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Women Baby Boomers' Experiences of Personal Growth Through Later-Life Divorce After a Long-Term Marriage

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WOMEN BABY BOOMERS' EXPERIENCES OF PERSONAL GROWTH THROUGH

LATER-LIFE DIVORCE AFTER A LONG-TERM MARRIAGE

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty

of Montclair State University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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2023

Dissertation Chair: Dr. W. Matthew Shurts

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

We hereby approve the Dissertation

Women Baby Boomers' Experiences of Personal Growth Through Later-Life Divorce After a Long-Term Marriage

of

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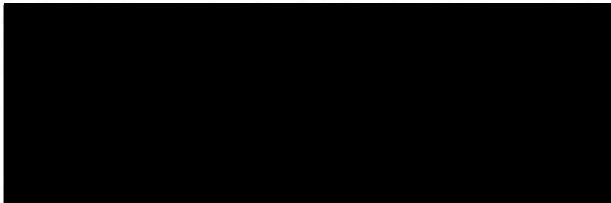
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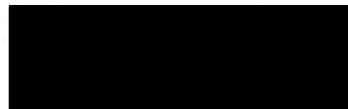
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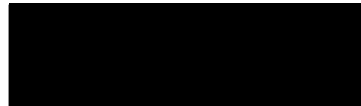
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Abstract

WOMEN BABY BOOMERS' EXPERIENCES OF PERSONAL GROWTH

THROUGH LATER-LIFE DIVORCE AFTER A LONG-TERM MARRIAGE

by Lisa Silva McHale

Later-Life divorce, occurring at age 50 or older, also referred to as *gray divorce,* has become increasingly common as the population ages (Brown & Lin, 2012; 2022). With gray divorce comes experiences that may differ from those faced by younger divorcees. The research demonstrates that divorce in later life brings unique challenges, especially for those who divorce after a long-term marriage (20 or more years, Sommerville, 2017). Few researchers have examined divorce in later life after a long-term marriage, and fewer yet when combined with a particular generational cohort. Additionally, there has been a lack of research exploring positive experiences and the potential for personal growth through a later-life divorce transition. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to fill the gap and illuminate the self-reported personal growth experiences of baby boomer women who divorced over age 50, after a lengthy marriage.

In this qualitative interview study, I employed two rounds of semi-structured interviews to explore the participants' journeys as they transitioned out of their marriages. Divorce did not begin when the legal documents were signed (i.e., legal divorce). It was a complicated process for this group of women as they navigated the various *types of divorce*: emotional, financial, psychological, physical, and social. Highlighted are challenges and changes participants experienced along the way. Data analysis revealed two overarching themes: *Getting "There" and Reconceptualizing the Self,* which emphasize participants' experiences of personal growth through their divorce transitions.

From the women's narratives, getting a divorce after a long-term marriage emerged as a

process that often began years prior to legal divorce. Personal growth was also a process that began anytime throughout the divorce transition from contemplation through postdivorce. Most of the women realized the importance of having a "positive attitude" and being "forward thinking" early in their journey. Without being positive and working through issues, they would have remained stuck in the past and unable to move forward. Their positive attitude set the stage for the ensuing growth.

While this life-changing transition had the potential to be psychologically, emotionally, and financially draining, it also held tremendous potential for growth for those involved. Having a positive mindset, acceptance, purpose, authentic connections, and solid support system appeared as instrumental to the baby-boomer women's personal growth through their divorce transition. The women experienced growth in all domains of life. Participants said they were finally able to be their "*authentic self*," they became who they were "*meant to be*," and they had a newfound "*sense of freedom*," and "*a lightness of being*."

Mental health counselors can prepare for the rise in later-life divorce by viewing divorce after decades of marriage as a complicated process that unfolds uniquely for each client. Counselors can work towards understanding the nuances of the cultural environment in which baby boomer women were raised and can explore the meaning this holds for them. Counselor educators can provide coursework on various cohort cultures, stereotypes of aging, divorce in later life, and how to promote personal growth through later-life transitions. Further implications for counseling practices and directions for future research are discussed in Chapter 5.

Key Words: adversarial growth, baby boomer, divorce, divorce adjustment, divorce process, gray divorce, midlife, later life, later-life divorce, long-term marriage, personal growth, postdivorce adjustment, posttraumatic growth, stress-related growth, transition.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my grandmother, Florinda Silva Henriques, a true inspiration. A woman before her time. My grandmother worked from the age of 18, as a factory worker through World War II, and later as a businesswoman and entrepreneur. She encouraged me to get an education and to reach for the stars. My grandmother often said, "be a doctor, be a teacher…you can be anything you want to be!" Thank-you grandma, I love and miss you, always.

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Divorce After a Long-Term Marriage

Chapter One: Introduction

Many factors have contributed to the considerable rise in later-life divorce in the United

States, including an aging population, increasing longevity (Brown & Lin, 2022; Ortman et al.,

2014; Vincent & Velkoff, 2010), and changes in societal views on aging, marriage, and divorce

(Bowen & Jensen, 2017; Brown & Lin, 2012; Canham et al., 2014; Crowley, 2018; Maples &

Abney, 2006). Late-life or *later-life divorce,* also referred to as *gray divorce* in the literature, is

defined as a divorce that has occurred for any individual at age 50 or over (Bair, 2007; Bowen &

Jensen, 2017; Brown & Lin, 2012; Crowley, 2018; Lin et al., 2019). In their often-quoted

seminal study, Brown and Lin (2012) found the divorce rate for individuals in their 50s and 60s

more than doubled from 1990 to 2010. The researchers identified the increasing number divorces

among older individuals as the *gray divorce revolution* (Brown & Lin, 2012). Brown and Lin

(2022) conducted a follow up to their seminal study in 2019 and found that while divorce rates

slightly decreased for individuals aged 50-64, it continued to rise for those age 65 and older. In

addition, Brown and Lin (2022) found that at least one of the individuals was age 50 or older in

36% of all divorces in 2019, compared with 25% in 2010. Stempler (2017) maintained that

although the divorce rate for individuals aged 50 and over saw a sharp increase over the past 25

years steady increases have been reported for the 50-plus population since 2008, "when the

Census Bureau began collecting divorce data yearly as part of its American Community Survey"

(p.1). Earlier divorce statistics demonstrate that 5 out of 1000 Americans aged 50 or older got

divorced in 1990, compared with 10 out of every 1,000 by 2015 (American Community Survey,

2015 as cited in Stempler, 2017).

Background

Given the increase in later-life divorce, it is important to understand the consequences and implications of divorce for older divorcees, as well as how they successfully navigate and adjust to this significant life transition. Historically, the negative consequences of divorce for younger individuals (especially women and children) have been well documented (Amato, 2010); however, empirical research regarding postdivorce outcomes and adjustment for older individuals is severely lacking (Bowen & Jensen, 2017; Crowley, 2018; Kaleta & Mróz, 2023; Lin et al., 2019). Nevertheless, a growing body of research identifies numerous potential negative consequences of divorce in later-life, especially for women, including financial instability, loss of self-identity and self-esteem (Crowley, 2018; Kaleta & Mróz, 2023), and physical and mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and stress (Sbarra, 2015; Sbarra, & Whisman, 2022) among other issues and problems affecting the family and the community (Brown & Lin, 2012, 2022). In addition to the negative consequences of divorce, researchers have also focused on *divorce adjustment*, the process of adapting to various life changes that result from divorce (Krumrei et al., 2007) among young adults more so than adults in middle and later life (Amato, 2010; Bair, 2007; Perrig-Chiello et al., 2015; Pudrovska, & Carr, 2008). Even gerontological researchers have overlooked adjustment to divorce in later life focusing instead on widowhood, as noted by Lin et al. (2019).

With the growing number of older adults experiencing divorce, it is important that counselors and other mental health professionals gain knowledge and skills on how to support and encourage positive outcomes and processes through this major life upheaval. In this chapter, I discuss the implications of gray divorce, with a focus on a specific population of baby boomer women divorcees, the gap in the research related to this topic, and the research

question that guides my study. I also discuss the purpose, significance, conceptual framework, and nature of this study and conclude the chapter with a list of key definitions.

Divorce Adjustment and Growth

There is limited knowledge of the factors related to positive adaptation to divorce and how to facilitate positive postdivorce adjustment, despite a developing body of research on how resilience and personal growth can help individuals overcome adverse life events (Perrig-Chiello et al., 2015). Although a few researchers have reported positive outcomes of divorce across various age groups, many of these studies have focused on constructs such as *life-satisfaction* and *well-being* and their relationship to divorce adjustment, rather than on personal growth as a construct (Degges-White, & Myers, 2006a, 2006b; Symoens et al., 2013). Personal growth has been described by researchers as positive changes in individuals' sense of identity, their relationships, and how they see their world (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013; Corey et al., 2018; Joseph, 2009). On the other hand, life satisfaction is typically operationalized and measured with standardized instruments that assess individuals' emotions (e.g., how happy they are) (Degges-White, & Myers, 2006b). One can infer that life-satisfaction and well-being connote the result of some personal growth that may help individuals overcome negative events; however as noted, these terms represent constructs that are different from growth which suggests a process and progress towards development. Furthermore, personal growth is not a specific dimension of overall wellness in the *Indivisible Self*, an evidence-based model of wellness (Degges-White, & Myers, 2006a, 2006b; Myers & Sweeney, 2004). Assessing for general divorce adjustment, or overall wellness, does not focus on personal growth as a construct, and may lose the detail and nuances of personal growth as separate and distinct from other positive outcomes and as a process or an outcome of a process on its own.

As noted, divorce has the potential for a range of negative outcomes for the individual, including impaired self-identity, severed relationships, and loss of financial stability, to name a few. By not identifying and focusing on personal growth as a buffer against negative outcomes of divorce or as a potential positive outcome and process on its own, we are missing the full picture of later-life divorce for women who may experience this major life change. Exploring how women make meaning of gray divorce in ways that contribute to their growth and illuminating the processes involved may provide valuable information that prevents, reduces, or softens the impact of the negative consequences of later-life divorce through primary, secondary, and tertiary interventions. For instance, understanding the process of growth through later-life divorce may enable clinicians to foster this mindset in women in the early stages of separation and divorce, when clients would be most likely to seek therapy. Understanding how women navigate later-life divorce and overcome the potentially negative outcomes associated with divorce to arrive at a better place may have far-reaching implications for the women themselves, as well as their family and their community.

