

## CHAPTER TWO

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In an effort to frame the diverse and complex experience of midlife single women, feminist and life course perspectives were blended to provide the theoretical underpinning for this study. The social structure of marriage and the family, which shapes and molds women's identities, as well as the biological and psychosocial dimensions inherent in midlife, are highlighted. Analysis of literature relevant to the study of single women is discussed as it pertains to the scope of the present inquiry.

#### Theoretical Perspectives

##### A Feminist Perspective

Despite diverse political doctrines or disparate viewpoints, feminists share some basic assumptions regarding women and their experiences (Baber & Allen, 1992). A feminist perspective embodies tenets that include (a) attention to the impact of social structures, policies, and ideologies on women's lives to the extent that they harm or oppress, disadvantage, or devalue; (b) a commitment to effect change by emancipating and empowering women; and (c) acknowledgment of the validity and value of women's experiences within the context of their individual lives (Walker, Martin, & Thompson, 1988).

By critically examining the composition of the modern nuclear family and questioning its natural occurrence and rigid assignment of both functions and roles (Thorne, 1982), feminism challenges the prevailing assumptions of what family is. In this way, a feminist perspective draws women in from the fringes of the family, centrally locating them as the figures of study themselves (Baber & Allen, 1992; Weskott, 1979). This "centering" allows

women's lived experiences to be the focus of attention, contributing not only to a redefinition of family, but also a reconstruction of knowledge (Baber & Allen, 1992).

A feminist agenda acknowledges the distinction between research *on* women and *for* women (Thompson, 1992). Research *on* women reveals, discloses, uncovers, and sensitizes individuals to the oppressive reality of women's experiences (Osmond, 1984), whereas research *for* women explicitly attends to the emancipation and enhancement of women's lives (Smith, 1987).

A feminist perspective emphasizes reflexivity, recognition of multiple voices, and the acknowledgment of women's experiences as source and justification of knowledge (Thompson, 1992). Through the utilization of reflection, critical examination, and analytical exploration of the research process (Fonow & Cook, 1991) reflexivity offers a source of insight, that is, of being an outsider within (Collins, 1991). Attention to the multiplicity and diversity of women's experiences recognizes the value of individual voices, whether they speak alone or resonate in chorus with other similar voices (Baber & Allen, 1992). Acknowledging women's experiences as source and justification of knowledge elevates the status of women's experience from that of the everyday to a level of authority (Thompson, 1992). This experiential exchange between researcher and researched (DuBois, 1983) transcends common discourse, culminating in the creation of knowledge by and about women (Smith, 1987).

### A Life Course Perspective

Arising in part from a need to address the changing face of the American family since the 1950s, the life course perspective offers a theoretical framework incorporating the concepts of time, process, and sociocultural context to the analysis of the individual and family within society (Bengtson & Allen, 1993). This approach emphasizes the importance of

multidisciplinary assessment (Aldous, 1990; Bengtson & Allen, 1993) while allowing for the recognition of heterogeneity and diversity of experience (Bengtson, Rosenthal, & Burton, 1990). Acknowledging a variety of distinct points along the life course continuum, normative and non-normative, encourages a more thorough understanding of development by highlighting the diverse aspects of families and family members.

An important component of the life course perspective is the idea of multicausal versus causal effects (Bengtson & Allen, 1993; Elder, 1978; Hareven, 1987). The individual, family, and society are intertwined; change is a process and does not occur within a vacuum. Factors that affect one aspect of the triad can be felt throughout all, causing a multigenerational and multidirectional ripple effect (Bengtson & Allen, 1993). For example, whether a woman marries can have a profound impact, not only on her experience as an individual, but on her family of origin (postponement or absence of transition to grandparenthood) and society (possible redefinition of singlehood as marginal status) as well (Hareven, 1987). Generational and historical response to individual actions may then cycle back to affect the individual who made them, reinforcing the idea of multidirectional process.

