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## Rural Women: A Thematic Perspective on Midlife

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### Abstract

A qualitative study was designed to hear the voices of rural women in South Dakota reflecting on their midlife experiences. Emerging themes constant with established theory included the importance of affiliation, religion, feelings of mastery, and interdependent relationships. Themes that differed included a broader definition of mastery as involving the well-being of their families along with personal accomplishments outside the family. These women viewed the reassessing of their dreams and goals as a continuing process in their lives rather than a separate thrust at midlife. All of these women reflected an attitude toward coping with life events rather than being captured by them.

### Résumé

Une étude qualitative a été créée pour entendre la réflexion, les voix des femmes vivant dans une région rurale au sud du Dakota sur leur existence. Les thèmes émergeant, en constance avec la théorie établie, incluent l'importance de l'affiliation, la religion, les sentiments de maîtrise et les relations interdépendantes. Les thèmes qui diffèrent comportent une définition plus générale de maîtrise impliquant le confort de leurs familles avec les accomplissements personnels à l'extérieur de la famille. Ces femmes voient la réévaluation de leurs rêves et de leurs buts comme un processus continuuel dans leur vie plutôt qu'une état spécifique imposé lorsqu'elles atteignent la quarantaine. Toutes ces femmes présentaient une attitude de contrôle face aux événements de la vie plutôt que d'en être prisonnières.

Studies exploring patterns of adult development have focused on the experiences of men and thus have not heard the voices of women describing their lives (Okun, 1984; Rickel, Gerrard, & Iscoe, 1984). According to Jean Baker Miller (1976), the linear, block-step series of transition and building stages described by Erickson (1950) and Levinson (1978) does not recognize the different psychosocial structure that influences women's development. Brooks (1990) writes that the interaction of sociocultural variables with the influence of other life roles has been omitted from studies formulating theories of career development. According to Josselson (1987), psychology has no theory of normal development for women.

Human development is an ongoing process that is characterized by continuous change (Okun, 1984; Mercer, Nichols, & Doyle, 1989). The time of transition into midlife can represent a growing awareness of these gradual changes that can influence perceptions of self, the world, and the future. A process of reappraisal is the commonality that cuts across adults in midlife transition (Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 1990; Okun, 1984). Some researchers, however, acknowledge changes that can occur

through the middle years but question the universality of a "midlife crisis" (Fiske & Chiriboga, 1990).

Women tend to define their age status in terms of timing of events within the family cycle, and thus tie midlife to the launching of children into the adult world (Neugarten, 1968; Rubin, 1979). Gilligan (1982) posited that life transitions centred around experiences of attachment and separation can be expected to involve women in a distinctive way. Connectedness with others is an important part of women's lives.

Individuals differ in their perception of the transitions of life and in their response and adaptation to the stress generated by these transitions (Schlossberg, 1981; Fiske & Chiriboga, 1990). This adaptation involves an integration of the changes into the person's life. An important component of the process of adaptation involves the individual's perception of personal resources balanced against deficits.

Little research has explored the everyday world of rural women and the social processes that circumscribe their lives (Haney, 1982; Ross, 1985; Sachs, 1983). A recent study used open-ended interview questions to explore the midlife transition experiences of eleven women in rural South Dakota. This article describes the organization and findings of that study. Selected quotes are used to illustrate the themes that emerged from analysis of the interview transcripts and the observations of the researcher.

#### METHOD

A qualitative research design was selected to "hear" the voices of a specifically defined group of rural women reflecting on their midlife transition experiences. Rubin (1979) defined midlife for women as the time when all of the children have left home. "Voice" used as a metaphor refers to women's views of the world and how they perceive their place in the world (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, Tarule, 1986). The purpose of the study was to listen for any themes emerging from this time of transition, and also to hear self-perceptions of their abilities to cope with these life changes. These women lived in a rural setting, were married, and had children, the youngest of which was in the process of leaving home.

Interview questions were developed to seek responses from the women regarding their affiliation, support systems, goals, accomplishments, and values. The participant's self-perceptions of this time of her life were evaluated through the use of *Your Transition Readiness Quotient* (Schlossberg, Ansello, & Pollack, 1985). This is an instrument designed to help individuals identify their reaction to transition and also to identify any areas in their lives in which some change might improve their ability to cope.

Qualitative research uses the relationship to be developed between researcher and participant as an important essence of the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Both observable behaviour and the words of the people become integral parts of this process and allow themes to emerge from the data (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975). Interviews were taped and then transcribed in written form. Additional procedures reflective of qualitative research were used in analysis and in validity checks of the data.

### *Research Findings*

Social context is an important part of women's lives according to existing knowledge. Jean Baker Miller (1976) and Carol Gilligan (1982) describe the cultural concept that women should focus on the care and nurturing of others while overlooking themselves. Women's sense of their own identity thus becomes intertwined with their relationships. When asked to describe herself, one participant responded, "That's kinda hard. I don't know how I'd describe myself."

