying all the time for their protection. But coming to know God in a personal way, they are going to have to make that step on their own.

Delores' words summarize the sentiments of this section on spirituality and relationships. She trusts in her relationships with Joseph and with God. She knows that everything will be fine as long as they are together and they have their faith and trust in God:

I just believe we can accomplish anything that we need to through prayer and God. Nothing is too big for us to do together. We trust each other and trust in God.

Midlife

A Time of Change

There are certain changes that are inevitable in midlife, even if subtle; the body is physiologically aging and the appearance of the body generally ages as the physical changes manifest themselves. Although as a group, the participants professed to have good general health, the topic of health changes emerged over and over again. Parallel to the topic of health was the

topic of changing physical appearance. The former topic was consistent across both genders, the latter mainly emerged from the women.

Changing health. Four of the men were on high blood pressure medication, and several were recently identified as diabetic. A number of individuals had developed back problems or problems with arthritis. Several women were on hormone replacement therapy for menopause. Others expressed contentment with their present health although they may not be as active as they were in earlier years.

John, 44, working in a high stress occupation, and a Vietnam veteran, feels that he has deteriorated physically:

Physically, I am definitely not the person that I was 15 years ago, I am in a tremendous amount of physical pain at times. It's like people ask me how I'm doing and I'm never one to say my back hurts, my knees hurt. I say I'm okay and go about my business, but there are some days that really irritate me, so I see those physical differences.

His wife Lucille is having a very different experience at midlife. Lucille has had a lengthy history of physical ailments and nearly died giving birth to her last and fourth child with John. She is delighted that she is feeling well now:

I feel good, I try to take care of myself. Very seldom am I sick. I still get out and walk, I exercise, I play volleyball, we go all day to Disneyworld. I feel fine.

Richard is 48 and works as a laborer. He is concerned about his health and actively seeks remedies on his own:

I am always looking for things for my health, like the bee pollen that I use. . .It's not up to par, because presently I am on blood pressure medication. Part of reading my mail involves all of these different opportunities, some of them health related. . . I was diagnosed as having carpel tunnel syndrome. They were recommending surgery for it when I was working in Lynchburg on the conveyor belt. I'm not doing that now, but the pain is still there.

Elizabeth, 37 and an active mother of four finishing up a masters degree, ponders the changes in her body and worries about going to the doctor:

My back feels differently. I'll have a pain in my shoulder, and I don't know if that was from stress or working at the computer. . . Is my body going through things or is it the way I've been sitting or laying, you know. I'm not as active as I used to be. Those things go through your mind. I think I need to go to the doctor and get my check up and then I think I'll go next time or the next time. I don't know if that's because I'm scared he might tell me something, or what. Other than that I feel good.

Pamela, 52, and Sharon, 48, are both on hormone replacement therapy for the symptoms of menopause. Both feel well now that they have their symptoms in control. Pamela offers this information:

A few more aches and twinges, like I've got a pulled muscle here now, from walking, I think I've aggravated a muscle there now. Trying not to get so out of shape, but it is a struggle, most definitely there is a change there. . .I feel good though. I am on estrogen and calcium for my bones.

Sharon has this to say:

When my daughter went to college, I started having hot flashes. Then they went away. They did not come back until I went for my mother's funeral. I have a sister who is a year and a half older and she was having hot flashes. . . I went to the doctor and I am on the hormone replacement therapy. . . I tried to manage it with over the counter types of things or went and bought a couple of books to read. . .I am on HRT and it's been fine. I think I was into the tears during that time and I just decided I was going to be a basket case so I did something. Carl encouraged me to go too. It has worked.

Delores, aged 51, mother of five and grandmother of two, works full-time in a job that requires physical exertion. She enjoys the work immensely but notices that there are some subtle changes in her body:

My eyes, I had to get reading glasses. I feel a little stiffer when I get up, otherwise I'm doing fine.

Geneva and Victor, both 45, enjoy good physical health. Victor runs regularly and is in excellent health. Geneva reports that she is healthy as can be:

I did have some female troubles about four years ago. But prior to that I had never been in a hospital since my early 20s to get my tonsils out. So I've been very healthy.

Victor is also in excellent health:

I've had a full physical about a month ago and things are still good. I run every day. We've been blessed.

Stephen, 35, active in sports, has just recently begun to notice that he is slowing down:

Healthwise, I feel good, I am a little slower. . .I feel different when I play softball and run, I notice that I don't have that overreserve of energy.

Rea, 35, was a dancer and gymnast through her teens and 20s. She and Stephen suffered the loss of several children in miscarriages and stillborn births. She has seen her body change since that time:

Well, my body, I used to be a gymnast. Of course some change when I had my first child, I was still working out, then I lost two children. . . I didn't get as active physically, I didn't put any effort, I was used to being muscular. One year in your life you have all this stamina, then, I always know in my mind, I will get it back. . . I stopped smoking, and sure some weight gain, but I feel so much better.

Changing appearance. The participants were asked about any changes that they have experienced at this time in their life. As discussed above, many noted changes, large or small, that have occurred in their health status. In addition, every one of the women commented on their change in weight and appearance. Several of the men commented on their change in weight, too.

Bella, 41, is very troubled by the weight she has gained since her mid-30s. She has also developed back problems which the doctor informed her is exacerbated by excess weight:

I have back problems this year and I am told it is osteo-arthritis, so that is another issue of weight. I'm not on any medication, other than arthritis medication, but I am recognizing the strain of the stress on my heart. My blood pressure, I'm not on medication, but I think I need to look into it. I hate the thought of it. I need to reduce my weight and stay healthy, I am more conscious of that.

Elizabeth, 37, in characteristic humorous fashion, notes changes in her general appearance and comments about her general attitude towards herself:

The only time I think about my age is when I look in the mirror, or try on some new clothes. I think I need to lose some weight, but it doesn't come off like it used to. I'll part my hair this way cause those grays are showing now, but I don't have to color it yet! Just basically I don't think about my age. . . It doesn't bother me to get old, I may not like it, but I'm not going to worry myself. I can't stop the aging process so I may as well enjoy it. I keep saying that I want to do things before I get too old. Go on a trip where I'm wearing a bathing suit. I don't wear a bathing suit anymore!

Thelma, aged 37, also comments about her change in appearance and like Elizabeth, decides that she can live with it:

It's depressing in the sense that my girlish figure is gone. I've got these, not love handles, they are rolls of fat! In the physical sense of aging. Other than that, I'm fortunate. I am a big girl, so I carry my weight well, and I look in the mirror and my face hasn't changed a lot. And considering what I've been through, I would think that I would have wrinkles and look really bad, and I feel good about myself.

Delores talks about going to Weight Watchers again to try to get off some of the pounds she has gained in middle age. Geneva , Lena, and Sharon mention that they are heavier than they ever were and need to lose some weight. Stephen mentions he has gained 40 to 50 pounds since his 20s although he still appears very slim. John is displeased about the extra 30 pounds he is carrying.

Carl, immaculately groomed and refined in appearance, talks about the challenge of weight maintenance and reduction at midlife:

It is a much more difficult challenge to keep the weight off. Eating is more recreational than anything else and that's a problem. I've got to deprogram myself, that I cannot exercise enough to maintain the

weight I want to maintain and eat the way I've always eaten, at least the types of things. So I've got to figure out how to change that.

Coping with change. Despite health problems, minor and major, and changes in appearance, these individuals managed to create strategies for taking care of themselves as they saw fit. Many exercised, either individually, or as a couple activity. Others, due to diabetes or other significant health problems, carefully monitored their diets.

Lena had a delightful and creative way of taking care of herself. She takes at-home mini-vacations:

I can't leave to go away for an extended time, but I need two weeks off, so I will not answer the phone, and that just does wonders for me. My daughter becomes my secretary and if there is really something important, I'll deal with it, but if it's something someone else can handle, she can pass the message on and I just kind of shut down and read my Bible and pull away from all the things I thought were major distractions that kept me from focusing on what was important. . . I take a mini vacation right here at home and shut it all down. I don't go anywhere I don't want to go. . . I've learned to modify what I do. Walk, get enough sleep, take vitamins, protect myself by cutting back for awhile.

Daniel, a busy administrator, recently discovered that he is diabetic. He has begun to change his lifestyle to accommodate to his health as well as to benefit his relationship with Bella:

What I normally do is take off a day, one to two days a month. I get regular check-ups every month, I'm a diabetic and see a doctor every 3 months. I know what I should eat, I take walks and things like that. But, I normally take off, after about 7 or 8 days of work, I take off a day. I work on things I enjoy, like I am working on my house now, so I get people in line for that. I do landscaping. . . I drive around, it is fun to do that. Bella and I plan recreational type things for the weekends. When I go on trips I try to take time on the back end of my trips, I get a lot of rest on my trips. . . I notice now that I require more sleep. I can get exhausted.

Joseph, a recently diagnosed diabetic, notices that he tires more easily than he used to and copes with this by doing less and pacing himself:

When I work outside I want to come in and lay down sooner. I get tired. I

just do less and pace it a little more. Aches and pains, but my health is pretty good.

Despite the emergence of some aches and pains, and certain kinds of adjustments that individuals made to cope with changing health, everyone shared the kind of sentiments that Ronald, Joseph, and Sharon expressed during the course of their comments on midlife:

Ronald - I never think of myself as old!

Joseph - You don't see the changes, they are so gradual. I was looking at two of my driver's license photographs and I thought gee, there is quite a change. I didn't see it happening. It sneaked up on me!

Sharon - I guess I feel that the time has passed by so fast I can't believe it. I'm in my early 40s but I don't feel like I am as old as I am. I have always said that as long as I have my health, age is just a number and it doesn't bother me to say I'm 48.