The life course approach offers a mechanism for examining “age-related transitions that are socially created, socially recognized and shared” (Hagestad & Neugarten, 1985, p. 35). Inherent in this definition of role transitions are socially ascribed expectations regarding the normative timing and sequencing of individual life events (Elder, 1985; Hagestad & Burton, 1986). Individuals build expectations regarding life course progression for themselves and others by assigning social meaning to the timing (Hagestad & Neugarten, 1985), or absence (Allen, 1989) of life events. Typically linked to biological processes (e.g., motherhood and

menopause) (Rossi, 1980), these transitions are socially and culturally reinforced as rites of passage (Baber & Allen, 1992).

In addition to the aspects of time and process previously noted, the contextual nature of the life course perspective deems it well-suited for the study of midlife single woman, while also illuminating the inherent nuances and unique histories of individuals and families (Bengtson & Allen, 1993). In considering the life context of given transitions, scholars need to expand the focus beyond the individual to “webs of interconnected people” (Hagestad & Burton, 1986, p. 473). Emphasis on the temporal, processual, and contextual dimensions of change with respect to the individual and family within society allows for a dynamic and emergent portrait of multiple roles, identities, and life careers (Elder, 1985). Each of the elements of the life course perspective highlighted are essential to the understanding and experience of single midlife women.

#### Review of Literature

Because singlehood is as much a social location as it is a form of personal identity, the sections that follow focus on the structure of marriage and the ways in which that structure shapes and defines women, as well as on the biological and psychosocial challenges present in midlife. Literature relevant to single women and qualitative methodology is presented.

#### Breaking the Yardstick - Single Women in a Married World

As a social institution, marriage serves as both cornerstone and foundation of the family in defining order and conferring legitimacy (Young, 1997). In Western society, the institution of marriage is “normatively linked to the regulation of sexuality, procreation and property” (Young, 1997, p. 102), while simultaneously conferring power, rights, and privilege (Baber & Allen, 1992; Chandler, 1991; Young, 1997). Although the meaning and function of marriage

have evolved over time, marriage continues to represent intimacy, romantic love, adult status, and a place for socially-sanctioned parenthood. For women, due to their gender, marriage may also symbolize the only true means of achieving female fulfillment and personal happiness (Anderson & Stewart, 1995; Chandler, 1991; Schwartzberg et al., 1995).

In a society where couplehood is the norm, marriage touches the lives of all adults, but its influences are no more keenly felt than by women. For most women, marriage casts a long shadow, in the ways that they are both defined and categorized by their relationship to men (Chandler, 1991). Wifhood is firmly embedded in womanhood, socially stigmatizing the unmarried, while creating a structure and ideology of marriage pivotal to the gendering of women (Chandler, 1991; Gordon, 1994). Considered a rite of passage to true womanhood (Baber & Allen, 1992), the absence of marriage leaves many women in undefined territory, void of legitimate social roles beyond a certain age (Schwartzberg et al., 1995).

Marriage is more than an expected transition in an individual's life progression, it is considered a grounding to normal family life (Chandler, 1991). Divorced single women did accomplish an initial rite of passage when they married; confirming social expectations and acquiring their rightful place in society, but in their divorced status there typically remains a pervasive sentiment of unfulfilled expectations, or expectations unsuccessfully met (Gordon, 1994). Despite the prevalence of divorce, failure in marriage is stigmatized, eliciting overt or internal apologies for marital misjudgments (Barkas, 1980). Whether true or not, divorced single people often feel that they must demonstrate how much their lives have improved since divorce (Barkas, 1980). Consequently, dissolving marital ties does not remove all association to marriage, but rather leaves women with a lifelong legacy, or heritage, of marriage (Barkas, 1980; Chandler, 1991).

Because marriage is given meaning beyond the relationship of the couple (Anderson & Stewart, 1995; Baber & Allen, 1992), remaining single at varying stages of adult life is a complex experience, beyond the phenomenon of simply being alone (Schwartzberg, et al., 1995). If marriage is a process, socially defined and constructed, then individuals grow up learning to create and define it in their own terms (Scanzoni, Polonko, Teachman, & Thompson, 1989). Central in influencing one's life (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989), the family "transmits cultural messages but also transforms them " (Schwartzberg et al., 1995, p. 7) to fit the meanings and roles shaped by the ethnic, racial, and engendered expectations of individual families.