Most of the women moved very quickly from a description of themselves to giving information about their children. When specifically asked to describe herself, one woman said the following:

I've always been proud and happy to be a mother and to be married. You know, I like that type of person, and I'm sure that I'm an old-fashioned lady is what I am. . . . I have a feeling of accomplishment to be a happy homemaker-type person.

Happiness for her meant having all the children home at once.

Over and over self-descriptions were framed in the context of affiliations with other people. One woman said she was a good listener. Another shared the importance with which she viewed trying to be understanding with her children. A commitment to volunteer work was mentioned by one.

Four women used the words "content" and "happy" to describe themselves. Observations of body language and affect reflected congruency with the spoken words. Only two of the women in this study reflected less satisfaction with themselves. One of these women indicated that her dissatisfaction stemmed from wanting to be a better listener and a better friend. This reflected her perception of her relationships with other people which is the traditional path to identity for women in this culture (Miller, 1976).

All participants indicated sharing some activities with their spouses. One woman said:

I think he and I spend more time together than we did when the family was home. I think he was busy working, farming, making a living and I was probably spending more time with the family.

Others also referred to the busyness of earlier years and the hopes for more time together in the future. A willingness to compromise was

implied in statements like: "I guess I figured what our minister told us when we got married that life would be full of adjustments, and he's so right."

During the discussion of their marital relationship, several women who work outside the home described an initial reluctance on the part of their husbands to have this be a part of their lives.

. . . it took awhile for him to adjust to the fact that as the kids got older that I wanted to do something, you know. I think maybe a lot of it came from his heritage and maybe mine too, you know, that like the woman should stay in the home. And I think rural men are much more this way than non-rural men. I think they're just used to having you there to always run and get supplies or repairs or something and I think they're kind of threatened when you decide that, you know, that you want to do something for yourself.

Several women described the process they used to gradually convince their husbands that they would follow through with their plan to work outside the home. Four women were employed full-time and four others worked part-time.

Other family members were mentioned as being important in the lives of these women. There was an emphasis on the connectedness of extended families. One woman with four children was always the one asked to invite visiting relatives to dinner. "And being I didn't mind cooking for six, I never minded cooking for twelve. So I was the one who always cooked for big groups."

All of the women emphasized the importance of friends. The role of friendship in the lives of people has a powerful effect on the development of a satisfactory sense of self (Rubin, 1986; McAdams, 1989). Affiliation with others also facilitates an adaptation to the transitions of life (Mercer, Nichols, & Doyle, 1989). The church and community were regarded as a focus for this connectedness with other people. ". . . that's where our friends are. You feel comfortable in your church." The support gained from being able to share with others in the same situation regarding children and farming was considered desirable. The participants in this study described their support systems as involving family, extended family, friends, organizations related to farming, and a connectedness with church and community.

No one indicated negative feelings regarding past choices which led to their present lives. When asked what they had wanted their lives to be like when they grew up, several responded indicating marriage and a family. One woman said, "I guess just a storybook, get married and live happily ever after." Even though marriage was eventually expected, nearly half of the participants expressed feelings that they were not in any hurry to have it occur. Career interests were expressed in terms of either being a nurse or a secretary.

Woven throughout the participants' descriptions of their lives were statements regarding what was considered of value to them. Involvement

with and caring for their families was mentioned most often. One woman worked five years as a nurse on the night shift.

I did that so my working did not interfere with my children's life. . . . I was home in the morning before they got on the bus; I was home at night when they were home. I was always there if something came up.

Both church and religion played an important role in the lives of these women. When asked how her job, community involvement, and church fit in her life in terms of time, one woman responded, "Of course church is number one, and we don't let anything interfere with that." Another woman shared the importance of religion in helping her cope with daily life. "You know, my strength comes from God. If you can talk to Him and can draw your strength from Him, you can make it."

Over and over, the words used by these rural women emphasized their traditional values revolving around family, church, and community. Nearly half of them indicated, however, that personal job success or fulfillment was also important in their lives.

No one anticipated any major changes in their lives during the next five years. Just as a number of the participants described themselves in relation to their family, some responses to their own future expectations tended to be more about the potential plans of children and spouses. One woman said "I'm just kinda going to go with the flow and see what happens." Another woman stressed her desire to continue being active. "I've got a lot of things I want to do yet."

There were a variety of responses to a question regarding what differences they expected in their lives now that their youngest child was leaving home. Some anticipated no change and some discussed actual physical changes in the house. "The house stays cleaner," was one quick response to this question. A few made mention of some emotional reactions.

. . . I myself don't find it hard. I think probably (her husband) at first, it was harder on him when she went off to college, but for me, it's part of life. They've got to grow up and I was ready for it.

Varying mixtures of relief and sadness were expressed by the participants at the end of this phase of their lives. According to Rubin (1979), midlife for women is the point in the family life cycle when the children are grown and gone. This would then be a transition time reflecting the need for a reassessment of life. Several women described a different time of transition for them.

