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Social Work and Middle-Aged Women:
Epistemological Issues

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of
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by

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

"Being in the middle" can have several meanings. In the most simple sense, it means being in a position that is neither at one edge or the other, or being among or in the midst of objects or events. "To be in the middle" commonly represents the mean, the average case, to be in the centre or to be a base for actions or objects above or below the centre. (Websters, 1977, pg. 728)

Many religious mythologies contain a middle place that symbolizes the principle of "neutralization". The middle is the place where all rules and laws no longer exist and one floats in a limbo. "Being in the middle" also symbolized the perfect centre where one "finds oneself" and can place everything around in perspective. "Being in the middle" has also suggested a position at a crossroads caught between ambivalent forces. In western cultures, the epitome of the "middle place" is purgatory or limbo. (Cirlot, 1962, pp. 39-40, pg. 200)

"Being in the middle" can be a point of confluence where all forces and acting principles meet - hence a creative location. (Cirlot, 1962, pg. 68)

According to Jung, women as mothers are associated with "where the roads cross and enter into one another ... there is the mother, the object and epitome of all union". (Jung, 1955, pg. 132)

Finally, there is the colloquial sense of "being in the middle", being caught as a victim of opposing forces, without the capability of resolving the situation. It may also mean being the object of blame or sanction for acts beyond one's control.

All these meanings are relevant to the experience of middle-aged women. The literature on middle-aged women is certainly not unanimous in its interpretation of what living through middle age means for North American women. This stage of life has been variously described. To some it is a time of consolidation - of being able to put the conflicts of young adulthood in perspective, to sort priorities and to continue on with renewed creativity and purpose. The consequences of the middle stage of life have also

been related to a deep sense of impotence, worthlessness and an absence of any satisfactory options. The middle-aged woman is sometimes referred to as a point of confluence or as an exemplar case of the changes that have occurred in the family, in the labour force and in the relationship between the sexes. There is strong disagreement as to the nature of the social impact of these changes.

Most middle-aged women in North America are married and have at least two children. (Boyd, 1976, pg. 17, pg. 36) It is these women who are the topic of this thesis. The developmental stages of women who do not marry and, to a lesser extent, of those who choose not to have children if they are married, have been found to more closely parallel the "career" of men their own age than that of married women with children in most aspects. (Mayer, 1969, pg. 101; Back, 1971, pp. 296-304) The following essay, it is hoped, will make it clear that there is a necessary and inextricable relationship in our culture between the experience of middle age for women and the facts of motherhood and marriage.

Fiske-Lowenthal et. al. , in their study of four stages of the life cycle state, " It is at this stage [middle age] that the greatest difference occurs between men and women." (Fiske-Lowenthal et. al., 1975, pg. 23) This is one fact about middle age that is agreed upon in the literature. Middle age means different things to men and women. This difference can, in large part, be attributed to the structures of family and occupational careers which, by and large, do not have the same consequences for the two sexes. It has also been widely accepted that the meaning middle age has for women is a function of how they and others view the roles of wives and mothers. The interpretations of these roles and their relative power in building or destroying ego strength are powerful predictors of success or problems in the transition to middle age. Because this relationship is so often proposed in the literature, a large part of this essay will deal with how these roles can affect the psychological development of women and how the conceptions of these roles by academics and practitioners can help or hinder women in successful adaptation to

middle age.

The classic definition of knowledge in philosophy is "the conformity between object and intellect." The issue of how this "conformity" is reached and justified in interpreting the behavior and experience of women and middle-aged women in particular, therefore, would appear to be essential in any analytic presentation of the relevant knowledge base. When middle-aged women can be considered a problem, from what theoretical and political contexts current knowledge is derived, who the individuals are who write about them and whose values establish the definition of functional or dysfunctional in their case will, it is clear, affect what is believed to be true about them.