A Time of Stability

Although health was changing, and appearance seldom remained the same, other aspects of the self were stabilizing or strengthening. This was particularly striking for the women participants who consistently mentioned feeling more confidence and more determination at this time in their lives.

Feeling strong. Lucille chose to stay at home with her four children (they now range in age from 12 to 24) when they were young. She and John have been married 16 years, and this is the second marriage for both of them. Lucille spent several years as a single parent of three small children before she remarried. Although she has worked on and off for many years, her dream was to become a nurse. Now she is realizing this dream:

I see it as a time in my life now to accomplish what I wanted to in my younger years, and I wasn't able to. That has always been to become a nurse. I was in LPN school before and I was sick. Things happened. . . There's no youngsters around, just little Johnny. I have the support of my husband. Things are going pretty much the way I wanted them to.

It's typical of midlife, I think if I don't do it now, it's never going to happen. This is the time to make an accomplishment.

Rea, artist, student, and rabbi in training, reflects that she has always been a strong person, but now she has a clearer idea of the paths that she wants to follow in life:

I am probably more the same, but different in that I know what I wanted. . . My father raised me to be a person and ... you should do something, live this life like the fathers raise their daughters .

Elizabeth considers that she is more able to speak her mind and assert herself but struggles for the right words to express these qualities:

I am a little bit more outspoken! I think my biggest change is the fact that I am a little more knowledgeable, and maybe a little more, I don't want to use the term aggressive, but I know what I want on some things. I just have to do whatever I do and however people take it, I can't change it. . . We all have moments that we question ourselves, but then you get over them.

Pamela who has been married 27 years to Peter, a second marriage for her, has had a life of challenges and some tragedies. Reflecting on herself at this point in time, she says:

I have more confidence in myself for sure. More ability to do things, than in my earlier years of course, through life experiences. As you live, you grow. You make mistakes and you learn from them and try not to do the same things, although sometimes we do, because we're human.

Geneva believes that she has grown steadily in confidence over the years, although as the oldest female in her family, she recognizes that this position gave her an advantage:

I'm very confident in terms of me being the oldest girl in my family. I have this position with my seven siblings. . . They respect what I have to say, that gives me a lot of confidence. I feel confident with my position at church. . . I've grown more confident, I'd step up and do things that I might not have done before.

Lena, the mini-vacationer, has not only learned how to take better care of herself to cope with changes in her life, but she has also gained in determination:

I guess I have more determination to get something accomplished: I have more of a desire to get it done right the first time. . . I guess two things that I used to let happen that I'm determined now more not to, is to let anybody use me and to be influenced or persuaded by fear. . . So if anybody tries a scare tactic or threat kind of thing, well I'm more determined than ever. I don't go for intimidation. . . I just don't stand and let somebody run over me. . . I don't have that dependence on somebody's opinion as to whether or not I can go on with what I believe is right.

Thelma is gaining strength and sees herself as becoming more responsible. She has recently begun to address, in therapy, an early history of sexual abuse and the consequences to her from a relational standpoint. She sees things are changing about her, and also sees where she needs to go:

It is definitely different. I needed somebody to love me. . . Right now I know that if I can't make myself happy, I can't have anyone else make me happy. . . I can't have crutches anymore. I can't use cocaine or relationships to cover it up. I have to depend on myself. It has come full circle finally, to be at peace with myself. I'd rather have peace of mind than have all the money in the world and not have peace of mind. To me it's the most important thing.

Bella believes that she has found a very solid and secure place in herself. She is pleased with her life and her relationship in a way that she did not expect:

All of us know that we are unique, and we want validation and respect and acceptance in that. If I would say anything about myself I would say that I know who I am. There is a lot about me that I like and am going to keep. . . It has taken a 40 year old Bella to come to that!

Delores, married for 30 years to Joseph, stayed at home for the first 19 years of their marriage to raise their five children. She recognized that she is a changed person from the person she was years ago:

I feel better about myself than I did when I was younger. I'm doing things that I didn't think I could do when I was younger, I make decisions that I wouldn't have, I would have been quiet. I'm doing a lot on my job, if you had asked me about doing those things 20 years ago, I would have said no, I can't do that. The job I have has prepared me to grow.

These are women who know what they want and know who they are.

They are not afraid to assert themselves and are determined to achieve their goals.

Personal maturity. While confidence and strength at midlife seemed to be uniquely a female theme, personal maturity was a theme that was mainly male. The men used the concept of maturity along with the notion of being more settled or with become more thoughtful and internalized.

Richard and Ken both used the term "settled" in conjunction with different factors in their lives:

Richard - I am more settled. I don't worry so much. I want to take life easy now. In my younger life there were times I didn't want to stop.

Ken - I'm more settled, more productive than I have been in the last 10 years. I never really had low self-esteem. . . not too many things get me down. The only thing that I am still stuck with is, that I need to get back in school, and I have to do it myself. When I get focused and headstrong, there is nothing anybody can say or do, it is something that I have to do.

Victor and Carl have a different, perhaps more internalized sense of maturity. Victor discusses how he sees himself as changed:

I'm more mature, I look more mature. I'm more critical of myself and my thinking, of my ability. I'm more sober, I'm more focused, I'm more goal oriented. I've always been goal oriented, but it's more focused now. I'm much more successful now than before. Just kind of goes back to the benefits, and I am no way at the point where I feel done.

Carl talks about maturity in terms of finding a deeper spirituality and understanding of life:

I think you do more soul searching. What would you have done differently. . . I have recently learned that there is the spiritual side of it that is real significant and beneficial that I just didn't place a lot of

value on. I am beginning to place more value in that as an individual. It could help me, and by helping me, help the family.

Daniel is more careful about his environment and more careful to take his time:

I'm more mature, and I say that in that I look at things more objectively. I also take my time and make decisions. I also outline and plan and organize better than I used to. I'm more conscious of the dangers that I might face, so I try to anticipate what could happen in different environments. So if I know that an environment is hostile, then I try to anticipate that and go around it. Where as a young person I didn't fear it.

Relational maturity. In addition to growing as individuals in confidence and maturity, there was also a growth in terms of the relationship attributed to this period of midlife. Stephen felt that he had matured as a father and husband. He joked that his wife might be surprised at this statement:

Personally, . . . my wife may fall out of her chair, I think I have more of a maturity on family. I mean, family as in wife and child. I have always had a strong sense of extended family. . . I am appreciating my wife.

Rea felt that she had also matured in terms of their relationship:

I am not nearly the person I used to be, in every good way I am not the person I used to be and in every bad way, I am not the person I used to be. . . I see it as a process, this maturity, I appreciate him... we gave our all, got it all worked out, and now we have to work on us.

Pamela believes that she and Peter have done a lot of growing up and put aside their old ways to be together in quieter ways:

I've done a lot of growing up that's for sure . . . I've mellowed out Before we came to the Lord we used to have a pretty wild life, partying and things like that. We have changed from that.. . I loved to go out night clubbing and just having fun dancing and things like that. Now those things don't interest me. Now the quiet life, to go out to church, to dinner, enjoying friends and family. Get together. I'm happy doing that.

Bella and Daniel saw this as a time when they were each able to be a better and more capable partner in a relationship. Daniel had been married

before for 25 years in a relationship that could be described as distant and parallel. Now he feels that he is ready for a close and personal relationship with Bella:

This was a great time to move into a relationship. Early years I had a different perspective of life. I had limited experiences. I had a different view of what a relationship ought to be like . . . I think by having the kind of experience that I had in the early years, I think it prepared me to be a better partner. I feel more comfortable about who I am, the direction I want to go, what I want out of life. I think by having that security and feeling, I can really work as a partner.

Bella compared her previous experiences with men to the one she is in with Daniel now. She recognized what she wanted in a relationship and at the same time was able to give to this relationship:

I'm more aware of myself and my needs and I'm very protective of that. I recognize how much energy it can take from me if I'm not mindful of those things. So be it an intimate relationship or otherwise, it has to be one that does not take energy from me, it must be one that helps to create energy, with a mutual investment in one another.

Time is Running Out

All of the participants in this study had full lives. They were busy with children, extended family, church or synagogue, school, and occupations. Although most of these individuals expressed pleasure in their family and relationships, they also had concerns about the lack of time, both in the present moment, and in the future sense.

Not enough time/daily life. Thelma and Ken have an especially hard time managing time, with alternating shifts and difficult work schedules.

Thelma describes what this can be like:

Life is jumbled, that's the best word I can think of to describe our lifestyle. I work a job where my shift changes every two months, and my days off rotate every week. He works a job where he is off every Monday and Tuesday, and then his shift is different on Wednesday and Friday, and he works the same shift on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

John works in a high stress occupation where he is often on call. He and Lucille are very close to one another and would like more time together:

Busy schedules, just having the time to be together. Johnny, too, sometimes impedes us to some degree in being together. Just the fact of when you have a child you sacrifice some time and that's a reality. Homework, sports events, all the other things that kids do.

Ronald and Elizabeth have four young children and are busy with schooling and their children's activities:

Busy schedules. . . It was probably a little more controlled when Elizabeth wasn't in school. . . . This past winter the kids were each involved in two sports. We were running all of the time. The kids also take piano, and they go to private school, so we are very active in the school. The school is a very pro-active school as far as family and encourages doing lots of things.

Geneva is also in school, she and Victor have very full schedules with children, occupations, and church activities:

His job is demanding. . . It can take up all of your time, and schoolwork can take up all of your time, it's nothing for me to stay up all night to get something done, because of what we've done with the boys. . . I work in our bedroom which isn't the best place, but it just seems to be the only place I can keep my papers private and separate and not have anybody messing with them. He's sleeping and I'm typing.