. . . it wasn't that hard when the youngest left. The hardest part of having children leave is the first one. It's not the last one. It's your first one leaving home is the hardest on the parents.

Another participant suggested that the transition of the youngest going to kindergarten was more important to her. ". . . that is when I got the 'I've got too much time on my hands'."

Statements shared by the women in this study reflecting their approach to coping with the events of life included the following. “. . . I’ll take whatever comes, I guess.” “You know, you just do what you have to do.” “You’ve got to handle it.” In discussing the empty feeling she had because of her children leaving home, one woman said, “I just really made up my mind I wasn’t going to sit and be depressed about that.”

#### DISCUSSION

These women described themselves in the context of family and friends and highlighted the importance of affiliation within their lives. The fact that each woman described the need for having a variety of interests and activities is indicative of the importance of a feeling of mastery in her life. They expressed feelings of having no choices about duty and responsibility, but at the same time indicated a firm acceptance of doing what needed to be done. Stress resulting from the uncertainty of the farm economy was mentioned by all of the participants. An emotional “rootedness” to the land was emphasized. They all expressed an acceptance of the inevitability of change in the context of the process of life as it moves along. The lifestyles of these women would fit what might be described as traditional, but they did not see themselves as locked into certain roles. Their positions within their families represented interdependence, not dependence. The words they used to describe their activities and approach to life indicate that they view themselves as capable of making contributions to their families and to society.

A variety of themes consistent with established theory was heard in the voices of the women participating in this study. The importance of affiliation was heard in all the voices. Family relationships were interdependent. All of the women emphasized the importance of religion. This is consistent with other research involving rural women.

Some themes emerged that differed from those found in established theories. Josselson (1987) made a distinct separation between happiness and ambition for women. For the women in this study, ambition was tied in both with pride in family and with achievements in other aspects of their lives. The need for feelings of achievement and mastery were revealed through expressions of pride in children and through personal accomplishments involving work outside the home, work within the home, and the creation of various handicrafts. Baruch, Barnett, and Rivers (1983) described a need for outside reinforcement of accomplishments to gain a sense of mastery. The voices in this study gave a broader definition to the meaning of mastery as the well-being of their families was emphasized along with a sense of both needing and having something for themselves in life. A study by Mercer, Nichols, and Doyle (1989) also identified women who found personal satisfaction and a sense of achievement in the accomplishments of their children.

Rubin's (1979) definition of midlife transition as the time when the youngest child leaves home was not universally true among these women. A reassessment of dreams and goals during midlife, as described by nearly all of the theories of adult development did not appear to be an issue with the women in this study. Reassessment appeared to be part of the ongoing process of life.

Contrary to Levinson's (1978) suggestion that the identity of women comes through their husbands, these women described an identity that was intertwined with their families, but also included a sense of personal separateness.

The basic theme of a healthy acceptance of life events did not surface in literature related to either the psychosocial development of women or studies of rural women. Over and over the women in this study expressed the philosophy that "you do what you have to do." Their voices sounded positive, not simply resigned.

During analysis of the messages heard in the voices of these women, the researcher identified several factors that influenced the meaning of the transition of the youngest child leaving home for these rural participants.

1. **Values.** Basic to the lives of these rural women is a sense of personal identity derived from an assimilation of a culturally traditional style of life. Their personal values involving affiliation and connectedness with family and friends fit within societal expectations. Little dissonance occurred between individual goals and those of the family.
2. **Mastery.** The need for something for themselves was recognized, but the possibility of carrying out these needs was relatively easily assimilated within the family structure. Choices emerged for these women, but the choices they perceived were relatively limited. The definition of personal achievement included a sense of affiliation and pride in family, so fit within the traditional lifestyle. They had personal dreams for their lives and these dreams predominately included marriage and children.
3. **Acceptance.** An underlying theme heard throughout these interviews was that of an acceptance of the various stages and events of life. Viewing life as a process that moves forward might mean that less dissonance would be perceived from a change in life stages.
4. **Interdependence.** Research about rural life stresses the interdependence among women and men in farm families. The women in this study indicated a willingness to make decisions for themselves that might differ from the expressed wishes of their spouses. They viewed themselves as sharing in decisions made by the family. Their statements regarding the need to accept the events of life did not

reflect feelings of inability to have any control over their lives. They viewed themselves as intertwined with family, but accepted this connectedness along with some degree of separateness for themselves.

5. Religion. The importance of religion and the church as values in their lives was also reflected in how they viewed support from these sources as affecting their ability to cope with the changes of life. Again, there was a consistency between personal values and those of the society in which they lived.

Viewing life as a tapestry that can sometimes include twisted threads that knot and tangle, provides a metaphor that can be used as a background in the process of hearing the voices of rural women as they describe their thoughts and feelings about their life experiences. Each woman has woven her own individual tapestry, but looking at these tapestries together provides a broader picture of both adult development and the psychosocial development of women.

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