#### Off-time, But Not Out of Place - Single Women in Midlife

Although there is variability in the chronological markers used to denote midlife, the subjective quality of this time period has been articulated in varying ways. For men, it has been dubbed "the moment of greatest unfolding" (Jung, 1954, p. 193); for women, "a time when one door closes while another opens" (Brooks-Gunn & Kirsh, 1984, p. 11), and for single women " the age of ambivalence" (Mercer et al., 1987, p. 191). A less benign, but equally accurate descriptor, depicts midlife single women as being in a "double bind" (Anderson & Stewart, 1995, p. 69). Likened to a day of reckoning, this sentiment expresses the conflicted emotions experienced by midlife single women when the fantasies of marriage and motherhood clash with the biological and social realities of aging.

Embedded in any perception of midlife is the notion of time and the knowledge of its incumbent roles (Neugarten et al., 1965). For women who enter middle age without the roles of wife or mother, the passage through midlife has unique meaning. To illuminate the complexity and challenge for single women in creatively negotiating a non-normative, non-traditional passage through midlife, it is important to examine not only the social structures

that frame their lives (marriage and motherhood), but also the biological and psychosocial issues that inform their experience. Focusing on the transitional period from early to late middle age, the life cycle model of single adulthood detailed below addresses some of these unique concerns facing midlife single women.

Adapted from the Schwartzberg et al. (1995) life cycle model of single adulthood, the following biological, psychological, and social issues facing midlife single women are defined in these ways: (a) expanding life goals beyond the parameters of marriage, (b) defining the meaning of work in their lives, (c) defining oneself within the construct of single status, (d) establishing an adult role within the family of origin, and (e) relinquishing the fantasy of the ideal family (e.g., accepting the possibility of never marrying or mothering). Elements of the model cited above are highlighted and expanded upon below.

Expanding life goals. The 30s represent a time when single women may be living their lives waiting for something to happen. Reluctance to plan for the future creates an illusion that singlehood is merely a long aisle leading to the altar of marriage and the attainment of true adulthood (Anderson & Stewart, 1994; Chandler, 1991). A challenge of midlife is to restructure the dream that begins and ends with the belief that only a relationship resulting in marriage is valuable (Schwartzberg et al., 1995). As single women face the potential absence of a traditional modern family life (Thorne, 1982), friendships may take on a different dimension, where separation between family and friends becomes less distinct. Friendships may deepen and expand to form more family-like structures for women. While identity traditionally has been linked to family affiliation (Brammer, Nolen, & Pratt, 1982), single women may begin to explore new avenues in creating a meaningful vision of life, exclusive of the boundaries of marriage and family.

Relinquishing the fantasy. Despite the degree of positive feelings women may attach to being single, there is generally a counterbalancing feeling of being somehow “off-time” or “out of sync” (Elder, 1985). Straying from the normative life path represents not only a deviation from the expected course of life, but often a relegation to deviant or marginal status (Allen & Pickett, 1987; Chandler, 1991; Chasteen, 1994; Gordon, 1994; Simon, 1987; Uhlenberg, 1974). Due to the strength and pervasiveness of the marriage and motherhood mandate, relinquishing the dream of the ideal family in exchange for an alternative and unscripted life path may be a challenge for single women in midlife.

Defining the meaning of work. Midlife represents a period of self-identity (Gilligan, 1982), a time of creativity and leadership, as well as an opportunity to deepen personal meaning in life. For some women, “work becomes important in constructing their lives, because they are not married, while others do not marry because work is already important in the construction of their lives” (Gordon, 1994, p. 47). Pride in earning, giving to society, and creating something enduring is empowering. Without the obligations of spouse or child, single women possess the freedom to contemplate change, defining personal meaning while rescripting the remainder of their adult lives.

Creating an authentic life. Defining authenticity, or “composing a life” (Bateson, 1989), is an on-going process of frequent and renewed commitment. For a single woman in midlife, this theme is expressed not as giving up the idea of marriage, but giving up waiting for marriage to happen and hence, real life to begin (Schwartzberg et al., 1995). During midlife, the association between love and marriage often needs to be renegotiated, allowing for the expression of love outside a marital relationship (Holland, 1992).