Later-life Divorce and Personal Growth

Most individuals experience changes and adjust throughout the divorce process. While many of these changes may be challenging and perceived as negative, some researchers (e.g., Bowen & Jensen, 2017; Demo & Fine, 2010; Gregson & Ceynar, 2009; Makidon, 2013; Somerville, 2017; Thomas & Ryan, 2008) have found the potential for benefits such as personal development and growth. The challenges inherent in divorce may prevent some individuals from experiencing positive outcomes. Still, they also may be the triggering force that propels others to undergo positive life changes leading to personal growth and personal transformation (Brodbeck et al., 2016; Demo & Fine, 2010; Somerville, 2017; Thomas & Ryan, 2008). The rising rate of

later-life divorce and the potential for women to experience growth through this transition is

significant when considering the increasing number of older adults in the United States.

Later-life Divorce and an Aging Population

The population of individuals aged 50 and over in the United States was 108.7 million in

2014 and was projected to increase by 19 million by 2024 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). This

group included 76.4 million individuals who make up the baby boom cohort (U. S. Census

Bureau, 2014). This cohort, also called *baby boomers*, is comprised of individuals born between

1946 and 1964; the youngest of whom will turn 65 by 2030. Caplan and Rabe (2023) reported

that the 2020 U.S. Census, which looked at age in 10-year groupings, identified the largest

population increase in the 65-74 age group. This population age group grew by 52 % (11.4

million) from 2010 to 2020, primarily as a result of the aging baby boomer cohort (Caplan &

Rabe, 2023).

Not only are there more individuals in later-life cohorts than ever before, but they are

living longer than in the past. Life expectancy has been increasing steadily in the United States

over the past few decades (Arias et al., 2022; National Center for Health Statistics, 2017), which

contributes to the increase in the number of individuals in the midlife and older population.

Considering the increase in life expectancy over the years and the previously mentioned

demographic data and divorce statistics (i.e., pre-COVID pandemic statistics), it is likely that

counselors and other mental health professionals will see an increasing number of older clients

navigating a later-life divorce, many of whom will be baby boomer women. Sbarra (2015) noted

that the mental health and wellness field needs better "empirically validated" (p. 9) interventions

for separated and divorced individuals. It follows that clinicians will need to understand the

characteristics and culture of the baby boomer population to provide appropriate counseling

interventions for this large demographic cohort as they separate, divorce, or consider divorcing.

Professional counselors have the task of adhering to professional standards that encourage cultural competence and, as such, must understand the population they serve (American Counseling Association, 2014). The baby boom generation or cohort may be viewed as a distinct cultural group with characteristics, beliefs, and values unique to its members (Maples & Abney, 2006). Anderson et al. (2012) maintained that family history, gender role expectations, and the cultural group with which one identifies heavily influences an individual's divorce experiences. In this regard, mental health professionals would benefit from understanding the perceptions and experiences of the baby boom generation to help facilitate positive change as these women navigate the divorce process (Laidlaw & Pachana, 2009).

Later-life Divorce and Challenges

Although divorce is stressful and can present challenges for individuals at any age (Amato, 2010), the challenges faced by older individuals are likely to be qualitatively different from those experienced by younger individuals (Laidlaw & Pachana, 2009). For example, financial issues such as a division of assets are often one of the biggest stressors and challenges in any divorce (Knox & Corte, 2007); nevertheless, they may represent unique challenges to individuals who divorce later in life (Crowley, 2018; 2019).

Given the cohort's 18-year age span (ages 58 through 76 in 2022), younger baby boomers may differ in various ways from older baby boomers; however, when compared to younger divorcees (under age 50), all baby boomers may have less time left to work and potentially recoup financial losses (Crowley, 2018; 2019). In addition to financial instability, older individuals (50-plus) may struggle with changes such as a loss of identity, established roles, and social supports (Brown & Lin, 2012; Wu & Schimmele; 2007) more so than younger adults, who

may also experience these issues and changes but possibly to a lesser extent. Crowley (2018) noted that older individuals (especially those in long-term marriages) who suddenly find themselves single may have a more difficult time breaking free of long-established roles (as husband or wife) than younger individuals who have had less time married; these roles can strongly be tied to one's self-identity. After decades of marriage, there may be various systems of long-term social support (i.e., spouses' family and friends) that have been established and can be lost through a divorce (Crowley, 2018). Furthermore, there is an increased potential for stress and other adjustment issues for later-life divorcees (Wu & Schimmele, 2007), since many of them are exiting long-term marriages (e.g., a first marriage of 20 or more years) (Somerville, 2017).

Women and Later-life Challenges

Women tend to face external barriers that are different from those experienced by men, which may stem from gender role socialization (the tendency for boys and girls to be socialized differently) and may lead to sexism, employment inequities (e.g., men earning more than women), ageism, and greater family responsibilities (Coogan & Chen, 2007; Crowley, 2018). These barriers have the potential to restrict women's positive adjustment post later-life divorce (Gregson & Ceynar, 2009). Crowley (2018) noted that women often experience an "economic gray divorce penalty" (p. 17), as they "are much more likely than men to suffer from financial problems if they divorce at or after the age of 50" (p. 18). In addition, older women may experience changes in relationships (e.g., children leaving home) and physical changes (e.g., menopause), which can affect their postdivorce adjustment (Crowley, 2018).

Baby boomers have contributed to changes in societal views on aging, marriage, and divorce throughout the years (Maples & Abney, 2006). These societal changes, with the unique

perspectives and life experiences associated with the baby boomer population, have sparked my interest in exploring what women who divorce in later life have experienced that they believe contributed to their growth and development postdivorce. My hope is that my study sheds light on how baby boomer women divorcing in later life navigate changes and challenges in ways that help them overcome potential barriers or disadvantages. For these reasons, I am interested in baby boomer women's positive postdivorce adjustment that goes beyond returning to predivorce functioning (i.e., baseline). I aim to understand how some women manage to grow and thrive through the divorce process. Giving voice to baby boomer women who divorced in later life after a long-term marriage and perceive they have experienced personal growth may help counselors understand what the growth process looks like through this major life transition. In turn, this understanding may enable clinicians to facilitate this positive outcome or process in their clients with intention.

Statement of the Problem

The demographic data previously cited in this chapter supports that there has been an increase in individuals divorcing later in life (Stempler, 2017). There is a substantial amount of empirical research on divorce, although much of it focuses on younger divorcees (e.g., Amato, 2000; Amato, 2010; Amato & Previti, 2003) and the negative effects and consequences of divorce (e.g., Amato, 2000; Dare, 2011), especially for women (e.g., Sakraida, 2005, 2008; Steiner et al., 2011). Additionally, there is considerable research on the divorce process (Demo & Fine, 2010) and postdivorce adjustment, including factors that contribute to negative and positive postdivorce adjustment (Bevvino, & Sharkin, 2003; Demo & Fine, 2010; Krumrei et al., 2007; Montenegro, 2004; Sakraida, 2005, 2008; Steiner et al., 2011; Thomas & Ryan, 2008). There are, however, a limited number of studies that have focused on later-life divorce (Bair, 2007; Brown

& Lin, 2012; Canham et al., 2014; Crowley, 2018; Pudrovska & Carr, 2008; Wu & Schimmele, 2007) and divorce after a long-term marriage (Bowen & Jensen, 2017; Makidon, 2013; Perrig-Chiello et al., 2015; Somerville, 2017). Furthermore, much of this research has focused on the increase in later-life divorce (Brown & Lin, 2012; Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014) and on individuals returning to predivorce levels of functioning. There has been limited research identifying the potential for individuals to experience positive changes in their lives (e.g., the belief they are in a "better place" postdivorce, beyond returning to baseline) through or because of the divorce (Gregson & Ceynar, 2009; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Makidon, 2013; Somerville, 2017; Thomas & Ryan, 2008).

Makidon (2013), Somerville (2017), and Thomas and Ryan (2008) reported growth as an outcome in their examinations of women's general postdivorce experiences. The researchers concentrated on participants' overall experiences postdivorce. They focused on divorce adjustment, the negative consequences of divorce, and did not intentionally seek out individuals who self-identified as having grown through the divorce transition. In addition, the researchers did not ask participants to describe their growth, the process involved, or to indicate what might have contributed to and challenged the participants' growth process. As a result, many of the participants were surprised when the researchers identified and labeled their experiences as growth. Further, Makidon (2013), Somerville (2017), and Thomas and Ryan (2008) did not limit the timeframe after divorce was finalized, nor did they limit the age ranges of the participants to woman who divorced in later life. My study differs from these prior studies in that I explicitly highlight and examine women's growth and development (not overall postdivorce experiences). This study focuses on a specific population of baby boomer women and their experiences of personal growth in the early postdivorce years. Attention is given to how women describe

growth for themselves and in ways that helped them make meaning of a later-life divorce. Limiting the number of years postdivorce is important because I believe that most individuals will seek counseling early in the divorce process. Knowing how women who divorce in later life make sense of divorce in ways that contribute to their growth may enable counselors and other mental health clinicians to help facilitate these outcomes for others during these critical years.

In addition to the limited focus on personal growth in the divorce literature, there is a paucity of research that examines divorce over age 50 (Brown & Lin, 2012; Crowley, 2018), divorce after long-term marriage (Benson & Jensen, 2017; Perrig-Chiello et al., 2015; Pudrovska & Carr, 2008; Stempler, 2017), and how individuals can make meaning of the divorce transition (Bevvino & Sharkin, 2003). The divorce adjustment literature also is limited in terms of diversity, including race, culture, socio-economic status, geography, and education. Many of the studies centered on white, middle-to-upper-middle-class, educated women from a particular region of the United States, such as the Midwest and the Southwest (e.g., Makidon, 2013; Somerville, 2017; Thomas & Ryan, 2008).

There is limited research regarding what baby boomer women identify and describe as personal growth and a limited understanding of what has contributed to and inspired their growth processes through the transition of divorce (Leighman, 2009; Thomas & Ryan, 2008). The research to date does not provide a clear picture of what may help promote and facilitate positive life changes for gray divorcees after a long-term marriage in the early years after a divorce, how to navigate the challenges that can potentially inhibit or inspire personal growth through this transition, and what the journey looks like, especially for specific populations of women.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how baby boomer women,

divorced at age 50 or over after a long-term marriage, describe how they have grown through the divorce transition and to illuminate experiences and processes they believe have contributed to their personal growth. I set out to expand on results of previous studies in which personal growth emerged as an outcome for divorced women of varying ages (i.e., participants were not solely gray divorcees) by conducting qualitative interviews with gray divorcees. My intent was to capture nuance and details pertaining to how baby boomer women describe postdivorce personal growth for themselves. I aimed to highlight experiences that challenged, supported, inspired, and in any way affected or influenced the participants' growth. My goal was to give voice to women who experienced personal growth through a later-life divorce and to illuminate the processes involved through exploring the narratives of a diverse group of baby boomers.

