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THE EXPERIENCE OF MIDLIFE CRISIS: A DEVELOPMENTAL CONTEXTUAL PERSPECTIVE

by

SHIRLEY DUMBECK

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled THE EXPERIENCE OF MIDLIFE CRISIS: A DEVELOPMENTAL CONTEXTUAL PERSPECTIVE submitted by SHIRLEY DUMBECK in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the co-researchers who participated in the study. Without your courage, openness, and willingness to share your experience, this work would not have been possible. You have contributed to my life and learning. Your contribution will also enrich the lives of others in many ways. To each one of you, I offer my gratitude and my heartfelt thanks.

Abstract

This research explores midlife crisis as it is experienced by both men and women. Midlife crisis is a time of painful inner turmoil and conflict with the external world. The experience has a dramatic impact on individual lives, yet midlife crisis is neglected in adult development literature. A review of the literature suggests that prevailing theories of adult development are based on research grounded in organismic metatheory. Traditional theories fail to address the complexity of human development and are criticized by feminist researchers for ignoring salient aspects of women's experience. Proposed models of women's adult development, however, also have significant shortcomings. Psychology is moving towards conceptualizing human development within a contextual worldview and focusing on the dynamic relations between individuals and their contexts.

In this study, it is proposed that: 1) the experience of midlife crisis is best understood within the metatheoretical perspective of developmental contextualism; and 2) the fundamental experience of midlife crisis is shared by men and women. The basis for the research question is drawn from an analysis of the contrasting metatheories, and what is known about adult development, midlife transitions, developmental crisis and midlife crisis. The research question is: **What is the meaning of the experience of midlife crisis?**

Existential-phenomenological research methodology is used in this study. Transcripts of interviews with the co-researchers, twenty men and women experiencing midlife crisis, are analyzed to develop a phenomenological description of the experience. Data analysis involves a hierarchical thematic analysis resulting in a synthesis of the structure of the shared experience. Four structural themes emerge: the onset of the experience, the disruptive nature of the experience, the revealing power of the experience, and developmental change in relation to the experience. Results are discussed within a developmental contextual perspective.

The intent of this work is to enable educators, clinicians, and the general public to gain an understanding of the experience of midlife crisis in order to maximize the opportunities presented in this experience while minimizing or avoiding the inherent dangers. Implications of the results for education, clinical practice, and adult developmental theory are discussed.

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With all my heart, I thank my parents, Case and Johanna Vandersteen, who gave me the gifts of life and love, and who continue to inspire me to make the most of these gifts.

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Chapter 1

MIDLIFE CRISIS: A DISCOVERY OF SELF

Introduction

In midlife crisis, women and men grapple with the fundamental existential issues of life. This intense psychological struggle spills over into all aspects of a person's life and often comes as a complete surprise. There is a commonly held assumption that the lengthy span of adulthood holds few developmental challenges. And, although it is acknowledged that there are numerous tasks which need to be accomplished after adolescence and prior to retirement, it is assumed that the process of adult maturity is gradual and hardly noticeable. The popular literature suggests that midlife crisis is a humorous and primarily male phenomena wherein a man desperately clings to a fading youth and masculinity. To recapture the virility of youth, men engage in adolescent behavior, have an extramarital affair, or buy a sports car. Women's emotional difficulties at midlife are attributed to the empty nest or the decrease in female hormones at the onset of menopause. The prescription for a woman suffering from midlife crisis is usually the suggestion of activities to keep her busy, or simply patience until the grandchildren arrive to once again fulfill her maternal needs. Those who experience midlife crisis, however, vehemently deny that it is merely about getting older or having too much time on hand. For those who experience midlife crisis, it is not amusing at all.

The co-researchers of this study, who are in midlife crisis, present a very different picture of this experience. They describe the experience as compelling and frightening. They vividly portray their sense of isolation and insecurity at suddenly finding their worlds turned upside down. The co-researchers describe a process of losing themselves and losing their ways in the world. As they respond to an inner and growing need to express who they are, they feel lost and confused. They experience little compassion, understanding or support from others. They feel out of control and often make impulsive decisions - some of which have lifelong implications - in order to try to bring some sense of order back into their shattered lives. Indeed, they find nothing funny about the experience of midlife crisis.

Questions about the experience of midlife crisis have frequently surfaced for me in my own life, in my relationships with friends and colleagues, and in my work. In my work with clients in private practice, many of whom are in middle age, I am aware of the complexity of issues that lead them to seek counseling. At the same time, I am struck by the similarity of the existential issues that appear to underlie the unique presenting problems. These are: death, freedom and responsibility, immediate and existential isolation, and a search for meaning or purpose. These deep philosophical concerns have always intrigued me. In working with clients, another theme has consistently emerged - in order to experience growth producing change, individuals seem to have to alter their worldview or paradigm. Many clients resist this "deep structure" change,

and search for a satisfactory cosmetic or superficial change. These simple changes seldom, if ever, reduce or eliminate the psychological conflict over an extended period of time. When a client does engage in a deep level change, it is as if a transformation in self has occurred. It is this type of change that appears to be involved for those who experience midlife crisis. I am left wondering why it is that some people experience midlife crisis while others don't. There are likely many factors which contribute to the propensity to separate oneself from the stream of life and to re-examine one's perspective. Perhaps it is related to level of ego development as suggested by O'Connor and Wolfe (1991). It does appear that this process requires an ability to think about and view one's life from an abstract perspective; it requires somewhat of an introspective nature; an ability to engage in dialectical and relativistic reasoning (Kramer and Woodruff, 1986); and for many, an initiating internal or external event which precipitates a crisis. Whatever the factors involved, I do believe that midlife crisis reflects a healthy and normal process of adaptive psychological functioning.

Midlife is a unique time in the life course because numerous factors converge upon the individual that set the stage for a potential paradigm shift. The bulk of the population in the Western world is in the midlife age range - between 35 and 55 years. This is the generation that has always wanted to change the world, that has a history of searching for world peace and for inner peace. These are the "baby boomers" who are now moving into positions of leadership and control in the world. Closer to home,

however, I and many of my friends, colleagues and clients are in midlife and I am fascinated by the process of self discovery and personal empowerment that is often the outcome of midlife crisis. Not only will a greater understanding of this phenomenon contribute to my personal growth but it will greatly benefit my work with midlife clients.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of the present study is: 1) to understand the subjective experience of midlife crisis in terms of common themes or patterns in the relations between the multiple levels of context; 2) to frame this understanding within a developmental contextual perspective; 3) to synthesize the research on men and women in midlife by highlighting similarities rather than differences; and 4) to discuss the implications of the findings for education, research and clinical practice with individuals at midlife.

The experience of midlife crisis exists for a substantial number of individuals, resulting in significant inner turmoil and conflict with the external world. While there is general agreement regarding the multitude of factors which contribute to the stress of midlife, much of the research has been limited in scope primarily because it has been conducted within an organismic perspective. In addition, the actual experience of midlife crisis is largely unexplored. The purpose of this study is to examine the meaning of the experience of midlife crisis within a contextual perspective.

The developmental contextual perspective, as presented by Richard M. Lerner (1991), was chosen to provide the metatheoretical framework for the results of the study because this perspective fully acknowledges the multiple levels of context in dynamic interaction as a basic process of development. The individual and the world are viewed as co-constituting one another. The focus is not on the individual or on the context as separate entities, but on the participants' experience of the "goodness of fit" of the person-context relations.

Midlife crisis, like other aspects of human experience, is a phenomenon which is deeply embedded in the relational and dynamic world of the individual. The phenomenological method of research is utilized in this research because this method enables the researcher to access the human experience and to bring to view the structural components through which experience is formed (Polkinghorne, 1981). To completely understand the subjective experience of midlife crisis, one must enter the phenomenal world of the individual and enable him or her to explicate the implicit structures given in the experience itself. The researcher is able to observe and articulate the common themes in the relations between an individual and the multiple levels of context in such a way that the meaning of the experience is not destroyed, distorted, decontextualized, trivialized or sentimentalized (Bergum, 1986). The phenomenological approach used in this study reflects the contextual worldview (Lyddon, 1989).

Previous research on midlife crisis has generally addressed the experience of either men or women. As will be illustrated, research which

emphasizes maximal gender differences has a detrimental effect on the sociocultural roles of both men and women and further entrenches cultural stereotypes and ideologies. By utilizing an existential - phenomenological approach within a developmental contextual perspective, this study highlights the similarities in the structure of the experience of midlife crisis shared by men and women, while granting that several levels of contextual variables are obviously different for the subgroups of men and women as they are different for each individual.

The major implications of this study are for general public education and for clinical practice. While clinicians generally take into account the developmental history of the adult client, the issues confronted in therapy are not always considered within the framework of adult development. Too often the questioning and exploratory behaviors of those experiencing midlife crisis are viewed as irrational, a temporary aberration, or as symptoms of mental illness. Rationalist approaches to therapy, which view the symptoms of crisis as pathological and which focus on eliminating or controlling the symptoms, are guided by first-order, or behavioral assumptions about change (Lyddon, 1989). In contrast, the developmental contextual perspective is based on the assumption that individuals actively construe or create their personal and social realities. Counseling, within the contextual perspective, is guided by second-order assumptions about change wherein, "client and counselor engage in a search for patterns and process in the understanding of old meanings in the creation of the new" (Carlson, 1988, p. 92). The emphasis, within a developmental contextual

perspective, is on a shift in paradigm rather than the modification of the surface structure content or symptoms. The explication of the "deep structure" meanings of the person-context relations of midlife crisis in this study will serve as a guide to clinicians in their work with clients in midlife.

The results of this study will also have implications for public education in adult development. The presentation of a coherent person-context structure of the experience of midlife crisis is one step towards a putting back together of "the whole that analytical science, over the past 300 years, has rent asunder" (Bevan, 1991, p. 481). Previous theory and research have relied on hierarchical models of simple, relatively static systems which have exacerbated the dichotomy between research and practice. By looking at the broader varieties of order in human experience, psychology can work towards more interactive models of complex dynamic systems - models which more adequately reflect the human phenomena with which psychologists deal on an ongoing basis (Lerner, 1993; Lerner and von Eye, 1993). The intent of the present study is: to capture the complex and dynamic nature of midlife crisis as it is experienced by individuals, to provide a necessary link between research and practice, and to provide the general public with an understanding of midlife crisis which is grounded in human experience.

Much of what the general public understands about human development is derived from popularized versions of developmental theory or fictional accounts of human nature and behavior. Bevan (1991) maintains that "behind the worlds we construct, coloring both our logic and our rhetoric,

are the ideologies that give our worldviews their dominant cast" (p. 478). This study recognizes the insidious nature of cultural, scientific and personal ideologies as part of the context of human experience. The vast majority of literary accounts of human psychological growth reflect the predominant cultural ideologies and depict human beings as one-dimensional and as following a linear, predictable path through life. Like much of the research in adult development, these versions are unable to adequately capture and communicate the rich tapestry of human developmental processes. As a result, our definition of "normal" has become far too narrow and does not adequately represent human experience. Many people feel "different", isolated, and unable to understand or adapt to the developmental challenges of life. A greater knowledge of midlife crisis will enhance professional and public education of this adult developmental process, and hopefully foster a recognition and appreciation of the existing diversity of developmental outcomes.

Organization

Chapter 2 of this study provides a review of the metatheoretical approaches to adult development, and specifically examines the research on midlife crisis. An analysis of the contrasting metatheories in relation to what is known about midlife crisis forms the basis for the research question.

Chapter 3 describes how the existential-phenomenological research methodology was employed in this study to explore the experience of

midlife crisis. This chapter also explains the criteria for assessing phenomenological research.

Chapter 4 describes the experience of midlife crisis within an existential-phenomenological perspective. The primary themes which emerged during the research, and the structure of the experience of midlife crisis are the essential components of the results of this study.

Chapter 5 briefly summarizes the results of this study and frames the meaning of the experience of midlife crisis within the developmental contextual perspective. This chapter also discusses the implications of the results for education, clinical practice, and adult development theory.

Chapter 2

MIDLIFE: A TURNING POINT IN ADULT DEVELOPMENT

Overview

Traditional theories of adult development highlight the significance of midlife as a crucial turning point in adult development. "Middle crisis", a term first used by Jacques (1965), is a familiar descriptor of the psychological and psychosocial stress experienced by many adults as they struggle through this pivotal time of their lives. While traditional theories of adult development view development as a maturation process with growth proceeding in a uniform, linear and sequential manner, these theories have been heavily criticized in recent years for failing to address the complexity and diversity of human developmental processes. Feminist researchers in particular have challenged the prominent age/stage conception of adult development as well as the related concept of midlife crisis (Baruch, 1984; Gilligan, 1982). They argue that: the theoretical, clinical and empirical concepts of adult development arose out of studies of males only; the complexity and variety of women's developmental paths cannot be encompassed within linear, sequential, and inherently male models; and the unique experience of women is ignored or devalued in these theories. In spite of the many endeavors to articulate the developmental path of adult women, the resultant research has come under the same criticism as has been levied against the traditional theories. The

outcome of this dialectical process, however, has been a major shift in the metatheoretical approach towards understanding adult development. The limitations of the organismic worldview, which has been the prevailing worldview in developmental psychology, are being recognized. Contextualism is replacing organicism as the primary metatheoretical paradigm in developmental psychology. This shift in metatheory has shed new light on the concept of developmental crisis, and in particular, the transitional period of midlife crisis.

The Organismic Approach to Adult Development

The traditional theories of adult development are inherently biased and incapable of addressing the complexity and diversity of human experience in adulthood. These theories have been significantly criticized by feminist researchers for ignoring the unique aspects of women's development. The recent emphasis in research on women's adult development has attempted to respond to this bias, however, this research has its own shortcomings. First, there is little theoretical research on women in midlife. Second, the research that exists, while acknowledging the significance of midlife transition in women's development, has also been criticized as being restrictive, negative, and limited in scope. The research on women in midlife carries with it vestiges of the traditional view that women are defined in terms of their biology or in relation to men and children. The growing complexity of women's lives, along with a rejection of the traditional male oriented theories, has made it extremely difficult to capture

and articulate a common developmental trajectory of wo n in the adult years.

It has become increasingly apparent that research emphasizing gender differences has a negative impact on both men and women. Stereotypes, social roles and the social power hierarchy become entrenched and restrict the development of both sexes. Further, the dialectical nature of this form of inquiry precludes the investigation of the common experience of men and women in their adult years. One of the major purposes of this study is to examine the common experience of men and women in midlife. This view does not ignore differences between the sexes, but also does not focus on gender alone as an explanatory concept. The assumption is that a multitude of situational and sociohistorical factors create observed gender differences (Eagley, 1987).

While the proposed models of the female life course have inadvertently contributed to the perpetuation of restricted roles of women in our culture, they have had a tremendously positive influence on the metatheoretical level in psychology. It is interesting to note that the recent criticisms of models of women's development are similar to the criticisms levied against traditional theories. Because of this evaluative and critical discourse, feminist research has contributed to search for new paradigms and methodologies that will adequately and comprehensively address the human developmental experience. Psychology is now questioning the need for two sets of gender developmental theories (Brittan, 1989; Lerner and von Eye, 1992) and recognizes that individual development is embedded within a

multilevel context. Many theorists are suggesting that the unit of analysis become the relational process rather than the individual (Lerner, 1990; Gergen and Gergen, 1988; Rosnow and Georgoudie, 1986). Actions, personality traits, and the ongoing development of the individual are seen as being derived in relational processes and cannot simply be attributed to autonomous, internal processes. The developmental contextual perspective, as formulated by Lerner (1990), addresses the multitude of intra- and interpersonal factors which contribute to human development. This perspective, which will be described in a later section, offers an exciting and viable alternative to the traditional approaches to understanding human development.

Traditional Theories

Traditional theories of adult development conceptualize development as a maturation process with growth proceeding through a series of hierarchical stages. These theories stem from an organismic worldview (Lyddon, 1989; Pepper, 1942). Human development, within an organismic worldview, is generally perceived as a systematic, linear process in which individuals progress from immature stages of lesser organization and differentiation to more mature, complex and adaptive integrations. These stage-based developmental progressions are clearly evident in Piaget's (1975/1985) theory of cognitive development, Kohlberg's (1984) theory of moral development, Havinghurst's (1953) theory of developmental tasks,

Levinson's (1978) and Erikson's (1963) theories of psychosocial development, and Jung's (1971) life stages.

Most adult development theory traces back to Jung's (1933) recognition that personality development continues throughout the adult years. Jung compares the life course to the rising and setting of the sun, with midlife providing the "noon" of existence. Based on his work with adult patients, Jung described the first half of life as a time when attention is focused on becoming established in the external world, i.e., home, family, work. At midlife, the individual must begin to come to terms with the inner world. As the first half of life entails the making of choices and going down one path instead of another, the second half often entails a re-evaluation of the roads not taken. The inward emphasis is on spiritual and philosophical concerns and the reclamation of formerly suppressed values or aspects of the personality. Jung accounted for the problems so often associated with midlife transition as the inability to make this shift in values and concerns. He called this process the path of individuation. The process of individuation is directed towards finding meaning in life and wholeness of self in order to come to terms with a growing awareness of mortality. This move toward introspection and interiority in midlife has also been emphasized by Buhler (1953) and Neugarten (1964).

While Jung (1933) stressed the intrapsychic dynamics of midlife transition, Erikson's (1963) principal focus was on the relationship between the individual and the social world. In his theory of psychosocial development, the seventh stage of generativity vs. stagnation corresponds to

middle adulthood. Although Erikson describes a gradual evolution of meanings throughout the life cycle, meaning in the midlife stage is acquired through self-transcendent ventures. Individuals in this stage must orient themselves toward establishing and guiding the next generation, or face a sense of stagnation and personal impoverishment. Contrary to Jung, Erikson maintains that the attention must move from internal, self-centered concerns to external and more global or universal concerns. The major virtues which are to emerge in successfully negotiating this stage are care and responsibility for what has already been created - whether it be children, ideas or works. He suggests that, while society has a responsibility to promote the emergence of the values of each stage in development, the individual in the adult stages must be responsible for choosing the positive polarity in each stage. Failure to do so in this midlife stage involves an implicit rejection of a universal sense of values and a lack of awareness of the collective life of mankind. These implicit intrapsychic issues are similar to Jung's themes of life meaning and wholeness within the global context.

Havinghurst (1953) applied Erikson's (1950) psychosocial tasks to the various age periods in his model of specific developmental tasks. Havinghurst, however, stipulated two principle sources of developmental tasks: the biological changes of the body (which present the individual with new opportunities, needs and problems of adjustment), and the expectations of society (which present the individual with a number of social roles that change with age). Changing biological development and social

expectations "give direction, force and substance to the development of personality" (Havinghurst, 1973, p. 11). Havinghurst identified middle age as the period in which men and women have optimal influence on society, and as when society makes its maximum demands on adults for civic and social contributions. The specific developmental tasks of midlife are: 1) achieving civic and social responsibility; 2) establishing and maintaining economic stability; 3) assisting teenage children to become responsible adults; 4) developing leisure activities; 5) relating to one's spouse and oneself as an individual; 6) accepting physiological changes in oneself; and 7) adjusting to aging parents. It is apparent that some of these tasks are no longer considered to be age-related normative tasks. For example, it is not uncommon for middle age parents to have very young children or children who have already left home. Both Havinghurst's and Erikson's developmental theories, however, are significant for their recognition of the need to understand developmental growth of the individual within the context of the demands, constraints and opportunities provided by the social environment.

Perhaps the best known study of midlife as a major turning point in adult development is Levinson's "Seasons of a Man's Life" (1978). Utilizing a life structure framework to conceptualize developmental changes, Levinson incorporates both the psychosocial and developmental task notions of Erikson (1963) and Havinghurst (1953). Levinson also credits Jacques (1965) for much of his understanding of the midlife period. Jacques identified the "middle crisis" as a normal developmental period starting in

the late thirties and continuing for several years. Jacques suggested that the growing awareness of one's mortality is the core intrapsychic conflict which must be confronted at this time of life. Levinson expands on this central conflict and delineates several other major issues which men must come to terms with during the "midlife transition". Levinson explains that during midlife transition a man must "work on the polarities that animate and divide him" (1978, p. 245). Like Jung (1933), he believes that individuation is the central underlying theme of midlife. He describes individuation as consisting of four polarities: young/old, destruction/creation, masculine/feminine, and attachment/separateness. The young/old polarity addresses the age related concern of being neither young nor old; there is a growing realization of the circumscription of life. The destruction/creation polarity describes a realization of the inherent powerful forces of death and destruction within the individual coupled with the desire and awareness of the potential for creativity. Similar to Erikson's concept of generativity, the desire for creativity involves participating in the societal enterprises that advance human welfare and contributing to the coming generations. The masculine/feminine polarity emphasizes the need to recognize and integrate the repressed or antithetical parts of the personality. Finally, attachment/separation involves the ongoing resolution of the need for connection to others and the equally important need for separateness and autonomy. Levinson states that a failure to confront these polarities during the crucial midlife transition period will result in "a progressive withering of the self and a life structure minimally connected to the self"

(1978, p. 198). The questioning of the meaning, value, and direction of life is a necessary and vital aspect of the psychological growth during midlife and has tremendous implications for adaptive social and psychological functioning. The primary criticisms of Levinson's theory are related to the limited sample size utilized in the study (40 male participants) and the lack of applicability to the life course of women.