Not enough time/getting things done. Stephen, the youngest of the men at 35, is just beginning to get in touch with the idea of aging and his personal sense of time running out:

So I feel a dichotomy, there are times when I feel very much the same, I still have the same desires, to work out west with Native Americans, to work with the Africans coming into the Middle East. . . The same desires are there, but I feel like time is running out.

John expresses some concern about being at midlife. He sees his older stepchildren grown and gone, and his young son growing up. There are things that he, like Stephen, wants to accomplish:

It seems up until the time I was about 30 that things were slow. It seems that now time is just shooting by at a tremendously fast rate. It seems that it is going by so fast. Yesterday, for example, the older kids were

with us, and now everybody is gone. I look at how big my son is getting, and I'm saying to myself that it's only going to be another five or six years and he is going to be going off to school. I just know that time is not forever, I need to grab that gusto. . . I think that I feel a little anxious about being 43. There are certain things that I wanted to accomplish by this point in my life that I haven't.

Ken sees midlife as a time to get moving on things that need to be done, and to get on with the education he had plans for:

It means hurry up and get yourself together because we are half way there. . . Time to get my education.

Not enough time/preparing for what's ahead. Being at midlife meant for some, hurrying to get things accomplished that were important to them, it also meant preparing for the future. All of the men expressed some concerns about the future, either in terms of accomplishments not yet made, accessing financial security, or in some cases, preparing for retirement. The women seemed to be more focused on the present, other than the daily issues of insufficient time, and only Sharon touched upon the issue at all:

I've always had a sense of mortality. I guess since the time that I read Gail Sheehy's Passages in my mid-30s, I said hey, by that time you come to realize you have about 35 more years if you live to 70. Or the age span increases a little and you say, maybe to 75. . . By the time I was 35 I realized that and I don't have a great fear of dying as such.

Joseph, at 52, was looking towards his retirement in seven years, as a longtime state employee. He was looking forward to spending more time with his grandchildren but has his concerns about it:

The only thing I think about is my grandchildren. . . Is it more time than I have? Being able to do what I can for them.

Several men discussed the importance of financial security. Carl refers to the ways they had planned for financial security and prepared financially for retirement:

We are more financially secure. We have a lot more supporting us than we used to. . . Now we have equity in a home, in other properties, we

have savings, retirement funds.

Aside from the practical issues of preparing for the future, there was also some discussion about getting a perspective on time and the future from a philosophical point of view. Victor illustrates this point of view:

It makes you value your time a lot more. You adjust your goals, or you kind of become more focused. . . You're just more conscious of the big 50 and where you've come and how you've gotten here. I think you just become more conscious of where you are and where you've been and what you need to do to get to where you want to be. Yeah, I think about retirement, not that I want to do that, but I think about that and where you are financially, career-wise, children, all those things.

Finally, in a fitting end to this section on time, Daniel reflects on his mortality. He seeks to maximize his life in the present and leave a legacy for the future:

I think as you get older you begin to look at the end. You have the end in mind and you put the end in mind. You begin to think what can I do to get the most out of the next few years I have on this earth? You become very serious about that. In the early years you think you have plenty of time, so you wander along. Now I want to get the most out of the next few years so I want to be in a relationship that I will help me enjoy it and that has quality. Even now I am a risk taker. I still like to challenge things. I love things that will make an impact on lives. I think I am more concerned about people, when I was younger, I was more concerned about myself. Now I want to make a contribution to society, even a legacy.

Ethnicity

Diversity Within

Although these individuals and couples shared the common characteristic of belonging to the African American ethnic minority population, there were many differences among them. These included age differences, educational differences, class differences, regional differences, religious differences. Some members of the sample were raised in an urban environment, others in a rural environment. Some were in first marriages,

some were in second marriages. The following discussion reflects both differences and similarities in these individuals.

We're not all alike. Several of the couples in this study had moved to the southwestern section of Virginia in the last few years from large East Coast cities. They expressed some disappointment in the African American community as it existed in this area in comparison to the large urban environment to which they were accustomed. Rea and Stephen, active in political and global movements, make these comments:

Rea - We try to talk to people to get them into higher education but it is different here, people's ideas of what they are supposed to be, they are shaped so early. . .I'm not used to seeing a whole bunch of noneducated African American people, without education. I mean we were a land grant university of 100 years, and there was a real sense of community among the African American population.

Stephen - Where we used to live, you go to a NAACP meeting, and everyone is involved, attorneys, business owners, legislators, people of all levels. . . people participate.

Rea - Where we came from . . . we have dialogues, town talks, we talk about things to do with race. . . we challenge and try to stop things . . people don't challenge anything here.

Thelma and Ken have a different orientation to life; they enjoy an upbeat lifestyle and miss the liveliness of their old city:

There isn't a lot to do here culturally for African American people. You have the country western scene, all the stars, concerts and things. Virtually no clubs, every time one opens up, it closes down. . . We were both kind of live wires where we used to live, we can't wait to get back, just to visit. There was so much to do, there is always something going on somewhere. It didn't even have to be something you pay to do. . . I miss the people. I feel the African Americans here have a different outlook on things. . . we don't fit into certain cliques and social activities in the groups.

Elizabeth recalls a conversation that she had with a friend about skin color. She discussed the way in which skin color can be used to discriminate within the "Black race:"

Like a conversation I had with a friend about an article in the paper, and within the Black race, it is the self that you have all kinds of problems with. If you are in a neighborhood and you are a light skinned Black, you don't associate with our color. Or some light skinned people, that's all they associate with. It's almost like a white couple staying inside the Black race. There are all kinds of colors within the Black race, light skin or dark skin.

Bella discusses a similar phenomenon and how her own coloring has been an asset in comparison to the problems others have had:

I think visible difference plays out in the world. Being a fair complected, non-kinky haired Black woman, unfortunately, I think subconsciously opened doors for me that other Blacks did not have the opportunity to benefit from. . . I would find myself involved with Black men who did bring experiences where they had been dealt with differently because they were Black. So I was often accused that "White people like you" or "you're a white folk nigger."

Bella later talked about how she saw class differences as more important than ethnic or racial differences:

I would say that if you find yourself with a group of Black participants who have an upper level of education, that they are going to be pretty close to the mainstream class. I would guess that.

John comments on these class differences but also recognizes how they are related to educational disparities between men and women within the ethnic minority culture:

When you are looking at the situation, the African American female has had a much better opportunity than the African American male . . . it is not uncommon in the Black household, to have a real separation in the types of jobs they have. . . for the Black female to have a college degree or masters, for the husband to be a bus driver.

Color blind. Other participants commented on the absence of experiences of racism in their lives or the nonrelevance of race and ethnicity in their routine experience. Sharon expressed it this way:

Sometimes I think I am color blind in that respect. But other times I know, obviously I know I'm African American, I've had times when it has angered me to hear people make racial jokes. I don't like them, I tend not to speak up, I look away. . . I feel comfortable with who I am and where I am. We have always lived in a neighborhood like this,

and have never identified with, as you hear sometimes, the black experience. We've always been in an integrated neighborhood and church. I have never really socialized with only people of color.

Stephen and Rea, active in many community organizations had these intriguing comments to share:

Stephen - It is not as much about color as how you carry yourself.

Rea - People from all races participate (in community activities) so you don't think of yourself as different in any way.

Ronald believes that being able to assimilate and be a part of an integrated community is important to survival:

I think what we did was get free from all of that. When God started to deal with us, he just took the limits off. You put those on to be safe or to keep your identity, we chose to take them off so there wouldn't be any limits and I think that has helped us to survive.

Living with Racism

Surviving in a culture in which a person can be identified as different in some visible way brings with it experiences of oppression. Some of these experiences are overt whereas others are more subtle.

Public and private experiences of racism. Peter was the first African American to graduate from his high school. Before he transferred there, he was transported to a segregated school for "Negroes" in another area. He recalls his experience going to the integrated school for the first time:

Well, it was pretty lonely, pretty scary. My sister and I were the only Blacks in the high school. . . Stress producing, especially with all of the other things going on at the time. Like in Carroll County where they were rioting, in Alabama, all the things going on in Arkansas, Mississippi. So it may not have been where I was, but it was close by.

Victor describes his experience in a competitive field and the subtle and not so subtle experiences he has had to overcome:

I think at times you feel more secure than at others. I've always felt that I've had a strong sense of who I am. I think that there has always been opposition and I think there has been added opposition that I'm Black. . .

Knowing that many times people's first perception of you is a negative, rather than a positive, and if there is a choice between this person being bright, confident, good, secure, etc. that initial perception by the majority culture is going to be negative. You've got that against you. It means that you've got to work really, really hard, you've got to be very, very confident, very strong, bold, wise, go the extra mile. . . I learned a lot of this growing up. My parents have always been very politically aware, and very racially in touch with who they were and how that plays itself out in life, society, etc.

Carl, also in a competitive field, is very successful in the area in which he has chosen to compete. He makes these comments on surviving in the mainstream culture of the business environment:

It's a daily part of African American life. It is one that I didn't choose to focus on here. It is and it's unfortunate it is and in a number of ways. I grew up in a rural agrarian southern community. I grew up where the examples of racism were very obvious. It was a law and that made it even more painful. You knew what you could do but there were laws that restricted what you could do. I came up in a time when there laws started changing. Yet still my experience is that there are unwritten laws about where you can go, it is a daily thing, it's a conscious thing. It is something you just have to get through. Work, socially to some extent, you have to sort through it in your head, and that takes energy. I chose not to highlight it, but it is definitely in my head.