Research Question

In collaboration with the participants, I inductively elicited their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors related to how they describe personal growth; how they believe they have grown through their divorce; what they believe has contributed to their growth and the processes involved. Based on identified gaps in the research, which has implications for the counseling field, the overarching research question guiding this study is: What are women baby boomers' experiences of personal growth through later-life divorce after a long-term marriage?

Significance and Need for the Study

The trends depict midlife and older adults (most of whom are baby boomers) getting divorced at greater rates than ever before in history (Bowen & Jensen, 2017; Brown & Lin, 2012; Stempler, 2017). Brown and Lin (2012) and Lin et al. (2019) predicted that the trends will continue. In addition, most of the current divorce research has focused on the under-50 population; therefore, studying positive outcomes after a later-life divorce can inform counseling

practice by increasing counselors' understanding of older divorcees, which in turn may lead to ways to better help them achieve personal growth and well-being postdivorce (Brown & Lin, 2012; Maples & Abney, 2006). Brown and Lin (2012) maintained midlife and older divorcees' mental health and wellness often suffer and, as this population increases in numbers, so too will their need for mental health services. This is particularly relevant to the counseling field. As Anderson and colleagues (2012) noted, one of the most common reasons adults seek counseling is that they are having trouble navigating or adapting to transitions involving close relationships, and divorce is one of the most common of life transitions.

Baby boomers utilize counseling and other mental health services in greater numbers than previous generations; however, there is a shortage of mental health professionals trained to work with this population, as well as a lack of effective services developed with their needs in mind (Institute of Medicine, 2012). There is also a need to foster a greater understanding of personal growth experiences that occur through stressful or adverse life events (Joseph, 2009). Joseph (2009) maintained that informing clinicians about ways they can help facilitate clients' growth at different points along their journey may help prevent the development of mental health disorders. Helping women who are in various stages of the divorce process (i.e., from contemplation to newly divorced) discover how they may experience positive changes and potentially thrive in the process can be empowering to older women who may otherwise struggle with the varied negative consequences of divorce.

The baby boom cohort is inherently different from previous generations in many ways (Maples, 2007; Maples & Abney, 2006). One distinguishing feature of this population relevant to my study is that many baby boomers came of age during the 1960s and 1970s, a time of acceleration and acceptance of divorce (Brown & Lin, 2012). Growing up during those decades

may have significantly influenced baby boomers' perceptions and acceptance of divorce in their own lives (Brown & Lin, 2012; Maples & Abney, 2006). If clinicians are to work effectively with baby boomer women, it is imperative that they understand their values, attitudes, and beliefs; have knowledge of clinical interventions that work with the population; and become aware of their own biases about aging (Laidlaw & Pachana, 2009; Maples & Abney, 2006). For instance, a better understanding of how members of this cohort have been able to move beyond negative outcomes after a major upheaval such as divorce may help to dispel the ageist notion that older individuals are set in their ways and are resistant to change (Maples & Abney, 2006).

Laidlaw and Pachana (2009) stated that the changes in demographics, including the uniqueness of the baby boom cohort, have implications for clinical training, education, and interventions. I aimed to gain an understanding of how baby boomer women perceive and experience personal growth after later-life divorce to inform counselors and counselor educators how to encourage positive outcomes when working with this growing population. My hope is that sharing baby boomer women's stories of positive change and growth through a later-life divorce, after a long-term marriage will add to the counseling knowledge base.

Conceptual Framework

Constructivist principles (Mahoney, 2003) provide the conceptual framework and overall contextual lens for the descriptive design of my study. Constructivists posit that individuals actively interpret their world and construct reality through the structuring of their experiences (Mahoney, 2003; Neimeyer, 2009). Creswell (2009) maintained that in *constructivism*, reality is thought to be subjective as it is viewed through one's perspective. As such, it is understood that multiple realities may exist across individuals. The constructive paradigm is aligned with my belief that individuals create their unique realities based on past and present experiences and, in

turn, derive meaning from these events. Most theories of adult development traditionally taught

in mental health professional training programs are based on age and stage theories, which posit

that individuals typically experience change in an orderly fashion (Blando, 2011), as compared

to the process of change represented by constructivist views. Mahoney (2003) noted that

constructivism emphasizes developmental processes such that individuals may make small or

large changes, either gradually or abruptly, in a non-linear fashion. According to constructivists,

individuals experience changes or growth when they are faced with challenges such as those that

occur when the order or patterns of their lives are disrupted (Mahoney & Marquis, 2002).

Constructivists believe that change or growth, therefore, does not occur linearly or within a status

quo but occurs instead with ebbs and flows (Mahoney, 2003).

Constructivism and Divorce

Although there may be a series of steps or events inherent in the legal divorce process

(Green, 2016), the rest of the divorce process (e.g., emotional, psychological) is not linear; it is

fluid and dynamic (Demo & Fine, 2010).This study will take the broader perspective of divorce

as a transition or a process, rather than viewing divorce as a single event (i.e., the signed papers

and court proceedings). When viewed through a constructivist lens, individuals may experience

growth at any point throughout the divorce process: from separation through post legal divorce.

Since the focus of this study is on how women experience growth both as a process and an

outcome through the divorce, when the participants believe they have experienced growth will

remain fluid and open to their interpretation.

Constructivists place a strong emphasis on emotion and action, in addition to

incorporating meaning reconstruction with cognitive-behavioral approaches (Mahoney, 2003;

Neimeyer, 2009). By viewing participants' stories through a constructivist lens, the focus is on

how they interpret their divorce transitions and how they cognitively construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct their realities to make meaning of experiences related to their growth (e.g., meaning reconstruction).

In constructivism individuals are active participants in exploring their narratives and in telling their stories (Brott, 2005). I view and interpret my participants' narratives in ways that allow for their experiences of personal growth to emerge, through the re-telling of their experiences rather than through linear stages of change. Constructivists describe meaning making as a relational, social, and cultural process and as a way to redefine reality with language (Neimeyer, 2009). The women in my study gave voice to their experiences of personal growth by explaining how they felt, what they did, and what they thought throughout the divorce process by attributing meaning to these feelings, actions, and thoughts.

Constructivism and Growth

Individuals can experience personal growth in any of the following dimensions: self or self-identity, relationships, and philosophy or worldview (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013; Corey et al., 2018; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). I view these three overall dimensions of personal growth through a constructivist lens. The three dimensions of personal growth relate to Mahoney's (2003) contention: "A constructive view of human experience is one that emphasizes meaningful action by developing self in relationship" (p. 5). In my study, I sought out individuals who self-identified as having experienced growth related to their divorce (whether or not the growth fits into the above description of personal growth). Although I provide a scholarly definition of growth, my intent in doing so was to provide a frame of reference rather than to force the participants' concept of personal growth into any predetermined categories. Using a constructivist approach, I, as the researcher, was cognizant of how patterns of information or

themes emerged (including whether the participants identified experiences as "personal growth" or what terms they used to identify and describe their growth). I was cautious about assuming that those patterns reflected any particular definition of personal growth cited in the literature or the dimensions of growth purported by Mahoney (2003).

Nature of the Study

My population sample included baby boomer women aged 56-74 in 2020 (born 1946-1964), who had been legally divorced between two and seven years, and who self-identified as having experienced growth triggered or influenced by a later-life divorce transition. They had been in a long-term marriage, defined as a first marriage of at least 20 years (Somerville, 2017) before their legal divorce and divorced at age 50 or older. Age 50 is the starting point, as this is the commonly identified age in the literature as the beginning point of later life or late-life divorce (Bair, 2007; Bowen & Jensen, 2017; Brown & Lin, 2012; Crowley, 2018). In addition, age 50 can be a potential psychological marker in a woman's life as well as for the implications for physical changes it holds (e.g., menopause) (Sheehy, 1998).

I proposed a qualitative interview study in which the underlying philosophy and central characteristic is constructivism, described by Merriam (2009) as "understanding the meaning a phenomenon has for those involved" (p. 22). I wanted to understand how women aged 50 and over make meaning of the divorce transition in ways that contributed to their personal growth. I believe that employing a qualitative interview study allowed me to comprehensively describe and understand the phenomenon by exploring multiple women's experiences, which in turn will hopefully inform how counselors can facilitate personal growth in baby boomer women who are considering or have experienced a divorce.

Summary

Although there can be a multitude of losses experienced by anyone who divorces, divorcing later in life can be qualitatively different from divorcing at a younger age (Laidlaw & Pachana, 2009). While many postdivorce experiences are negative regardless of age, there is the potential for individuals to experience positive changes that lead to personal growth while navigating the divorce transition. These changes can occur in thoughts, behaviors, and feelings related to self, relationships, and philosophy or worldview (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013; Corey et al., 2018; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). As noted, the research on postdivorce adjustment is plentiful, especially across younger age groups. However, the research on positive changes and how individuals grow beyond their previous functioning through the divorce transition is lacking across all age groups. It does not provide a clear picture of what may help facilitate personal growth experiences through the divorce process, especially for gray divorcees who divorce after a long-term marriage. As such, the goal of this study was to uncover and understand perceptions and experiences of growth for women who divorce at age 50 and older.

Organization of the Dissertation

I have used a five-chapter format to organize this dissertation. In this chapter, I introduced my study, including the topic of interest, statement of the problem, research question, significance of the study, and conceptual framework. I introduced the focus of my study: baby boomer women who perceive they have experienced personal growth through a later-life divorce transition, and I offer the reader an opportunity to consider the value of understanding their experiences at a deeper level from what is currently known. At the end of this chapter, I share definitions of key terms.

In Chapter 2, I review selected literature on constructivism and personal growth, the baby boomer population, societal changes affecting divorce, divorce transition and adjustment, and

constructivism and personal growth. I present conceptual and empirical literature to support the

relevance of my study. In Chapter 3, I describe the research design and provide a rationale for

choosing a qualitative approach and the population of the study. I provide the method for

recruiting the sample and discuss my interview process, as well as procedures for data collection.

To conclude, I present methods for data analysis and examined limitations. Chapter 4 presents

the analysis of the study's findings and Chapter 5 is the conclusion, where I include the study's

limitations, implications for the counseling field, and suggestions for further research.

Definitions of Key Terms

The following definitions are provided to ensure understanding and consistency of terms

throughout the proposal.

Baby boomers (baby boom cohort). Individuals born between 1946 –1964.The oldest

baby boomers turned 76 in 2022, and the youngest turned 58.

Divorce. The final, legal termination of a marriage; when the divorce papers are signed

(Green 2013; Sakraida, 2005). For this study, participants must have been legally married and

have had that marriage officially terminated by a court or other such authority.