Current social science may be seen to contain two basic views of what is functional behavior in women. The first view assumes a necessary and fixed relationship between the physiology of women and their development which is universally applicable. Maturity and success are defined differently for men and women due to their different developmental needs. Specifically, the achievement of feminine maturity is characterized

by accepting the needs of others, especially husbands and children, as the primary focus of adult life. In the wider context, this developmental model represents a social role necessary to the continued stability and functioning of a society that also operates according to fixed laws of human nature. In this context, it becomes crucial to prescribe and maintain a rigid sex-differentiated model of adult functioning.

The second view assumes the criteria for mental health and social responsibility for men and women are essentially the same. The continued functioning and stability of society depend, in large part, on providing and creating multiple roles that fill various types of needs in the individual. In this context, the primary focus of adult life is expected to change with time and circumstance. Functioning is basically evaluated and understood in terms of the ability to create new satisfactory and productive roles as these change.

There is atleast an equal amount of evidence to support both views.

Later in this essay, the observation that the social work literature overwhelmingly reflects the first view to the virtual exclusion of the other will be discussed at length. The treatment of women by the profession, it is clear, will be directly related to its choice of conceptual framework.

A critical examination of its knowledge base may be especially important when producing a work for a social work audience for two basic reasons. The first is that the social work profession, to a great degree, operates from a reactive position. It derives its definition of the desirable and formulates practice methods on the basis of theoretical and political justification from other sectors of society and academic disciplines. This can mean that significant beliefs from other fields and the mandates they imply are often accepted at face value. The assumptions underlying these ideas and their consequences are not always fully appreciated by social workers. * Thus, it can be proposed that

* A historical overview of the interaction between the development of social work goals and dominant political and social thinking is presented in "The Influence of Political Power in Determining the Theoretical Develop-

examining the political and theoretical derivations of current practice literature will constitute an addition to social work knowledge. Secondly, it has been noted in the literature that social work has generated very little in the way of descriptive-analytical studies of the family, women and the forces that affect them. (Maas, 1971, pp. 123 ff.; Johnson 1976, pg. 531) One writer relates this observation to the increasing evidence of the ineffectiveness of standard social work practices which he attributes to a lack of conceptual rigour in the formulation of practice policy. The specific criticisms put forward in this

* cont. - - ment of Social Work" by Reuben Bitensky. (Jour. of Social Policy Vol. II, No. 2 (Apr. '73, 119-30)) Bitensky elaborates, documents and defends the thesis that the social work profession has tended to react to political influences by co-opting them into its own structure. This has not been done in a self-aware manner, and, so, the profession has found itself forwarding objectives whose implications are not fully understood. He relates this trend to what he perceives to be a pervasive pre-occupation with methodological concerns and a narrowing of the ambit of professional concerns. Joseph L. Vigilante ("Between Values and Science: Education for the Profession During a Moral Crisis- Is Proof Truth?", Jour. of Education for Social Work, VOL. X, no. 3, Wint. '76, 10-6) proposes the profession has accepted the scientific logical-positivist model to the extent it considers value as a species of fact. He believes this has resulted in a neglect to acknowledge
cont.

regard are that there has been a trend to narrowing the perspectives used to evaluate social situations and to intellectual isolation from new relevant work in other fields in an effort to clearly delineate an identifiable area of social work expertise.

It has been suggested that social work practice with women in particular suffers from a lack of conceptual clarity in distinguishing fact from value and in exercising any kind of critical sense about the consequences of the theoretical frameworks commonly used as a basis of practice with women. (Wetzel, 1976 b; Meisel and Friedman, 1974; Schwartz, 1973; Berlin, 1976) In addition, in simple language, there is evidence that most social workers do not know very much about women,

* cont. - - the instrumental role values and context play in the construction of social science theory and practice decision making.