In summary, the traditional organismic theories of adult development recognize the significance of midlife as a crucial turning point in the life cycle. While each theory accentuates different issues from a somewhat different perspective, all theories recognize, to varying degrees, the interaction between biological aging, intrapsychic dynamics and social factors. With regards to the intrapsychic dynamics of midlife transition, several themes emerge: 1) the individual's move to interiority and concern with philosophical or existential issues; 2) the individual's growing awareness of the limited time left to live which necessitates a confrontation with one's mortality; 3) the search for meaning, wholeness and integration; 4) a re-examination of the complex and fluid boundaries between self, others and society; and 5) the individual's increasing realization of responsibility for creating his/her own life and contributing to the growth of future generations. The social environment is seen as having an integral role in individual development by providing various expectations, demands, constraints and opportunities for growth. Underlying both intraindividual and environmental factors is the ongoing biological development of the

person, which contributes to the interaction of intrapsychic and environmental factors at midlife.

The traditional stage-based theories of human development, while still prominent in psychology, have been substantially criticized for two reasons. First, feminist researchers have drawn attention to the fact that most of these theories have been based on research with men. They argue that the paths and contexts of women's lives differ significantly from that of men and that one-dimensional, linear theories are incapable of capturing the complexity of women's adult development (Gergen, M., 1990; Baruch et. al., 1983). In a second related criticism, the organismic paradigm (which encompasses traditional theories), has been identified as having serious shortcomings in accounting for the major role of situational influences in development and in addressing the diversity of developmental outcomes (Lyddon, 1990).

Research on Women

Classical theories of human development have been criticized for minimizing or ignoring the life cycle considerations of women, for devaluing women's unique experiences, and for emphasizing a male oriented, individualistic, rationalistic and egocentric orientation to life (Enns, 1991; Wine, 1985). In spite of the emphasis in research during the last two decades on women's adult development, there are no comprehensive theories specifically about women's development at midlife (Gergen, M., 1990). The general research that has focused on women's

adult development falls into three areas: 1) attempts to assess the applicability of traditional stage theories to women's development (e.g. Josselson, 1987; Ryff and Migdal, 1984), 2) efforts to refute some of the commonly held assumptions about women's normative experience (i.e., empty nest syndrome, Radloff, 1980, Lowenthal and Chiriboga, 1972; menopause, Neugarten et. al., 1963), and 3) conceptualizing new frameworks of development that attempt to reflect more realistically women's experience (i.e., women's approach to knowledge, Belenky et. al., 1986; women's moral development, Gilligan, 1982; the self in relation model, Jordan and Surrey, 1986; feminist object relations theory, Eichenbaum and Orbach, 1983; and women's identity development, Peck, 1986).

For example, Josselson's (1987) longitudinal study examined how women proceed through Erikson's (1968) identity stage and proposed a theoretical model of women's identity development. She observed that significant relationships, rather than work, provide the primary basis for women's identity. At the conclusion of her study, however, the women were approaching their mid-thirties and had not yet entered the midlife stage. Similarly, Ryff and Migdal (1985) found support for Erikson's intimacy and generativity constructs for women. Their study showed that women in young adulthood valued intimacy, whereas attributes measured by their generativity scales were more important to women in middle age.

Mitchell and Helson (1990) indicate that the middle years for women have often been described as the worst years because of the adjustments

required by menopause and the "empty nest". Empirical research, however, has provided evidence that rather than being dreaded by women, these events are often welcomed. Lowenthal and Chiriboga (1972) showed that children's departure from home was positively anticipated and that the time and space that became available was far from being "empty". As early as 1963, Neugarten and her colleagues demonstrated that the majority of women find menopause an uncomplicated and often desired change. In a study of both men and women, Lowenthal et. al. (1975) examined four life stages in middle and lower middle class populations. They did find that middle aged women scored more negatively than other groups with respect to most of the psychological and sociological domains. Areas of increased stress included spousal relationships, self confidence, identity concerns and increased psychological symptoms. On the other hand, a more recent study by Baruch et. al. (1983) indicated that middle aged women are less distressed than younger women. They determined that employment and an intact marital relationship were positively related to a sense of mastery and well being. It was recognized that social factors, such as the greater ability to seek divorce and obtain employment, likely contribute to the positive results in these two areas. The researchers emphasize that changing sociocultural factors have a significant impact on women's experience of midlife.

Various theoretical frameworks have endeavored to reflect the relational capacities of women. Chodorow's (1978) work provided a catalyst for many of these relational models. She argued that boys are encouraged to

separate themselves from a primary identification with their mother, but girls have no need to separate in order to establish gender identity and are encouraged to maintain more connected, fluid relationships. The most popular version of the relationship models is Gilligan's (1982) model of moral development. Gilligan emphasized that attachment is a central theme in women's lives, and that "the elusive mystery of women's development lies in the recognition of the continuing importance of attachment in the human life cycle" (p. 23). A morality of care develops through three major stages: 1) individual survival and self interest; 2) morality as a responsibility to others; and 3) morality of nonviolence that involves a balance of self nurture and care for others. Several questions and concerns have been raised about Gilligan's contention of a global dichotomy between the moral reasoning of men and women (Colby and Damon, 1983). These will be addressed later.

Criticisms of the Research on Women

While research on the adult development of women has highlighted the limitations of traditional theories of development, similar limitations in the feminist research are now becoming apparent. Mary Gergen (1990) points out that women's adult development is still "staged around the core notion of woman as reproducer" (p. 474). She states that one of the major differences in men and women, particularly at midlife, is in the significance granted to the centrality of the public spheres of cultural life (i.e. financial success, career involvement, job satisfaction, public service, or outstanding

achievement). For men these issues are considered central to midlife development but they are scarcely mentioned for women, despite the fact that women are involved in all of these areas. Another conventional view is that women are less interested in money than men are, more interested in comfort and interpersonal relationships, and thus not willing to do the kinds of work that earn high pay (Major, 1987). Major noted that there is little empirical evidence for such a sex difference. When men and women are in the same high-prestige jobs, their values are identical and their behaviors are similar. This emphasis on the sexual-reproductive relations of women is also evident in the Reinke et. al. (1985) study of the timing of psychosocial changes in women's lives that focused on age, and stages of the family life cycle. While they found an increased interest in working and career development in the late thirties, they noted a greater number of systematic changes in women related to the family-cycle phase as opposed to chronological age. They concluded that women's lives are oriented around relationships and that women's development occurs in conjunction with changes in social roles, but they base their findings only on women who were considered within a family system. Women who were not identified in terms of this status were simply dropped from the analysis. Women who were primarily career women or who were non-normative in their relational status were implicitly considered deviant. The results indicated that a major transition occurred in women's lives between the ages of twenty-seven and thirty years. Midlife women, on a less dramatic scale, showed intrapsychic and relational changes in terms of increased depth of

friendships, more thoughts about personal finiteness, increased acceptance of and resignation to the realities of their lives and, increased mellowness in that they had more patience with minor irritants.

Mednick (1989) refers to the recent feminist theories as an expression of "cultural feminism" which implies a special and even superior nature of women. Theories which link personality traits such as relatedness and nurturing to female anatomy, "place maximal emphasis on sex differences, direct the focus of explanation intrapsychically, and attribute causality to either biological/genetic factors, or to an early socialization process with strong long range effects" (Mednick, 1989, p. 1120). While such views are popular with feminist scholars, the validity of the gender differences in individual and social development is questionable (Lerner and von Eye, 1992). For example, the empirical hypotheses generated by Gilligan's (1982) theory do not hold up under scrutiny. There seems to be general agreement among moral development researchers that the presumed sex differences in moral reasoning have not been supported (Friedman, Robinson and Friedman, 1987; Thoma, 1986).

The particular emphasis on intrapsychic factors has serious consequences. First, romanticizing such factors as nurturing and relatedness and attributing them to the intrinsic nature of women, serves to strengthen the myth that women are superior caregivers and fosters a "modern cult of true womanhood" (Luria, 1986, p. 320). In addition, the more these qualities are ascribed to only women, the less likely that men will identify and act on their own skills in these areas (Lerner, 1988). Next,

the strengths that are attributed to women in the relationship theories have historically been associated with subordinate groups; entrenching these beliefs may contribute to maintaining the subordinate status of women (Lerner, 1988). Finally, an intrapsychic focus serves to blame the victim and places the burden of change entirely on the individual. This perspective "does not lead scientific inquiry to an examination of cultural, socioeconomic, structural, or contemporaneous situational factors that may affect behavior" (Mednick, 1989, p. 1120). Further, the outcome of such an emphasis is the growth of a mental health - rather than a social change - movement (Kahn and Jean, 1985). Attributing gender differences to immutable early female socialization processes or biological/genetic factors has similar effects on research endeavors, the social structure and subsequent views about women.

Both Gergen (1990) and Mednick (1989) warn that the gender dichotomy literature, which provides one-dimensional accounts of women by focusing on the centrality of their biology, has a tremendous impact on women's roles in society. Mednick points out that this perspective is very appealing and pervasive because it confirms stereotypes and provides strong intuitive resonance. In doing so, it entrenches women's central role and responsibilities in the family and restricts the opportunities of both men and women to share in life's work. Gergen draws a link between the biological biasing of life cycle accounts of women and the maintenance of the existing patriarchal structure of power. She suggests that it is conceivable that a person's level of autonomy or relatedness may depend more on their relative

position in the social structure than on gender. Gergen concludes that "the existing literature is regressive in its social effects on women" (1990, p. 477). She cautions that further research of this type will serve to solidify both the structural and ideological constraints against the enhancement of women's roles in society.

The Contextual Approach to Adult Development

Since the 1970s there has been an increasing interest in metatheoretical issues in psychology. The philosophical framework of Stephen C. Pepper's (1942) "root metaphor theory" is frequently employed to explicate the various conceptual schemes of human development. Of the four world hypotheses described by Pepper - formism, mechanism, organicism and contextualism - contextualism has emerged as a popular metatheoretical paradigm in both clinical and developmental psychology (Lyddon, 1990; Kramer and Bopp, 1989).

The Developmental Contextual Perspective

The major proponent of the developmental contextual perspective in psychology is Richard M. Lerner (1983, 1984, 1985, 1989). Developmental contextualism views development in contextual and relational terms rather than in terms of uniform linear sequences (Lerner and Kauffman, 1985). A familiar application of the developmental contextual perspective is life-span developmental psychology which involves the study of constancy and change in behavior throughout the life

course (Baltes, 1987). Lerner (1985) argues for the use of a metatheoretical contextual paradigm in understanding human development because "the characteristics of intraindividual development cannot be explained without reference to changes in the context of development" (p. 156). Further, he maintains that intraindividual development is reciprocally and causally linked to changes in context; the very fabric of individual development is embedded in multiple contextual levels. These levels include the biological, psychological, dyadic or familial and, the sociocultural and historical (Birkel, Lerner, and Smyer, 1989). Individual and context co-constitute one another, transcending the traditional subject - object dichotomy. The context is not simply external to, but is an integral part of the act or event to which it relates. Rosnow and Georgoudie (1986) explain that within a contextual view, "an act or event cannot be said to have an identity apart from the context that constitutes it, neither can a context be said to exist independently of the act or event to which it refers" (p. 6). In elaborating on this point, they quote Bhaskar (1983) as saying, "To think of contexts as existing in addition to or apart from practices is like imagining smiles alongside or beside faces" (p. 87). In other words contexts, including intraindividual contexts, cannot be isolated for analysis or reduced to unilinear causal patterns.

In addition to this concept of person-context interdependency, Lerner (1990) outlines three further principles of the developmental contextual perspective: 1) the changes in the relations between the developing person and his or her context are seen as the basic process of development; 2)

variables from the multiple levels of context change in a bi-directional or dynamic interactional manner; and 3) despite the importance of the context, it is the individual's characteristics, in fitting with the demands and presses of the context, which establishes the range of adaptive developmental outcomes at any given point in the developmental trajectory.

The dynamic interaction between person and context inherently implies the potential for systematic change or development throughout the lifespan. Lerner (1985) calls this potential "plasticity". Because changes at one level of context are producers and products of changes at other levels, plasticity is a relative, as opposed to unlimited, feature of human development. This quality of relativity stems from the fact that the structures and functions at each level constrain and limit change as well as promote it. For example, a given personality trait or a particular cultural norm can both limit and promote the range of possibilities for a specific developmental path. The implication is, therefore, that no two people will experience the same person-context relations across their lives. Consequently, "interindividual differences in intraindividual change trajectories are the rule in human development" (Lerner, 1990, p. 912).

This concern with developmental diversity and multiple levels of context elevates the importance of a focus on the individual in three areas: 1) the general features of an individual developmental path; 2) the unique features of an individual developmental path; and 3) the role of the individual in actively producing his or her own development. With regard to this last point, the emphasis is on the personal and unique meaning making activity

of an individual within a given context (Kramer and Bopp, 1989). From an objective perspective, events and contexts are neutral; what an event means for an individual depends entirely on the individual's subjective experience in relation to the context within which the event is embedded. Person-context patterns can only be understood by describing the dynamic relationship between an individual's subjective self perceptions or self evaluations and the multiple levels of context within a developmental perspective (Cavanaugh and Morton, 1989; Bandura, 1982).

Limitations of the Developmental Contextual Perspective

Developmental contextualism is a non linear dynamic theoretical perspective for understanding the nature of human development. This perspective enlarges and opens up the concept of development to include multilevel causally interrelated factors, feedback loops, and "plasticity", or the potential for change across the lifespan. With a virtually endless number of variables affecting human development from the multiple levels of analysis, several methodological issues must be considered.

First, the parameters of human plasticity are undetermined. As indicated previously, the variables of different levels of context can both restrict and promote a range of developmental alternatives. In their research on cognitive functioning training in the aged, Kliegl, Smith and Baltes (1990) have demonstrated the potential to enhance cognitive functioning by introducing a revised regimen of person-context relations. Because this cognitive training research involved elderly people (where potential for

actualization operates within an increasingly narrow range of structure and functions), it may be interpreted as representing a conservative test of the concept of plasticity and as demonstrating the presence of a "developmental reserve capacity" (Baltes and Baltes, 1980). Secondly, these "constraints" and "affordances" for human development are themselves continually variable across a given lifespan (Rosnow and Georgoudie, 1986). Changes in the "exosystem" of human ecology (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) such as technological advances, ecological environmental changes or sociocultural progressions make future predictions of the potential for plasticity impossible.

Thirdly, it must be recognized that while all levels of context change over time, there is a "nonequivalent temporal metric" (Lerner et.al., 1980) within and across both the macro and micro levels. For example, the effects of societal level changes may take much longer to detect than changes at the intraindividual level. Similarly, some non normative events, e.g., a war or a tornado, may have an immediate dramatic impact on a specific group of individuals, whereas changes in legislation, e.g., lowering the drinking age, will have different immediate and long-term effects on different cohort groups (e.g., seventeen year old vs. thirty year old).

A fourth consideration is that changes at any of the levels of context will influence other levels in an asymmetrical manner. Social programs tend to influence lower socioeconomic groups differently than higher socioeconomic groups. Larger classroom sizes may impact children's academic achievement differentially depending on levels of cognitive

ability. Given the variable rates and impacts of change across different levels, and the fact that multiple levels of context are embedded within one another, it becomes important to understand how the processes at different levels are connected to one another (Lerner, 1985). In response to this concept of dynamic interaction, Lerner and Lerner (1983) have devised a "goodness of fit" model of person-context relations. In this model, intraindividual characteristics are analyzed in relation to their congruency with contextual demands and presses. The premise is that "adaptive psychological and social functioning do not derive directly from either the nature of the person's characteristics....or the nature of the demands of the contexts within which the person functions" (Lerner, 1985, p. 177). Adaptive functioning results from the congruency or fit between individual characteristics and the demands of a given context. A particular characteristic only has meaning for the person as a consequence of the impact it has on the intraindividual and interpersonal context. Lerner and his colleagues have applied the "goodness of fit" model extensively to the study of individual temperament in student - teacher relationships (J.V. Lerner, 1983; Lerner and Lerner, 1983), in mother - daughter dyads (Palmero, 1982; Kacerguis, 1983), and in young adult dating dyads (Windle and Lerner, 1984).

Implications For Intervention

A basic tenet of the developmental contextual perspective is that there is considerable diversity in individual developmental trajectories. As such,

"There is no one developmental trajectory encompassing the entire lifespan, no universal developmental function that has generic applicability across all of the life course" (Lerner, 1990, p. 913). Also, developmental contextualism denies final causation, i.e., that the goal of intervention is to move individuals toward an ideal developmental outcome. As Birkel et. al. (1989) point out, within this perspective there is no assurance that, given optimal environments, one must only wait for the predictable unfolding of the individual's inherent potential. Intervention within a developmental contextual perspective demands an ethical awareness and consideration of the complex processes involved in the multiple dimensions of developmental change. This perspective implies that intervention can occur at any level and that an intervention at one level will necessarily have consequences for other levels. The dynamic interaction of person-context relations also stipulates that a given intervention, regardless of intended goals, has the potential for both positive and negative outcomes. It is possible to have a positive outcome at the level of intervention, yet have an unintended and unanticipated, negative outcome at some other level. Similarly, more than one target variable may be influenced by a treatment or intervention. Because of this "ripple effect", and because people adapt in unique ways to their social contexts, social scientists must be extremely cautious about altering people's developmental paths in inadvertent ways (Lerner, 1990). On the other hand, failure to intervene is in itself an intervention that has consequences and this also must be taken seriously into consideration. For example, enabling a passive woman in an abusive

relationship to become more assertive may result in the relationship becoming more abusive. Failure to do so, however, may perpetuate not only the abuse and possibly endanger the woman's life, but also may contribute to an abusive cycle in the next generation if there are children in the family.

Finally, interventions themselves are developmental phenomena and have their own developmental trajectory (Birkel et. at., 1989). Although final causation is denied within the developmental contextual perspective, it is recognized that interventions are always value-based and generally reflect the prevailing sociocultural norms. In other words, interventions are themselves located within a specific sociohistorical time frame. Consequently, interventions within this or any other perspective prescribe, as well as describe, optimal ways of achieving certain outcomes and specify - to some extent - what those outcomes should be. As Bruner (1986) explains, "theories of human development constitute a policy science" (p. 20). He goes on to suggest that developmental theory, in some cases, becomes an arm of "culture-creating" when cultural values are made explicit. Interventions can therefore be construed as making certain values explicit. For example, an intervention aimed at controlling the expression of intense emotions in an individual or in a group of individuals necessarily implies that the expression of these emotions is contrary to the prevailing cultural norms and promotes the value of repression of intense emotion (Lyddon, 1990). Social scientists must therefore carefully examine and articulate the value presuppositions of interventions or they will "risk

serving as the mindless handmaiden of implicit beliefs in the culture" (Bruner, 1986, p. 27).

In summary, developmental contextualism highlights the dynamic interaction over time of individuals and the multiple contexts of life. The concept of plasticity accounts for the tremendous diversity in developmental processes and in individual developmental trajectories. Individual development and the potential for intervention exists throughout the lifespan. The inherent complexity of the developmental contextual perspective presents unique methodological challenges. The "goodness of fit model" (Lerner and Lerner, 1983) is one methodological framework which has been successfully applied to the study of person-context relations. The emphasis on multilevel person-context relations stresses the importance of considering the widespread implications of developmental interventions. The design and implementation of ethical interventions requires a theoretical conception of the multilevel processes involved in developmental change. Within the developmental contextual perspective, the concept of developmental crisis takes on new meaning as one considers the dynamic interaction of person-context relations.