When the prevalent pattern for women is marriage, then being outside that pattern means having to confront one's sense of self (Gordon, 1994). Developing relationships within the larger community, deepening friendships (Miller, 1986), and taking responsibility for the financial and other future realities of life as a single woman all represent steps towards ownership of singlehood status, and creation of an authentic life (Anderson & Stewart, 1994; Schwartzberg et al., 1995).

Defining a place in the family of origin. Establishing an adult role in the family of origin is a theme for single and married women alike. The effects of non-marriage reverberate throughout the family system, altering or postponing the normative transition of life events for both parents and grandparents (Schwartzberg et al., 1995). Midlife intensifies and often crystallizes feelings of loss experienced by parents who must also "give up the dream" of their children ever marrying or having a traditional nuclear family.

### Empirical Studies of Single Women

In reviewing the literature, it was evident that most of the empirical work was qualitative. Studies that did incorporate quantitative methodology generally focused on both males and females and was somewhat dated. Research that highlights the experience of single women has traditionally been exploratory in nature, necessitating, as well as justifying, the utilization of qualitative methodology.

Although much exposure has been given to the occurrence of singlehood in American society (Adams, 1976; Austrom, 1984; Barkas, 1980; Cargan & Melko, 1982; Staples, 1981; Stein, 1981; Schwartzberg et al., 1995, Urbanska, 1986), and single women in particular (Bakos, 1985; Kaslow, 1992; Papp, 1988; Payne, 1983; Peterson, 1982), the life experiences of working-class single women without children have been virtually obscured from the spotlight. This review,

though not exhaustive, was selected for its relevance to aspects of marital, motherhood, and socioeconomic statuses, the life stage period of midlife, and theoretical and methodological analysis. The insights reflected in these works provide the foundation and impetus for the research interest presented.

In an attempt to bridge the gap between singlehood, womanhood and environment, Chasteen (1994) conducted a feminist qualitative study, exploring the economic disadvantage and social subjugation experienced by single women in a couple-oriented society. For the 25 women sampled ranging in age from 27-54 (23 white, 2 African-Americans; 23 heterosexuals and 2 lesbians), singlehood was broadly defined to include divorced, widowed, and never-married women; presence or absence of children was not a delimiting factor for inclusion. Although socioeconomic comparisons between respondents were not explicitly addressed in this study, interview excerpts lent credence to the assumption that the majority of experiences reported were from working-class or single mothers. Although not a specific focus of the inquiry, perspectives elicited regarding marriage (or remarriage) were generally organized around its social and economic benefits versus its role as a source of personal fulfillment or the end result of love.

Shaped by the dual assumptions that the social stigma of being alone and also without a love relationship contributes to loneliness (Brain, 1976; Gordon, 1976; Rook & Peplau, 1982), Burnley and Kurth (1992) conducted a psychosocial study of 30 never married women, aged 30 to 40. Guided by social exchange theory (Edwards, 1969) and qualitative methodology, this investigation focused attention on the age 30 turning point (Donelson, 1977; Stein, 1981) often experienced by never married women with regard to their marital status. Congruent with Burnley and Kurth's (1992) initial assessment that loneliness is difficult to define, the data

indicated that loneliness has more to do with role satisfaction than with the roles themselves. The predominantly white, middle-class population sampled encourages speculation as to whether socioeconomic location affords single women the luxury, privilege, or illusion of choice with regards to their self-perceived marital status.

Lewis and Moon (1997) conducted a comparison of always single and single again women in midlife. This phenomenological multicase inquiry incorporated qualitative methods to investigate perceptions of singlehood among heterosexual women aged 30 to 65. The sample was heterogeneous with respect to age, type of singleness, motherhood and dating and relationship statuses, but fairly homogeneous in terms of educational and socioeconomic levels. All the respondents were white, urban, middle-class professionals. An overwhelming finding of the study was the incidence of unresolved or unrecognized ambivalence regarding singlehood. This ambivalence was expressed as (a) awareness of both advantages and disadvantages of singlehood, (b) ambivalence about reasons for being single, and (c) feeling content and loss regarding singlehood. Although the women in this study expressed feelings of having control over looking for an appropriate partner, they felt no control over finding one. Because questions such as “Are you single by choice ? ” “Do you believe you will ever marry ? and “How do you understand your singleness ?” produced inconsistent and inconclusive responses, the likelihood that a less restrictive, more reflexive method of exchange would have resulted in a richer account of single women’s perceptions with regard to their singlehood is great.