Divorce adjustment/postdivorce adjustment. The process of adapting to life changes

 that result from divorce; can refer to either positive or negative consequences (Krumrei et al.,

 2007).

Divorce process/divorce transition. The divorce process has been described as the time

between the actual separation of a married couple and their legal divorce (Perrig-Chiello et al.,

2015; Symoens et al., 2013). Although legally there may be specific steps and events that occur

to have a divorce become recognized by a state (Green, 2016), divorce is also considered an

emotional and psychological *transition*, or a *process*, which is not linear nor comprised of as a

series of structured events; it is fluid and dynamic (Demo & Fine, 2010). Additionally, I use the

terms *divorce process* and *divorce transition* interchangeably.

Gray Divorce. A late-life marriage dissolution (divorce) among adults where at least one

of the individuals is age 50 or older (Brown & Lin, 2012). An individual who divorced at age 50

or over is considered a *gray divorcee* and, therefore, considered to have had a gray divorce (i.e.,

both spouses do not have to be 50 or older).

Initiator status. The initiator is the individual who began the divorce process (e.g., first

asked for the divorce) (Sakraida, 2005, 2008).

Late-life/later life. Consistent with the age used by some researchers (e.g., Bair, 2007;

Bowen & Jensen, 2017), the operational definition for "*late-life" and "later life"* is individuals

over the age of 50. The terms *"late-life" and "later life"* are used interchangeably for this study.

Late-life/Later-life divorce. A divorce at age 50 or older; interchangeable with the term

"gray divorce" (Bair, 2007; Bowen & Jensen, 2017).

Long-term marriage. The operational definition of *long-term marriage* used in this

study is a first marriage of 20 years or more (Somerville, 2017).

Midlife. The U.S. Census Bureau (2010) described *midlife* as 45-65.

Personal growth. Positive change that occurs in the areas of self or self-identity,

relationships, and individual behavior in relationships, beliefs, values, and worldview (e.g., their

philosophy and worldview) (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013; Corey et al., 2018; Joseph, 2009;

Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). For this study, *personal growth* experiences may occur in any realm

of life (e.g., emotional, psychological, social, spiritual, and physical) and can be intentional or

unintentional.

Separation. A separation typically occurs when married individuals live apart, with or

without a legal *separation* document. Individuals may be separated (legally or not) and still live together. In addition, some states (e.g., New Jersey) do not have legal separation documents.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Later-life divorce, described as divorce at or over age 50 (also called gray divorce), has been on the rise in the United States (Brown & Lin, 2012, 2022) and is expected to continue to increase over the next decade or two (Crowley, 2018; Lin et al., 2019). An aging population (Brown & Lin, 2022; Ortman et al., 2014; Vincent & Velkoff, 2010) and changes in societal views on aging, marriage, and divorce (Amato, 2010; Cherlin, 2004, 2009; Crowley, 2018) have been cited as some of the main reasons for the increase in divorce in later-life (Bowen & Jensen, 2017; Brown & Lin, 2012; Canham et al., 2014; Crowley, 2018; Maples & Apney, 2006). Researchers have historically focused on negative consequences of divorce and divorce adjustment among young divorcees, with less attention to divorce outcomes for older individuals (Amato, 2010; Bair, 2007; Crowley, 2018; Perrig-Chiello et al., 2015; Pudrovska & Carr, 2008). Nonetheless, positive outcomes (i.e., personal growth) have also emerged in some studies which have centered on divorce among individuals of varied age ranges.

My study expands the divorce research in which growth emerged as specific outcomes (e.g., Makidon, 2013; Somerville, 2017; Thomas & Ryan, 2008) by concentrating on baby boomer women who divorce in later life after a long-term marriage (Bowen & Jensen, 2017; Dare, 2011; Perrig-Chiello et al., 2015; Stempler, 2017) and by highlighting how growth emerged as a process though the divorce transition within a limited timeframe postdivorce. This chapter begins with a review of constructivism (Mahoney, 2003; Mahoney & Marquis, 2002; Neimeyer, 2009) which serves as the conceptual framework and lens to view this study. I discuss divorce in relation to constructivism, with the focus on divorce as a process and transition (Anderson et al., 2012; Demo & Fine, 2010; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Researchers (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013; Joseph, 2009; Joseph & Linley, 2008; Tedeschi

& Calhoun, 1996) described growth or personal growth as positive changes in individuals' sense of self, their relationships, and worldview. This growth is seen through a constructivist's lens and is included in the discussion of the conceptual framework of this study. I discuss personal growth as a construct in the literature as well as a process and an outcome of divorce. This chapter includes a discussion of the aging U.S. population, highlighting the baby boom generation (those born 1946 – 1964) and their characteristics and values, relevant to their increasing divorce rates and postdivorce outcomes. Included is a brief description of middle and later adulthood as it relates to this cohort. An overview of the historical perspective on changing societal views on marriage and divorce in the United States will be presented. This chapter presents a focused review of the divorce literature, with attention to challenges and consequences, divorce adjustment, and later-life divorce. I also discuss positive outcomes highlighting personal growth as it emerged in a few studies. I used the following database sources in this study: EBSCO, ERIC, PsychINFO, and Google Scholar.

Conceptual Framework – Constructivism

As noted, constructivism and constructivist principles provide the conceptual framework and overall contextual lens to view my study. Constructivists believe reality is subjective and that multiple realities exist for and across individuals (Creswell, 2009; Mahoney, 2003). Mahoney (2003) and Neimeyer (2009) maintained that individuals actively interpret their world and construct reality through the structuring of their experiences. Mahoney and Marquis (2002) explained that the verb *construct* means, "To arrange or give structure to" (p.799) and maintained that the continual "… nature of structuring (organizing) processes is the developmental heart of constructivism" (p. 799). Human beings find patterns, impose structure, assign meaning, and make sense of fluid and changing events, based on their needs and

experiences (Mahoney & Marquis, 2002; McWilliams, 2011).

Constructivist Approaches

Constructivist counselors believe that individuals develop as they make choices based on their experiences (Savickas, 2011). Constructivist counselors strive to encourage personal development and meaning in addition to the correction of deficits (Neimeyer, 2009) and believe that change or growth does not occur within a status quo (Mahoney & Marquis, 2002). Most theories of adult development typically taught in counseling programs are based on age and stage models that maintain most individuals experience change in an orderly, linear fashion (Blando, 2011). Mahoney (2003), however, noted that constructivism involves developmental processes in which individuals may make small or large life changes, either gradually or abruptly, in a non-linear fashion.

Mahoney and Granvold (2005) maintained that constructive approaches do not ignore or deny challenges. Constructivists believe that individuals experience change and development when they are challenged, such as when the order (i.e., pattern) of their lives is disrupted (Mahoney, 2003). Neimeyer (2009) emphasized that constructivists view negative emotions as a component of change and resistance as a part of an individual's meaning-making process. The participants in my study had the opportunity to share their constructed reality and continued this process as they gave voice to their divorce experiences, both positive and negative (e.g., perceptions and experiences of growth). Participants had the opportunity to make meaning of their narratives, and in doing so had the ability to continue identifying areas of development and personal growth.

Core Tenets of Constructivism

Mahoney (2003) maintained that there are five themes in constructivism: *activity, order,*

self or *identity, social-symbolic relatedness,* and *life-span development.* In the first theme, *activity*, humans are described as active participants in their lives and therefore are active in shaping their experiences. In the second theme, *order* acknowledges that humans need and "seek order in the face of constant challenge" and "seek to create meanings" (Mahoney, 2003, p. 50). According to Mahoney (2003), "Challenges to our order are essential for all learning and development" (p. 50). He described the third theme, *self* or *identity* as a "sense of self and relationships with self" (Mahoney, 2003, p. 50.). This sense of self develops and changes mostly in relationship to others. Mahoney (2003) explained that the fourth theme, *social-symbolic relatedness*, relates to self-organization that occurs through "social bonds and symbolic processes" (p. 50) and how individuals make meaning through their narratives (life stories).

Mahoney and Granvold (2005) contend that much of the meaning individuals create emerges from experiences and relationships with others. The last theme, *life-span development,* refers to the developmental processes involved in changes to life-order, either gradual or abrupt (Mahoney, 2003). The shifts that can occur internally and externally from old life-orders to new ones are rarely "easy or painless" (Mahoney & Granvold, 2005, p. 76).

The core tenets of constructivism (Mahoney, 2003) serve as the foundational framework and lens for this study of divorce and personal growth. I first discuss divorce as a transition process and its relation to constructivism. Next, I define and discuss personal growth in relation to the counseling literature before identifying and highlighting the connection between Mahoney's five themes and personal growth for this study.

Constructivism and Divorce

Divorce can destroy the structure and order in an individual's life, as noted by Hetherington and Kelly (2002) in their seminal study and may therefore be viewed as a

disruption to one's life order. As previously noted, constructivists believe that individuals are active participants in their lives and the challenges they may experience when the patterns of their lives are interrupted (such as in divorce transition) can lead to change and growth (Mahoney & Marquis, 2002). Noted divorce researchers Demo and Fine (2010) assert that as active agents within their families and society, individuals are continually making decisions, arranging or rearranging their lives, and selecting roles and relationships in which to invest their time and energy.

Hetherington and Kelly (2002) chronicled Hetherington's three longitudinal studies on the nature and consequences of divorce, which followed 1400 divorced families (many over 30 years), beginning in the 1970s when the individuals were newly divorced young adults. In the often-cited research, divorce is described as a process (rather than a single event), resulting in many pathways that lead in and out of divorce (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Hetherington's seminal research combined make up *The Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage* (1989, 1991, 1994, 1993, 1998, 1999). Hetherington's research helped dispel some of the misleading views of divorce (e.g., divorce was always devastating; there are only two outcomes to divorce – win or lose; men are the big winners in divorce) (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Hetherington and Kelly (2002) reported that the negative views of divorce were based on studies that examined people too soon after their divorce (i.e., during the first year or two) and that in the first few years (i.e., the early years) after a divorce, often called a time of *crisis*, dramatic change frequently takes place. Hetherington and Kelly (2002) described the early years after a divorce as the "window of change" (p. 45). They maintained that although this period can be incredibly challenging and stressful, some individuals survive, while others thrive based on

their choices during this period. The researchers noted, "…if no steps toward positive change are taken in the early years postdivorce, they are less likely to be made later" (p. 45).

True to constructivist perspectives, Hetherington and Kelly (2002) asserted that individuals were active participants throughout their divorce: they made choices, planned for the future, developed new competencies, and sought out and used available resources. The researchers reported that when individuals were inactive, helpless, and full of self-pity, they did not move forward past their divorce, in other words, they were "left behind" (p. 277). Hetherington and Kelly (2002) maintained that although the divorce transition may contribute to many challenges, as well as much stress and confusion, it was also an opportunity for "life-transforming personal growth" (p. 5) and a chance for a better life.