The Concept of Crisis

The concept of crisis is a familiar one in developmental theory but it is a concept which lacks clarity and definition. The confusion seems to stem from disparate worldviews and the conceptualization of change and developmental diversity within a given theory. An examination of the

concept of crisis within the metatheoretical perspectives of organicism and contextualism clarifies the role of crisis in development.

Riegel's (1974) dialectical/interactional interpretation of development, wherein crises are seen as necessary and normal precursors to change, provides an excellent framework for clarifying the various notions of developmental crisis. Riegel noted that life crises occur as a result of the contextual interplay among dynamic intra- and interpersonal systems. Crises are brought about by asynchronies between some or all of what he terms "the developmental planes of progression" (p. 102). He lists the planes of developmental progression as: 1) the inner-biological; 2) the individual-psychological; 3) the cultural-sociological; and 4) the outer-physical. In this model, crises "represent steps of constructive changes aiming toward better synchronization along different planes of progression" (Riegel, 1974. p. 125). Crises tie together the structural changes on the various levels; they are opportunities for change and provide meaning to change. Reigal maintains that crises and change in response to asynchronies between the levels are the fundamental cause of development.

The well-known stage-based theories of human development, drawn from the organismic worldview, acknowledge to some extent the role of developmental planes of progression in crises. Organismic theories perceive developmental growth as proceeding in relatively uniform stages whereby the individual is involved in a process of maturational "unfolding" (Geert, 1986). Erikson (1968) and Levinson (1978) both emphasize the linear framework of psychosocial stages or of life events as the basis for the

timing and nature of age related, normative crises in development. The social context provides the external arena within which the maturational unfolding occurs - inner-biological and cultural-sociological forces interact to initiate distinct periods in adult life. While both Erikson and Levinson address the interdependence of individual and cultural development, they do so in a limited way. More importantly, neither theorist provides a systematic interpretation of why the individual grows and develops from stage to stage or what the role of crisis is in developmental progression.

The theme of development through dialectical crisis or disequilibrium is amplified by constructivist versions of development. Piaget's (1975/1985) theory of cognitive development, for example, maintains that individuals do not passively absorb information generated by their sense data but actively construct knowledge. Chapman (1988) describes Piaget's equilibration theory as a "coherence theory of justification" (p.95). In other words, when representations of reality are found to be internally inconsistent or contradicted by experience, more general knowledge structures are constructed in order to reconcile the discrepancies. Kohlberg's (1984) theory of moral development utilizes similar concepts of disequilibrium or dialectic contradiction to account for developmental progress. Both of these theories, however, cast development as a limited maturational process involving limited planes of developmental progression and presuppose equilibrium as an ideal end state. Although Piaget and Kohlberg address the process of developmental growth, none of the organismic theories accounts for the complexity of ongoing development (Kagan, 1980) or

considers the importance of multiple situational influences in developmental change (Magnusson and Allen, 1983).

Recognition of the shortcomings of organismic theories of development to account for the complexity, diversity and process of change has led researchers to view development in contextual and relational terms. This shift in perspective has had important implications for understanding the role of crisis in development. Within a contextual framework, Epstein and Erskine (1983) highlight the theme of development through dialectic crisis and constructive change. They suggest that individuals build implicit and personal theories of reality to organize their perceptual world. These personal theories are the "mediational interface between person and environment" (Steenbarger, 1991. p. 291). When inevitable discrepancies accumulate, the individual's worldview becomes untenable and a full fledged crisis emerges until a new worldview is constructed. For Epstein and Erskine, crises are the necessary "deconstruction" that must precede change. Development does not proceed in a fixed or limited number of stages but is a never ending interactive process.

The conceptualization of development as a lifelong, interactive process is a major tenet of life-span developmental psychology which is founded on a contextual, rather than organismic, worldview. The concept of crisis within contextualism involves a tension in the relations between some or all of the multiple levels of context. Contextualism emphasizes the "nonlinear interplay between age-graded, history graded and non-normative life events" (Baltes, 1979, p. 2). There is no simple chain of cause and effect,

only reciprocally determining patterns of influence. Lerner (1983) presents what he terms a "strong concept of organism-environment interaction" (p. 125). Organism and environment are always embedded in each other. Lerner's description of context is similar to Riegel's (1974) planes of developmental progression. As indicated previously, Lerner (1990) describes the context as being composed of multiple levels: biological, individual-psychological (involving cognitive, emotional and personality functioning), interindividual (family or peer relationships), and extra-individual (relations among such sociocultural institutions as educational, political or economic systems or relations between people and their physical ecology) - all changing interdependently across time. Because individuals influence context, individuals play an active role in their development and relations between developing persons and their changing contexts are the primary focus of understanding. Changes in these relations are seen as the basic process of development (Lerner, 1990). Change is an ongoing process in which tensions in the relations between the levels are resolved, only to generate further tensions. As Lerner (1989) points out, psychosocial adjustment reflects a "goodness of fit" between person and context. Crisis, within this perspective, is described as an untenable relationship or lack of fit between the individual and the multiple levels of context.

In summary, crisis within an organismic model of development is limited in scope and in heuristic value. Organismic models do not fully address the role of crisis in developmental change, do not consider the bi-

directional and continuous nature of change throughout the lifespan and finally, do not account for the significance of situational factors in the developmental process. Further, the implicit value presupposition of equilibrium as an ideal end state negates the values of pluralism and diversity in normal developmental process or outcomes.

Within a developmental contextual perspective, development is change. Contextualism is a process view of development which focuses on the dynamic interplay between multiple intra- and interpersonal levels of context. Crisis, in this view, is conceived of as: 1) a lack of fit or asynchrony between one or more levels of context; 2) a necessary and normal precursor to change; and 3) a description of the nature of the relations between the developing person and the multiple levels of context at a given point in time (Lerner, 1990). An understanding of a specific developmental crisis, such as midlife crisis, will necessarily include an analysis of the relationship between the individual and all levels of context. This study examines the subjective experience of midlife crisis in terms of the perceived goodness of fit in the relations between the person and the multiple levels of context.

Midlife Crisis

"Midlife crisis" is a well known and popular term which usually conjures up images of middle-aged adults engaging in adolescent behavior as they grasp at the straws of a fading youth. The popular version trivializes the experience, but the reality is that at midlife many men and

women experience emotional turmoil and conflict with the external world as a result of the stress that accompanies this developmental transition. A review of research on midlife crisis demonstrates the lack of definitive knowledge of this experience. There is little agreement as to the extent of the incidence of midlife crisis, the span of years that constitute midlife, the factors precipitating or associated with the experience of midlife crisis or, the parameters of the transitional process of midlife crisis.

Incidence

There is little consensus as to the rate of occurrence of midlife crisis. In the research on men, Valliant (1977) considered a crisis at midlife a rare event while Levinson (1978) proposed that 80% of men experienced some form of crisis. McGill (1980) suggested that approximately 33% of men experience crisis at midlife and Ciernia (1983) reported a 70% incidence. In a study of successful career women at midlife, Leiblich (1986) indicated that only 33% of the sample reported acute midlife crisis. This tremendous variation of occurrence likely reflects different methods used in research and different definitions of midlife crisis (Ciernia, 1985a).

Definition of Midlife Crisis

While there is no concise definition of "midlife crisis", the definitions that are used have many similarities. Ciernia (1985a) defined midlife crisis as an "experience (of) turmoil that may result in changes in attitudes and values or changes in personality and behavior" (p. 84-85). Leiblich (1986)

did not define midlife crisis but considered subjects to be experiencing acute crisis if they reported midlife concerns accompanied by "severe inner turmoil, often resulting in some change in the respondent's reality" (p. 309). She noted that a prominent feature of the acute crisis group was the appearance of physical symptoms of distress. Levinson (1978) describes midlife crisis as a profound reappraisal of every aspect of life which involves "emotional turmoil, despair, the sense of not knowing where to turn or of being stagnant and unable to move at all" (p. 199). Although the severity and conflictual nature of the psychological disturbance is recognized, Levinson emphasizes that experiencing midlife crisis is not in itself pathological. Erikson (1968) utilized the word crisis in its "true" form as indicating a crucial turning point which inherently presents both dangers and opportunities, i.e., "the ontogenetic source of generational strength and maladjustment" (p. 96). More recently, O'Connor and Wolfe (1991) encompassed many of the above factors by noting that a crisis in midlife signals the presence of a significant threat to an individual's existing paradigm. They define an individual's paradigm as "the system of assumptions, perceptions, expectations, feelings, beliefs, and values organized to understand an extensive range of situations and events" (p. 325). A midlife crisis represents an unfreezing of a given paradigm. The extent of an individual's crisis can vary in terms of scope, intensity and emotional tone.

For the purpose of this study, the following concept of midlife crisis is utilized and incorporates many of the above factors: 1) a recognition of

midlife crisis as a turning point in development which has the potential for both danger and opportunity; 2) an acknowledgment of a varied scope of transition which includes both intra- and interpersonal contexts; 3) a focus on the individual's subjective experience in the process of a paradigm shift; 4) a recognition of the presence of inner turmoil and conflict with the external world which accompanies the deconstruction of an existing paradigm; and 5) the view that midlife crisis is a normal rather than pathological developmental process.

Age Span

There is considerable variation in defining the age span that encompasses the midlife period. Levinson (1978) suggested that the developmental crisis of midlife occurs during Midlife-Transition which is between the ages of 38 and 47 years. McGill (1980) proposed an age span of 40 to 60 years; Julian, McKenry, and Arnold (1990) defined middle age as the span between 39 and 50 years and O'Conner and Wolfe (1991) used the age range of 35 to 50 years. The span of 35 to 55 years as suggested by Neugarten (1976) includes the generally accepted time period and will be used in this study.

The Precipitating Factors of Midlife Crisis

Stevens-Long (1984) contends that midlife may be second only to adolescence in degree of biological, psychological and social changes experienced by most individuals. The most concrete changes of midlife are

physical ones. As Jacques (1965) points out, "the individual has stopped growing up and has begun to grow old" (p. 506). In this primary and basic sense, midlife is the central turning point of life. Physical changes, although gradual, are both experienced and observed by the individual. "Body monitoring" begins to occur as individuals pay attention to the appearance and performance of their bodies (Kets de Vries, 1978).

Closely related to the physiological changes of midlife is a change in the way in which time is viewed. Neugarten (1976) found that midlife individuals restructured their conception of life "in terms of time left to live rather than time since birth" (p. 17). There is a growing awareness of the circumscription of life accompanied by a sense of time urgency (Gould, 1978). Time is experienced and counted differently during this central life stage.

Financial responsibilities seem to escalate in middle age. Financial commitments and expenditures tend to be at their greatest in midlife as "younger and older family members must be provided for, and one must also make provisions for one's own retirement" (McIlroy, 1984, p. 625). Individuals are generally at their peak earning capacity at this age and begin to recognize the limitations of their earning potential.

The changing perception of the lifespan, aging parents, growing children, financial restrictions and inevitable biological changes lead individuals to confront the limitations of their own lives within the framework of their impending death. According to Jacques (1965), the reality of eventual death is the crux of the midlife crisis. Death becomes a

personal matter (McIlroy, 1984). Death concern has been related to midlife crisis for both men (Ciernia, 1985b) and women (Richardson and Sands, 1985).

Numerous researchers have identified midlife as a time of reflection, introspection, self analysis and questioning (Neugarten, 1976; Levinson, 1978; Jung, 1933). The middle-aged seem more preoccupied with inner life and engage in existential questioning of life purpose, personal identity and self expression, personal finiteness, responsibility for self and others, and religious or philosophical concerns (O'Connor and Wolfe, 1991; Reinke et. al., 1985; Yalom, 1980; Levinson, 1978; Erikson, 1968; Jung, 1933).

Related to the existential questioning of midlife is the reappraisal of women and men of their social, family and work roles (Tamir, 1982). Until recently, women's primary roles have been defined in terms of the family cycle (Reinke et. al., 1985) whereas men have traditionally defined themselves in relation to their careers (Levinson, 1978). With over 42% of the workforce being represented by women, the career issues previously associated with men are now applicable to a large number of women (Ackerman, 1990). Many women begin a career at midlife as declining child-rearing functions provide greater autonomy and change in social roles. Role adjustments in the family relationships further contribute to the stress of midlife.

Levinson (1978) states that one of the major tasks of a man at midlife is the reappraisal of what has been done with his life and the discovery of how much of it has been based on illusions about one's self and the world.

Coming to terms with illusions and accepting or resigning oneself to the realities of the present life also appears to be an aspect of women's midlife issues (Reinke et. al., 1985). In addition to these factors, there is an indication that parent-adolescent relationships and marital satisfaction are associated with the intensity of midlife crisis in both men (Julian, McKenry and Arnold, 1990) and women (Koski and Steinberg, 1990).

It is apparent that numerous biological, psychological and social factors converge upon the individual at midlife which contribute to the stress associated with this time of the life course. In addition, for each cohort group there are unique cultural and historical forces that impinge upon individual development and psychosocial adjustment. The causes of crisis and change at midlife are complex and varied. Although multiple levels of context are involved, there does appear to be a common pattern underlying the process of moving through midlife crisis.

The Process of Transition in Midlife Crisis

As Jung (1971) noted, "we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the program of life's morning; for what in the morning is true will in the evening become a lie" (p. 92). Jung identified the need for a shift in perspective in midlife but it is only recently that researchers have focused on how this shift occurs. Levinson (1978) for example, defined a transitional period as a process of changing a relatively stable life structure and building a new one. The life structure is a set of activities, relationships and life spaces that link the individual to his or her world.

The steps involved are, "to reappraise the existing structure, explore new possibilities in self and world and work towards choices that provide a basis for a new structure" (Levinson, 1978, p. 318). He suggests that this reappraisal involves every aspect of life. While Levinson addresses some of the behavioral changes and emotional stress associated with midlife crisis, he does not delineate the cognitive processes which give coherence to the thoughts, feelings and behaviors of midlife crisis.

O'Connor and Wolfe (1986) proposed a grounded theory model of transitions which describes progress through five phases: stability (pre-transition), rising discontent, crisis, re-direction and adaptation, and re-stabilizing. They stipulate that the phases are not necessarily linear and distinct as individuals are typically involved in "multiple simultaneous equations" rather than dealing with issues one at a time. In a later study, O'Connor and Wolfe (1987) further outlined the specific contours of midlife transition. They found that emotional tone, emotional arousal and emotional energy varied depending on the phase a person was in. During the crisis stage it was noted that emotional energies were not being effectively channeled in accordance with individual purposes and goals; individuals were engaged in a wide scope of change in their lives; and the personal issue of greatest concern was to find guidance from internal feelings and values as opposed to external expectations or pressures.

In their most recent study, O'Connor and Wolfe (1991) examined the process of midlife crisis in terms of paradigms and paradigm shifts. A paradigm is not a life structure but is the central source of one's meaning-

making. Like Epstein and Erskine's (1983) personal theories of reality and Lerner's (1990) concept of plasticity, paradigms are "intangible and internal, but permeate everything concrete and external" (O'Connor and Wolfe, 1991, p. 326). At any given moment, an individual is embedded in his or her paradigm. The inevitable internal and external changes of midlife strains the adaptive capacity of the established paradigm. As anomalies chip away at the established worldview, the view becomes untenable and a crisis emerges. A new perspective or construction of reality is required. A paradigm shift is, therefore, a reconstruction of the basic premises or worldview that frame one's way of being in the world. As O'Connor and Wolfe (1991) point out, "moving to a higher level of organization requires an extensive passage through uncertainty, much like re-designing the proverbial plane in flight" (p. 326).

A crisis at midlife does not necessarily result in a paradigm shift or developmental growth. O'Connor and Wolfe (1991) point out that while midlife brings numerous issues to the fore, these issues may be approached utilizing the familiar and established processes of adjustment and meaning-making. They term this a cycle of development as opposed to a spiral of development. A spiral of development occurs when the issues of life are addressed in a qualitatively different way as the individual has reconstructed a new worldview. A paradigm shift represents a discontinuity or an underlying change in worldview whereby one's construction of reality is fundamentally different.

In the results of their study, O'Connor and Wolfe (1991) note that both the scope of transition and progression through the transition sequence effect the occurrence of a paradigm shift: the "personal paradigm shift increases as one progresses through the midlife transition sequence and consequently experiences some degree of crisis, peak emotions, and higher than normal uncertainty" (p. 331 and 332). The wider the scope of transition, the greater the shift in paradigm. A major paradigm shift requires at least a moderate scope of transition which entails a questioning of important core beliefs about oneself and the world. Gender differences were not significant in the relationship between scope of transition and shift in paradigm, although the authors acknowledge that the specific life structure issues of men and women vary. Also, they found that level of ego development correlated with scope of transition and involvement in paradigm shifting. Those at lower levels of ego development had difficulty questioning the basic core assumptions of their worldview; participants at higher levels of ego development were able to more closely examine personal philosophies, beliefs and assumptions and were willing to experiment with alternatives. They conclude that the process of shifting paradigms during midlife requires both inner and outer changes and, while it cannot be determined if the paradigm shift is the cause or result of changes in the levels of context, the process involves an ongoing interaction between the inner and outer worlds. In terms of ego development, some individuals are better prepared and more likely to successfully engage in the process of paradigm shifting than others.

In summary, both qualitative and quantitative research indicate that the experience of midlife crisis exists. Numerous internal and external stressors converge at midlife and contribute to a lack of a "goodness of fit" between the individual and the multiple levels of context. While the nature and intensity of the stress confronted in midlife varies from person to person, the process of change that occurs in midlife crisis can be understood in terms of a paradigm shift. Not everyone who experiences a midlife crisis will evidence substantial change. The change may be cyclic in which old paradigms are reconfirmed, or the change may be spiral, which results in a fundamentally significant alteration in paradigm or worldview.

The Research Question

The analysis of metatheoretical issues which influence theories of adult development and contribute to what is known about midlife crisis, illustrates the predicament of those who are impacted by this experience. While it is recognized that midlife is a major turning point in adult development and that this transition is experienced as a significant crisis for many men and women, the popular notions of midlife crisis (as men's desperate clinging to youth or as women's empty nest or menopausal symptoms) force men and women to experience this phenomenon in fear, isolation and embarrassment. Individuals in midlife expect themselves to be psychologically static and emotionally mature at this point in their lives; they do not expect to find themselves confused and in the midst of a critical process of developmental change.

An important aspect of popular and clinical psychology is the therapeutic and educational efforts to assist individuals to successfully encounter developmental transitions, including midlife crisis. The primary concern is the psychological well being of the individual which, within a contextual framework, necessarily includes all aspects of an individual's life. The existing literature gives information about several aspects of midlife crisis but not of the fundamental, human experience of midlife crisis itself.

A more thorough understanding of the experience of midlife crisis is needed: What is the experience like? What are the central issues and questions of the experience? What is the process of the experience? What is the outcome of this experience? Also required is a holistic conceptual framework that places the experience within the context of the lifespan. Clinicians must work with the developing individual rather than simply confronting the presenting symptoms. These questions and issues give rise to the primary question of this study: **What is the meaning of the experience of midlife crisis?**

Chapter 3

The Path to Understanding Midlife Crisis

Overview

This study employs the existential-phenomenological research methodology to understand the meaning of the experience of midlife crisis. Phenomenological research is a descriptive science. Existential-phenomenological research is based on the fundamental value of objectively understanding the structure and meaning of human experience. The guiding principle of the phenomenological method is "fidelity to the phenomenon" as it is lived (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 52). This method requires a respectful listening to what the phenomenon speaks of itself by consciously articulating and attempting to put aside one's presuppositions as best as one can. The intent of this approach is the understanding of persons' lived experiences of their world (Giorgi, 1970). Phenomenological research provides descriptions of experience which are then interpreted within a particular theoretical perspective. The emerging structure of the phenomena, however, may supersede the chosen perspective. Developmental contextualism is the metatheoretical perspective used to frame the results of this study.

In addition to fidelity to the experiential phenomena, there are several other characteristics of phenomenological research which guide this study. A major tenet of the phenomenological method is the priority of the life-

world. If we consider experience objectively, "we will discover that our experience is not inside us but instead our experience is always of how we behave towards the world and act toward others" (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 52). The life-world, according to Giorgi (1970), is an individual's "immediate presence to reality or that world in which everyday life runs its course....it is the world as we live it prior to any reflection on it" (p. 134). In other words, human existence and the world constitute an inseparable unity. The person and the external world cannot be compartmentalized and understood separately because they co-constitute one other. Understanding the givens of experience, therefore, means understanding the meaning derived from experiences of the world which create an individual's perception of reality. By maintaining the primacy of the life-world, phenomenological research seeks to understand the person-world (i.e., person-context) structure or relationship.