Simon (1987), in a feminist study of never-married women, challenged the stereotyped, stigmatized, and negative portrayal of single women as spinsters and old maids, illuminating instead the diversity of experience and unique contributions made by always-single women.

By utilizing the qualitative method of retrospective interviewing, Simon (1987) explored the work, family, and personal careers of 50 never-married women, ages 66 to 101. Utilizing Stein's (1981) typology of singlehood, three-fourths of the respondents were identified as voluntary, stable single persons, either choosing or preferring singlehood to marriage. A cogent finding of this study was the privileged statuses of marriage and men in our society.

In search of "successful" midlife single women, Anderson and Stewart (1994) conducted a feminist qualitative study of 90 never-married, divorced and widowed women, ages 40 to 55. Through the method of subjective assessment, Anderson and Stewart (1994) sought to discover and illuminate the qualities of life that allow women to embrace and celebrate their singlehood, while dismantling the cultural myths and societal constructs that serve to denigrate and devalue it. Although this study served as a landmark work in validating the various life paths leading to single adulthood with or without motherhood, its message is representative of, and directed towards, a white, middle-class audience. Because of the double stigma of being gay and single, a decision was made to exclude lesbians from the study, rendering a less than accurate portrait of the life experiences of all women who are "flying solo."

Gordon's (1994) study of 72 single, and predominantly midlife, women was groundbreaking in its emphasis on diversity. Included in the sample were women from three countries representing a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, women with different sexual orientations, as well as disabled women. Through utilization of in-depth interviews and a selection method of theoretical sampling, aspects of everyday life, work, leisure activities, family, friends, social support and sexuality/intimacy issues were explored. In considering voluntary versus involuntary singlehood (Stein, 1981), special attention was directed towards the hopes, dreams, and messages received during childhood and adolescence which may have

shaped and molded current assumptions regarding marriage. Although the sample population included a higher degree of better educated and better paid women that would affect generalizability, the scope of the work was impressive and worthy of study.

By applying a life course perspective to the qualitative study of 30 women from the 1910 birth cohort, Allen (1989) compared and contrasted the life experiences of 15 never-married working-class women and 15 ever-married working-class women. Innovative in her approach was the utilization of retrospective life histories in tandem with the theoretical orientation of the life course. This interplay between theory and method provided a broader view of women's lives outside the normative parameters of the family. Central to this study was the shared experience of older women and their family connections, despite differing life paths. Incorporation of the life course approach highlighted the dimensions of time, process, and context allowing for a more fluid and dynamic portrait of women's life experiences to emerge. Given the sociohistorical context of the study, it is uncertain whether a similar study conducted during early or late midlife would have yielded comparable analyses.

Despite the application of differing theoretical frameworks, analysis of the literature substantiates the importance and justification of utilizing qualitative methodology for the study of single women's life experiences. By highlighting dimensions such as socioeconomic location, child-free status, and the period of midlife, these investigators explored specific facets of a single women's experience but none combined these elements to reveal a portrait of midlife singlehood recognizable to never-married and once-married women without children. In addition, exploration into the way beliefs regarding marriage are defined, understood, created, and re-created from childhood throughout adulthood have been incomplete. Through the development of research questions designed to explore the meaning of marriage over time

and within the current context of midlife, in the present study, I attempted to bridge the gap in research which allows alternate life experiences to fall unnoticed between the cracks of the normative life course.

### Summary

In this chapter, I highlighted the theoretical perspectives of feminism and life course that guided this investigation. I also attended to the structural aspects of marriage as well as the biological and psychosocial realities of midlife. Analysis of literature relevant to single women was discussed exposing gaps in the research while elucidating the necessity and justification for the qualitative study proposed here.