Janice Wetzel ("Social Adjustment as a Social Work Principle", Frontiers, VOL. I, No. 3, Wint. '76, 17-25) defends similar arguments in her review of the work of major social work theorists. In another article, ("Interaction of Feminism and Social Work in America", Social Casework, Apr. '76, 227-36), she pursues the theme of the unconscious interaction between the "value climate" and the social work profession in terms of women as clients and workers.

have not read even rudimentary texts about the sociological and psychological forces that affect women and most social work curricula do not address these issues. (Meisel and Friedman, 1974; Berlin, 1976; Johnson, 1976; Kravetz, 1976; Smith and Cummings, 1976) Some recent content analyses of various professional journals and books suggest that these issues do not receive substantive attention in these publications. (Rosenblatt, et. al., 1973; Kravetz, 1976) In the light of these observations, it would seem reasonable to examine where "intellect and object conform" in social work knowledge and in the formation of practice goals for women and then to analyse these goals in the light of knowledge available from other fields. Several authors have engaged in critical examination of the derivation and consequences of current conceptions of norms for women in fields allied to social work, especially psychology and sociology. Part of this thesis will present this material in an endeavour to enrich the current social work practice context.

The goal of this thesis is to compile a

"working paper" for social work practice with married middle-aged women who have children. It is a library thesis and, as such, contains no primary data or findings from original research. It has been conceived as an attempt to provide a sensible and appropriate context for practice decisions. It is based on the assumption that, though relevant and useful information exists on this subject, it has not been structured in a form that is easily accessible to social workers. Therefore, a good deal of the analysis presented here is not the result of original interpretation for the purposes of this thesis, but represents the insight of the authors that were consulted in compiling this paper. The task undertaken was to form connections between various analytical and critical works and to suggest what relevance they might have in practice with middle-aged women. A secondary goal of this thesis is to use the situation of middle-aged women as an exemplar case of how the various ways social workers understand women can affect the ways we can serve them professionally. This question revolves around issues

in the "epistemology" of social work knowledge - the examination of "its nature and grounds with reference to its limits and validity". (Baldwin, 1940)

Characteristics of the Population being Discussed

Middle age is a relatively new mass phenomenon (Vedder, 1965, pp. 4 ff.) In prehistoric times, the average life span was 18 years. Fossil remains indicate that few lived beyond forty. As recently as 1900, the average life expectancy in America was 45 years and only 10% of the population was middle-aged. In 1965, 80% of the population survived to 60 and the average adult in the labour force was 45 years of age. While the total population of the United States increased 98% between 1915 and 1965, the total number of middle-aged increased by 200%.

There is, however, considerable disagreement as to when exactly middle age begins and ends. Several authors have reported difficulty in establishing guidelines for their own research. Bart (1967) uses

the limits of 40-60 but she notes the 45-70 might be equally appropriate for other types of research. General standards in the field of demography delineate the years between 45 to 64, yet a large number of human development and social science textbooks refer to the period between 30 and 60. (Vedder, 1965, pp. ix-xii) Other experts (Levine, 1957; Leighton 1952; Thompson 1955) have calculated the middle allocation, based on the average age of onset of biological or psychological changes marking the end of youth, as the ages from 36 to 55. Studies of middle-aged women tend to favour the lower ends of these ranges. (Lloyd-Jones, 1956; Self, 1969; Klass and Redfern, 1977; Dulude, 1978)

Identifying the boundaries of middle age for women is no easier. Though there is a temporal relationship between the physiological changes associated with middle age, there is no hard evidence establishing a necessary or causal relationship between the biological events of menopause and the social and psychological phenomena associated with

middle age. Furthermore, middle-aged women cannot be readily identified by a wide variety of features of ascribed status and prescribed age roles. (Neugarten, 1968a; Bart, 1969; Turner, 1970, pg. 369) Middle age is a stage more distinguished by a lack of such definitions.