Daniel, also a successful man, credits his inspiration for success to the determination and perseverance of his mother. He tells this remarkable story about her:

In the area where we live, in Mississippi, one percent of the population was African American. Black farmers worked closer than White farmers, and we did witness racism. But we were taught that racism should not be an obstacle, that we should succeed in spite of racism. My mother had demonstrated that in her life as a young woman growing up. . . While she was working in the fields with her aunt and uncle, she always wanted an education. She told her family that she wanted an education and they said she was crazy, she didn't have any money, and they couldn't see how she could do that. There was a school in Mississippi that allowed young men and women, African Americans, to come in and work and stay there. So she went to that school and worked her way through. She got a two year degree. . . in the late 1950s she received her college degree. . . She was an elementary school teacher, and later during integration, she was demoted. So she filed a suit against the school system, and tried to get the other Black teachers to come in and file a class action suit. They were afraid to do that. . . My father told

her he would take care of the family if she decided to stay out. . . She pursued the lawsuit against them, and when I was in graduate school, years later, she finally won. She got her back pay and also her job back. She demonstrated that if you stay with it, you can succeed.

While in graduate school, Daniel had the opportunity to fight his own battle against racism, and it was there that he decided to become an administrator so that he could have the authority to make fair decisions: "based on what is right, rather than political pressure, bias, or prejudice."

Lucille and John describe the incidences of discrimination that they and their children have experienced over the years. Lucille is particularly sad and angry about the persistence of these effects on her adult children:

I see it as an issue when it comes to society, feeling that a lot of times their accomplishments are not fulfilled because of what is happening in society. This rests on my shoulders as well. I can see the hardships, what they encounter, having a college degree like my oldest daughter, and still having a hard time. Seeing her counterparts go ahead and finish school and get the jobs that they want, and then again she is still struggling. So it's part of life, a reality that they have to deal with. In trying to educate your children about this, the many questions that do arise, and sometimes having no answers to give back, and it's very hard.

John adds:

Right here in this area of Virginia too, we still encounter stares, and looks, and people going by with a van load of children yelling "nigger" out the back.

John is frustrated with the system in general and sees the effects on men and women as divisive and detrimental. His comments refer to the problem of internalized racism:

The disconnection felt by the African American male, lack of acceptance into the system, it is a hostile world out there. . . Many times African American females don't realize how emasculated males feel by the hostility of the system. That drives a lot of men into not retaining relationships. One of the hardest things a male has to do is to learn how to love a Black woman. . . the internalized hatred. I've seen it manifest itself in relationships for a lot of African American males, that disunity, and again not knowing how to treat African American females.

Overcoming. In order to survive, oppressed people develop ways of gaining strength against adversity. Two of the strengths of the African American people that emerged in this study were spirituality and resilience.

Victor addresses the presence of spirituality in African Americans lives:

Traditionally, there is a greater spiritual element in Black people's lives. I think in part it's because of the oppression that Black people have had I also think too that the need today is much greater than what human qualities can provide. . . . You've got the psychic network now, you've got the new age movement . . . you know everyone is looking for God.

John addresses the quality of resilience and how it was necessary, and still is necessary, for survival:

It's the fact that the obstacles are there, they've been there and one thing about the African American people is that we are very resilient and very able to go ahead and surmount our obstacles. We've been doing that since slavery and it continues.

Summary

It was apparent throughout all of the interviews, both by observation and by examining the content of the interviews, that these were family-centered and family-focused individuals and couples. There was a central concern with the well-being and welfare of family members, including family of procreation, family of origin, extended family, and created families. There was a high regard for and pride in the multiple generations of relatives. This high regard was also present in the relationships of the individuals in the couples. Although it was clear that life had not always been smooth or easy, the participants shared their strategies for creating connection and closeness with one another.

Friends and Lovers addressed the ways couples maintained their relationship, worked out strategies for closeness, and worked out the details of

daily life. Sharing responsibilities, making decisions, sharing activities, sharing time, and being able to talk to one another brings comfort, reassurance, and trust. This can generate a home that is a safe place to be, with family that matters and with a special friend who loves you.

In the third theme of the relationship domain, Walking with God, religious beliefs were personalized, not just institutionalized. Spirituality formed a foundation upon which family and relationships were built. Religious beliefs provided both personal and relational benefits to the participants. Church activities were not confined to Sunday as participants were involved in daily or near daily activities with their church communities. Religiosity permeated beliefs and attitudes about gender and predicated how men and women positioned themselves. Prayer and faith in a higher power were a source of faith and hope for the participants.

Changing health and changes in appearance were common for everyone in midlife as depicted in the theme A Time of Change. These changes were more significant for some than for others, when more serious health problems such as diabetes or high blood pressure were involved. All of the individuals and couples were concerned about these changes but primarily in terms of coping with the changes in order to continue in their present lifestyles. Other than the distress expressed by some over excess weight gain, there was little negativism or fatalism regarding the inevitability of aging.

Midlife as a time of strength and confidence was reflected in the theme of A Time of Stability. The category of feeling strong was a particularly significant one for the women in this study. The women all expressed feeling more competent, more capable, and generally more satisfied with their lives. Likewise, the men were pleased with the maturity and insight that they have

developed at this point in time. In terms of the relationship, individuals in newer relationships felt more capable of being a better partner; individuals in older relationships recognized that their relationships had become more solid and secure.

While individuals and couples are feeling better about themselves and their relationships in general, they are also in a very busy time of their lives, illustrated in the theme of Time is Running Out. The problem of not having enough time is a real and universal one. On a more subtle note, midlife also presents as a time when it is necessary to get on with the goals that need completion. The men in particular, spoke about the need to get things accomplished and about their sense of the future. At midlife, the future also includes looking toward the end of one's life.

The ethnic experience of being an African American in the latter part of the 20th century is at the very least a complex and mixed experience as illustrated in the themes Diversity Within and Living with Racism. Some of the participants have encountered and overcome personal and historical experiences of racism, but others have not. Some of the participants were very politically active and concerned with racial politics, but others were not. Some individuals were mainly involved with members of the African American community; others were more involved with the majority culture. Perhaps it is most telling that as in any group of people, there are both differences and similarities. From any perspective, being an African American means knowing about resilience and survival, as these participants illustrate. These couples constructed ways and chose paths that helped them to overcome social oppression and maintain their families. These are people successfully embracing life and its challenges.

CHAPTER FIVE
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Overview

The purpose of this study was to understand intimate relationships at midlife. Central to this study was a focus on the relationships of African American couples. Interviews were conducted with 10 couples to gain information about their dyadic and individual perspectives and experiences. During individual and conjoint interviews, 20 African Americans shared their histories, their changes, their challenges, their tragedies, and their joys.

An underlying assumption of this study was that men and women are capable of and competent at intimate relationships. Using the gender and life course perspectives for guidance, this study was designed to examine how men and women construct intimate relationships within the temporal circumstances of midlife and the interlocking cultural and social context of their lives. The gender perspective offers a critical examination of the social construction of gender and the effects of gender dynamics on relationships. The life course perspective offers an examination of the broader temporal dimension, looking at the effects of change over time, and in this case, within the context of midlife and ethnic culture. Both the gender and life course perspectives include an awareness of the social construction of meaning and place an emphasis on context and sociostructural location.

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What aspects of couples' lives contribute to the maintenance of intimacy in romantic relationships?
2. How do gender constraints from within and without the relationship, act as barriers to such intimacy?

3. How does membership in a particular ethnic group affect such intimacy?
4. How do life course circumstances, such as work and family responsibilities, contribute to or restrict the process of intimacy?
5. How do life course transitions unique to midlife, such as the sandwiching of caregiving and the physical and sexual changes of midlife, act as constraints or contributors to intimacy?

Discussion

The relationship between the research questions, three domains, and eight dominant themes is depicted in Table 5.5. These results are addressed in the sections that follow. They are ordered according to the three research domains of relationships, midlife, and ethnicity.

Relationships

The main themes for this domain were Family Matters, Friends and Lovers, and Walking with God. These themes reflect the importance of family, being both friend and lover, and the centrality of spirituality in the relational and personal lives of the participants. These themes correspond with research questions 1, 2, and 3.

Research question 1 asks: "What aspects of couples lives contribute to the maintenance of intimacy in romantic relationships?" Shared commitment to family, shared commitment to one another, and shared commitment to religious beliefs contributed to the stability and maintenance of intimate relationships. Within familial, relational, and spiritual domains, individuals and couples created strategies for dealing with their personal and religious values and reconciled their beliefs about gender and gender equity.

TABLE 5.5

Relationship of Research Questions to Domains and Themes

Research Questions	Domains	Themes*
1. Contributors to intimacy	Relationships	100s, 200s, 300s
2. Gender constraints to intimacy	Relationships	300s
	Ethnicity	700s, 800s
3. Effects of ethnicity	Relationships	100s, 200s, 300s
	Midlife	600s
	Ethnicity	700s, 800s
4. Work/family constraints	Midlife	500s, 600s
5. Stresses/transitions	Midlife	400s, 500s, 600s

Note. The dominant theme codes for relationships are: 100s-Family Matters, 200s-Friends and Lovers, 300s-Walking with God. The dominant theme codes for midlife are: 400s-A Time of Change, 500s-A Time of Stability, 600s-Time is Running out. The dominant theme codes for ethnicity are: 700s-Diversity Within, 800s-Living with Racism.

The importance of kinship and religion in African Americans' lives has been documented in the family literature. Large extended families, fictive kin, and kinship networks (Johnson, 1995) have helped to give African American families more strategies for survival and safety. Historically, Black families needed to be able to turn to people they could count on in order to make it through the trials of life; "If it were not for strong kinship bonds, black families could not have survived the physical and psychic atrocities of slavery" (Staples & Johnson, 1993, p.94). Families not only provide safety but are cited by black adults as their greatest source of satisfaction (Staples & Johnson, 1993).