Divorce as a Process/Transition

Anderson and colleagues (2012) posited that adults in transition (e.g., those experiencing a pending or completed divorce) often are confused, in need of assistance, and can typically identify the issues that affect them. Although a transition is often linked to one specific event, a process often also occurs (Anderson et al., 2012). An expanded view of the divorce process is common among researchers, who have maintained that a divorce is not a discrete event. It is a process which typically begins during the marriage and extends for years following separation and the legal divorce (i.e., when the papers are signed) (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott 2007; Demo & Fine, 2010). Conversely, a narrower view of the divorce process focuses on the legal proceedings occurring between the actual separation and when the divorce papers are finalized (i.e., the legal divorce) (Green, 2016; Symoens et al., 2013).

Green (2016), a divorce attorney for 30 years, explained that options for resolving divorce exist on a continuum; on one hand, spouses may have a conversation about how to end

the marriage and agree on how to divide assets and, on the other hand, there may be full

litigation that culminates in a trial. Regardless of how a couple chooses to end their marriage,

Green (2016) maintained that legal divorce is a process comprised of a series of events or stages

with opportunities for choices along the way. For instance, Green (2016) explained that the

litigation process is predictable and results in the following five stages: initiation of a divorce

suit (e.g., filing the divorce papers); resolving immediate issues (e.g., who lives where, who pays

the bills, etc.); discovery of significant information and facts; negotiation; and the trial (Green,

2016). Demo and Fine (2010) described divorce as an emotional and psychological process that

is fluid and dynamic. Drawing on over 20 years of research on families' experiences of divorce,

Demo and Fine (2010) presented a view of divorce that concentrates on the variation in

processes, experiences, and outcomes that are fluid and change over time.

As noted, the divorce process or transition can be viewed as a series of processes (e.g.,

legal, emotional, psychological), as well as an opportunity for growth and development at any

time throughout the transition, depending on the individuals' perceptions, choices, narratives,

and how (and if) they make meaning of their experiences. In this study, I adhere to the expanded

view of divorce as a process, as the focus was on the participants' growth experiences at any

time through the divorce transition. Participants, however, were not restricted to time frames

when discussing their perceptions and experiences of their growth. The transition model

(Anderson et al., 2012) discussed in the next section is a constructivist way to encourage

reflection and growth with individuals' experiencing a divorce transition. This model merges

with a constructivist approach, as explained below.

Transition Model

Schlossberg (1981, 1984) developed a transition model, which provides a systematic

framework for helping individuals in transition (Anderson et al., 2012). Anderson et al. (2012) revised and expanded Schlossberg's model. Their now well-known and often cited and utilized model is comprised of three parts: (1) Approaching transitions: Transition identification and transition process; (2) Taking stock of coping resources: The 4s system; and (3) Taking charge: Strengthening resources (Anderson et al., 2012).

Anderson and colleagues (2012) explained that an individual undergoing a transition will move into, through, and out of a situation and "moving through a transition requires letting go of the self, letting go of former roles, and learning new roles" (p. 30). Similar to Demo and Fine's (2010) view of divorce (e.g., as a process, not a single event), Anderson et al. (2012) noted that although the start of a transition may begin with a particular event, transitions are processes that take place over time. For instance, it may take up to two years for an individual to move through a major transition, which involves "leaving one set of roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions," to move on to new ones, through an "emergent growth process" (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 49).

A key concept in the revised transition model, that major life transitions can provide opportunities for psychological growth, is particularly relevant for my study. The researchers believed that a significant component of many midlife transitions is the need to make meaning of the transition. Although Anderson et al. (2012) spoke about midlife transitions in general and some of my participants may be considered post-midlife (depending on the definition), their research applies to my study because all my participants have moved through and out of their divorce (a transition, as defined by Anderson et al., 2012). They have all made meaning of the transition in ways that led to their personal growth (as self-identified). The women in my study are in the last phase of the transition model (e.g., taking charge and strengthening resources).

They have had the chance to leave "one set of roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions" (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 29) to assume new ones and discussed their beliefs and experiences in relation to these notions.

The constructivist approach involves encouraging individuals to explore their narratives with the goal of empowerment through the emphasis of strengths (Anderson et al., 2012). This model is particularly relevant to my participants' experiences in that they have self-identified as having grown. In telling their stories, the women had the opportunity to uncover further areas of strength and growth and had the potential to make meaning of their experiences (or further their meaning-making). The view of divorce as a process or a transition rather than a single event is important to my study in that the participants may identify as having experienced growth, not only after the culminating event (i.e., when the divorce papers are signed) but anytime throughout the divorce transition.

Constructivism and Personal Growth

Personal growth is defined by Corey et al. (2018) as growth "in which the individual defines and assesses his or her own growth in a lifelong process while dealing with numerous crises at various stages of life" (p. 10). Researchers (Brandtstädter et al., 1999; Lerner & Walls, 1999, as cited in Corey et al., 2018) have maintained that personal growth involves the intentional self-development of one's own personality. Although some researchers believe that setting out to grow involves intentionality and choices (Anderson et al., 2012; Corey et al., 2018; Dweck, 2016), other researchers have implied that personal growth need not be intentional and can occur without the individual setting out to grow" or even without the individual's knowledge. For instance, Gladding's (2011) definition of personal growth "…stresses *development* as a result of experiences such as travel or encounter and interaction with others"

(p. 116). This description of personal growth does not focus on intentionality as a condition for growth, nor does it necessarily depend on a crisis or trauma (or even major stressors or challenges). However, most definitions of personal growth in the literature involve a trauma or a major transition or challenge as the triggering event for the positive changes that coincide with personal growth, in addition to intentionality (i.e., choosing to grow).

Dimensions of Personal Growth

Behavioral and social science researchers have described three overall dimensions of personal growth: self or self-identity, relationships, and philosophy or worldview that involve positive changes which have been triggered by a stressor, crisis, or trauma (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013; Joseph, 2009; Joseph & Linley, 2008; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Similarly, Corey et al. (2018) maintained that growth involves "a relationship with significant others, the community, and the world" (p. 10). Although personal growth has been conceptualized in somewhat similar fashion across the social sciences (e.g., the dimensions and the triggers), the term has not been defined consistently nor systematically across the literature (Joseph, 2009; Joseph & Linley, 2008), nor have the terms *trauma* or *growth* (Christiansen et al., 2015). It is important to emphasize that the above descriptions of personal growth are often how various other types of growth are also described (e.g., post-traumatic growth, stress-related growth, growth following adversity) with some variation across and within terms. These terms will be described later in the chapter.

As noted in Chapter 1, the operational definition of personal growth for my study combines the following dimensions: self-perceived positive changes in self or self-identity, relationships, and worldview or philosophy (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013; Joseph, 2009; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). For example, individuals may identify as having a stronger self-identity, they

may have discovered strengths not previously identified, report a more positive view of themselves, or find they have healthier relationships (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013; Joseph, 2009; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). In addition, the individuals may experience growth because of specific experiences (Gladding, 2011). The definition of personal growth for this study does not depend on the individual's perception that they have experienced a trauma or crisis, or whether they intentionally set out to grow, only that they perceived they have grown any time through the journey to divorce or postdivorce, as self-defined. Furthermore, this is in alignment with the constructivist view which posits that the individual constructs meaning as they impose order on their world and make sense of their experiences (Mahoney & Marquis, 2002; McWilliams, 2011). What is meaningful for this study is how individuals describe their growth as they make sense of their experiences. In addition, the participants may not have recognized their growth or all components of it as they were experiencing it.

Personal Growth and Core Tenets of Constructivism

In viewing personal growth through a constructivist lens, I am connecting the construct to Mahoney's (2003) five themes in constructivism (i.e., order, activity, identity, relationship, development). I expect that the natural order of my participants' lives had been challenged through the divorce transition and that they were active agents in creating order by participating in the events that helped shape their personal growth experiences. I believe their specific choices influenced their experiences and their outcomes. Through challenges, the participants may have created order and made meaning of their experiences in ways that led to changes in themselves and in relation to their worlds. Furthermore, I maintain that these changes may be considered personal growth experiences in relationship with self and others and changes in their worldviews (i.e., personal growth) which may or may not have been intentional.

Growth as a Construct

A core value of the counseling profession, as noted in the American Counseling Association's (ACA) Code of Ethics, is "to enhance human development throughout the lifespan" (ACA Code of Ethics, 2014, p.3). The ACA Code of Ethics (2014) describes the professional counselor's role as one that facilitates "client growth and development in ways that foster the interest and welfare of clients and promote formation of healthy relationships" (p. 4). During challenging times individual counseling provides support and can be an opportunity for growth (ACA, 2014). Gladding (2011) describes counseling as "the application of mental health, psychological or human development principles through cognitive, affective, behavioral, or systematic strategies that address wellness, personal growth, or career development as well as pathology" (p. 40). As illustrated, facilitating personal growth and human development is identified in the counseling literature as a focus of the work that counselors do; however, it is important to reiterate that personal growth has been defined in the professional counseling literature in various, and at times, conflicting ways.

Given that facilitating personal growth is a crucial objective for counselors when working with clients (ACA Code of Ethics, 2014), it follows that clinicians need to have a clear picture of personal growth as a construct. Understanding how women who divorce in later life perceive and experience personal growth, and what it means to them, may aid clinicians in facilitating and encouraging growth with this population (Maples & Abney, 2006). A better understanding of personal growth and the implications it holds for various populations may help counselor educators when instructing and supervising students in how to work with clients. Such understanding may also aid social science researchers when focusing on personal growth as a construct in their research.

Conceptualizations of Growth

A review of the literature across topics within the behavioral and social sciences uncovered a variety of terms used to define growth (and personal growth). These terms include posttraumatic growth (PTG) (Calhoun, & Tedeschi, 2013; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, 1996); stress-related growth (SRG) (Dolbier et al., 2010; Joseph, 2009) and adversarial growth (Linley & Joseph, 2004; Joseph, 2009; Joseph & Linley, 2008). In their edited compilation of works linking positive psychology to posttraumatic stress and posttraumatic growth, Joseph and Linley (2008) asserted, "there is no commonly agreed-on definition of what constitutes growth following adversity" (p. 20). Each measure that has been designed to assess the various terms has been developed according to its own theoretical orientation and though there seems to be overlap between the definitions and the measures of growth, researchers cannot be sure each measure assesses the intended construct (Christiansen et al., 2015; Joseph & Linley, 2008). Joseph and Linley (2008) maintained that a holistic and integrative approach would better prepare practitioners to facilitate resilience and growth after trauma.