Phenomenological research is a structural approach to the dynamic, interactional context of person-world interactions. Because it is a methodology of description, the intent is to produce a meaningful description grounded in human experience. The goal is to understand a phenomenon and provide a description of the structure and meaning of a particular experience. It is an inner perspective of the person; the emphasis is on the participant's view of the experience and the meaning this experience has for the participant. The product of phenomenological research is a structural description of the "givens" of experience (Polkinghorne, 1981). The description consists of the invariant ingredients

of the experience under investigation; the ingredients which form the necessary and sufficient parts of the whole. The outcome of this study is a descriptive identification of the structure of the experience of midlife crisis.

In phenomenological research, participants are purposively selected on the basis of their direct experience with the investigated topic and their ability to articulate their experience. Generalizability is established a posteriori rather than by a priori procedures based upon sampling theory. It is assumed that, "any subject belonging to a specified group is considered to represent that group" (Sandelowski, 1986, p. 32). The number of participants needed is variable as the researcher requires as many participants as it takes to elucidate the phenomenon (Wertz, 1984). The intent is to make the sample as homogeneous as possible because this enables the researcher to articulate the essential structure and constituents of the phenomena (Becker, 1986). The participants are actively engaged in the search for the meaning of the experience and are fully informed of the nature of the research. Because they are extensively and knowledgeably involved in the research process, participants are often called "co-researchers".

Data sources can be spoken or written accounts of the experience. Becker (1986) and Kvale (1983) have thoroughly described the use of the interview as a primary means of gathering data in phenomenological research. Becker's (1986) theoretical framework and guidelines for the researcher's participation in the unstructured interview are utilized in this study.

The analysis of data is not a completely separate process from the gathering of data; the two processes interact with each other throughout the research endeavor (Polkinghorne, 1981). The process is not limited to a predetermined schedule or procedure; as new themes or patterns emerge, the researcher may return to a particular participant(s) in order to explore and deepen the examples. Analysis of the data involves analytic procedures designed to produce thematic clusters which represent the essential structure of the phenomenon. The final structural description must be shared by all participants and is the outcome of phenomenological research. Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological research procedures of analysis are employed in this study.

The Methodology of this Study

Co-researchers

The author of this study appeared on a province-wide, public broadcasting radio show. The show lasted for one hour during which the author was interviewed by the host of a regularly scheduled public interest, "talk-back" program. The author described what is known about midlife crisis and the nature of the research project. The audience was invited to call "on the air" to discuss their experiences and/or ask questions about the topic or about the proposed research. The author specified three criteria for participating in the research: 1) persons who believed that they were experiencing midlife crisis as described during the radio program, 2) persons who were in the age range between 35 years and 55 years, and 3)

persons who were willing to describe their experience in an interview setting and validate the results of the research in a follow-up interview. The author provided a telephone number for those who were interested in participating in the research. The telephone was answered by clerical staff who were instructed to take the name and number of the callers and indicate that the author would contact each caller as soon as possible. A total of fifty-two calls were received during and immediately after the radio program. In the following three weeks, thirteen more calls were received. Calls were received from all parts of the province and included both rural and urban people. The author returned all calls. Twenty-six people were invited to participate as co-researchers in the study. Six of these people either canceled their interviews or did not show at the scheduled interview time. Interviews were rescheduled for three of these people who subsequently failed to show up for the second interview. The other callers did not participate in the research for one of the following reasons: 1) unable to reach by telephone after at least five attempts; 2) too far for the person to travel; 3) not appropriate because the person was under age 35 years or over age 55 years; 4) not appropriate because the person was in need of mental health services; or 5) the caller was seeking information for a spouse or a friend.

Twenty people participated in the research as co-researchers. There were nine women and eleven men. Participants were chosen on the basis of the following criteria:

1) they were in the midlife age range, i.e., between 35 and 55 years.

2) they indicated that they were experiencing psychological distress which they identified as "midlife crisis". Limiting the participants to only those who indicated that they were presently experiencing midlife crisis served to avoid the difficulties associated with retrospective designs (Greenwald, 1980; Vaillant, 1977).

3) they were able to articulate their experience in terms of thoughts, feelings and behaviors and were willing to explore this experience in depth as it related to their relationships with themselves and with the external world.

Data Collection

Each participant was interviewed for two to three hours. The interview procedures closely resembled an unstructured clinical interview consisting of three phases. In the first phase, the participant was fully informed of the nature of the research and given a copy of the Research Design Summary (Appendix A: Research Design Summary); the participant signed a written consent regarding the nature of participation in the research, audio recordings of each interview, confidentiality and publication of results of the study (Appendix B: Consent Form); preliminary biographical data was obtained, and rapport established. The second phase of the interview consisted of data gathering in the form of an open-ended dialogue. While the data gathering interview was unstructured, the author was guided by an interview outline to ensure that all aspects of the experience were explored (Appendix C: Outline of the Interview). The final phase of the interview

process was in the form of a follow-up interview and took place approximately four months after the first interview. The follow-up consisted of a dialogue with individual participants during which the author presented each co-researcher with the "Descriptive Identification of Midlife Crisis Structure" (Table 4-2). The author asked each co-researcher to comment on the "goodness of fit" of the description with the lived experience (Kvale, 1983). The intent of this final stage was to have the participant confirm, elaborate and correct (if appropriate) the researcher's interpretive portrayal of the data. During this last phase, the author also ensured that each co-researcher had not experienced any detrimental effects as a result of the research process. The interviews took place in the business office of the researcher. All interviews were taped on an audio cassette recorder and the tapes transcribed into written form.

Data Analysis

As indicated previously, the analysis of data is not a separate process from the gathering of data. The author utilized Colaizzi's (1978) outline of phenomenological research procedures in the analysis of the transcript data. The researcher began by reading all of the participant's descriptions or protocols in order to gain a general sense of the data. Each participant's protocol was then reduced to the "significant statements" - statements which directly pertained to the phenomena of midlife crisis. Next, the meaning of each significant statement was formulated. In this process, the intent was to "go beyond what is given in the original data and at the same

time, stay with it" (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 59). Once the meanings for a given protocol were formulated, this step was repeated for each protocol. The aggregate formulated meanings were then organized into clusters of themes that were common to all of the participants' protocols. Clusters of themes were then referred back to the original protocols for validation. The purpose is to allow for the emergence of themes that are common to all of the participant's protocols, while at the same time, allowing for the advent of contradictory or unrelated themes (Table 4-1). This process of data analysis and synthesis continued until there was a "clarity without tension between the structural description and the descriptions of the particular manifestations which have served as a data base" (Polkinghorne, 1981, p. 25). These results were formulated into an exhaustive description of midlife crisis. The "Exhaustive Description of the Experience of Midlife Crisis" is found in Appendix D. Finally, the exhaustive description was formulated into an unequivocal statement of identification of the fundamental structure of the experience of midlife crisis shared by all participants (Table 4-2). This structure is presented as a written synthesis of the experience. The clusters of themes and synthesis of the structure of the experience of midlife crisis are elaborated upon in the next chapter.

Criteria for the Assessment of Phenomenological Research

Phenomenological research is one of several approaches to qualitative research and is based upon human science metatheoretical assumptions (Wertz, 1986). According to Burns (1988), qualitative research is based on

the assumptions that: "a) data were gathered across time; b) the study was conducted using primarily inductive reasoning; c) data were presented in the form of words; d) all data are context specific; e) data analysis involves multiple transformations from raw data to theoretical statements; f) generalizations occur abstractly through theoretical statements; g) the value of a study is related to relevance for theory enhancement; h) there are multiple layers of reality; i) reality changes across time; and j) the most important things to understand about events are the meanings which are attached to them" (p. 45). Consequently, the criteria used to evaluate qualitative research must inherently reflect these assumptions.

Guba (1981) proposed a model for assessing the trustworthiness of qualitative research. He described four aspects of trustworthiness: truth value, applicability, consistency and neutrality. Truth value "is usually obtained from the discovery of human experiences as they are lived and perceived by informants" (Krefting, 1991, p.215). A qualitative research study has demonstrated truth value and is considered *credible* when the structural description of the experience is so accurate that the informants and other people who share the experience, immediately recognize the description. As previously indicated, the informants of this study were given the opportunity to validate the structural description of the experience of midlife crisis. Secondly, applicability is the ability to generalize beyond the informant group to larger populations. Although data are context specific and the purpose of the research is to describe an experience, the results are *transferable* to others who share the experience.

Generalizability, in this sense, depends upon the extent to which the description of the experience resonates with those outside of the study who have experienced the phenomena (Shapiro, 1986). A third criterion used in evaluating a qualitative research study is that of consistency of the data. In qualitative research, *dependability* of the data, "implies trackable variability, that is, variability that can be ascribed to identified sources" (Krefting, 1991, p. 216). Variability is the norm in qualitative research and stems from the assumption of multiple realities. The final criterion of trustworthiness is neutrality. When truth value and applicability are established in qualitative research, the results and procedures may be confirmed as being free from bias. *Confirmability* speaks to the neutrality of the data.

Delimitations

This study of the experience of midlife crisis is delimited in the following ways: 1) the stipulation that the sample will only include participants in the midlife age range; and 2) the inclusion of only those participants who indicate that they are experiencing what is defined as midlife crisis. By limiting the participant group to individuals in the midlife age range, it is acknowledged that the results of the study cannot stipulate that the structure of the experience of midlife crisis is unique to this age group. It may be that the structure of the phenomenon of midlife crisis is not very different from the structure of any other developmental crisis. On the other hand, there is a unique confluence of variables associated with

this age period which warrants the specification of midlife crisis as a salient feature of adult development. It is also recognized that cohort effects (i.e. variables associated with the historical time within which people are born), cultural variables and age-related organismic changes will contribute to the shared structure which emerges from the data. The results of this study are a "snapshot" of the experience of midlife crisis at this particular point in time and in this particular place in the world. Within the developmental contextual perspective, these contextual variables are a significant part of the multilevel context which characterizes human development and contribute to, rather than confound the results of the study.

Secondly, by utilizing the phenomenological research methodology and by including only those participants who are experiencing midlife crisis, the results are delimited in terms of providing a single viewpoint of this experience; that is; the viewpoint of the experiencer. It is understood that co-workers, spouses, children, extended family members and friends of the participants would likely have different perspectives on the experience of the participants. These other perspectives, however, speak to a different structure of experience which is deemed to be beyond the scope of this study. It is acknowledged this data would contribute to a broader understanding of the "goodness of fit" between the multiple levels of context.

Chapter 4

The Experience of Midlife Crisis

Women and Men In Midlife Crisis

Nine women and eleven men shared their personal experiences of midlife crisis for the purpose of this research study. The participants ranged in age from thirty-nine to fifty-five years of age. The average age was forty-three years. Thirteen of the participants were married (three for the second time and one for the third time). Three participants were divorced (one for the second time), two were widows, and two were single. Seventeen of the twenty participants have children. The children ranged in age from three months old to thirty-one years. Education of the participants ranged from grade twelve to doctoral level; fifteen of the participants have university degrees.

These men and women participated in the research for varying reasons. Several commented that they felt like the author was speaking directly to them and about their lives when the experience of midlife crisis was described during the radio program. Many of them indicated that they were surprised and relieved to learn that their experience had a name; they felt more normal and less "crazy". They were grateful to know that others shared their experience and that they were not alone. All of the participants stated that they hoped to contribute to, as well as gain from the research process. They wanted to learn more about themselves and their experience.

They wanted help from the researcher in understanding what was happening to them, to gain a sense of direction in how to cope with this experience, to heal some of their emotional wounds, and to regain a sense of control in their lives. They wanted to share what they had painfully learned about themselves and about life so that others would benefit from their experience. They also wanted to share the joy and inner peace that they were creating in their lives as a result of their midlife crisis.

Whatever the reasons that led them to participate in the research, all gave generously of their time and innermost selves. Each person in this study presented as bright, thoughtful, articulate, sensitive, and courageous. They willingly shared their thoughts, feelings and experiences and I am grateful to each one of them.

The Themes of Midlife Crisis

The experience of midlife crisis is marked by four overriding themes: the variable onset of the experience, the disruptive nature of the experience, the revealing power of the experience, and developmental change in conjunction with the experience. Table 4-1, found at the end of this chapter (p. 112-114), presents a summary of the thematic clusters of midlife crisis.

Onset of Midlife Crisis

The participants of this study describe the onset of their experience of midlife crisis in three different ways. One participant attributed the onset to the occurrence of a traumatic event which forced a confrontation with her

personal death. Several described a gradual awareness of psychological discomfort. Unsettling questions persistently nagged at them over a period of years until they could longer be ignored. Several others described one or many momentous events that abruptly shattered the foundation of their life structure. Regardless of how the participants entered into midlife crisis, they all discovered that there came a point where their comfortable and familiar way of being in the world no longer was no longer workable. Each one was obliged to consider the nature of his or her existence in order to move forward in life.

These three different ways of entering into the experience of midlife crisis are defined as "boundary experiences" by psychiatrist Irvin D. Yalom (1980). A boundary experience is "an event, an urgent experience, that propels one into a confrontation with one's existential 'situation' in the world" (p. 159). Yalom outlines three different types of boundary experiences which affirm the three different paths leading to the experience of midlife crisis. The first boundary experience is dealing with one's death on a personal level; the second is having to make a decision, particularly a life-changing or irreversible decision; and the third is experiencing "the collapse of some fundamental meaning-providing schema" (p. 8). Yalom explains that boundary experiences "act as a catalyst to shift one from the everyday attitude to the 'ontological' attitude - that is, to a mode of being in which one is mindful of being" (p.319). These experiences force one to consider the ultimate existential concerns of existence: the awareness of

self-creation, one's fundamental groundlessness, personal responsibility and existential isolation.

Personal Death: Although awareness of one's impending death is a common theme for all participants in midlife crisis, Bonnie was the only participant who was forced to confront her personal death. The reality of imminent death marked the onset of her midlife crisis. Bonnie was diagnosed with colon cancer, required immediate surgery and a year of chemotherapy as a follow-up. The research interview took place at the conclusion of her chemotherapy program. At the time of Bonnie's diagnosis, her father-in-law was dying of cancer. She felt a tremendous loss when her father-in-law died because she was closer to him than to her own father, who died of cancer the previous year. Bonnie's experience with cancer was that this disease kills: two important people in her life had just died of cancer. Bonnie's terrifying confrontation with her own death launched her into a major existential crisis: "I know that my life will never be the same as what it was, and I am not the same. I can never be the same as what I was before all of the things happened" (8, 11-12). Bonnie's previous trust in her body, in her life and in the future was gone and the impact was felt in all aspects of her life. She was thrust into awareness of the tenuous nature of her existence and there was no going back.

Decision: As the majority of co-researchers in the study discovered, the need to make a major decision builds slowly and leads to a gradual onset of the experience of midlife crisis. The point of crisis is reached when there is a sense of urgency to make a decision or do something different, yet one

feels stuck and unable to move forward. The need to do something different doesn't just suddenly appear; it has been growing and rumbling under the surface for some time. In midlife, there is an increasing awareness of the circumscription of life; one is compelled to take an overview of life's journey. Midlife becomes the symbol of a crossroads or an intersection and the choices one makes at midlife will likely carry one through the remainder of life. Although one has the option of continuing to travel the established route, numerous other paths become visible from the vantage point of midlife. As one becomes aware of these alternative paths, one looks behind and to the sides and sees, perhaps for the first time, that these paths have been there all along. A new thought creeps in - not only have these paths been there, but it may be possible that one has always had a choice of leaving the present path and traveling them. Now comes the dilemma - which path is one to choose and how is one to make this choice? Even not choosing and staying on the same path is suddenly a choice; one is making a conscious decision to remain on the familiar route. And then, along with this dilemma of choice and decision comes the frightening awareness of the life-altering consequences of choosing a different path.

Several of the participants have had significant events which contributed to the onset of midlife crisis, but it is only through hindsight that they recognize how these events contribute to their present experience. These participants describe a growing awareness of dissatisfaction with life, unhappiness, a sense of something missing, a feeling of boredom and needing something more in life, a growing concern with getting older and

the passage of time. Many are aware of needing to make a decision but others have not yet reached that point. For example, Daniel is only dimly aware of the choice he faces and of the possibility of choosing a different way of being in the world. He has focused his life on building his businesses and has been very successful, but he is beginning to wonder what is wrong in his life. Daniel says, "It probably started about five years ago. I had reached what I thought was the ultimate in the industry...and there was nowhere else to go. When you arrive, there is not a hell of a lot there...I'm totally, totally bored." (7, 11-20). Daniel has run out of "things to do" and is just beginning to realize that he doesn't know how "to be". Daniel has thoroughly explored the path of success in business and until now, he hasn't been aware of the possibility that other paths may exist. Even now, he believes he simply needs some new and exciting things to do and is considering numerous challenges that he can take on. Something is still wrong, though - everything he plans seems boring. At some level, Daniel knows that he needs something to be different in his life but he has no idea what that difference may be. He is starting to realize that making changes in the external world are not the answer but he is totally unfamiliar with the inner world of the self. He knows he must do something but how can he make a choice when he doesn't know what the choices are?

For Brad, the rumblings started about ten years ago, "when I had this thought that wouldn't go away, and it was 'Is this all there is?' " (5, 11-12). Shortly after the initial questioning began, Brad's wife left their marriage and a divorce followed soon after. Two years later, Brad remarried. Two

years ago his father died and at the same time he separated from his second wife. Brad has also experienced a major reorganization of his responsibilities and duties in his career, which has caused him to lose some confidence in his abilities and judgment. In a short while, Brad has gone through numerous changes, many of which he had little control over. When his first marriage of eighteen years ended, Brad's life suddenly veered off the planned path. He tried to return to the established route with his second marriage but soon realized that this marriage was a mistake. Now Brad is feeling lost and disoriented. He knows that he must decide how he will live the rest of his life.

Lisa has felt a loss of focus in her life for the past few years. She has taken several different university courses, started her own business which failed, went to Mexico with her husband and children for a year, and recently moved to the city from the country. She relates the experience of midlife crisis to her age, "because I am you know, forty-two now, and looking back on what I've done, and the things I've achieved, and also looking forward on where I really want to go" (4, 26-28). Lisa has no idea what she wants to do; she knows that she needs more in life yet doesn't know what she wants. She is seriously considering leaving her marriage because she feels confined and unable to explore her interests - whatever they may be. Up until this point in her life, she has just "stumbled into things" as she assumed the socially prescribed roles of wife and mother. For the first time in her life, Lisa is aware of having a choice. This choice is gnawing away at her and although she feels a sense of urgency to move

forward, she is terrified of the life-altering consequences of the choices she is considering.

For Randy, midlife crisis began about two years ago as sort of a "background thing". In the past year, he has started to brood more about different areas of his life. "On the physical side, I see myself getting older, I feel myself getting older. I'm getting white (hair)...I tire more easily. On the professional side, I see a career that's at midpoint...I question how satisfying it's been or fulfilling...I'm questioning the kind of work I'm involved in...On the family side, I'm looking at the absence, being with my family during my spare time. I think I've let them down in some ways" (5, 9-32). Randy wants his life to be different, he is tired of feeling like a "cash cow". All he sees in his life are obligations and responsibilities. He is confronted with making a decision: "either I do what I'm doing, or opt out" (28, 27). Randy is totally stuck in this dilemma because either choice has disastrous consequences. To opt out is to be alone. To opt out is to walk away from his family and the life he has built over the past fifteen years. On the other hand, to continue with his present life is to stay trapped in his role, feeling resentful, exhausted and burdened.

Meaning: Ann was thrust into a midlife crisis when her father died. She sadly states that, "The world has never been the same since my dad died" (9,9). One year after her father died, Ann's husband died. She had built her life around these two people who loved and cherished her and now they were gone. Her familiar and comfortable world was shattered: "they loved me and as long as you're loved, you just carry on and do what you

want to do, and that makes you happy. So you do your little things whatever they are" (18, 26-28). The foundation that gave Ann's life meaning and structure was suddenly pulled out from beneath her. Ann now feels "paralyzed" because, for the first time in her life, she is confronted with the possibility of self-creation and finding her meaning internally instead of externally.