Likewise religion has been noted as a pervasive feature in the lives of African Americans. Churches provide central points for the community to come together for support and outreach to one another and those in need. They also provide confirmation and validation that every human being is worthy and made in the image of God (Staples & Johnson, 1993).

The proportion of African American couples who divorce has increased, whereas the proportion of those who marry has declined, resulting in the fact that only 50% of African American families as of 1990 had both a husband and wife present (Cherlin, 1992). Empirical evidence in several recent research studies have demonstrated that religiosity has a strong effect on the stability of African American marital relationships. Religious differences was a strong predictor of marital disruption for African American couples (Lawson & Thompson, 1995) while religiosity was associated with higher levels of marital interaction quality and co-caregiver support (Brody, Stoneman, Flor, & McCrary, 1994). Religion was cited as a means of support during times of adversity and provided a general orientation towards family-centeredness.

As illustrated in the section entitled Faith kept us together, religion acts as a stabilizing force in these relationships and reinforces what the participants consider to be the sacred commitment of marital vows. Religion also acts as a deterrent to the escalation of conflict, or as a means of guidance in solving conflicted situations.

The couples in this study protected their intimate relationships through practical strategies that seemed to differ, for some, in their expressed ideology. They devised methods of sharing responsibilities and sharing the decision-making that would fairly accommodate both parties. Cooperation in decision-making (J. McAdoo, 1993) has been noted as a survival mechanism for African American couples who must combat the external forces of lower wages and negative societal evaluations. These couples also devised strategies for maintaining their closeness, spending time together in any activity that they could, and most importantly talking together, sharing confidences. They established a friendship within the relationship as well as a partnership. Not surprising for African American couples (Aschenbrenner, 1975; Oggins, Veroff & Leber, 1993), self-disclosure, for both men and women, and dyadic communication, played an essential role in establishing and maintaining intimacy.

Research question 2 asks: "How do gender constraints, from within and without the relationship, act as barriers to such intimacy?" Constraints from gender appeared to have little relevance to the couples in this study. Traditional gender attitudes appeared to be mitigated by spiritual and ethnic factors. Within familial, relational, and spiritual domains, individuals and couples created strategies for dealing with their personal and religious values and struggled with their beliefs about gender and gender equity. Within the

family, men were highly involved with their children (Tatum, 1987) as nurturant adults. Both men and women cited role models in their family of origin for gender flexibility and reported sharing many of the household and decision-making responsibilities.

Yet many of the participants adhered to traditional gender ideologies as illustrated in the theme Head of the Household. In essence, it appeared that everyday practice was not always congruent with ideology, in a reverse of what is more commonly found in the literature on White middle class heterosexual couples (Blaisure & Allen, 1995). White middle class heterosexual couples who identified themselves as feminists were found to have egalitarian ideologies but their everyday practices did not necessarily reflect these ideologies (Blaisure & Allen, 1995). This incongruency in African American couples may be explained by the implications of Wilkinson's (1993) comments: "One of the most disastrous effects of slavery was that the slave husband was not the head of the household" (p. 31). Regaining authority and status that were historically removed from African American men may be the essential aim of a stated ideology, important in a symbolic sense if not a practice sense.

Black men have been reported as more likely to accept responsibility in the household (Taylor et al., 1993) and less likely to accept responsibility in the household than their White counterparts (Blee & Tickamyer, 1995). It has been suggested that Black men are consistently more accepting of their wives' employment but not consistent in the accepting of sharing the responsibility of the household. Pinderhughes (1988) suggests that these inconsistencies may be the result of status issues for Black men in the society at large. Taylor (1994) suggests that for many Black men, "gender-role becomes extremely

complex and problematic" (p. 36). Perhaps having more status within the household helps to compensate for less status in the larger society.

There may be other factors involved, as well. The youngest couples in the sample, couples where both male and female were 35 -39 years, expressed the most liberal gender role attitudes. The extent of change in gender role attitudes has been found to be most noticeable by historical periods (Blee & Tickamyer, 1995). Additionally, both of these couples were recent transplants to southwestern Virginia and had spent most of their lives in larger urban environments. Interestingly, the other couple with the most liberal gender role attitudes was the cohabiting couple who were both in their 40s. However, these two individuals had both grown up and lived primarily in the rural South. The factor of cohabitation may contribute to more liberal gender ideologies (Surra, 1991). These six individuals spanned the range of education and income. The last factor that these three couples had in common may contain the most potential for explanation--all three couples had been in marriages or significant cohabiting relationships before. These were three of the five couples who were in second marriages or significant relationships.

Research question 3 asks: "How does membership in a particular ethnic group affect such intimacy?" The results detailed above suggest that there are mitigating factors for African American couples such as ethnicity and religiosity. When both members of the dyad share similar ideologies, it appears that it does not in essence act as a constraint. When one member of the dyad has a differing ideology, it can act as a constraint. This was evident in the couples that appeared to be still actively negotiating responsibilities. For the most part, the participants were congruent in their beliefs and had found ways of reconciling them with practices. It seems as if the sharing of

beliefs and the experience of difficult and tragic occurrences within a spiritual framework helped to reconcile whatever contradictions or differences might lie between the men and women concerning gender issues.

Although there were some differences along gender continua, there were few differences along closeness continua. These men and women clearly enjoyed the companionship of their mates, and looked forward to the time they spent together. Both the men and the women appreciated the ability of their partners to listen, to show concern, and to offer support when it was needed, qualities that are requirements for strong and caring friendships.

In the next section, the domain of midlife will be addressed.

Midlife

The main themes for this domain were A Time of Change, A Time of Stability, and Time is Running Out. These themes reflect the focus on midlife as a time of life in which aspects of daily existence were being simultaneously enjoyed, coped with, and examined. These themes correspond with research questions 3, 4, and 5. Using the words and stories of the participants, midlife was characterized in the language of time as one of change, stability, and running out, which is consistent with the literature on midlife (Hunter & Sundel, 1989). While all of the main themes applied to both men and women, some of the categories were specific to men or women, as noted, and gender differences are included in the discussion that follows.

The theme of Time is Running Out, particularly in the aspects of Not enough time/getting things done and Not Enough Time/Preparing for What's Ahead, were two categories that primarily emerged from the male participants. These categories correspond with research question 3: " How does membership in an ethnic group affect intimacy?" As a group, the male

participants were more concerned with the imminence of the future and questions of mortality than the women were. This may be partly explained by the contrasting longevity factors of Black men and women. African American men have a lifespan average of 63.7 years (Kain, 1993). This is shorter than any other adults, male or females. In addition, Black males are especially vulnerable to high blood pressure and other heart diseases (Kain, 1993). Perhaps these men were more aware of their shortened lifespan potential and were responding accordingly.

Research question 4 asks: "How do life course circumstances, such as work and family responsibilities, contribute to or restrict the process of intimacy?" The responsibilities of work for women appeared to be a contributing factor to intimacy in several ways. Many of the women felt better about themselves because of their involvement in paid employment (Coleman et al., 1987) or because they were training for the profession to which they had aspired. Thus their growing self-esteem and life satisfaction enhanced their intimate relationships. Their status as dual earners or potential dual earners provided additional avenues of financial security for the family. Financial security was a concern of many of the male participants and has emerged as an important factor in the satisfaction of African American couples (Engram & Lockery, 1993; Lawson & Thompson, 1995).

Family responsibilities appear to be both constraints and contributors to intimacy. On the one hand, family chores and child care activities produce a high level of demand on couples and interfere with couple time. On the other hand, pride and concern over the needs of children unite men and women in their efforts towards improving and maintaining their families' well-being. Additionally, the participants were involved in extensive kinship networks

(Chatters & Taylor, 1993) that appeared to bring both the stress of practical demands and the satisfaction of caring involvement.

Research question 5 asks: "How do life course transitions unique to midlife, such as sandwiching of caregiving and the physical and sexual changes of midlife, act as constraints or contributors to intimacy?"

Sandwiching of caregiving did not emerge as an issue as there were no households in which older adult relatives were present and many family of origin parents were deceased, at a relatively young age. Parents who were living were generally in dyads, although several elderly adult mothers were characterized as living independently in the neighboring community. Several of the women participants expressed impatience with the interference of their mothers who lived close by. Some of the participants expressed concerns for the future regarding their parents, but it did not appear as a significant issue at this time.

There were two kinds of changes apparent in the analysis: positive changes in self-confidence for the women and in maturity for the men, negative changes in the physical manifestations of midlife in terms of health and appearance. Midlife has been characterized as a developmental period which is influenced by body and physical changes (Huyck, 1989; Neugarten, 1968). Although these changes were not welcomed, they were also accepted as inevitable in the course of aging. Participants had established ways of taking care of themselves and were successfully coping with these inevitable changes (Katchadourian, 1987; Mancini & Bird, 1985). For the most part, participants characterized this period of their life in terms of strength, competency, and security.

Although the women did appear to be more concerned than the men about the negative aspects of aging (Gergen, 1985) in terms of their appearance, the mitigating factors of stability, in terms of confidence and competency at this time in their life, seemed to be significant. Both men and women appeared to be enjoying this time as a period of personal growth and at the same time, enjoyed the stability of their relationships and inner peace and maturity.

The ambiguous nature of midlife has been noted (Hunter & Sundel, 1989) and the data bear out this ambiguity. In general, despite competing demands of work and families, these individuals and couples were pleased with their lives and accepting of the concomitant changes of midlife.

Ethnicity

The aspects of being in a relationship as an African American and being at midlife as an African American have been incorporated into the other sections. This section specifically addresses the experience of being a person of color in an oppressive society. The themes for this section are titled Diversity Within and Living with Racism and the content of this section depicts a variable array of experiences regarding ethnicity. For many of the participants, ethnicity is a central factor of their lives, for others it is peripheral. Notwithstanding individual differences, ethnicity is a factor for the society at large. The themes of this section correspond to research question number 3 which asks: " How does membership in an ethnic group affect intimacy?"