The overwhelming majority of middle-aged women in Canada are married and have children. (Boyd, 1976, pg. 17, pg. 36) In the case of married women with children, a starting point in developing a definition of middle age seems to be the age and status of the last child. (Neugarten, 1961, pp. 364-6; Bart, 1967, pp. 150 ff.; Neugarten, 1968b, pg. 95; Mayer, 1969, pg. 101; Harris, 1975, chap. 4; Glick, 1977, pg. 11) It has variously been described as the point at which the youngest child begins schooling, the point at which he turns eighteen or the point at which he marries. The chronological age that would correlate with these events ranges from 32 to 64 years of age. The end point of middle age is usually identified as the time at which a woman's husband retires, which is usually age 65 for men and

so would, in most cases, apply to women in their late fifties and early sixties.

Lloyd Jones (1956) emphasized that middle age for women, whatever its exact boundaries, was emerging as a longer period of the life cycle, beginning earlier and ending later. Her research findings have indicated that earlier marriage ages and compressed childbearing spans for women have resulted in an earlier age at which the youngest child enters school. She calculated the average American woman reached this stage at age 46 in 1940 and at age 32 in 1955. At this point, Lloyd Jones notes, "the very definite objectives every girl has clearly in mind - getting married and having children-have been realized. Women at 32 enter into the fairly uncharted and vague business of trying to 'live happily ever after'." (Lloyd-Jones 1956, pg. 21)

The evidence that middle age is becoming the major span in the life cycle of women has been supported by other researchers. There is widespread agreement that there have been basic shifts in the timing of major life

events, especially for women. "The much longer empty nest period now than formerly is perhaps the most dramatic change that has occurred in the pattern of the typical family life cycle. The increase from two years to thirt-
een years for this stage... has a multitude of social, economic and psychological implications." (Glick, 1977, pg. 11)**

Studies in Canada (Boyd, 1976, pg. 28) have concluded that there is an increasing tendency for Canadian women to compress their childbearing into a shorter time span. A large proportion of women do not make a 'career' of childrearing but return to work when or shortly after the youngest child enters school. (Gunderson, 1976, pg. 96) Given the average age of the mother at the birth of the last child, 29.5 years, (Boyd, 1976, pg. 34) the majority of married

** Paul C. Glick ("Updating the Family Lifecycle", Jour. of Marriage and the Family, VOL. XXXIX, No. 5, Aug. '77, 5-13) bases this calculation on the average time between the marriage of the last child and the death of one the spouses. He himself notes (pg. 8) that these figures do not realistically reflect the length of the post-parental stage because they do not take into account the increasingly younger age of women at the end of childbearing or children who have left for college or established separate households on their own.

women with children in Canada will experience a relatively short span of time in the exclusive wife-mother role and can expect to re-enter the labour force some time before their thirty-fifth birthday.

i Return to the Labour Force

Boyd notes that unmarried women have always worked due to a lack of an alternative source of income; the rise in labour force participation rates for women in recent years has been due to the influx of married women. (Boyd, 1976, pg. 27) However, she cautions against using these figures to exaggerate, overstate or magnify any implications for changes in the norms for the behavior of married women or to any major changes within the family. Many married women work because of simple financial need. Level of spouses' income is a potent predictor of labour force involvement of wives. The lower the family income, the more likely it is the wife will work. (Gunderson, 1976, pg. 99)

ii Childbearing

The fertility rates of Canadian women have been dropping. Older women tend to have more children than younger women. (Boyd, 1976, pg. 34) A woman whose youngest child entered school in 1977 has spent less time in the exclusive role of childrearing than a woman in the same situation in 1967 or 1971. As previously stated, there has been an increasing tendency to compress the space between children and complete families in a much shorter period of time.

Most ever-married middle-aged women in Canada in 1971 did, however, have children. Women in the five-year age categories (35-9, 40-4 etc.) between 35 and 59 had at least three children on average. (3.1 to 3.4) (Boyd, 1976, pg. 36, pg. 45) The figures for percentage of childlessness, adjusted for assumed rates of biological sterility, indicate a trend to voluntary childlessness among young women. However the rates for women between 35 and 59 decreased between 1961 and 1971. In 1971, over 90% of married women in Canada between 35 and 49 and a slightly lower percentage of women between 50