Regardless of whether the participants are able to identify a sudden or insidious onset of their midlife crisis, they all are aware that they are in the midst of a crucial and portentous life experience. All are aware that life is changing and that they are changing too. There is a difference in midlife, however. Habitual ways of responding to change are no longer sufficient. The stakes have abruptly become much higher and the factors involved more complex. The experience of midlife crisis reaches to the very core of one's being, of one's existence in the world. The pressure is building and the consequences are being felt in all aspects of life. The familiar ground is shaking and crumbling. Once one awakens to the "ontological attitude", one cannot return to forgetfulness.

Disruptive Nature of Midlife Crisis

The participants of this study all discuss how their lives have been extremely disrupted by this experience of midlife crisis. At the height of the crisis, the emotional turmoil is often overwhelming. Participants seriously question and re-evaluate all of their relationships and often find themselves in conflict with, or withdrawing from, most of the people in

their lives. One challenges choice of career as it relates to present life satisfaction and the meaning of one's life. Time is experienced differently. While it seems like the emotional turmoil is going to go on forever, there is also a sense of time moving too quickly. The end of one's life is in sight and there is a sense of urgency because time is running out.

Emotional Turmoil: As the pressure and intensity of midlife crisis builds, the emotional turmoil disrupts all aspects of a person's life. Participants become overwhelmed and exhausted trying to stem the flow of powerful and often frightening emotions. Bonnie couldn't find the words to describe the emotional experience. "To say it's been an emotional roller coaster would not do it justice" (8, 8-9). Jeff's feelings came pouring out of him when he found himself weeping uncontrollably after hearing about the stillborn death of a friend's baby. He had no idea what was happening to him, but from that point on, his emotions would "be triggered by listening to music, or just in watching something on television, it would just trigger it, and I'd be right back into full tears and crying" (6, 19-21). Mandy was surprised to discover her anger. "I was just filled with rage...it was a rage over minute, little things, whether it be at home or at work, and this just took me totally off guard because it's never been a part of me" (31, 9-12). Jan continually spoke about an overwhelming sense of confusion and indeed, the total interview with her lacked direction and clarity. Brad talked about how exhausted he was. "I'm getting tired, I'm getting very tired...of either getting bashed around or bashing myself around" (26, 1-2).

For some of the participants, the depth of the emotions was too intense. They were left feeling numb and empty. Ann was so detached from herself, she described her feelings in the second person. "I guess your heart is beating, but that's the extent of it. You're not really alive or vibrant" (15, 7-8). Similarly, Vanessa talks as if the experience was happening outside of herself. She states that prior to midlife crisis she was in love with life but during the worst of her experience, "it was like being a vegetable, I think. In that you're growing, your body is physically doing things, but you don't have any mind...there's nothing there. It's like being in a black hole too, or a gray hole, black has strength to it, gray has nothing to it" (11, 12-16).

The pain of ongoing emotional turmoil leads to a longing for escape, even if it is only for a short period of time. Bonnie says, "Sometimes I wish that I could put it away...just to get a rest from it because it is so agonizing" (12, 4-7). Lisa would like to escape from the needs and opinions of others. She would like to be able to sort through the confusion and indecision in her life without having to feel guilty or consider anyone else: "if I was just making this decision in an absolute vacuum, like no parents, no friends, or even children or spouse. Mind you they are part of the whole scenario but... there would be so much pressure off" (23, 14-17). Ann has moments when she cannot bear her emptiness and isolation. She has considered suicide or running off to a foreign country but realizes that "there is no meaning in escape" (10, 14).

Sean found release from the force of his emotions by painting his experience. One of his paintings was a pair of lips with a drop of blood

oozing out at the corner. He made sense of the image only after he had finished the painting: "it's a closed lips - silence. But there is so much hurt and change and things going on inside; this little drop of blood shows that there's a sign that something is going on inside and that's the turmoil" (28, 22-25).

In response to the emotional upheaval, there is a tendency for those who experience midlife crisis to become increasingly introspective and to withdraw from others. Although this creates much external conflict, one is drawn within to try to understand the internal discomfort, the questioning, and inner conflict. There is a feeling of being separate from others and even from one's own life. There is a feeling of being utterly alone in the experience. Brad speaks about feeling disoriented and confused in terms of his environment and he spends much time contemplating his experience (6, 9). Mandy echoes the thoughts of many when she confesses to feeling very guilty and angry with herself for wasting time on these deep philosophical issues. She wonders what is wrong with her, and frequently scolds herself: "I say, 'Why are you spending all of this energy and time within yourself, thinking about yourself and your life?....I have this nice life, everything's nice, and why are you doing this kind of thing?' And then I get more confused again and wonder why am I so unhappy. Why, why haven't I felt joy for so long?" (16, 2-8). It is as if the two ways of being - mindfulness of being and forgetfulness of being- sit side by side and one doesn't know anymore which is real. The longing for escape is a longing for a return to

the everyday diversions of life, a return to forgetfulness, and a release from the emotional storm.

Changing Relationships: The inner turmoil spills over into other aspects of the external world. Relationships, in particular, become strained and difficult. All participants in the research are engaged in questioning their relationships with others, whether it be spouse, children, parents, siblings, friends, extended family, or even coworkers. The closer and more significant the relationship, the greater the conflict. Many participants express anger and resentment at the demands placed on them by others. Jan, for example, feels trapped by the caretaker role she has assumed in her family. She doesn't know how to extricate herself from her duties because a part of her believes that "everybody would fold up and die if I went away, but of course they wouldn't, I know that" (10, 8-9). Ann wants to run away because she is exhausted caring for her elderly mother and dependent in-laws, but "if I turn and run somewhere, escape somewhere, they wouldn't have nobody else to depend on, they would feel abandoned, and rightfully so" (11, 24-26). Randy feels that he has missed the opportunity for friendships because he has spent his adult life focused on work: "like to find new friends and say 'Hey, we go back a long ways' - well, we don't, we just met" (27, 21-22). Heather longs for a friend who is fifty and can share her interests. During the past several years, Heather has developed a pattern of taking to her bed and withdrawing from the world for long periods of time. She feels guilty knowing that her withdrawal seriously affects her relationship with her husband: "he gets very lonely and very

sad...I can see all that but I just haven't the energy for him" (9, 1-2). Edward is searching for a significant relationship. This need for someone to share his life with, "comes from a deep inner place" (16, 8). Heather, Lisa, Ross and Sandra are questioning whether they want to stay in their marriages. Ann, Michael and Mary are struggling with changing their relationships with their parents.

Aaron has most dramatically experienced conflict within his significant relationships. He is married with five children from his marriage. Aaron left his professional career six years ago and has been studying to become a minister. He fell in love with another woman and fathered a child outside of his marriage. He is now trying to sort through his relationships with his spouse, his lover and his six children. Since the knowledge of his affair and the birth of this child has become public, Aaron has also had to confront relationship issues with his parents, siblings, religious community, friends and neighbors. Aaron describes the disruptive nature of the experience as a "re-birthing process, like being born again. But it's also a total destruction of the person that I was. So there is pain and there is also a deep joy...it's a crazy experience" (8, 18-21).

Questioning Career: The searching and questioning of midlife crisis also extends to the arena of career or life's work. Don walked away from an executive management position with a major company to begin his own business. The precipitating event involved an issue of personal integrity where he had to ask himself, "Do I want to stay with an organization that is this wrong, compared with my vision of the world?" (11, 29-30). His

answer was "No!". He realized that the ongoing issue with the company had created a daily feeling of anger and anxiety and the stress was beginning to take its toll on him. This has been a frightening move for Don; he had worked with this company from the time he graduated from university. Don is now in the process of having to redefine success which is very confusing and unsettling for him. Although he knows that he made the right decision in leaving the company, he is not completely confident in his ability to create his "vision of the world".

One's career is intimately connected to personal identity and life goals. As those in midlife crisis begin to contemplate their way of being in the world, they have no choice but to question their life's work. All of the participants expressed some degree of disruption in their careers in relation to midlife crisis. Jeff is beginning a master's degree while Jan dropped out of a master's degree program without completing it. Heather and Mandy want to leave their careers as nurses. Ann wants to leave her career too; she hasn't enjoyed selling real estate since her father and husband died. Vanessa has been unemployed for a year. She feels ready to return to work but is having difficulty finding a job in her field because she lacks the educational qualifications and few jobs are available. Lisa is desperately searching for a direction but has no idea what she wants to do. Daniel is bored with his several businesses and wants something exciting and different in his life. Reg has toyed with the idea of starting his own business but does not like the risk involved. Sean has left his career as an engineer because he was laid off. He is now coordinating a cultural project

for a third world country. Sandra is thinking of applying for a promotion but this move would have several implications for others areas of her life and she just can't sort through all of the factors to make a decision. Mary has been on leave from her job for the past year and is thinking about resigning her position. Aaron would like to be able to continue his training and career as a minister but his future in the ministry program is uncertain. Career decisions which were once simple and straightforward are now intricately connected to all other aspects of life. In midlife, a career involves issues of personal integrity, the need for creativity and self expression, the desire to contribute in a meaningful way to others and the world, and the need for balance with other aspects of one's life. In midlife, a career involves much more than position and income. As these other significant issues emerge, some disruption must naturally occur in order to realign one's career with the changes within oneself.

Time Running Out: Time is experienced differently in midlife crisis; it seems to speed up and create a sense of urgency. There is a perceived, and sometimes real, pressure to make decisions but decisions are no longer easy to make. The decisions in midlife crisis are different than the ones previously encountered in life. As indicated previously, one becomes aware of the life altering impact of these decisions. Too many factors are now involved, everything is connected to everything else, and too much water has gone under the bridge. Some decisions appear to be insoluble and keep one going around and around in circles. Sandra, for example, feels absolutely stuck. She has recently begun to feel very insecure about

her financial future and would like to begin planning for retirement. Her husband will not participate in the planning. As Sandra explains, "I am feeling more and more trapped and more and more frustrated as I get older, because I have no way of discussing the future. My husband is not open to discussing the future...he won't sit down and discuss things that go on in his head...I suddenly started thinking about how many productive years I have left in terms of earning." (31, 11-30). The sense of urgency intensifies her long-standing need for more communication and intimacy in the marriage. Although she thought she had resolved to stay in her marriage, she is once again considering leaving the marriage to gain some control over the future. The thought of divorce throws her into a greater feeling of insecurity and back to the issues of financial security, pensions, friendships, place of residence, career decisions, custody issues and life goals. Sandra is going around in circles as she sees no way of meeting with her needs for security within the marriage. To leave the marriage, however, would thrust her into the insecurity that she fears the most. The dilemma appears to be insoluble and her whole life feels like it is in turmoil as time continues to slip away.

The sense of time running out causes disruption in other ways. One is forced to recognize the natural limitations of life when diagnosed with a major illness, when dealing with the death of parents or friends, or when the physical signs of aging become apparent. This confrontation with mortality, whether it be direct or indirect, forces one to come to terms with the concept of life itself: "Death reminds us that existence cannot be postponed. And that there is still time for life" (Yalom, 1980, p. 162).

When Bonnie was diagnosed with cancer, she states that "the most outstanding thing I had to face up to was just the simple idea of my own mortality. The fact that I am not always going to be here. That there was a time when I wasn't here, and there will be a time again when I'm not here. And to face up to the fact that it might be sooner rather than later" (9, 1-5). About three months after the initial diagnosis, Bonnie felt the full force of this existential crisis: "it was like bucket after bucket of ice water in my face. That lasted for about three months" (16, 15-16). She describes the experience as being like an "emotional hurricane".

Although others in the study did not have to deal with the imminent possibility of their own deaths, they all felt pressured by the awareness of the limitation of their lives. An awareness of the circumscription of life is an awareness of the possibility that one can alter one's life until (but only until) the endpoint of life - death.

Reg, like others in this study, expresses a tremendous fear of altering his life but the sense of time running out is pushing him to begin moving in this direction. As he says, "Being in midlife, I know what forty years is like....I never thought of dying but now I can see the end of my life, I can project another thirty, forty years. So now I can see an actual spectrum of time in personal experience...It's a real realization...it's scary" (19, 1-9). Reg's grandparents died ten years ago and some friends his age are dying. These deaths are having a great impact on him: "When you're young you don't know anybody who's died, but as you get older, there's people I've known that have passed away and that has come as a real shock" (19, 18-20).

What he finds frightening about death is that it is irreversible and after death it is too late to do the things he might have wanted to do: "I have this nightmare that one day I'm going to be sort of dying and I am going to come to this realization...I am going to see what I really want to do in life" (20, 4-7). The sense of urgency is building for Reg. He is aware of a declining confidence in his abilities, of experiencing mood swings, of being unable to continue to ignore the glaring problems in his marriage, and of spending more and more time looking back on life. He questions whether or not he has succeeded in life and if he presently has a good life. He feels a sense of panic as he wonders if he has done the really important things in life: "You chase after all of these material things and then once you achieve a certain level of these material things, all of a sudden they're not that important anymore" (8, 18-20). Reg knows that his life cannot continue in this way for much longer. He knows he has to make some major decisions, particularly regarding his marriage: "I know that I can't continue on the way that I'm feeling. There comes a time when you've got to bite the bullet, have some courage and do something in life" (21, 16-18).

Once midlife crisis begins, the disruption has a "snowball" effect and eventually includes all aspects of a person's life. The breaking loose of the previously static and habitual ways of being in the world begins a process whereby the very foundation of one's life is challenged. One's self, as a human being, is placed under a microscope. Past, present and future come under glaring scrutiny. The results are often surprising, humbling and enlightening.

The Revealing Power of Midlife Crisis

As the familiar foundation of one's life slips away, one is forced to come to terms with oneself. Perhaps for the first time in life, one stops "doing" and concentrates on "being". Values, beliefs and behavior patterns are re-evaluated, dichotomies between beliefs and behaviors become apparent, and the past is re-examined for clues to the present and to serve as a guide for the future. What has always been taken for granted is now seen as questionable, changeable or illusory. One struggles to understand who one is and how one has come to be. One begins to become conscious of one's life.

Values Clarification: Don has always felt successful in his life. Since Don quit his high-level executive job, however, he has found himself continually having to redefine "success". Don used to measure success by his position and his annual income but this definition no longer applies to his circumstances. He is president of his own company but head office is in his basement and he hasn't made much money yet. Don is also questioning his definition of a successful parent. He used to define a successful parent as one who had successful children but this definition isn't working anymore, either. He has been in ongoing conflict with his adolescent son who continues to have problems in school. As he says, "I've always had the answers. In the case of my son, I don't have the answers. In the case of where I'm going right now, I don't have the answers" (18, 19-21). Don realizes that he must now define success differently and this shift is hard for

him to make because his lifelong patterns get in the way. He notices that he is changing. In terms of his career, "there is not that intensity. There is very much this kind of reaching out and being more concerned about the family; being less willing to brush them off for a day or a week" (21, 20-22). He is sorting through the question of what a successful father is and finds that the definition given him by his father does not hold up under close scrutiny. "A successful father, in the model I've been dealing with, is very much in the success of the children. And yet, when I look back at my own father, there's a lot of things I see in him that I don't like...but nevertheless he's always defined his success as a father by my brother's and my success" (29, 16-24). The familiar pillars that guided Don's life in the past are no longer sufficient. He is in new territory and he must construct new supports.

Sean is also defining success differently. He left a professional career last year because he was laid off. Although Sean has a Master's degree in engineering, he is presently putting together a cultural project for implementation in the Ukraine as part of that country's move towards democracy. Sean sees himself as being very much in a transitional period in his life. He describes himself as being torn; "sometimes when I think only in terms of money, I see that my life has been a 'write-off'. When I think of growth, caring for other people, spiritual things, I think my life is very successful" (12, 16-19). He is aware of changing his values, gaining more confidence in his abilities, and feeling more comfortable with his choices. "The balance is definitely shifting more to the new way of

thinking and the new way of looking at the world. Every now and again there is a relapse" (13, 2-4).

Brad is wrestling with the issue of being selfish versus acting in his own self interest. "What I'm trying to do is say it's okay to act in your own self interest. It's absolutely, perfectly okay. It's not being selfish if you want to do this or that, or the other thing...you don't have to conform to the script, to the role of provider, father, husband, lover, son, whatever" (28, 21-30). Brad is realizing that these scripts are all value based and come with familial and cultural expectations. His central conflict is between living by his old beliefs - the beliefs he was raised with - or choosing beliefs which serve him. Coupled with this struggle is a lack of trust in his ability to choose for himself. Brad has been divorced once and is now separated from his second wife. He does not assume responsibility for his first divorce because his wife was the one who left him and initiated the divorce. Brad's fundamental belief is that divorce is wrong. Choosing divorce seems like a selfish act even though he knows that his second marriage was a mistake and that he can no longer live in that situation. He describes his beliefs as "old school thinking" (39, 19). Brad was able to rationalize his position after his first divorce, but he is now unable to reconcile his behavior and his beliefs. His present beliefs are untenable and he is becoming aware of the dichotomy between his behavior and his beliefs. Something has to change. Brad must either remain married, try to rationalize a second divorce, or change his beliefs.

Existential Concerns: As those in midlife crisis re-evaluate their life structure, clarify values, and begin to see themselves clearly, each must come to grips with one or all of the fundamental existential concerns of life: 1) death, 2) freedom, 3) isolation, and 4) meaninglessness (Yalom, 1980). This confrontation seems to be the heart of midlife crisis and indeed, of a conscious life itself. As indicated previously, Yalom suggests that this confrontation is catalyzed by boundary situations. The multitude of factors which converge on an individual at midlife, the gradual awareness of the circumscription of life, and the necessity of deep personal reflection in the face of these overwhelming concerns provide fertile ground for the discovery of the nature of the givens of existence.

1. Death: Death is the most obvious existential concern. A confrontation with death may be entirely personal and immediate, as in the life of Bonnie who was diagnosed with cancer. It may be secondary, as in the lives of Mary and Ann whose husbands died. Or, it may be even somewhat further removed: as in the life of Jeff whose midlife crisis erupted when a friend's baby died in childbirth, as in the life of Edward whose significant relationship died a slow death, or as in the life of Reg who started to think about death when his grandparents and some of his birth cohorts died.

In most situations, however, the confrontation with death has more to do with reaching the crest of life and being able to see the beginning and the end of one's life simultaneously. The participants all talked about reviewing their life, re-evaluating their direction, questioning the values that

had sustained them to this point in their lives, and contemplating how they wanted to live the rest of their life. Jacques (1965), in his essay, "Death and the Mid-life Crisis", emphasizes that the individual in midlife is particularly susceptible to death anxiety. A mature adult engaged in self-exploration must come to terms with the decline that is inevitable in the aging process. Having spent the first half of life achieving the prescribed goals encouraged by society, one reaches the prime of life only to become aware that personal death lies beyond. A confrontation with death is a confrontation with life. Randy, who is tired of the burden of being a "cash cow" and chasing after material success, realizes he has reached a critical point in midlife. The decisions he makes now will determine how he lives the rest of his life. He describes his present way of being as a "tunnel, and it has a length and I can go the distance but I don't feel that that's what I want to do" (28, 22-23). He goes on to explain: "I look at fifteen years, and boy it's gone really quickly and the next fifteen years could probably go quickly, but then I'm at, (pause) maybe I'll live longer than my father did, but I'll be up near the end. I want more out of it between now and that point" (30, 14-17). The reality of impending death is forcing Randy to pay attention to his life. Awareness of one's personal death is what gives one's life meaning and authenticity and abruptly shifts one's perspective to the "ontological mode". In this state of mindfulness of being, one is mindful not only of the fragility and finite nature of being, but mindful too of the inherent responsibility of self-creation.

2. Freedom: To be aware of the responsibility of self-creation is "to be aware of creating one's own self, destiny, life predicament, feelings and, if such be the case, one's own suffering" (Yalom, 1980, p.218). Freedom, in this sense has terrifying implications. It means that one must decide how one is to live. There is no inherent design or pattern for being; the foundation of one's life is not a given, it is chosen. This is the meaning of co-constitutionality which is central to the contextual worldview. For some participants, this awareness of the freedom to choose one's life is like a rebirth or a new beginning, while for others, it is a shocking and frightening realization. Aaron discovered repressed aspects of himself through an extramarital relationship and is now able to pay attention to who he is and questioning how he wants to live his life. He has become conscious of his responsibility to create his own life. Aaron must decide how he will resolve the relationship with his wife and the woman he had an affair with. He refers to his mistress as "the woman I fell in love with". The boundary experience of a life-changing decision has forced him to confront his responsibility for who he is, for what he has already created in his life, and for what he wants to create in the future. Aaron is grappling with the magnitude of the implications of this responsibility: "I guess the issue for me is that in order to relate to my wife in the long run, if I have to accept an unhealthy situation, then I have to enter into a kind of denial (of who he is). I don't know whether I will be able to do that...I'm quite frightened. I feel I am shattered as a person - who I was no longer existing - and I'm rebuilding myself" (29,4-20). Rebuilding is a conscious activity.