Being an African American for these participants required adaptation and survival skills. All of these couples seemed to be doing well together, and had constructed ways to implement their survival, to maintain their

relationship, and to maintain their work and family lives in the external social system. Racism in public and private ways prevents people from achieving desired goals, and from attaining educational and career status. Participants described ways in which they had to adapt and learn to cope with the range of oppressive behaviors and attitudes directed towards them in society.

Mobility factors emerged as potentially a divisive factor between men and women, not necessarily problematic for the participants of the study but for their children, or others of their ethnic group. Several of the participants expressed beliefs that African American women have an advantage over African American men, due to gender and perhaps to skin color. McAdoo (1993) points out that Black females are more able to move in and out of the larger culture with greater ease as they are perceived as less of a threat and less threatening and volatile than Black males are perceived to be.

The issue of skin color is an interesting one. Staples and Johnson (1993) address this issue and cite research that bears out the fact that lighter skinned Black men were located in higher economic and occupational positions. They also address the advantage of lighter skin color for women both in terms of economics and in terms of relationship choices.

In terms of economics, although some of these couples were struggling financially, most were comfortably middle class. In several couples, the women had higher educational status and occupational status than the men, a situation not uncommon in African American couples (Lawson & Thompson, 1995). Sharing the financial responsibility was important to these couples, as was establishing financial security for the future.

The durability or strength of their relationships may be related most of all to their shared commitment to family and faith, and the working partnership that they have evolved in their intimate relationships.

Conclusions

The research results broaden and expand existing life course and gender perspectives. Discussion of the extensions of the life course and gender perspectives is incorporated into the sections that follow delineating the four conclusions that have been drawn. The conclusions are categorized into four thematic areas: competency, spirituality, ambiguity, and durability.

Competency

Both men and women were clearly competent at creating closeness in their intimate partnerships, as the gender perspective suggests. The gender perspective focuses on competency, with the assumption that women and men can construct intimate relationships (Thompson, 1993). Thompson called for research that would identify the conditions that are necessary for competency to be present.

For these participants, it was evident that there were active strategies for maintaining intimacy. These strategies included sharing tasks, communication strategies, and sharing a spiritual life. Men and women demonstrated cooperativeness and sharing of responsibility in daily and practical tasks. They sought out and maintained ways of being with their partners through communication and everyday life. Being both a friend and a lover was an ideological and practical method of successfully coping with contextual factors. Despite some expressed differences in gender ideology, these men and women were capably negotiating the nuances of their intimate relationship.

Gender as a contextual constraint may be less significant in the lives of people who must contend with the constraints of race, ethnicity, and class. It may also be that gender was less of a constraint for these couples due to their status of being at midlife. Most of these couples had been together for a long period of time and divisive issues would have been resolved along the way. It may also be that as individuals approach their older years, issues associated with aging combined with the multiple responsibilities of work and family are preeminent.

Spirituality

Spirituality played an essential role in the relational and family lives of these African Americans, emerging from both sociohistorical and contextual aspects of racial ethnicity. Spirituality or religiosity is an organizing concept around which other factors such as family and relationships are maintained. Religion was personalized and played a central role in the daily lives of most of these individuals. It provided support and comfort against both normative and oppressive forces. Religion provided a stability that was not necessarily present in other societal institutions.

Religious beliefs stabilized and strengthened the intimate partnership and structured the ideological as well as the practical aspects of life. Some of the oppressive aspects of organized religion in terms of gender prescriptives were mitigated by the comfort and safety that religion provided both personally and collectively.

Ambiguity

Midlife was a time of ambiguity, as the life course perspective articulates. Despite the changes in health and appearance, the transition of midlife was a positive one. Socioeconomic factors and family structural

changes were stable for most of these couples contributing to the stability of their lives.

Midlife was a time of wisdom and consolidation, characterized by strength and awareness of the movement of time. Although individuals are confronting change in their bodies and physical appearance, they are also consolidating financially, emotionally, and relationally. The contextual aspects of these couples' lives added the everyday stress of busy schedules but this was balanced by the general gains in strength and self-esteem. Women gained confidence and men gained maturity while preparing for the future. Everyone had too much to do and not quite enough time to do it in.

The transitions of midlife were negotiated with humor and confidence. Changes in physical appearance were viewed as inevitable, whereas changes in physical health were viewed as events to be reckoned with. Most individuals and couples had devised strategies for caring for their health, which included stress management techniques and dietary and exercise interventions. Midlife was an interesting combination of two pathways, coping with or enjoying change, while at the same time, maintaining or enjoying stability.

Contributing to the ambiguous nature of midlife was the uncertainty for African American men about their future longevity. As African American men have a statistically shorter lifespan, this knowledge had an impact on the meaning of midlife to African American men. At the same time, it affects the intimate partner of an African American man as it necessitates that she prepare carefully for her future and her family's future well-being.

Durability

A number of factors contribute to the strength and durability of the individuals and couples in this sample. These are individuals, now at midlife, who continue to develop their abilities and achieve success in their chosen fields or are striving for success. These are individuals who have had to adapt to the social system in order to achieve their desired goals. These women and men demonstrated insight and spiritual solidity, skills for survival.

As couples, they have defied the odds and remained together for many years; 7 of the 10 couples were together for over 14 years. Much of the literature on ethnic families catalogues the ways in which oppression and economic hardship has resulted in divided families. Deep spiritual beliefs and commitment to family intensified the stability of the primary relationship. By combining forces and supporting one another, and drawing on the strength of their spiritual relationships as well, successful negotiation in the majority culture was assisted and reinforced.

Recommendations for New Ways of Thinking about Families

Dilworth-Anderson et al. (1993) suggest that information on ethnic minority families should be used to both examine the relevance of existing ways of thinking about families, and to broaden the existing ways of thinking about families. The results and conclusions of this research suggest possibilities towards this effort.

This research challenges thinking that implies that members of ethnic minorities are a homogenous group. Although there were obviously similarities, patterns, and trends that emerged, there was also a great deal of variation and diversity within the sample. Individuals and couples had been

affected by a number of differing influences including location of early experiences, present occupation, and relationship status. Individuals reared in urban environments presented attitudes and beliefs that were somewhat different from some of those that were reared in more rural environs. Individuals in occupations that provided direct services to ethnic minority populations expressed heightened political and social concerns, and were actively involved in organizations such as the National Association for Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Differences in expressed gender ideology also appeared to be related to the status of first or second marriage, or cohabitation. Individuals in second marriages or cohabiting relationships were more outspoken about the need for equality in household and child care than their counterparts in first marriages.

Evidence from this research supports the notion that men and women in equitable relationships establish strategies for sharing and flexibility, and as a result of this process, they experience an outcome of interdependency. This research suggests that men and women in successful relationships have structured ways in which they can and do depend on one another. These couples looked to one another for encouragement and solace and devised ways in which they could be available and accessible to one another. Some of these ways included talking together, exercising together, and worshipping together.

The outcome of interdependency may also be related to the temporal circumstances of coupling at midlife. It may be that by the time couples in long-term relationships reach midlife, many routines and patterns have been established between them to maximize the fluidity of practical and relational demands. It may be that dealing with the physical changes and challenges of

midlife adulthood may help to strengthen the bonds of psychoemotional dependency on a partner and interdependency between partners.

The essential nature of spirituality in the lives of these African Americans couples poses the need to question the place of spirituality in the lives of families. Family scholarship might examine the connection between spirituality and stability in both ethnic minority families and other family groups. Organized religion is a dominant presence in the world at large, and in the United States where most people claim a religious orientation. Spirituality and religiosity potentially have a place in broadening family theory.

Finally, evidence from this research supports an earlier notion of family as a "haven in a heartless world" (Lasch, 1977). Earlier in this century, the family was considered an escape from the external stresses of the industrialized world. In a similar fashion, African American families may escape the oppressive aspects of a racially stratified world through the solace of strong family bonds. These family bonds would include a wider definition of family that applies to extended family, fictive kin, and the community of the spiritual family.

These suggestions may contribute to the expansion of current theorizing on the family. In the following section, the limitations of the study are examined. Studies that reached beyond the scope of this study would further the effort for new ways of thinking about families.

Limitations of this Study

Being an outsider to this population presented advantages and disadvantages. As an outsider, the possibility that participants may have edited certain information always existed. Of course, that is a risk facing all

researchers. As an outsider, I could also be more objective in listening to stories and analyzing the data. In many ways, sharing the experience of growing up in a family that had specific ethnic rituals and was identified as part of an ethnic sub-culture created a foundation for greater understanding and commonality of some experiences. I appreciated the respect for traditions and the sense of pride in one's ancestry that the African American participants displayed.

A second limitation of this study is in the educational and occupational backgrounds of the participants. Two of the participants, one male and one female, were in working class occupations. Three other participants, two males and one female, were in paraprofessional occupations that had more status but relatively low incomes. All of the 10 couples would be considered in the range of lower to middle middle-class. A sample with more members of the working class population would have undoubtedly enriched the data (Rubin, 1994). However, as an outsider, gaining access to the individuals in this sample was a challenging achievement, not only because of my outsider status but because the lives of middle aged people are full and busy.

Suggestions for Further Research

Every couple was secured through personal contacts followed by extensive networking. Someone known to the couples had to speak for me in order to gain entry into their lives, explained perhaps by my status as an outsider. Creating routes of access to ethnic groups in the population is a challenge that may be undertaken in a variety of ways which could be strategized far in advance.