Posttraumatic Growth (PTG)

Posttraumatic growth (PTG) has been discussed in the behavioral and social sciences literature for over two decades, along with the theory and self-report measures to support it as a measurable construct (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, 1996, 2004). Calhoun and Tedeschi (1999, as cited in Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013) defined PTG as a "positive life change" an "individual experiences as the result of a struggle with a traumatic event" (p. 6). Calhoun and Tedeschi (2013) emphasized that growth does not arise from the traumatic event but comes instead from the struggle to find meaning from the event. Also, the researchers identified the following dimensions of PTG: improved relationships, seeing new possibilities, increased personal

strength, positive spiritual change, and an increased appreciation of life (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). Calhoun and Tedeschi (1996) did not specify that an individual had to experience trauma or have a diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), as defined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (*American Psychiatric Association, 1994) to experience PTG. However, the use of the term "posttraumatic" implies an association between the two terms, which has led to some misunderstanding that individuals need to have experienced a trauma or have a PTSD diagnosis to experience growth from adversity (Joseph & Linley, 2008).

Many of the concepts used in relation to PTG are the same or similar to the personal growth processes and definitions previously noted; however, the implications and the perceptions of the two terms may vary a great deal. Often when researchers use the term "personal growth" in a study, they define and assess it using the PTG definitions and assessments. The PTG research, however, typically focuses on traumatic events (i.e., bereavement, terminal illness, natural disasters, sexual assault) rather than on divorce. Researchers have discussed divorce or other relationship dissolution as a trauma that could lead to posttraumatic growth only minimally and typically as one type of event among many different types (Joseph, 2009; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995) rather than focusing specifically on divorce. In addition, although individuals may experience a great deal of stress and upheaval in their lives when going through a divorce, (Demo & Fine, 2010; Green, 2016; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002) not all divorcees consider divorce a trauma.

As identified by the counseling profession's codes and guidelines (ACA Code of Ethics, 2014; Gladding, 2011), growth and personal growth are terms that have a positive wellness orientation rather than originating from pathology (i.e., the PTG/PTSD relationship/connotation). When researchers mention personal growth (i.e., as an outcome or protective factor in divorce

adjustment), it had often emerged from an assessment designed to measure constructs related to growth after trauma or crisis such as PTG, or SRG, or as a part of positive but more global constructs such as life satisfaction or well-being (Joseph, 2009, Joseph & Linley, 2008).

Growth After Stress and Adversity

Stress-related growth (SRG) and adversarial growth (AG) refer to growth that has occurred after stressful or challenging events (Joseph & Linley, 2008; Linley & Joseph, 2004). Dolbier et al. (2010) described SRG as "positive changes that result from stressors with varying levels of severity" (p. 2). They maintained that SRG is not "merely recovering from a stressor, but rather the development of a higher level of adaptive functioning" (p. 2). Adversarial growth is described similarly by Linley and Joseph (2004) as positive changes that stem from the process of struggling with adversity, and it is through the struggle that changes may arise to propel individuals to function at higher levels than before the event (Linley & Joseph, 2004). Like PTG, SRG and AG have been described as positive changes in self-perception, changed relationships, and changed philosophy of life (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998, Joseph & Linley, 2008).

Linley and Joseph (2004) reviewed 39 studies related to growth after adversity. They found that positive change (beyond pre-adversity levels) was reported by 30-70% of individuals (of varying ages) who experienced trauma across a multitude of traumatic events (e.g., transportation accidents, natural disasters, medical issues, combat) and other life challenges (e.g., relationship breakdown, bereavement). They found that growth tends to be associated with younger age, higher education, higher socio-economic state, social support, various coping methods, and certain personality traits such as optimism and extroversion (Linley & Joseph, 2004). Very few studies Linley and Joseph reviewed included divorce as a trigger for growth,

and none focused on growth solely after divorce. In addition, the researchers identified a wide range (i.e., 30-70%) of various positive changes in the studies they reviewed. My study centers on women's experiences of personal growth in the early years post later-life divorce and illuminates influences and circumstances associated with the process of growth, specifically for baby boomers exiting long-term marriages.

Anderson and Lopez-Baez (2011) maintained that while "most studies of personal growth as defined by the PTGI, have focused exclusively on adversarial growth, there is little reason to believe that all growth is adversarial" (p. 73). As is common among counseling and other social science researchers, Anderson and Lopez-Baez (2011) utilized the *Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory* (PTGI, Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) to assess personal growth in their study. The researchers studied college students' personal growth as defined by the five dimensions of the PTGI (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996): Relating to others; New Possibilities; Personal Strength; Spiritual Change; and Appreciation (Anderson & Lopez-Baez, 2011). They found that personal growth did not have to relate to trauma and was not necessarily adversarial. Their results suggest that PTG, AG, and PG are actually distinct constructs.

Some researchers believe that using the terms interchangeably is misleading and confusing and that personal growth and PTG should be defined and assessed differently and independently of one another (Joseph & Linley, 2008). The phrase *growth from adversity* (adversarial growth) is utilized to refer collectively to growth occurring after various challenges and is used as an alternative to PTG to avoid the reference to "trauma" and the association with the pathology orientation of PTSD (Linley & Joseph, 2004; Joseph & Linley, 2008). The main objective of my study was to understand the meaning personal growth holds for the participants, and to illuminate the paths they traveled towards growth.

Women and Growth

As noted, a commonly cited dimension of growth (changes in relationships and how individuals act within them) relates to Mahoney's (2003) assertion that a constructive perception of human nature focuses on individuals' active development of self in relationship. Constructivists believe "people develop as they construct meaning" within their cultural and social environments (Anderson et al., 2012). This notion aligns with relationally based perspectives, which maintain that growth-fostering relationships are central to healthy human development (Deanow, 2011; Jordan, 2010; 2017). Anderson et al. (2012) emphasized that relational models of women's development have focused on the importance of relationship to women's identities. According to Jordan (2010, 2017), Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) suggests that people create their lives through connection with others, which aligns with the constructivist notion that individuals create their realities. Constructivist approaches are relevant to the lives of women (Anderson et al., 2012) while also being in line with long-held theories related to how women grow (Jordan, 2010; 2017).

A common theme in professional literature is that a woman's sense of self and self-identity is related to connectedness and relationships, whether in work, family, or in social areas (Anderson et al., 2012). A key concept in empirically based RCT is that women grow through connection, with themselves, others, and their work (Jordan, 2010). Also, it has been found that having people you care about and who care about you are vital to a satisfying life, especially for women (Gergen, 2009). The above-cited research (see Deanow, 2011; Gergen, 2009; Jordan, 2010; Jordan, 2017) maintained that women grow through relationship. These concepts support my constructivist approach throughout this study. They are also parallel to the descriptions and dimensions of growth previously discussed and are aligned with my focus on exploring baby

boomer women's experiences of divorce (i.e., focusing on their connections with self, others, and their world). I next describe the baby boomer cohort and some common characteristics, values, beliefs, and how they were influenced by society and, in turn, influenced society.

Baby Boom Generation

The baby boom population, which numbered 76.4 million individuals , is the largest generational cohort in U.S. history, comprising over 40% of the adult population (Brinckerhoff, 2013; U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). The cohort's name referred to the "boom" in babies born during the 18-year span, beginning with the return of the soldiers from World War II in 1946 and ending in 1964, when America's birth rates returned to pre-WWII numbers (Maples & Abney, 2006). The baby boomer cohort has nearly three times the number of individuals as the Silent Generation, the cohort before them (26 million, born 1925-1945), and a third more than Generation X, the cohort after them (49 million, born 1965–1980). Pruchno (2012) noted that the baby boom generation is significant not only for its considerable size but also for its unique social and demographic characteristics.

Characteristics and Values

Blando (2011) maintained, "Each of us belongs to a cohort, based on the generation of which we are a member and the shared histories and experiences of that generation" (p. 171) (e.g., living through the Vietnam War). Similarly, Santrock (2015) stated that a cohort is a group of people who are born at the same time in history. Many studies demonstrated variations in values, beliefs, and characteristics among generational cohorts; however, some researchers examined different cohorts at the same time in history (Moss, 2016). Moss (2016) pointed out that when two cohorts (e.g., baby boomers and Generation X) are studied at the same time or age (e.g., as young adults), cohort differences could be attributed to biological processes, such as age

and maturity. However, Generational Cohort Theory posits that differences across generations are mainly a result of social events (Sessa et al., 2007).

Santrock (2015) explained that in life-span research, *cohort effects* are due to an individual's era or time of birth but not actual age. Santrock maintained this is important because in studies that focused on age, cohort effects can significantly affect the dependent variable(s). It is crucial to know whether studies of divorce identify and focus on age (midlife or older) or cohort (baby boomer). Few studies center on both, as my study did (baby boomers, divorced at age 50 or over).

Although the experiences of older adults include recent events, key historical events are important markers in their lives (Blando, 2011) and have helped shape their worldviews, perceptions, values, and beliefs (Maples & Abney, 2006). Researchers noted that what individuals experience during their formative years, from birth to age 20 (i.e., when they come of age) helps shape their values (Moss, 2016). For instance, Cherlin (2010) explained that baby boomers came of age during a time in U.S. history when family life went through dramatic and complex changes. Pruchno (2012) noted that "Marriages were delayed or forgone, divorce rates climbed to all-time highs, rates of cohabitation soared, and out-of-wedlock childbearing became more commonplace" (p. 149). This is important to keep in mind for my study when considering baby boomers' values and beliefs about marriage and divorce and how individuals are ultimately affected by their own divorce.

Some researchers (e.g., Brinckerhoff, 2013; Maples 2007; Maples & Abney, 2006; Moss, 2016) stated that baby boomers have characteristics and values that distinguish them from other generational cohorts and have identified a variety of phenomena to support these claims. Brinckerhoff (2013) noted that baby boomers' "…outlooks, worldviews, upbringing, traditions,

and perspectives" (p.1), the phenomena that make up a culture, are fundamentally different from other generations before or after them. Maples and Abney (2006) pointed out that one reason baby boomers hold worldviews that are vastly different from the generation before them is that they were raised during a time of relative peace.

Maples and Abney (2006) maintained that the baby boomers did not experience the struggles brought on by the Great Depression and World War II as had their parents (Silent Generation) and grandparents (Greatest Generation). Individuals from the Silent Generation, born during the depression and World War II, are considered conformists and are described as loyal, practical, compliant, and civic-minded (Santrock, 2015; Sessa et al., 2007). In contrast, many baby boomers have questioned fundamental societal attitudes and values throughout their lives (Pruchno, 2012). For instance, although baby boomers lived through the Vietnam War, unlike generations before them who supported wartime efforts, they were generally opposed to the war (Kinsley, 2010). Maples (2007) noted that baby boomers' worldviews encouraged them to pay attention to their "physical, emotional, mental, and financial health," as well as their spirituality (p. 2). This focus on the individual's needs has contributed to the change in marital views, as discussed later in this chapter.