Sean spent much of his life trying to please his family in order to gain their attention, love and approval. He extended this behavior pattern into his marital relationship. "I was her, I was like a parrot. That relationship ended when I ceased to be a parrot and look after her totally" (8, 22-24). Sean sees himself in transition. "It's like the first half of my life happened and I'm looking back at it....right here, it is in limbo. Looking back at what happened before and looking ahead to what I want to happen, and I'm not sure what is possible yet" (8, 4-12). He is entering the second half of his life quite differently, exploring and choosing how he wants to live. "I'm starting to do what I want to do, and having some confidence in doing it. So I think for the first time in my life I'm starting to be an individual, and have a life, and that I'm responsible for my life" (13, 7-10). Sean is describing the freedom associated with responsibility whereby one realizes that one has the freedom to choose one's way of being in the world.

The desire to avoid the responsibility of self-creation is a central struggle for all participants. Ann had lived the first half of her life being defined by the roles of wife, mother and daughter. When her father and husband died and her children moved away, Ann was left caring for her elderly mother and in-laws. She is now exhausted, emotionally drained and struggling to get through each day. Ann is terrified of taking responsibility for creating her life and defining herself. The only options she sees are to escape to another country, be offered a job in another city which would give her an excuse to leave, or the death of her mother and in-laws. There is no one left to take care of Ann and she is unable to take care of herself by

defining who she is and how she wants to live her life. Until she does this, Ann will be driven by the expectations of her mother and in-laws, her sociocultural roles of woman, daughter and daughter-in-law, and her parental values which stipulate that in order to be considered a good person, she must sacrifice her life for others. By taking responsibility for others, Ann avoids taking responsibility for herself.

Lisa is very aware of her avoidance of creating her own life and would be much more comfortable if others would take responsibility for her decisions. She is considering leaving her marriage but is frightened of the consequences. She realizes that because of her fear, she has tried to get her husband to make the decision for her. "I began to wonder if I couldn't make the decision to leave, maybe I'd make it that he'd want me to leave...I was being very cold and all of that. Of course that's a ridiculous thing to do but I did it" (28, 24-28). Lisa is starting to see that her marital relationship may not be the primary issue. "I think there's two things here; there's the relationship and there's me dealing with what I want to do. I think I have been using (pause) I've been blaming my husband instead of just taking responsibility for myself" (31, 2-5). Lisa recognizes her habitual pattern of expecting others to define her and is beginning to shift her perspective. When one realizes that no external structure or person can determine one's personal boundaries, then one is forced to assume responsibility for creating those boundaries for oneself.

3. Isolation: The confrontation with death and freedom in midlife crisis inevitably leads one to a confrontation with existential isolation.

Existential isolation is a difficult concept to describe. Existential isolation is distinct from interpersonal isolation whereby one is disconnected from others, or intrapersonal isolation whereby one is disconnected from parts of oneself. Existential isolation is a fundamental separateness from others and the world, "an unbridgeable gulf between oneself and any other being" (Yalom, 1980, p. 355). One comes into this world alone and one must die alone. To the extent that one is aware of the responsibility for creating one's life, one is alone. Yalom suggests that one enters into "isolation denial" by clinging to relationships with others. Ann is having great difficulty letting go of those she lost through death. After Ann's father and husband died, she no longer felt safe in the world. "I loved my dad and I loved my husband. They gave me security without my ever knowing it at the time. They gave me a security that the world was safe, and now I know it isn't. They loved me and as long as you're loved, you just carry on and do what you want to do that makes you happy" (18, 19-28).

The experience of existential isolation is extremely uncomfortable and cannot be tolerated for long. Daniel has been living with his fear just underneath the surface of everyday awareness. Although he does not know why, he is terrified of being alone and consciously works at never being in a situation where he is alone. He cannot rid himself of this primordial fear because his aloneness is within. His awareness of being separate from the world creeps up on him at night, "Sometimes when I go to bed and the lights are out, I wonder, 'How come I'm here? Where am I going to go from here?' You know, if I started to walk, and I walk past Mars and all of these

other planets, where is the end? You know, what is the universe, how come I'm so lucky to be here instead of on Mars?...I never come up with a reason or an answer, but it's just sort of a haunting, haunting thought...Where's the wall, where's the end of the universe? It's a frightening thought - but, you know, how big is it? Where are the limits - there are no limits?" (12, 1-16). The universe is indifferent to our individual lives and there is no rescuer to shield us from existence. In the face of this vast abyss stretching to eternity, it is understandable that a need for control, or boundaries, or limitations, or structure becomes a primary issue in midlife.

Until one is challenged by the fundamental issues of existence, there is an illusory belief in one's power to control the forces of nature and society. When one shifts into the ontological mode and confronts the issue of existential isolation, one becomes aware of being separate from, and unable to grasp the world. At this point one re-examines religious faith or spiritual beliefs. One is challenged by the opportunity to make the shift from need (in terms of needing a supreme being to act as shepherd in one's life), to choice (consciously choosing one's spiritual beliefs). Brad describes the shift in this way: "I just got to a point where I said, 'I'm just going to give this (religious faith) all up because I can't handle it any more. I mean it's out of my control.' And I just realized, 'Hell, you didn't have any control over it in the first place' " (36, 22-24). When asked if he had a need for this sense of control, Brad replied, "Oh sure, you bet, I've got hands on all the leaders. The leaders aren't connected to anything but you've got that need there, that's right! That insight, realization, whatever, has been very

profound, very profound - extremely helpful in keeping things on track" (37, 3-7). Accompanying the loss of one's illusory grip on the world in midlife crisis is a loss of meaning and direction in one's life. If one has no control over others or the world and if there is no "right" way to be, then where is the meaning in one's life?

4. Meaninglessness: This existential conflict stems from the human condition of one's need for meaning within a universe that has no meaning. Individuals must construct their own personal meaning in life. When one questions the meaning of one's life, one questions the very foundations on which life rests. Victor Frankl (1969), who has devoted his career to a study of "meaning therapy", concludes that the lack of meaning is the primary source of existential stress. In midlife crisis, that which has previously given life meaning is exposed and found to be thin and shallow. What is exposed is the transitory and superficial nature of sociocultural roles and values. One is led to believe that one is what one does and that the measure of what one is, is determined by the amount of what is accumulated in terms of accolades, people or material possessions. In midlife crisis, the challenge is to transcend the narrow, externally determined definition of meaning and to integrate one's "meaning of my life" with the cosmic "meaning of life". A search for meaning is a search for coherence. The coherence begins within the individual and extends outward to include the individual's place within the cosmos. As one consciously assumes responsibility for self creation, the next important step outward is to grapple with the question of one's spirituality. One begins to

distinguish between religion and spirituality. For example, when Edward was asked what gave his life meaning, he struggled to clarify his thoughts: "I waiver on the question a lot, because again what gets mixed up is the religious stuff. More and more I believe that the meaning of life is what takes place in the present, and your relationship with others, your relationship with your environment, your relationship with everything. Especially seeing my mother dying now and knowing that every day is a precious day" (23, 15-20). Edward is trying to distinguish what he has been told should be the meaning of life, from a personally constructed meaning which is slowly emerging and which he hopes will bring coherence to both his inner and outer life.

Like Edward, John has spent much of his adult life searching for inner peace. He has been through two previous marriages, serious physical and emotional illness, numerous career changes, and several moves to different parts of the country. He returned to university and completed a degree a few years ago and has started his own business. John now realizes that he needed to take responsibility for his life. "I needed to feel successful in life based on my own input...My business is built solely on my own. My degree was a product of solely my own input. Those are the things which I have total claim to, I've put away all the old ghosts" (25, 12-22). John finds this a very comfortable stage to be at. "I feel comfortable in my skin, it's okay to be forty-three, it's okay to live where I live. I like where I live and who I live with...I was always trying to find some place where I felt comfortable. I had to feel comfortable within my body and myself" (35, 5-

14). He now believes that the meaning of his life is to "effect change as best I can amongst those people that I love and are close to me. I can't change global politics, global ecology but I can change the quality of life for myself, my children, my wife, my business partner, employees and my friends" (33, 8-12).

Jeff has spent all of his adult life involved in an organized religion and he and his wife lived in a church sponsored Intentional Community for several years. Jeff did not want to leave the community but did so in order to "preserve my relationship with my wife". Jeff describes his leaving as a very painful process in which he felt forced to sacrifice his goals and ideals in order to keep his marriage. He is now re-examining his relationship with the church and the Intentional Community and realizing that this community was the only place where he could be "dependent, that I could be taken care of, where I could trust that I wouldn't be abandoned by those who are caring"(10, 3-5). He is finding the process of sorting through his relationship with the church very freeing. His spiritual beliefs are now more focused and more congruent; his personal relationship with God is more authentic. "I find God a lot more life-giving than life-sustaining or as just being there....Now I see Him as much more essential and there is more energy than there was before because I see life a lot differently than before. That's where the energy comes from" (19, 9-14). Previously Jeff defined his life's purpose as giving to and sacrificing for others but now he is content to "wait and see what happens and see how things work out because I guess I observe a lot more miraculous things happening. Like the trees

seem more lively, they have more life and the moon looks so much more alive...before I felt that it was necessary to make things happen and now it's okay to wait and see things happen and I can participate in life more than drive it" (20, 1-12). Before his midlife crisis, Jeff continually tried to please others and was driven by his needs for security and love and approval. In discovering his inner self, he now participates in life more fully and authentically. He is now able to 'connect with people' because he is more comfortable being himself. He is more connected to himself. Like his relationship with God, Jeff's personal relationships are formed out of choice rather than need. He no longer blames his wife for his feelings of anger and loss of the Intentional Community, and is more able to be fully present in his marital relationship. His wife is appreciating the changes in him and Jeff is optimistic about their future together. "I see some possibility of growth to happen in our relationship over the next couple of years" (14, 18-19).

The need for personal and cosmic meaning stems from one's fear of responsibility for creating one's life and the desire to be connected to the world. It is the existential confrontation with death, however, that offers salvation - death gives life a limit or boundary. Death gives life meaning. When one stares at the reality of personal death, it becomes imperative to ask, "How shall I live?". When one embraces the deep and personal nature of the answer required by this question, one becomes free to transcend sociocultural prescriptions and to assume authorship of one's life. The answer to the question, "How shall I live?' is not the creation of new goals

or scripts, but opening to the experience of participating in life for the sake of life itself: "One must immerse oneself in the river of life and let the question drift away" (Yalom, 1980, p.483).

Individuation: As one enters into the "ontological mode" or the state of mindfulness of being, one views the totality of his or her being from a new vantage point. Self creation is not only possible, it has already happened and will continue to happen. In order to consciously assume authorship of one's life, one must do more than choose one's values. One must, at some level, reconcile the past with the present and the duality of existence itself. As Yalom (1980) explains: "In this state, one becomes fully self aware - aware of oneself as a transcendental (constituting) ego as well as an empirical (constituted) ego; one embraces one's possibilities and limits" (p.31). The process of reconciliation is a process of individuation. It is one of the paradoxes of human existence. To individuate is to separate and define oneself as distinct from others; yet one is never totally separate from others nor does one ever want to be totally separate. There is a fundamental and inescapable connection with all that is contained in the universe. In midlife crisis, individuation involves clarifying these fluid boundaries between oneself and others, between past and present, and coming to terms with one's humanness.

The participants in this study express great confusion about the boundaries between self and others. Some, like Brad, have difficulty distinguishing between being selfish and acting in their own self interest. Others, like Jan and Sean, have assumed lifelong roles of taking care of

others to gain love and approval. Jan has taken on many different caretaker roles in her life while keeping her private self very much hidden from others. She has allowed others' needs to define her and to determine her life experience. As she states, "You know, like I haven't been a liar, but I have been things for people that I'm not, and I want to be finished with that" (9, 22-24). Jan was in a Masters degree program in Theological Studies but left the program because there were too many competing demands on her time. She wants to finish the program but realizes that "In a sense you're responsible for what you have built up around you...I have played a large part in that, and there are people with real needs. I was going to say that everybody would fold up and die if I went away but of course they wouldn't" (10, 4-11). Jan is unable to separate herself from others. She feels responsible for them and in assuming this responsibility, she avoids having to separate from others or assume responsibility for defining herself.

Sean has spent much time thinking about his relationship with his family and friends and clarifying his responsibility for himself within the context of these relationships. He simply became exhausted in his role of taking care of others and trying to be what they wanted him to be. "I don't have the energy to do it anymore. When you're young you've got a lot of energy. You can do things, you can push yourself a lot harder. Now I don't have that energy. I can't go and help all of the people and then stay up late at night and do my own stuff, there just isn't enough energy to do it....I guess I'm starting to see the people around me as they are, not the way I want them to be. Seeing the world as it is, rather than the way I wanted it to be"

(14, 20-27). In seeing the world as it is, Sean is seeing that he is separate from others and that he must stand alone. He cannot express who he really is and still be approved of by his family. He now accepts that "there isn't someone that I can talk to in my family. I can talk to friends and someone like yourself, strangers. I can be more open and expressive with them. My family can't listen without feeling that they are responsible for my feelings. So it's very much a loneliness" (16, 1-5). He now knows that in his expression of who he is, he does not need the approval of others but he still needs to be connected to others: "they're my feelings, all I need is acknowledgment" (17, 22-23).

Sean and Jan are separating themselves from others and defining who they are. In their need for love and approval they, like many others in the study, conformed to cultural or familial expectations and fused their sense of self with others. In contrast, Daniel is too separate from others - separate to the point where intimate connection is presently impossible. Daniel is a very successful businessman who is absolutely bored with everything in his life. He describes himself as a loner who really doesn't want anyone "interfering in his life". He doesn't want anyone to know his private self because, "first of all, I don't think they're interested and secondly, if they did maybe they won't think I'm the person that they think I am...I really don't want anyone to know more about me" (28, 7-14). Daniel has explored all aspects of the business and social world but has yet to explore the world of who he is. Because he is unable or unwilling to intimately know himself, he is unable to form intimate relationships with others. He has

lived his life in the world of things and appearances. Daniel is locked within the prison of himself, the illusory boundaries so firmly in place that he is inaccessible even to himself.

The central challenge of Daniel's midlife crisis is the choice between the "engaged life or the spectator's life". To be engaged in life, to honorably assume responsibility for who one is and what one has created, and to accept the limitations and the tragic dimensions of existence, is to embrace the essence of human experience. The human experience is a humbling experience. In the process of individuation one must stand alone and come to terms with oneself in the present. As Sam Keen explains, "either we go toward decision, risk, action, individuation, guilt, self-definition, forgiveness, the joy of being a person, or toward indecision, security, conformity, shame, 'innocence', boredom, superiority" (1992, p.97). This is a pivotal point in midlife crisis: does one stay in the safe, familiar but increasingly dissatisfying and untenable world that one has known in the first half of life, or does one plunge into the engaged life with all its risks and pitfalls? It is this challenge that sets the stage for developmental change in midlife crisis.

Developmental Change in Midlife Crisis

The paradigm is shifting. In midlife crisis, one experiences dramatic changes in the relations between various aspects of one's self and between one's self and the world. Fundamental beliefs upon which one engages the world are being reevaluated, the existential concerns of life are being

confronted, represses aspects of the self are emerging and need to be integrated, and the boundaries between one's self and others are being redrawn. In spite of oneself, things are changing. One increasingly becomes aware of the need to move forward and to respond to these changes and new perspectives.

Midlife crisis is a process, not an event. Although the nature of the phenomenological methodology is such that one captures the essence of the experience, one cannot ignore that each participant is at a somewhat different place in the process of the experience. Some are stuck in the emotional upheaval, some are discovering new aspects of themselves and new ways of being, and others are beginning to actively respond to their experience. The multiple levels of context of one's life are dramatically shifting in midlife crisis and creating unbearable tension. Developmental change is inevitable.

The participants are responding in four different ways to the disruptive and revealing power of midlife crisis: 1) some are overwhelmed, confused and immobilized by the emotional upheaval of the experience, 2) some are trying to avoid or control the mounting inner turmoil by making deliberate changes in the external world, 3) some are trying to change themselves and adapt to the changes in the external world at a controlled and comfortable pace, and 4) some are surrendering to the experience by allowing full expression of their inner selves, and trusting and welcoming the inevitable changes external world.

Heather is stuck in the emotional turmoil of the experience. She is a nurse who identifies frequent episodes of depression and withdrawal as the major indicators of her experience of midlife crisis. She dreaded turning fifty years old on her last birthday. "I was in the biggest state in the world about turning fifty. I had visions of going uphill until fifty and you drop off a cliff...I was in a bad space for a year before I turned fifty, so fifty had some significance" (6, 6-10). She describes the incidents that trigger her depressions as "unimportant" or "minor" and has little recall of them. As she says, "I blank it all out, I just block it out. It doesn't exist once I am out of it...I'd like to think there is another person doing that, I know there isn't but I like to think that it is somebody else" (10, 5-15). Heather is unable to move forward in her experience, "I know I'm not clinically depressed, there's just something I need to be doing and I don't know how to do it, or whether to let myself do it or what" (31, 3-5). Heather describes her mother as a very critical person and says her father rejected her because she was like her mother. In her depressions, Heather finds herself mired in self criticism, "I need to get past that, feeling really sorry for myself and being really critical of myself" 31, 19-20). Even though Heather knows that she needs to come to terms with her ghosts from the past in order to overcome them, she has been unable to do so. She is extremely unhappy as a nurse and can only tolerate working in her position for two days a week. The dichotomy between her beliefs and behavior frightens her. "I don't know what damage it's doing. I don't know what I'm burying, I know if I do three days (of nursing) I die. It just worries me what damage I'm doing to myself,

to whom I am trying to become or where I'm going. It is like an anchor that holds me down or what I am burying. If you want to bury things, I'm the expert on it. I should have a degree in that, I think" (59, 13-20). She has buried her real self so deeply, she is afraid that she is dying inside. Heather is not optimistic about ever feeling whole and complete and healthy within. "It just seems like an uphill battle. I sometimes get depressed and say 'You either have it or you don't'. And I don't, so what's the use" (52, 18-20). She has almost given up and feels she has little, if any, control over the outcome of her experience.

Unlike Heather, Daniel believes he does have control over his experience even though he wishes that "everything would have kept on at the same pace it was going up until three, four, or five years ago" (42, 12-13). He has no understanding of the reasons for his boredom and "internal tension", but he certainly knows how to solve a problem: "I think now I've got to look at it and say, 'Okay, here's the situation and I'm going to make some changes', which I've already started to make" (42, 14-16). Daniel is seriously thinking of selling his business and getting into another career, he has already sold his house and moved into a condominium so that he has more freedom to move around, he is going to stop seeing some people socially because he finds them very boring, he is going to have more medical checkups and be more physically active, he wants to have an affair, he wants to take up some new hobbies, he wants to become a director of some company because that would be "a hell of a learning career", and he is moving his offices because he is tired of being in the same environment and

taking the same route to work every day. Daniel considers politics to be the ultimate career. Although he believes he is well qualified for political office, he will not try it because "I'm not a good public speaker and I get really unhappy if somebody challenges me, like you see politicians being challenged, somebody booing and hissing - I don't think I could handle that" (44, 3-7). Daniel is willing to risk his professional self but not his personal self. He is willing to change everything but himself and his way of being in the world. There is a frantic quality to his efforts to manage his experience of midlife crisis. One gets the feeling that he is trying to control the uncontrollable, and that at some point he will no longer be able to push back the internal tension building within.