One suggestion for further research is to broaden the demographics of the sample. There is a scarcity of literature on ethnic minority families;

research on younger African American couples and elderly African American couples would be enlightening. Replicating this study with members from another ethnic minority group would be informative for family scholars and family practitioners. Contributing to the literature on ethnic minority families in ways that do not pathologize, generalize, or stigmatize the population is needed.

Particularly intriguing are some of the discrete bits of information that emerged in the research process. The younger members of the sample generally sounded different from the older members. It is unclear whether this was related to their age or to the fact that the younger couples happened to be urban and in their second marriages. Another piece that might warrant further investigation is the length of marriage. Most of these couples had many years together. Perhaps men and women who have weathered the early and mid-years of child-rearing and are still together have unique characteristics that warrant further investigation.

Another avenue to explore is the connection between gender attitudes and remarriage. The individuals who were in second marriages or significant cohabiting relationships displayed the most liberal gender attitudes. The question arises: In what ways are these individuals more likely to leave unsatisfactory relationships because of gender incompatibilities? Do they develop more liberal attitudes as they evolve through subsequent relationships?

Other suggestions would include replicating the study with a working class or low income African American sample. Perhaps the effects of midlife might differ for a population that had more economic stress or even more

physical stress from manual labor occupations. The meanings and effects of aging might well differ under these differing circumstances.

Implications for Practitioners

The key findings have implications for family practitioners intervening with midlife couples or with ethnic minority groups. In terms of midlife couples, the inevitable changes of midlife can be presented as normative and the stresses of too many competing demands as normative for this time in life. Sometimes the stresses of competing demands can overwhelm couples, and time can be reframed as the mutual enemy, rather than the other person. Sharing responsibilities and sharing communication has again emerged as essential to strong relationships. Establishing relationships that contain a foundation of friendship also emerged as a cornerstone for intimacy. Couples can be encouraged to find ways to establish or re-establish a friendship, and to find time for one another, to be together and to talk.

In terms of ethnic minority groups, it is essential to understand the cultural values and attitudes of a group before intervening (Devore & London, 1993; Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995). The strong religious ties of the African American population and the adherence to certain traditional gender beliefs can be respected and understood as responses to oppression. Some of the tension between men and women in African American couples may arise from mobility and status issues from the society at large that are internalized and brought inside of the relationship. Secular and humanistic-based interventions may not be as appreciated or appropriate as spiritual ones. For parents, resources found within community churches may prove more valuable than professional resources. It is also important to remember that

being an African American does not predict homogeneity; cohort, age, and regional factors should also be considered.

Devore and London (1993) advise practitioners to remember that ethnicity has a significant influence on individual identity. They also remind practitioners that ethnic group membership can provide a source of cohesion and strength in the face of adversity.

Final Comments

Invited into their homes, meeting members of the family and household, and listening to the details of their lives, I was often moved by the level of affection and trust that these women and men showed for one another. These were no storybook marriages; there were stories of tragedies, conflicts, and dilemmas. There was evidence of trials, personal and familial, that had to be overcome. There were disagreements, even during the interviews, as these were strong personalities, people who had lived, with stories of survival to tell. As a researcher, I was honored by the willingness that each of the participants showed to privilege me with the details of their stories. As a person, I was deeply inspired by the sincerity of such dedication and devotion to kin, to faith, and to one another. I hope that their individual and combined voices can inspire others as they have inspired me.

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Appendix A

Appendix A

Demographic Worksheet

To be Completed at the Beginning of Individual Interview

Individual

1. Background Information

Date and place of birth:

Racial, cultural or ethnic identification:

Education:

Work history (brief):

Family

Family of origin information: Brief description of parents, siblings, extended household.

Names and ages of children:

Appendix B

Appendix B

One Day Diary of A Typical Day

Please describe a typical day in your life, include work and home events.

Please bring this with you to the interview.

Morning Activities:

Afternoon Activities:

Evening Activities:

Comments:

Appendix C

Appendix C
Advertisement to Recruit Volunteers

Ethnic Couples at Midlife

Are you in the middle? In the mid-years of your life, in the middle of raising or launching children, taking care of elderly relatives, trying to get ahead at work, and still keeping your couple life together? If you and your partner are at midlife and have been in a committed relationship for at least three years, living together during this time, either married or cohabiting, you're invited to participate in a research project. Please call Marsha Carolan, Doctoral Candidate, Department of Family and Child Development, Virginia Tech, 231-5668.

****** I'm especially interested in interviewing African-American couples. Please consider sharing a few hours of your time so that underrepresented voices can be heard.**

****** Interviews will be respectful, confidential, and scheduled at your convenience.**

Appendix D

Appendix D

Application for Approval for Research Involving Human Subjects
Marsha T. Carolan
Department of Family and Child Development
1-703-231-5668 or 1-703-552-7488

Protocol for Research Involving Human Subjects

Title of Project: Intimate Relationships at Midlife: Gender and Life Course Perspectives

Justification of this Project

The purpose of this research is to explore the individual and dyadic experience of midlife in a close personal relationship. Typically, midlife adults are engaged in a flurry of generative activities, including work and caregiving to children and/or elderly parents. At the same time, many midlife adults are confronting the developmental issues of aging. For many women and men, it includes physiological and socioemotional changes. The majority of these adults are in committed relationships. Information is needed to inform our understanding of how individuals and couples negotiate personal and dyadic midlife experiences, and of how they maintain their ongoing couple relationships. Information is especially needed that informs our understanding of ethnic couples.

Procedure

Volunteers, individuals who self-identify as middle-aged, living in committed long-term relationships, will be recruited for individual and conjoint interviews (see Appendix C). In addition to advertising, and to implement efforts to recruit a ethnically diverse sample, volunteers will be recruited through the method of snowballing. Snowballing is a procedure

which involves requesting that current participants recommend future participants for the study.

The sample will consist of 15 couples, a total of 30 individuals.

Volunteers will be asked to consent to two interviews, one individual one hour interview and one conjoint two hour interview. The individual interview will precede the conjoint interviews. In the beginning of the individual interview, questions from the demographic worksheet will be completed (see Appendix A). At the end of the individual interview, participants will be asked to complete a one day diary of a typical day and bring this diary with them to the conjoint interview session (see Appendix B). Individual and conjoint interview question guides can be found in Appendix E.

Risks and Benefits

Volunteers for this study will be assured of their right to terminate the interviews at any time. Interview questions are not intended to cause risk.

The participation of individuals and couples in this study will enhance our understanding of the meanings of midlife and the strategies that couples devise to negotiate a time of busy generative activity.

No guarantee of benefits will be offered for participation.

Confidentiality/Anonymity

Only the named investigator will conduct the interviews and have access to the list of participants. The list of names and telephone numbers of participants, as well as the audiotapes, will be kept in a locked file cabinet and destroyed after completion of transcriptions. Audiotapes and transcriptions will be coded with numbers to replace identifying information. In the event that it may be necessary, a professional transcriptionist may be hired to assist with the transcription process. This transcriptionist will have access to only

coded audiotapes and in keeping with the rules of professional transcription conduct, will be required to maintain strict confidence about any information that is transcribed. Future documents or presentations will use pseudonyms.

VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY
Informed Consent for Participants of Investigative Projects

Title of Project: Intimate Relationships at Midlife: Gender and Life Course Perspectives

Principal Investigator: Marsha T. Carolan

I. THE PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH

You are invited to participate in a study of intimate relationships at midlife. The purpose of this project is to increase understanding of the ways that midlife affects individuals and couples.

II. PROCEDURE

You will also be asked to participate in two interviews. The first interview will be an individual interview and will last for approximately one hour. The second interview will be a conjoint (couple) interview and will last for approximately two hours.

After the individual interview, you will be given a one day diary form that you will be asked to fill out at home and bring back to the couple interview. This will be used as additional information about you and your partner's daily activities.

III. BENEFITS OF THIS PROJECT

Your participation in this project will provide information that will be helpful to our understanding of midlife and relationships. As people live longer and more complex lives, we need to know more about the middle years of the lifespan. Your participation will help our understanding of how people balance work and family demands and personal needs while maintaining a couple relationship. Your participation will also help us to understand how people make sense of these middle years.

No guarantee of benefits has been made to encourage you to participate.

IV. EXTENT OF ANONYMITY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

The responses of individuals and couples who participate in these interviews will be kept strictly confidential. All identifying information will be removed and code numbers or pseudonyms will be assigned to all information and written reports.

The list of names and telephone numbers as well as the audiotapes will be kept in a locked file cabinet. This list and the audiotapes will be destroyed upon completion of the transcription. Individual and couple interviews will be audiotaped for transcription purposes. The tapes will be reviewed and transcribed by the principal investigator.

In the event that it may be necessary, a professional transcriptionist may be hired to assist with the transcription process. This transcriptionist will have access to only coded audiotapes and in keeping with the rules of professional transcription conduct, will be required to maintain strict confidence about any information that is transcribed. Future documents or presentations will use pseudonyms.

V. COMPENSATION

There is no compensation for this project.

VI. FREEDOM TO WITHDRAW

You are free to withdraw from this study at any time.

VII. APPROVAL OF RESEARCH

This research has been approved, as required, by the Institutional Review Board for projects involving human subjects at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, and by the Department of Family and Child Development.

VII. SUBJECTS' RESPONSIBILITIES

I know of no reason I cannot participate in this study.

Signature

IX. SUBJECT'S PERMISSION

I have read and understand the informed consent and conditions of this project. I have had all of my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent for participation in this project.

If I participate, I may withdraw at any time without penalty. I agree to abide by the rules of this project.