Pruchno (2012) claimed that baby boomers have "redefined each stage of life as they experience it…and influenced education, music, race, relations, sex roles, and child rearing" (p. 149). Baby boomers are better educated, more technologically savvy, and have generally had higher standards of living than generations before them (Maples, 2007; Maples & Abney, 2006). As a group, they have had more investors in the stock market than other generations (Maples & Abney, 2006). This has been both positive and negative for them. For example, many baby boomers lost their retirement savings in the economic downturns in the 2000s, affecting their

financial stability in later life, in their retirement, and through their later-life divorce.

Leading and Trailing Edge

As a cohort with an 18-year age span, there are bound to be many differences in younger baby boomers when compared with older baby boomers. To attempt to address differences due to the large age range, Green (2006) reported that the baby boomer population has been divided into trailing edge (born 1956 -1964) and leading edge (born 1946 -1955). Barnes (2007) noted that the Vietnam War was the defining time in history for the leading-edge baby boomers. In their youth, leading-edge boomers rebelled against authority, challenged American values, and fought for change (Green, 2006). Leading-edge boomers created protest music, used recreational drugs, and valued free love and open marriage (Barnes, 2007). They questioned, explored, and redefined all aspects of expected behavior in human relationships (Green, 2006).

Trailing-edge baby boomers experienced a somewhat different culture with the end of the Vietnam War, Watergate, high inflation, space exploration, and various civil rights movements (i.e., disability, gay rights) (Barnes, 2007). While these differences have been noted in the literature, baby boomers are more often separated into the two groups in the popular press and by marketing efforts rather than in the scholarly literature. Furthermore, as Green (2006) noted, some researchers believe that the two baby boomer groups are more alike than different and maintain that both groups place importance on health and wellness and value personal development and psychological growth, which are relevant to my study. I aimed to address differences in the perceptions and experiences across the ages within my sample of participants.

In the next section, I briefly discuss middle and later-life development as it relates to the baby boomer cohort. I discuss how middle and later life are defined and the variations in the age range for these life stages. I also briefly identify variations in conceptualizing adult development

while highlighting several theories that focus on personal growth in later life.

Baby Boomers and Middle/Later-Life Development

Women in middle and older adulthood are members of diverse populations and present with a wide range of personal counseling and development needs (Blando, 2011; Deanow, 2011; Lachman, 2004; Saucier, 2004). To provide effective counseling that addresses personal development to this growing population of women, mental health clinicians need to understand the nuances of the various cohorts in these phases of life (Blando, 2011; Deanow, 2011; Lachman, 2004; Maples & Abney, 2006; Saucier, 2004). However, there is considerable discourse among what is described in the social sciences' literature as midlife or older adulthood. For instance, there can be as much as a 30 to 40-year age span for what is considered midlife (Anderson et al., 2012; Lachman, 2004). There is also some overlap among the more common age ranges considered midlife (ages 35-65) and later life (ages 65 plus) in the professional literature (Blando, 2011; Erikson, 1950; Santrock, 2015; U. S. Census, 2010), and what is considered "late-life" or "later life" (age 50 and over) when referring to a later-life divorce (Bair, 2007; Brown, 2012; Crowley, 2018). This is important to note so that readers keep in mind that my definition of *later life* in relation to divorce may be a younger age range than what is referred to as later life within the stages of life

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Midlife and Older Adulthood

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Before discussing the issues surrounding later-life divorce and providing a review of divorce adjustment literature most relevant to my study, I briefly identify what constitutes midlife or middle adulthood and later-life stages of adulthood. Midlife has commonly been defined by researchers as the ages from 35-45 to ages 60-65 (Blando, 2011; Erikson, 1950; Montenegro, 2004). Anderson et al. (2012), however, found that when asked, individuals from

their early thirties to late sixties, considered themselves in "midlife." There are a myriad of ways to define middle adulthood, and the conception of "midlife" is continually evolving (Anderson et al., 2012).

Changing Parameters of Midlife

The parameters that describe midlife have always varied but have also moved upwards through the years, which results in a longer midlife lifespan than in previous generations (Santrock, 2015). For instance, an early version of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* described midlife as 40 to 60, *(*American Psychiatric Association, 1994), although the latest version (DSM 5, American Psychiatric Association, 2016) does not define midlife. However, in 2013, the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2013) identified mid-life as ages 45 to 65. Further, older adulthood has historically been considered as over age 65 (Blando, 2011). Since individuals are living longer, it has been common to identify later-life stages into the *young-old,* ages 65 to 84, and the *oldest-old,* ages 85 and older (Blando, 2011; Santrock, 2015). What is relevant to this study is how the participants refer to themselves and what that means to them (e.g., middle-aged, in later life, etc.).

Levinson (1978) described the midlife period as the time of life (early in the fourth decade) when individuals experience psychological upheaval and instability. The concept of the midlife crisis emerged from Levinson's research. However, Anderson et al. (2012) maintained that current research does not support the claim that individuals experience a crisis during midlife. They believe instead that adults may experience a shift in areas of concern during midlife and that many individuals find this time to be especially rewarding (Anderson et al., 2012). For this study, I have identified midlife as the ages 40-65 and older adulthood as 65 and over (Blando 2011, Santrock, 2015). As noted, it is important to identify these age ranges or

categories with the concurrent age ranges of middle and older adulthood.

Adult Development

Adult development may be conceptualized by developmental, lifespan, contextual, and/or transition theories with thematic and conceptual models overlapping and intertwining (Anderson et al., 2012). Some theorists view midlife and older adulthood as a time of decline and despair. In contrast, others view it as a time of activity and posit that if one is changing, one is developing (Blando, 2011), despite an individual's age.

Erikson (1950, as cited in Blando, 2011) described the midlife period as *middle adulthood* (ages 35-65), a time when individuals struggle between "generativity and stagnation*"* (p. 16) marked by nurturing others, giving back to the community, and contributing to society (as cited in Blando, 2011). Erickson (1950) purported that productive work and creating positive change that will benefit others is very important during this stage; when individuals are not productive they can stagnate (as cited in Blando, 2011). The last period of life (ages 65 to death) was described as *maturity*, a time when individuals struggle between "integrity vs. despair" (p.16) marked by finding meaning (integrity), which leads to wholeness and virtue; despair results from a lack of meaningfulness (Erikson, 1950, as cited in Blando, 2011). Blando (2011) reported that Erikson described later life "as a time for potential growth" (p. 350), believing adults can change throughout their lives well into old age, and that how one resolves each stage can affect later stages. These descriptions of later life align well with the focus of my study on growth and change in later life. The notion of individuals as active agents in their resolution of each stage is similar to the constructivist idea that individuals' choices affect their outcomes through transitions such as divorce.

Relevant to my study is that baby boomer women (ages 56-74 in 2020) fit into both

middle and later-life stages as categorized in the human development and life-span theories and models (depending on their age). At the same time, individuals who divorce at age 50 or over are described as experiencing a later-life divorce in the current gray divorce literature (Brown & Lin, 2012; Crowley, 2018; 2019). Nonetheless, what may be more important is how the participants view themselves, rather than the label ascribed by researchers and others in a society based on their age.

Societal Changes and Divorce

There have been many societal changes in the past 20 to 25 years that affect the way researchers describe middle- and later-life divorce, and the way individuals (e.g., baby boomers) experience it. These changes include an aging population (Brown & Lin, 2012; Crowley, 2018; Vincent & Velkoff, 2010), the increasing number of divorces in middle and later life (Brown & Lin, 2012; Lin et al., 2019), and how we understand and view aging (Maples & Apney, 2007). In addition, there has been a multitude of societal changes related to family life, including shifting views on marriage and divorce, the greater ease with which one can obtain a divorce (e.g., no-fault divorce laws), and the increase of women in the workforce (Demo and Fine, 2010; Green, 2016).

An Aging Population and Changing Views

In this section, I highlight several factors that have contributed to the rise in later-life divorce. I focus on the demographics of an aging population and the increase in life expectancy, with a focus on women (Brown & Lin, 2012; Colby & Ortman, 2014; Ortman et al., 2014; Vincent & Velkoff, 2010).

Demographics

The number of midlife and older adults is greater than at any other time in history and is

expected to continue to grow as the population ages (Brown & Lin, 2012; Lin et al., 2019). The number of individuals aged 45-64 rose from 61,952,636 (22.0 % of the U.S. population) in 2004 to 81,489,445 (26.4 % of the U. S. population) in 2010 (Vincent & Velkoff, 2010). These figures represent a 31.5 % increase in the number of individuals ages 45 to 64 (i.e., midlife) in six years (2004 through 2010) (Vincent & Velkoff, 2010). Ortman et al. (2014) reported that the number of individuals aged 50-plus (i.e., the age range for gray divorcees) was 108.7 million in 2014 (including 76.4 million baby boomers) and was projected to increase by 19 million by 2024; compared with a growth of only 6 million for the 18-49 population. The researchers noted that 53.5 % of the 50-plus population were women. It is not surprising that a higher percentage of the 50-plus population (and therefore a higher percentage of gray divorcees) is female since they have a greater life expectancy, as noted in the next section below.

Ortman et al. (2014) predicted that the United States would experience extensive growth in its older population (those aged 65+) between 2012 and 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Colby and Ortman (2014) projected that by 2030, one in five Americans will be over age 65. The increase in the older population is essentially due to baby boomers; the oldest began turning age 65 in 2011; the youngest will turn age 65 in 2029; and all will be over age 85 by 2050 (Colby and Ortman, 2014; Ortman et al., 2014). Mather (2016) noted that the number of individuals in the United States ages 65 and older "…is on course to more than double from 46 million…to over 98 million by 2060, while the 65-and-older age group's share of the total population will rise to nearly 24% from 15%" (p. 1). Maples (2002) coined the term "Silver Tsunami" to refer to the wave of baby boomers that began entering their 60's in 2006 (Maples, 2007).