Bonnie, like most of the participants in the study, is quite willing to respond to the need for change in midlife crisis but she wants that change to take place at her own pace. She wants to understand what is happening to her, to reason it out intellectually, and to choose her response. She wants to control the experience so that it will not overwhelm her even though she will admit to frequently feeling overwhelmed. Bonnie is in the process of exploring and reconciling the dualities of existence that characterize her experience. Bonnie is learning many things about herself and about life through her experience of midlife crisis: "I've learned that I can get through some tortuous times. I'm more appreciative, I have a much changed attitude toward daily life. I find myself grateful and I say thank you to God every morning for letting me open my eyes...That sort of focused awareness is new, a direct result of all this stuff" (32, 24-33). Although surgery and

chemotherapy have supposedly removed the cancer, she still doesn't trust her body or her own judgment about her physical health. She is struggling with issues of control and responsibility. "I'm trying to not waste energy. Like controlling outcomes, which is another thing I'm having trouble with, but I'm still working on it. Control, and taking responsibility for things that aren't mine. It's all mixed up together somehow...that, plus redefining the boundaries because I tend to take too much responsibility" (34- 35, 17-22, 5-6). Bonnie is living her life quite differently now and is still in the process of making personal inner changes and learning more about how she wants to be. She is trying to live consciously and incorporate her learning into daily living. She is trying to maximize who she is as a person, but "I'm not trying to be perfect either. I don't want to be perfect anymore. There was a time when I did, but I don't even want that anymore" (36, 8-11). Bonnie is working at being more self-determined, listening to the voice of her inner self, and "I'm trying to be more gentle with me too, because I'm pretty hard on me sometimes" (38, 5-6). She is thankful that the relationships she has with friends have changed and deepened through her experience, and that she is now more able to allow others to give to her as she has always given to them. And, although she was forced to come to terms with her existential aloneness through her illness, there is a newly discovered comfort in realizing that she is a part of a larger whole. "Just your human experiences can connect you with other people" (39, 8-9). Bonnie knows that her midlife crisis is not over - it has become an ongoing process of sorting through her humanly nature and the givens of human

existence. There is still fear, guilt and self-recrimination, but there is also strength and forgiveness of oneself and of others. There is still giving to others, but there is also replenishing oneself. There is sadness, loss, anger, and hurt, but there is also joy, wonder, pleasure and love. There is separateness and insecurity, but there is also connection and intimacy. For Bonnie, life is becoming a rich, fascinating and multidimensional experience, as well as a fragile experience. "It has made me more conscious of the transience of life. It comes back to the existential stuff, the fact that I'm not always going to be here and that my end might be sooner rather than later" (41, 10-13).

Unlike most of the others in the study, Michael is willingly going with the experience of midlife crisis and does not feel a need to control or slow down the process. In the past couple of years, Michael has found himself becoming more assertive. He is more willing to honestly express himself even though others may not agree with him or approve of him. He's not sure how this process began. "I don't know which comes first, the chicken or the egg. It's hard to understand when you're going through it or as it's happening. A lot of this stuff I didn't really understand until I kind of turned around and looked back and I can see some of these pieces where they started to fall into place or come together. It's a very strange perception or understanding of how it develops. There's nothing in my life that I have ever experienced or been exposed to that has had as much impact and I had almost no control over it...for people who are control freaks, it must be a spooky deal. To see a lot of things that you've done all

of your life; you start to understand them. Some of them come together, some of them fall all apart" (10, 1-18). Although the onset of midlife crisis began gradually, the separation from his wife forcefully propelled him into a reassessment of himself and his life. Michael is finding the changes both frightening and exciting. He realizes that he has been very work-oriented, responsible, externally controlled, and always trying to do the "right" things. Now, "I have more appreciation for people who have a sense of 'we don't know what's going to happen tomorrow, we may not be here tomorrow'.....I want to have a little fun, I want to do some different things, I want to meet some different people" (11, 23-28). Michael is consciously sorting through his values and taking the time to assess how his values impact his life. He has become more careful and selective in the values that he chooses to guide his life. He is questioning his habitual behavior patterns and asking himself whether his behavior is consciously chosen or whether it is being determined by cultural expectations, family pressures, or simply old habits. He is also looking at past events and seeing the effects these events have had on how he lives his life in the present. Michael realizes that some of his behavior is due to the fact that he has been trying to carry on some of his father's unfulfilled tasks. For the first time in his life, Michael is taking the time to stop and choose how he wants to live. "Instead of running around in these circles that are going even wider and faster, I'm taking some time and being honest with myself and saying, 'What would I like to do?' Setting aside all of these outside influences, pressures and asking, 'What would I like to do? What am I? What are my values?

Who am I?' " (13, 4-9). Although Michael does not have any regrets for the way he has lived his life in the past, he no longer wants to live his life reacting to the world around him. He feels fortunate to have done the things he has done but now he wants to improve his life, to expand his knowledge, experiences and understanding of himself. He acknowledges that he has gone through periods of being angry with his family, the educational system, the church and religion in general, the cultural expectations he was raised with (which include the expectations of being a man and being a first-born child), and the historical influences of being a post-war baby boomer. In a strange way, his separation from his wife has freed him from the constraints of his social roles and allowed him to shift to the ontological perspective. In trying to understand how all of these influences have come to shape his life, Michael is now more accepting of himself and others and more able to freely choose his way of being in the world. This gradual awareness of choice is somewhat disconcerting. "I've got a whole bunch of things that I'd like to do, that I'm interested in, but as for one specific thing - like that's spooky. You get to be forty-two years old and don't know what you want to do...In the middle of the night sometimes that's a little scary" (28, 7-15).

Michael is getting used to this feeling of being open to whatever happens in the future and going with his experience. "One thing I have learned is that if I try and rush a bunch of this stuff, it doesn't happen" (34, 1-2). Although many issues, including his marriage, are still unresolved, he realizes that he needs to go with his experience and trust in the process of

life. As he explains, "Instead of like in the past where I would be fighting against it or working harder against it or swimming upstream, I am starting to understand it and work with things" (36, 5-7). Michael describes his experience as a midlife "discovery" and says that "as tough as it is at times, I get pretty excited" (41, 7-8). All of this is new for him and "really different because I was brought up where you never got excited, nobody showed any emotion, nobody hugged or gave kisses, or held hands, or anything like that so this is really different" (41, 10-12). Michael is enjoying exploring and freely expressing his full human nature.

Developmental change in response to midlife crisis is inevitable. One's paradigm or fundamental way of being in the world is stretching to a breaking point. For those participants that are stuck in the experience of emotional upheaval and ongoing turmoil, it may be that they just have not reached that critical point where the old paradigm becomes untenable and must give way to a new one. The same may be true for those who try to exert absolute control over the external world while ignoring the need for a paradigm shift in the inner world. Both of these ways of managing the experience of midlife crisis are what O'Connor and Wolfe (1991) define as a "cycle of development". Both of these ways of being in midlife crisis utilize habitual and established processes of adjustment and meaning-making. In a cycle of development many aspects of one's life may be changing but one's central way of being in the world remains unchanged. The participants who are involved in a cycle of development are not optimistic about the outcome of their experience of midlife crisis. They all

expressed a wish that their lives had not changed and they are not confident that their lives will be better as a result of this experience.

For those participants in the study who are in the process of gradually or completely surrendering to the experience of midlife crisis, there is evidence of what O'Connor and Wolfe (1991) call a "spiral of development". In a spiral of development the adaptive capacity of the established paradigm has been pushed beyond its limits and the old paradigm is giving way. At the same time, a new paradigm is in the process of being constructed. Those participants who are letting go of the established paradigm in a gradual and controlled way seem to be more uncomfortable with uncertainty, have a greater need for a feeling of control, and a greater need for a sense of continuity as they proceed through developmental change. Those who are able to surrender to the experience are somewhat more comfortable with the issue of trust. They are more trusting of their adaptive abilities and are more able to trust in the process of life. The participants in a spiral of development are very optimistic about the outcome of the experience of midlife crisis and believe that this experience will enhance their lives.

The Structure of Midlife Crisis

The description of the essential structure of the experience of midlife crisis is presented in Table 4-2, found at the end of this chapter (p. 115-116). This description, which captures the themes of the experience, was given to each co-researcher in a follow-up interview approximately four

months after the initial interview. Participants were asked to read the description and comment on how well it 'fit' with their experience. The responses of the participants validated and affirmed this description. Many were surprised at their emotional response to reading the description. Several commented that it was like being right back in the turmoil of the experience. Many noted that in the intervening four months, they had moved beyond the emotional storm of the experience. Don stated that he began skimming the description, had to slow down by the second paragraph, and by the end of reading it he had such a gut level reaction to the content that he felt out of breath. Sean said that he felt naked and vulnerable as he was reading the description. Mandy and several others were surprised and relieved to know that nineteen others shared their experience and that this experience had a name. Others were somewhat embarrassed to find their inner selves revealed. Most participants commented that the initial interview had a positive impact on them and contributed to their feeling more comfortable with their experience. None of the participants reported any negative effects from their participation in the research. One participant indicated that the initial interview had caused him to think more deeply about his experience and he was considering continuing this exploration through individual counseling.

Developmental changes were also apparent during the second interview. Most participants spoke about changes they had undergone since the previous interview; some had made major changes in the various contexts of their lives, while others had made small but noticeable changes. Several

of the participants looked physically different in the second interview. They looked brighter, more lively and happy, more relaxed, and spoke positively about themselves and the future. They had obviously made some developmental changes which contributed to their well-being. Because the purpose of the second interview was to validate the description of the experience of midlife crisis, changes since the first interview were not discussed in depth.

Summary of the Experience of Midlife Crisis

Midlife crisis is a turbulent and emotionally exhausting experience which either creeps up on a person, or suddenly begins as a result of a traumatic event. A multitude of life experiences converge upon an individual in midlife which create the force required to shift one from a state of forgetfulness to a state of mindfulness of being. When this shift occurs, one loses one's familiar grip on the world. Few adults expect to find themselves so lost and confused at this time of their life. Few expect to find themselves in the midst of a process of self exploration and search for personal identity. It is a frightening, lonely, and often embarrassing experience.

One cannot stay in this state of emotional upheaval indefinitely. The tension is felt in one's career, relationships, and in one's way of moving through daily life. The experience demands that one choose how to live and to realize that one's choices entail both freedom and responsibility. It demands that one pay attention to one's self and one's life. It demands that

one begin to define one's self and establish personal boundaries while still remaining connected to others. Midlife crisis signals a need to grow up and to take responsibility of one's life. As Mary states, "Here I am at fifty four and for the first time I'm standing up to my mother" (22, 18-19). Finally, the experience compels one to make sense out of one's personal existence and to bring coherence to one's life.

In making sense out of one's personal existence, one has to acknowledge all aspects of one's self. This is an extremely difficult and humbling endeavor. One must come to terms with one's past. In coming to terms with his past, Sean wrote, "It's like looking at a white house and knowing I didn't have a home". One must also explore and accept unexpressed aspects of one's self. Up to this point, one has either consciously or unconsciously kept hidden those aspects of the self that are believed to be unacceptable but which, nevertheless, constitute one's self. The extreme stress involved in confronting the ultimate concerns of existence during midlife crisis forces these repressed parts of the self to the surface. Aaron, for example, was shocked to discover "all of the anger that I felt that I had never been able to express to myself about my relationship with my mother" (46, 24-25). As these surprising aspects of the self emerge, one may attempt to resist the full expression of one's self. To do so, however, condemns one to remaining stuck within the storm of the experience. The alternative is to accept one's humanness and to integrate or reconcile one's past self with one's developing self - one's constituted self with one's constituting self.

One cannot stand still in the experience of midlife crisis. One is compelled to respond to the experience even if that response is one of giving up in hopelessness and succumbing to various stages of depression. One can also resist the expression of one's self by trying to attempting to disregard the changes within and responding only to the external aspects of one's life. How long one can ignore the clamor and agitation within is not evident is this study. What is evident is that both of these types of cyclic developmental change take their toll on the individual as he or she becomes entrenched in habitual ways of being in the world. Remember Heather, who wonders what damage she is doing to herself by burying those parts of her that are seeking expression.

Developmental change, however, can also refer to psychological growth or a spiral of development. One can respond to midlife crisis by gradually and carefully letting go of one's old ways of being, or by fully surrendering to the process of life and trusting in the harmony that is the natural order of human existence. The process is the same regardless of how quickly or slowly one chooses to proceed. Instead of trying to work out everything with one's intellect and control the future, one lives more in the present - guided from within by intuition and inspiration. Instead of living life by a prescribed formula or social convention, life is encountered in the moment and becomes a daily revelation.

TABLE 4-1: CLUSTERS OF THEMES

Onset of the Experience

1) One experiences a personal confrontation with death, the need to make a major life decision, the collapse of a significant part of the present life structure.

2) One either abruptly or gradually becomes aware that one's comfortable and familiar way of being in the world is no longer tenable.

Disruptive Nature of the Experience

1) One questions various aspects of the present life structure and feels a need for change in one or several of the following areas: marriage, career, residence, future goals, relationships with friends, family and parents, and religious/spiritual beliefs.

2) One experiences a wide range of intense emotions which include some or all of the following: depression, fear, anger, resentment, confusion, emptiness, guilt, anxiety, loneliness, isolation, boredom, urgency, hopelessness, powerlessness, vulnerability, sadness, loss, grief, feeling overwhelmed, heaviness (burdened), exhaustion, lack of control, loss of meaning and direction, despair, denial, feeling trapped or stuck, and feeling a need for escape. The experience may be of a roller coaster of emotions or a severe restriction of emotion.

3) There is a feeling of a lack of congruency within one's self, and/or a lack of fit between one's self and others, or one's self and the world..

4) There is increased tension and conflict between one's self and significant others

5) The concept of time changes: there is a sense of urgency, of life moving very slowly and/or too quickly, and of time running out.

TABLE 4-1 (cont.): CLUSTERS OF THEMES

Revealing Power of the Experience

1) One gains perspective on past experiences, events, significant relationships, values, beliefs and behavior patterns and becomes aware of their contribution to the formation of the present self.

2) One discovers repressed aspects of one's self including: emotions, values, goals or dreams, creative abilities and both negative and positive characteristics, and becomes aware of a loss of a sense of self.

3) One confronts some or all of the primary existential issues including: death, freedom and responsibility, existential isolation and meaninglessness.

4) One becomes aware of the dichotomies and conflicts between values, beliefs and behaviors.

5) One feels disconnected from the self, others and the world.

6) One becomes aware of a distortion of boundaries within one's self, and between one's self and others.

7) One becomes aware of the lack of ability to change the past, control the future, or control others or external events.

8) Past issues surface and need to be addressed, i.e. self esteem, fear of failure, feeling different from others, insecurity, need for love and approval, power and control, fear of rejection, fear of abandonment.

Developmental Change in Relation to the Experience

1) One begins to search for resolution of the internal and external conflicts and emotional discomfort of the experience.

2) One searches for the authentic self and the inner strength to fully express the self.

3) One searches for wholeness and integration of all aspects of the self.

4) One clarifies values and beliefs and consciously chooses values and beliefs.

5) One strives to be more self defined, inner directed and trusting of oneself.

6) One clarifies boundaries between self and others and the external world.

7) One begins to surrender the need to control others, external events, or the future and gradually assumes control of, or responsibility , for oneself.

8) One is more accepting of experiencing a wide range of emotions.

9) One searches for genuine, emotionally intimate and balanced relationships.

10) One searches for new meaning and questions, clarifies, and reaffirms or formulates new religious/spiritual beliefs.

11) One feels a new sense of freedom and a sense of beginning a new life.

12) One feels a renewed energy and enthusiasm for life.

13) One achieves a greater acceptance of all aspects of the self and a sense of inner peace.

14) One has a greater appreciation of life and lives more in the present.

15) One becomes aware of their personal growth and change and accepts that the process will continue throughout one's life.

16) One has a desire to share knowledge of the experience and contribute to the world in a meaningful way.

TABLE 4-2: DESCRIPTIVE IDENTIFICATION OF MIDLIFE CRISIS STRUCTURE

Life has become a struggle; it is no longer comfortable or predictable. Either persistent feelings of dissatisfaction push their way into everyday awareness, or life is suddenly thrown out of balance by external circumstances. One experiences painful emotional turmoil and conflict in the daily world. Unwanted and uncontrollable feelings seem to take over and color all aspects of life. The feelings may go away for brief periods of time, but they always return. It is like being on an emotional roller coaster and one often feels overwhelmed and frightened. One becomes physically exhausted and emotionally drained: battered and bruised by the experience, or simply empty inside. Relationships, in particular, become difficult, strained or marked by increased conflict. One feels stuck: trapped by others and burdened by the constant demands of daily living. There is a need to withdraw from others and the world. There is a vulnerability that wasn't there before. Somehow life has gotten out of control. One feels an internal tension and a sense of urgency to do something different. There is confusion and disorientation as one has no idea of what to do or how to move on. One begins to search for relief. Although efforts are made to resist, escape or deny the experience, the internal clamor cannot be ignored. There is deep sense of knowing that it is time for change. The experience is so disruptive and powerful that it affects all aspects of one's life.

Regardless of the external factors involved, the experience ultimately refers to the inner world of the self. One becomes aware of previously hidden dimensions of the self: both positive and negative. One sees the existing dichotomies between beliefs, values and behaviors. There is no way to retreat from the truth of the inner self. All aspects of one's life come under careful scrutiny and must be examined and questioned. There is a startling and often angry realization that the roles of society or the expectations of others are being allowed to define one's life experience. The second half of life suddenly becomes important as one comes face to face with the reality of death. Time is running out. One questions how to look for the real self and wonders what to do with it if the real self is found. There is a realization of the huge risk associated with expressing the real self and taking full responsibility for one's choices. Previous doubts and

internal struggles interfere with being able to move forward. There is a feeling of helplessness -- what worked before just doesn't work anymore. There is a profound loss of meaning and direction. One feels utterly alone in their experience. The internal tension builds until one inevitably confronts the issue of developmental change in relation to the experience.

Life can never be the way it was before. As much as one tries to resist the change or hold on to the past, there is no going back. The only alternatives are: to stay immobilized within the storm of the experience, to try to control the uncontrollable by making changes in the external world, to gradually let go and move carefully forward, or to surrender and go with the experience.

For those who eventually move forward and go with the experience, it is a challenging and humbling journey. The search for a new way of being in the world begins slowly and painfully, and it often feels as if one is just stumbling along. However, the search is gradually rewarded with a renewal of energy, a maturing confidence, excitement and anticipation. There is awareness of a growing inner strength tempered with the fear of not being strong enough to handle whatever comes up. One searches for ways to express the real self. Relationships change: some relationships deepen while others abruptly conclude or drift away. Familiar values and beliefs are reassessed and new ones are consciously chosen. One begins to understand what it means to define and take responsibility for the self. One enjoys a surprising sense of freedom as the boundaries between one's self and others are clarified. There is an ongoing search for a broader sense of personal meaning and spiritual purpose to guide daily life. There is a desire to make a positive difference to the community and to others. One strives for inner peace and self-acceptance.

The changes do not happen quickly or completely. One must grieve for what one is leaving behind. As one proceeds, there is the joy of progress and then the despair of sliding backwards, but one gradually begins to trust oneself. There are intervals of standing still as one needs to rest in order to integrate all that has happened. Each day is lived fully and appreciated in the moment. The experience is no longer an event to conquer; it is a way of consciously living one's life.

Chapter 5

Midlife Crisis and Adult Development

Introduction

The experience of midlife crisis in adulthood has been the central focus of this study. The interviews with men and women in midlife crisis have illuminated the complex and intriguing structure of this pivotal experience. It is apparent that midlife crisis is not simply the expression of a desire to hold on to a fading youth; nor is it a matter of regretting the lapsing of social roles or of predictable and inevitable biological changes. Midlife crisis is about growing up, it is not about growing old. Midlife crisis is a search for unity, integrity, and harmony between the constituted self and the constituting self. It is a process of confronting the essential concerns of existence and of moving towards wholeness and individuation. Midlife crisis is about assuming authorship of one's life - of being internally determined rather than externally driven. It is about becoming mindful of one's life and actively defining, accepting, and expressing one's true nature. In midlife crisis one does more than think about life; one encounters life.

Midlife Crisis and Existential-Phenomenological Methodology

The existential-phenomenological methodology utilized in this study dramatically portrays the disruptive and revealing power of this experience. The results of this study demonstrate that midlife crisis is a profound and extremely intense experience. Obviously, an experience of this magnitude

must significantly influence a given developmental trajectory but, in what way? The nature of existential-phenomenological methodology is such that the results provide an in-depth description of the essential structure of the experience. The results do not measure developmental change. The results describe the experience of the changing relations between the multiple levels of context when these changes are at their most critical point. This knowledge is worthy in and of itself, however, framing the results of this study within the developmental contextual perspective allows a full appreciation of the potential impact of this experience on a given developmental trajectory as well as providing insight into future directions for developmental research.