Should I have any questions about this research or its conduct, I will contact:

_____ Marsha T. Carolan Investigator	_____ 703-231-5668 Phone
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_____ Katherine R. Allen Faculty Advisor	_____ 703-231-6526 Phone
--	--------------------------------

_____ E. R. Stout Chair, Institutional Review Board Research Division	_____ 703-231-6077 Phone
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Appendix E

Appendix E

Pilot Interview Guide

Individual

1. Gender Ideology

Tell me about your beliefs about men and women.

Where do you think your beliefs came from?

What are the things that your partner does that make you feel close to him/her?

What kinds of things get in the way of you and your partner being close?

Tell me about the last time you and your partner made a big decision together.

2. Midlife Issues

What does middle age mean to you?

Has middle age affected you on a physical level?

Do you see yourself as different in middle age than young adulthood?

How does your partner see you now?

What personal changes have you experienced?

Conjoint

1. Relationship background

Tell me how you met and decided to make a commitment.

Describe your life together before parenting. How did you decide to have children?

Describe your life together since parenting/stepparenting. How has it changed?

How does your paid work affect your life together?

2. Everyday life together (if not covered by diaries)

How much time do you spend together?

What do you do together? How is it planned and decided on?

How much time do you spend apart? What activities are you each involved in?

3. Gender ideology/relational

Who manages the money? How are money decisions made?

What happens when one of your children is sick?

How do you figure out who will do daily tasks and child care?

What would you like to be different?

4. Relationship maintenance

How satisfied are you with the level of closeness in your relationship?

What are the things that your partner does that make you feel close to him/her?

What would you like to be different?

5. Midlife issues

What does being a middle aged couple mean to you?

Has middle age affected your intimate relationship?

How is your relationship different at midlife?

How has middle age made it easier or harder to be close?

Revised Interview Guide

Individual

1. Gender Ideology

Tell me about your beliefs about men and women.

Where do you think your beliefs came from?

What are the things that your partner does that make you feel close to him/her?

What kinds of things get in the way of you and your partner being close?

2. Midlife Issues

What does middle age mean to you?

How is this a different time in your life than young adulthood?

Has middle age affected you on a physical level?

What life-altering changes have you experienced?

How does your partner see you now?

What personal changes have you experienced?

3. General Questions

How has being a part of an ethnic group effected you in any way?

To sum up, what do you consider important?

Is there anything you would like to add that I may not have asked that is an important part of who you are?

Conjoint

1. Relationship background

Tell me how you met and decided to make a commitment.

Describe your life together before parenting. How did you decide to have children?

Describe your life together since parenting/stepparenting. How has it changed?

How does your paid work affect your life together?

2. Everyday life together (if not covered by diaries)

How much time do you spend together?

What do you do together? How is it planned and decided on?

How much time do you spend apart? What activities are you each involved in?

3. Gender ideology/relational

Who manages the money? How are money decisions made?

Tell me about the last time you made a big decision together.

How do you figure out who will do daily tasks and child care?

What would you like to be different?

4. Relationship maintenance

How satisfied are you with the level of closeness in your relationship?

What are the things that your partner does that make you feel close to him/her?

What would you like to be different?

5. Midlife issues

What does being a middle aged couple mean to you?

Has middle age affected your intimate relationship?

How is your relationship different at midlife?

How has middle age made it easier or harder to be close?

6. Ethnic issues

Do you identify with a certain ethnic group? If so, how does this effect your life/life together.

Does being a part of an ethnic group affect your relationship in any way?

How does being a part of an ethnic group affect your parenting?

Appendix F

Appendix F

Dominant Themes with Coding Categories

100 Family Matters

- 101 The importance of family
- 102 Family of origin role models
- 103 Men as nurturers
- 104 Family of origin/making changes

200 Friends and Lovers

- 205 Marriage as a partnership
- 206 Flexibility and sharing responsibilities
- 207 Being together
- 208 Talking together

300 Walking with God

- 309 Personalizing the spiritual
- 310 Head of the household
- 311 Faith keeps us together
- 312 With God's help

400 A Time of Change

- 413 Changing health
- 414 Changing appearance
- 415 Coping with change

500 A Time of Stability

- 516 Feeling strong
- 517 Personal maturity
- 518 Relational maturity

600 Time is Running Out

- 619 Not enough time/daily life
- 620 Not enough time/getting things done
- 621 Not enough time/preparing for what's ahead

700 Diversity Within

- 722 We're not all alike
- 723 Color blind

800 Living with Racism

- 824 Private and public experiences of racism
- 825 Overcoming

900 Demographic Codes

- 926 Age and birthplace
- 927 Ethnic/racial group
- 928 Education
- 929 Marital/significant relationship history
- 930 Occupation

Appendix G

CURRICULUM VITAE
Marsha T. Carolan
4538 Manitou Drive
Okemos, Michigan 48864

EDUCATION

Ph. D., 1995, Department of Family and Child Development
Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University
Specialization: Family Studies, Certificate of Gerontology

M. A., 1988, Department of Human Development and Family Relations
University of Connecticut
Specialization: Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT Accredited)

M. A., 1986, Department of Dramatic Arts
University of Connecticut
Specialization: Dramatic Arts and Sociodrama

B. A., 1972, Department of English
Western Connecticut State University
Specialization: Literature and Theatre Arts

PROFESSIONAL CREDENTIALS

Licensure as Professional Counselor in the state of Virginia (LPC)
Clinical Member: American Association for Marriage & Family Therapy
AAMFT Approved Supervisor Credentials in Submission

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Assistant Professor: Department of Family and Child Ecology, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI. August 1995 to present.

Graduate Teaching Assistant, Field Study Coordinator, Human Services:
Department of Family and Child Development, Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University, Blacksburg, VA. January 1993 through July 1995.

Graduate Teaching Assistant: Department of Family and Child Development, Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University. Blacksburg, VA. August 1991 through December 1992. Full teaching responsibilities for FCD 3324 Marriage and Family Dynamics (Enrollment 125 per semester).

Clinical Supervisor: New River Valley Community Services Board, Mental Health and Substance Abuse Divisions, Christiansburg, VA. August 1992 through June 1995. Supervise and train clinical staff in family services.

Clinical Supervisor: Valley Counseling Services, Radford, VA. February 1994 through July 1995. Approved supervisor for professional licensure supervisees.

Clinical Supervisor: Center for Family Services, Department of Family and Child Development, Clinical Training Center for Doctoral Interns, Virginia Tech, January 1994 through July 1995.

Family Therapist: New River Valley Community Services Board, Mental Health and Substance Abuse Divisions, Christiansburg, VA. August 1992 through June 1995.

Family Therapist/Private Practice: Valley Counseling Services, Radford, VA. June 1993 through June 1995.

Family Therapist/ Substance Abuse Outreach Counselor: New River Valley Community Services Board, Mental Health and Substance Abuse Divisions, Christiansburg, VA. September 1991 through June 1992.

Family Therapist/Outreach Counselor. Center for Drug Free Living, Dr. Phillips High School, Orlando, FL. September 1989 through June 1991.

Family Therapist: Department of Family Medicine, University of Connecticut, Hartford, CT. May 1987 through June 1988.

Graduate Clinical Assistant: Department of Human Development and Family Relations, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT. Center for Marriage & Family Therapy, Assistant to the Director. June 1986 through June 1988.

Graduate Intern: Teen Parent Program, Willimantic, CT. 1986.

Graduate Intern: Sociodrama Workshop Facilitator, Somers Prison, Sexual Offenders Program, Somers, CT. 1984.

Graduate Teaching Assistant: Department of Dramatic Arts, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT. Introduction to Film classes, lecturer and teaching assistant. September 1980 through June 1982.

Graduate Intern: Women's Center, University of Connecticut. 1983.

Graduate Intern: Sociodrama Workshop Facilitator, Department of Dramatic Arts, University of Connecticut, 1982.

Psychodrama Intern: New Haven Center for Human Relations, Ct. 1979 through 1982.

PROFESSIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Awards, Grants

College of Human Resources, Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University, *Graduate Student Award for Research Excellence*, Department of Family and Child Development, April 1994.

Outstanding Student Paper Award, Monetary Award and Certificate in addition to publication in the Journal of Applied Gerontology, Southern Gerontological Society, April, 1993.

\$1000.00 Research Grant, Women's Research Institute, Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University, research and intervention on menopause, May, 1993.

Department Nominee (Family and Child Development, Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University) for the *Commonwealth of Virginia Future Faculty Teaching Fellowship*, August 1993.

Publications

Carolan, M. T. (1994). Beyond deficiency: Broadening the view of menopause. Journal of Applied Gerontology, *13*, 193-205.

Presentations

Carolan, M. T. & Marek, L. (November 1995). Narrative analysis of young adults' stories of gender development. Feminism and Family Studies Section, National Council on Family Relations Annual Conference, Portland, OR.

Carolan, M. T. (November 1994). Invited Discussant for paper session. Feminist Perspectives on Women and Identity, National Council on Family Relations Annual Conference, Minneapolis, MN.

Carolan, M. T. (April 1993). Toward an Integrated Model of Menopause in the Midlife Experience of Women. Roundtable for Southern Gerontological Society Conference, Richmond, VA.

Carolan, M. T. (June 1992). Feminist Family Therapy Training, Clinicians of New River Valley Community Services Board, Christiansburg, VA.

Carolan, M. T. (May 1990, May 1991). Family Life Education, Parenting Series, Dr. Phillips High School, Orlando, FL.

Editorial Reviews

West Publishing Company, 5th Edition, B. Strong & C. Devault text, Marriage and Family Experience, August, 1993.

Journal of Applied Gerontology, J. McAuley, Ph.D., Editor. Journal reviewer, Spring 1993- 1995.

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy
National Council on Family Relations
Southern Gerontological Society
Kappa Omicron Nu Honor Society