Midlife Crisis and the Developmental Contextual Perspective

The developmental contextual perspective is a multidimensional framework for understanding human development. The familiar concept of cause and effect becomes irrelevant as one recognizes the array of influences associated with the multiple levels of context in dynamic interaction. Developmental contextualism affords an understanding of both the diversity and context of development in midlife (Lerner, 1990). A focus on diversity speaks to the tremendous differences in individual developmental paths that are evident in midlife, and broadens the scope of what is considered normal adult development. Differences in individual developmental trajectories are the result of the unique and ongoing interplay between the constituted and the constituting self within the

multiple levels of context. In this perspective, it is readily apparent that "No two people will experience the same temporal sequence of person-context relations across their lives" (Lerner, 1990, p. 912). The emphasis on context highlights the numerous intraindividual, interindividual, and extraindividual factors that are involved in this developmental interplay. Inevitable changes at all levels are both producers and products of individual developmental experience.

The occurrence of midlife crisis in adulthood becomes understandable when viewed within the developmental contextual perspective. The unique combination and sheer number of intraindividual and extraindividual variables that converge on an individual at midlife contributes to a greatly increased tension between the different levels of context. The individual in midlife begins to experience a lack of fit between one or several of the multiple levels of context and there is a growing need to respond to the changes between the various levels of context in order to reduce the tension. When one's habitual responses or familiar way of being in the world is not sufficient to increase the goodness of fit, the inner tension and emotional turmoil builds to a critical point. This is the onset of the experience of midlife crisis.

As indicated previously, within the developmental contextual perspective, development is change. Lerner (1989) clearly indicates that the changing relations between the levels of context - the basic processes of development - "may best be understood by longitudinal research which includes assessments at multiple organismic and contextual levels" (p.368).

The results of this study highlight the significance of the experience of midlife crisis as it relates to adult development and clearly identifies the organismic and contextual variables which play a major role in this developmental experience. It is these variables, described in the structure of the experience, that will form the basis of future longitudinal research aimed at understanding the role of midlife crisis in adult development.

Midlife crisis is a "wake up call" in adulthood. Midlife crisis reflects a need to shift one's mode of existing in the world (Yalom, 1980), to reconstruct one's personal theory of reality (Epstein and Erskine, 1983), to alter one's personal paradigm (O'Connor and Wolfe, 1991), or to engage in "aptive" changes (Lerner and Tubman, 1989) in response to the tension generated by an increasing lack of fit between the multiple levels of context. The usual methods of responding are inadequate. The only change that one can adequately effect in response to the experience of midlife crisis, is a change at the intraindividual level of context - a change that reaches to the very core of one's being.

Implications of the Study

Understanding the experience of midlife crisis and framing the results of this study within a developmental contextual perspective has implications for education, clinical practice and adult development theory. In education, it is widely recognized that developmental researchers contribute to the body of knowledge that guides practitioners, educators and the general public in understanding human behavior. While much is known about

developmental changes in childhood, adolescence and young adulthood, there is little significant and relevant knowledge about middle adulthood, and specifically midlife crisis. This study draws attention to some important features of the experience of midlife crisis. The developmental contextual view clarifies the increased potential for a "lack of fit" in midlife which can result in the experience of midlife crisis. This perspective also accentuates the impact this experience can have on a given developmental trajectory as well as providing an understanding and appreciation of the diversity of developmental trajectories. The existential phenomenological methodology demonstrates that midlife crisis is not a frivolous or insignificant experience, but a forceful experience that has dramatic implications for the context and course of one's life. The description of the structure of the experience of midlife crisis also portrays its complexity and embeddedness within the life course. Midlife crisis is not an isolated event. It is a process of psychological growth which is interwoven into the fabric of one's life - connecting past, present and future. This is not an experience to be feared or avoided. Midlife crisis is a healthy, often necessary, and rational process of development which enables one to integrate and fully express all aspects of one's being. The more that is understood about the nature and implications of midlife crisis, the more likely it is that both professionals and the general population will be able to successfully address the developmental challenges inherent in the experience.

The experience of midlife crisis, as described in this study and framed within a developmental contextual perspective, holds a number of

implications for clinical practice with individuals in midlife. The emphasis of this perspective and of existential-phenomenology, is on the whole person who actively participates in his/her development throughout the life course within a complex and ever-changing exosystem. The symptoms of midlife crisis (whether they be physiological, psychological or relational) must be understood within such a conceptual framework if psychologists are to intervene in an ethically responsible and therapeutically effective manner. For too long, psychology as a natural science has fragmented the individual and focused on treating symptoms, as opposed to understanding the total person embedded within the dynamic context of his/her life. Clinicians are still laboring under outmoded beliefs about midlife crisis that reflect simplistic, biological, mechanistic, cause-effect relationships. Midlife crisis is frequently viewed as an event to be overcome or controlled rather than an integral developmental process of the lifespan.

The developmental contextual perspective highlights the far reaching influences of clinical intervention. As indicated in this study, there is opportunity for psychological growth within the experience of midlife crisis, but also the potential for regressive development in the form of psychological entrenchment in "repetitive cycles of disequilibrium" (Lyddon, 1989). Similarly, O'Connor and Wolfe (1990) distinguish between a cycle and a spiral of development, while Lerner (1990) warns that, "A system that is open to alteration for the better is also open to change for the worse" (p.913). How this experience is addressed in clinical practice has tremendous implications for the continuing developmental

trajectory of the client. Intervention at one level has varying degrees of consequences for every other level of context. Clinical intervention, therefore, demands an ethical awareness of the complex processes involved in the various dimensions of developmental change. The developmental contextual perspective also underscores the inherent value base of therapeutic interventions - all interventions are located within a specific sociohistorical context and describe as well as prescribe social values (Lerner, 1993). The clinician must be fully aware of and make explicit the values or assumptions which guide the process and direction of change in counseling. Further, in order to ensure ethical practice, clinicians must establish specific ideas for planning and evaluating interventions that consider the potential impact at all levels of context.

More specifically, the results of this research provide direction for clinicians working with individuals in midlife. As one's behavior patterns and beliefs are challenged in midlife, foundational values must be reassessed. The issues of freedom and responsibility, isolation, meaning, death and individuation demand attention. The clinician must enable the client to look beyond the life structure or content issues and begin to grapple with the fundamental concerns of being. Because of the intense emotional turmoil and the disruptive nature of the experience, the client who enters counseling is most often seeking immediate relief in the form of making changes in the external contexts of his/her life. The client expresses confusion and has lost confidence because the previous way of being in the world is no longer tenable, and a new worldview has yet to be

constructed. The clinician must ensure that the responsibility remains with the client; that the focus is on the inner world of the client and not on the outer world of problems and issues. The greatest danger is that the client is highly susceptible to making quick decisions regarding some aspects of the life structure to end the emotional turmoil. The client must be reassured that, indeed, some aspects of the life structure may need to change, however, if those changes are made prematurely or impulsively there is a likelihood of creating more turmoil and loss of confidence. The client can be encouraged to stay with the experience and explore the issues identified in this study prior to making life altering decisions. The clinician's efforts must be directed towards enabling the client to shift to the "ontological attitude" - with mindfulness comes freedom and choice.

Clinicians must teach their clients what they know about human development and about the importance of this midlife experience. Midlife crisis is a normal developmental process in adulthood. One of the most significant aspects of this experience is that it is a wonderful opportunity for psychological growth; a chance for wholeness and the integration of all aspects of the self. Unfortunately, the general connotation of the word "crisis" is negative; an experience with dire consequences which must be avoided. To be in crisis implies being in danger. In addition, the connotation of "midlife crisis" is that this is an embarrassing experience related to the fear of getting older. These are only half truths - there is danger but there is also opportunity; there is an emerging awareness of death, but it is this awareness that gives new meaning to life. How can this

dual nature of midlife crisis be communicated to the general public and to the clients seen in practice? Perhaps, the term "midlife crisis" should be avoided altogether and, as one of the participants in this research suggested, the experience could be called "midlife discovery". Mark Gerzon, author of "Coming Into Our Own", agrees with this change and suggests that the experience be envisioned as a "quest" rather than a crisis. To call it a discovery or a quest, however, is to ignore the emotional turmoil, the disruptive power, and the life altering consequences of midlife crisis. The word "crisis", in its true (rather than colloquial) meaning, does elucidate the full nature of the experience described in this study. Crisis comes from the Greek word "krisis" meaning turning point or time of decision - danger as well as opportunity. There does not seem to be a satisfactory answer to this dilemma. The only alternative is to continue to educate the public about all of the factors and risks inherent in the experience of midlife crisis, in much the same way that awareness is raised in general about mental health issues.

Finally, adult development theory enters into a new arena as the complex processes of human development are conceptualized within a dynamic and multidimensional perspective. There is no need for two sets of gender developmental theories. The developmental contextual perspective is capable of incorporating gender differences as vital aspects of intraindividual and extraindividual levels of context, while still addressing the fundamental developmental experience. This perspective also accounts for interindividual and situational influences, and sociocultural and historical conditions as they contribute to the diversity of individual

developmental trajectories. As this discussion of the experience of midlife crisis has demonstrated, the developmental contextual perspective offers a viable theoretical framework for the understanding of specific developmental processes.

Summary

This study has described the meaning of the experience of midlife crisis and illustrated the depth of the impact this experience has on those in midlife crisis. The description of the subjective experience of the person-context relations in midlife crisis highlights the total involvement of all aspects of one's life, and particularly, the painful, intimidating, and joyous consequences at the inner level of being. The journey of life requires commitment and discipline - one must be prepared to go the distance. "Rice suffers when it is milled. Jade must suffer when it is polished. But what emerges is something special. If you want to be special too, then you have to be able to stick to things even when they are difficult" (Ming-Dao, 1992, p.271). Although the experience of midlife crisis is extremely difficult, it must not be avoided, ignored, laughed at or dismissed - the future of one's self is a stake.

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Appendix A

Research Design Summary

Study Title: Midlife Crisis: A Developmental Contextual Perspective

Researcher: Shirley Dumbeck
Phone: 458 - 3157

As a participant of this study, you will be involved in a minimum of two in-depth interviews. The first interview will focus on your personal experience of "midlife crisis" and the meaning of this crisis within the context of your feelings about yourself and your relationships with the external world. The second interview will provide you with the opportunity to expand on this information as you reflect on a summary of your first interview which will be provided by the researcher. During the interviews, I may ask for clarification to ensure that I fully understand your experience and may ask you to more fully explore specific aspects of your life. You may refuse to answer any question and are encouraged to share only the information that you feel comfortable in discussing. My primary role is to listen as you share your perceptions with me. Each interview will be audio-taped and later transcribed by me or a typist who will maintain

confidentiality. In order to ensure your identity remains confidential, only your first name will be used on the audio-tape.

This study will be conducted as a Doctoral Dissertation under the supervision of Dr. Len Stewin, primary supervisor, and Dr. John Paterson and Dr. Henry Janzen who complete the supervisory committee. All three are professors within the Department of Educational Psychology, University of Alberta.

All information is confidential and the identity of the participants, as well as the name(s) of any other person mentioned, will not be identified with the research data. The audio tapes will be stored in a locked space during the study and erased by the researcher upon completion of the transcription process.

Please contact me if you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study.

Appendix B

Consent Form

Study Title: Midlife Crisis: A Developmental Contextual Perspective

Investigator: Shirley Dumbeck, Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Educational Psychology
University of Alberta

As part of the requirements for the completion of the Doctoral Program in Educational Psychology, I am conducting a research study which will explore the experience of "midlife crisis". The purpose of the study is to expand the knowledge of this transitional period of adult development. The focus of the inquiry is to explore and describe the participant's experience of midlife crisis as it impacts all aspects of his/her life. This knowledge can contribute therapeutic interventions with clients at midlife as well as public education and theoretical research endeavors.

Your voluntary participation in this study is appreciated. All information for the study will be gathered in two to three audio-taped interviews. It is anticipated that each interview will be one and one-half hours with a variable interval between. The study will be concluded within six months of the first interview.

Your signature below will indicate that you agree to participate in the study as described above.

I, _____ (print name) give permission to be interviewed and for the interviews to be tape recorded. I give permission for the investigator to reproduce this interview, in part or whole, in the study as deemed necessary. I understand that the tapes will be kept in a secure location and will be erased after they have been transcribed. I understand that identifying personal information will be deleted from the research findings and that no identifying data will be associated with any participant. I understand that the research findings may be published, and that these results will be available to me at my request. I understand that I may refuse to answer any questions and am free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Signed _____Date_____

Witnessed _____Date_____

Researcher _____Date_____

Appendix C

Outline of the Interview
Types of Questions and What Questions May be Asked

A. Introductory Questions

These question will include biographical data such as: age, marital/partner status, dependents and age of dependents, extended family, occupational history, income, leisure activities, religious beliefs (do they belong to an organized religion?), significant medical history and present medical status, and recent significant life events i.e. death of a person close to participant.

B. Experience/Behavior Questions

These questions will focus on the personal experience of midlife crisis, i.e. What is it about your present experience that you believe indicates that this experience is a midlife crisis? What do you think precipitated your experience of midlife crisis? Describe how this experience has affected your behavior. Describe how this experience has impacted you emotionally. Describe how this experience has impacted your relationships. Describe how this experience has impacted your fundamental beliefs about yourself and the world. Have you experienced any other changes in your life as a result of this experience? How do you anticipate that this experience will impact you in the future? Have you used any strategies to manage this experience?

C. Sensory Type of Questions

Have you observed any physical changes in your body during this experience? Have you felt different in any way during this experience?

D. Opinion/Values Type of Questions

Do you think that this midlife crisis has been a help to you in any way? Do you think it has had any negative effects on you or your life? Why do you think you have been undergoing this experience?

E. Concluding Questions

Has your experience of midlife crisis changed your philosophy of life in any way? Is there anything else about your experience that you would like to discuss?

APPENDIX D

EXHAUSTIVE DESCRIPTION OF THE EXPERIENCE OF MIDLIFE CRISIS

1. The onset of the experience occurs either very immediately as the result of a significant life event or it begins very subtly over a period of time. The significant event may be the death of a loved one, divorce, change of employment, diagnosis of a life threatening illness, etc. The experience can begin very slowly as one starts questioning the present life structure. Vague feelings of dissatisfaction insidiously creep into one's awareness and quietly erode one's feelings of contentment. These questions and feelings gradually intensify and color all of one's experience. Although there is a strong desire to push it away, the experience builds to a point where it can no longer be denied and must be acknowledged. As one enters into the experience, it seems as if the familiar foundation of one's life has been suddenly shattered or has slowly crumbled away. Either way, one's previous way of being in the world is dramatically altered. One abruptly becomes conscious of one's life.

2. Numerous persistent thoughts and intense feelings begin to emerge which eventually become overwhelming and frightening. The emotions may be so intense, one feels emotionally numb and empty.

3. The experience is like waking up in a strange and unknown place where nothing is familiar - not even oneself. Little by little, one sees oneself and one's life in a glaring new light and feels confused, disoriented, lost and out of control. There is a growing realization that something must change but little awareness of what that change needs to be.

4. These thoughts and emotions spill over and interfere with daily life, creating tension and conflict within significant relationships or dissatisfaction in one's career. Other people or the career are blamed for causing the experience of inner turmoil. They are viewed as barriers or

burdens which prevent resolution of the experience. There is a fear of being open and vulnerable in relationships and allowing others to see the real self. One feels unable to express the real self in one's career. There is a feeling of disconnection from others; the only relief is found in seclusion.

5. There is no escape from the experience. One feels trapped between worlds; in limbo or in a void. One feels stuck and unable to move, yet from within there is a sense of urgency to move forward. There is an awareness of time running out even though time may seem to be standing still.

6. One feels physically exhausted, emotionally drained; battered and bruised by the experience.

7. One becomes aware of the circumscription of life and begins to view one's life in its totality. With the sudden clarity of this comprehensive perspective, one is compelled to re-examine the past and give consideration to the future. One confronts the issue of death and one's own mortality.

8. One experiences oneself and others and the world differently. The previous way of being in the world is no longer compatible with the present experience. The experience feels strange; one is no longer comfortable within the various contexts of one's life. There is a profound loss of meaning and direction. What previously gave one a sense of purpose has been stripped away or has shown itself to be shallow and meaningless.

9. One becomes aware of how past relationships and events have contributed to the present life structure and the formation of one's beliefs, values, personality characteristics and behavior patterns. One begins to question aspects of the self and experience which have previously been taken for granted as immutable or determined. The existential issues of freedom and responsibility are confronted. One increasingly becomes aware of the absence of an external structure that provides a sense of order, control and security to one's life. The terrifying implication is that one is entirely responsible for one's life design, choices actions, and experience of the world. One confronts the inherent freedom of existence: the freedom to be the author of one's life experience. At the same time, one also becomes aware of having surrendered varying degrees of this power of choice to others and the external world. A further implication is that one

must accept the past and relinquish the illusory belief in one's ability to control or be controlled by others, external events or the future. The only control one has is over oneself in the present.

10. There is a greater understanding of internal conflicts and the subsequent dichotomies between values, beliefs and behaviors. One becomes aware of having allowed others or socially prescribed roles to determine and define oneself. One proceeds with the painful and difficult process of looking within to find the true self. There may be despair at being unable to do; of finding nothing that speaks of one's true self. Or, there may be the gradual discovery of repressed or previously hidden aspects of the self. One experiences a disconnection from parts of oneself - a deep feeling of isolation and loneliness within.

11. Although there may be much denial and resistance, one inevitably confronts the issue of developmental change in relation to the experience. Initially one begins to search for an escape from the experience or attempts a quick resolution by making changes in the life structure i.e. marriage, career. However, the resolution of the experience is not to be found in escape or in the external world. There is no meaning in escape, and while external changes may occur in conjunction with the experience, they are not a solution. At some level, there is an awareness that resolution of the experience can only be found within oneself.

12. It is at this point that individual outcomes of the experience begin to diverge. One may remain stuck indefinitely in the experience: feeling trapped and immobilized. One is unable to move forward because of fear of stepping into the unknown and yet unable retreat because it is almost impossible to retreat from oneself. The fear of moving forward is the fear of assuming responsibility for one's choices and one's life experience. It is a fear of coming to terms with what one has already created in one's life, of letting go of familiar behavior patterns, of risking the hurt, disapproval or rejection of others, and of possibly changing a predictable and secure life structure. It is a fear of looking within and not liking what is there. It is a fear of trying and failing. Ultimately, it is a fear of trusting oneself as one is really just beginning to know oneself.

13. One may continue to search for resolution by making changes in the external world. These changes provide a much needed feeling of control and some respite from the sense of urgency, but the experience doesn't go away. The external changes often intensify the experience and serve as a catalyst for further questioning and self exploration.

14. Finally, one may realize that the changes need to be internal and are connected to the very core of existence. In order to proceed with this inner work however, one must find the courage to challenge the very foundation of one's belief system. The search for one's inner self is a search for wholeness and integration and the complete expression of the authentic self. It is a search for the way to be fully present in one's life and in the world. It involves anguish and struggle but for those who proceed, it is also an enticing and stimulating journey.

15. It is as if life has just begun. One begins to see the world and oneself from a refreshing new perspective. There is a sense of freedom from previous constraints as one becomes conscious of past and present choices. There is a genuine effort to be more congruent and to act with integrity. One acknowledges and gradually begins to accept all aspects of the self, both positive and negative. In order to illuminate unknown aspects of the inner self, one explores new behaviors, creative talents and relationships. There is a questioning and clarification of values, beliefs and behavior patterns and a conscious choice of those which resonate with the inner self. There is a tenuous trusting of the self which gradually grows stronger as one learns from and is affirmed by experience. One struggles to become more self determined by consciously assuming responsibility for one's experience and allowing others to be separate and responsible for their choices. Anger and blame towards others slowly dissipates. As one becomes more comfortable with the inner self, there is a search for more honest, balanced and emotionally intimate relationships. There is a greater willingness to be open and vulnerable in relationships with others. Rather than repressing or controlling feelings, one is more open to experiencing feelings as they emerge. One becomes conscious of the range and varying intensity of emotions. Life is lived in the present with a sense of calmness and wonder. There is a renewed energy and enthusiasm for daily life. What was once viewed as simple, boring and predictable has now become surprisingly rich in complexity. Within a larger context, one explores

religious/spiritual beliefs and searches for a broader, yet personal, meaning to one's existence. One aspires to contribute to the world in a meaningful way. There is conscious awareness of the ongoing experience of personal change and a desire to share knowledge of the experience with others. Finally, there is a growing sense of inner peace and contentment, and trust in the process of life.