Life Expectancy

Life expectancy in the United States has been rising steadily over the decades, which

contributed to the increasing number of individuals in the midlife and older population (National Center for Health Statistics, 2014). When the United States was established as a nation in 1776, the average life expectancy at birth was only 35 years. By 1950, it nearly doubled to 68 years (U. S. Census Bureau, 1995) and rose to 78 years for those born in 2012 (National Center for Health Statistics, 2014). In addition, Mather (2016) reported that U.S. life expectancy increased by 11 years, from 68 years of age in 1950 to 79 years of age in 2013. Throughout the years, the average life expectancy for women has been higher than for men (Vincent & Velkoff, 2010). For instance, the average life expectancy for women born in the United States in 1991 was 79 years and 72 years for men (U. S. Census Bureau, 1995). By 2019, the average life expectancy at birth for women rose to 81.4 and 76.2 for men (Arias et al., 2022). Although post-pandemic provisional life expectancy estimates show a decline in overall life expectancy between 2019 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (79.1 for females; 73.2 for males) (Arias et al., 2022) the average life expectancy is still higher for women than for men. By 2021, the difference in life expectancy between the sexes was 5.9 years (Arias et al., 2022), up from 5.7 in 2020.

The difference in life expectancy between men and women indicates that women have a greater potential (compared with men) to be without a partner in later life. In addition, the increase in life expectancy does not necessarily mean a better quality of life. Adults may experience a variety of stressful life changes as they age that could negatively affect their quality of life at any time, and especially in later life. In the next section, I review societal changes and shifting attitudes on marriage and divorce in America (Amato, 2002, 2010; Bair, 2007; Cherlin, 2004, 2009; 2010; Crowley, 2018).

Societal Changes in Marriage

As women entered the workforce in increasing numbers throughout the 1970s and 1980s,

the dynamics of marriage and family life in the United States changed (Bair, 2007; Crowley, 2018). Gainful employment allowed women more financial freedom and independence than in the past (Crowley, 2018; 2019). Dual career households were a departure from the traditional family life of the mid-twentieth century (Cherlin, 2004, 2009; Crowley, 2018). It is important to note that during the 1950s, most family units (95 %) consisted of the traditional two-parent household across all socioeconomic levels (Cherlin, 2005), but one-income households (i.e., where one parent worked) were typical only among middle and upper-class families, rather than the poor. However, as the feminist movement took hold, an increasing number of contemporary women across all socioeconomic levels expected more equality and fairness within marriages than did their earlier counterparts (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007). The resulting change in gender roles led to conflict between home and family for many women (Cherlin, 2004, 2009).

Shifting Views

Historically, marriage as an institution was meant to provide a stable family life and involved a set of obligations with well-defined roles for men and women (Crowley, 2018). Cherlin (2009) stated that what we think of as traditional family life was created during the era of the 1950s when married life focused on procreation and provided stability for the family unit. The woman's role within the marriage was to stay at home and care for the children (depending on socio-economic status) and the home (i.e., women traditionally did the cooking, cleaning, shopping), while the man's responsibility was to support the family financially (i.e., by securing gainful employment) (Cherlin, 2004, 2009). Each spouse's role concentrated on what was best for the family, but not necessarily what was best for the individual. Individuals in the 1940's and 1950's turned from the turbulent times of the Great Depression and World War II to the home and family for comfort, subsequently producing the infamous baby boom (Cherlin, 2009). Being

married in the United States in the 1950s was considered by many to be the right of entry into family life; only 5% of the population (mostly the poor and uneducated) lived with a partner outside of marriage, and only 4% of children were born outside of marriage (Cherlin, 2009).

In the twentieth century, profound changes in American life with significant shifts in traditional societal views eventually led to the breakdown of the traditional family structure (Cherlin, 2009). Baby boomer women were at the forefront of a major shift in gender roles in the 1970s. This led to large numbers of women who went into the workforce as mothers rather than staying at home to care for the family (Crowley, 2018). Also, the baby boomer generation had views about sex, marriage, and cohabitating that were vastly different from their parents (Cherlin, 2009). These changes in values and beliefs have had a great impact on the institution of marriage.

Cherlin (2004, 2005, 2009, 2010) reported on the history of family and marriage in the United States and the changes that led to the deinstitutionalization of marriage in America. Cherlin (2004) contended that the deinstitutionalization of marriage, described as "a weakening of social norms that define partner's behavior" (p. 848) was at the forefront of the breakdown of the family unit as divorce doubled from the 1960s to the 1980s. Marriage had been thought of as an institution, as noted above, wherein customary social norms defined parameters for the partners' roles within the marriage (e.g., men as breadwinners; women as homemakers) (Cherlin, 2004). The transition (in the second half of the twentieth century) of marriage as an institution to companionate marriage and then to individualized marriage was chronicled in Cherlin's (2009) seminal work, *The Marriage Go Round.* In companionate marriage, husbands and wives were supposed to be each other's companion, friend, and lover, although they typically observed the traditional gender roles with the distinct division of labor. During the 1950's emotional

satisfaction (in the companionate marriage) was derived from the marital roles (i.e., being a good provider; being a good wife and mother) and later individualized marriage was ultimately a promise of partners to meet each other's individual goals (Cherlin, 2009) and provide a place for inner growth (Crowley, 2018).

Cherlin (2004, 2009) asserted that the shift from institutional marriage to companionate marriage and then to individualized marriage created a culture with conflicting values; marriage was still the desired ideal, but if one's needs were not met, divorce was always an option. In an individualistic society, people focus on getting their own needs met, and marriage as a unit loses its original purpose (Amato, 2002, 2010). According to Amato and Hohmann-Marriott (2007), Crowley (2018), and Wu and Schimmele (2007), the current view of marriage is such that many individuals now expect all their needs to be met within and through the marriage. Cherlin (2009) explained that instead of needing each other to survive, as demonstrated by each spouse fulfilling a traditional role in the marriage, individuals now expect their spouse to fulfill their higher-order needs (e.g., self-fulfillment and self-actualization). Individuals expect that they will "grow" with their partner and within the marital union (Crowley, 2018). However, an individual's needs are often conflicting, such as a need for stability and a need for excitement and growth. When a desire to grow as an individual is not met within the marriage, there may be an incentive to leave the marital union to experience growth, which may have been stifled during the marriage (Crowley, 2018). Amato and Hohmann-Marriott (2007) predicted that as expectations for marriage increase, so would the number of individuals unsatisfied with their marriages. The increase in gray divorce (Brown & Lin, 2012; Crowley, 2018) may be proving this true.

With baby boomers' focus on growth in middle and later life (Maples & Abney, 2006), there is an increased need to understand the potential for positive outcomes, such as how to

encourage and support growth for baby boomer women as they navigate life-changing transitions, such as divorce. This holds true whether the desire for growth plays a role in an individual's divorce or not. It was interesting to learn of participants' views on divorce and their awareness of unmet needs for growth before their divorce and/or how this affected them in the divorce transition.

No-fault Divorce

It is "easier" than ever to get a divorce. *No-fault* divorce laws do not assign blame to either spouse (Crowley, 2018; Demo and Fine, 2010; Green, 2016). Green (2016) explained that a no-fault divorce requires that only one spouse believes the marriage cannot be saved and does not "require proof of cruelty, infidelity or abandonment, the traditional grounds for divorce" (p. 10). During the 1970s and 1980s, as a reflection of the changing views towards divorce, no-fault divorce laws gained in popularity, and all states passed versions of the laws (Demo and Fine, 2010; Green, 2016). The no-fault divorce had a destigmatizing effect on the divorce, contributing to the increase in divorces across the country (Demo and Fine, 2010). With less expensive filing fees for divorce paperwork, no waiting period following the filing, combined with the greater expectations from marriage (Crowley, 2018; Demo and Fine, 2010; Green, 2016), the increase in divorce in later life is not surprising. However, although obtaining a divorce became "less stigmatizing, costly, and time-consuming" (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007, p. 623) than in the past, this does not mean divorce is without issues and challenges for the parties involved.

Challenges of Divorce for Baby Boomer Women

The issues and challenges which women commonly face in middle and older adulthood may have an impact on their postdivorce experiences. Women may face internal and external barriers that can restrict their positive development post-middle and later-life divorce, limiting

the possibility for growth. Barriers can include narrowly defined gender roles, employment inequities, family responsibilities, and ageism (Coogan & Chen, 2007). These barriers can be internal or external depending on the woman's environment, values, and beliefs and can add increased stress for a woman going through a later-life divorce. These barriers affect baby boomer women as they currently comprise much of the middle and older adult populations.

An overarching theme across the literature is that baby boomer women typically experience more stress as well as different stressors (specific or not specific to divorce) compared with men in the same cohort (Bair, 2007; Dare, 2011; Montenegro, 2004). Some stressors are unique to women, such as the physical changes of menopause and negative societal stereotypes of aging (Dare, 2011; Saucier, 2004; Sheehy, 1998), which may add to the stress of divorce. Many, if not all, women experience these common challenges in one form or another (Sheehy, 1998). For instance, although both sexes may experience ageism, it is more common for women in American society to be marginalized or stigmatized as they age (Johnson, 2013), and divorcing in later life can make this reality especially daunting. Women may face additional challenges of aging that are different from those experienced by men, such as living alone in their later years (Laidlaw & Pachana, 2009) (discussed later in the chapter) or changes in their roles and familial responsibilities.

Changing Roles and Responsibilities

As individuals transition through their midlife years and into later adulthood, they may experience changes and challenges in their life roles and responsibilities (Lachman, 2004). Women often juggle many roles, such as caring for young children, adult children, grandchildren, and aging parents, and divorce can add additional challenges (Laidlaw and Pachana, 2009). Stressors more commonly experienced by women than men include changes to

these societal roles, such as experiencing an "empty nest" (i.e., change in their role as a mother when the last child leaves home), or being a caregiver to aging parents (Santrock, 2015), adding to the stress of divorce.

As women move through the midlife stages to older adulthood, they typically negotiate a balance within their relationships: with their partner, their children, and their parents (Deanow, 2011). Since women are most often the primary caregivers to children and family members, as their relationships change, they must modify and adapt their roles and responsibilities (Deanow, 2011). Many baby boomers are part of the *sandwich generation,* caring for their children and their aging parents or in-laws at the same time (Sheehy, 1998) or have adult children who have moved back home (i.e., boomerang children) (Green, 2016). Green (2016) explained that individuals in the *boomerang* generation are young adults who return to their parents' home after college – or who never leave and are financially dependent on their parents. Green (2016) noted that the highest percentage ever of young adults living with parents (52% aged 18-25; 13% aged 24 -35) greatly add to the complicated financial landscape of divorce for their parents (typically baby boomers).

Transitions commonly associated with midlife women involve physical decline and loss, such as widowhood, the empty nest, and menopause (Degges-White & Myers, 2006). Dare (2011) investigated women's perceptions and experiences of midlife transitions and found that most women handle the typical transitions of menopause and the "empty nest" reasonably well. However, through her qualitative in-depth interviews with 40 women aged 45-55, Dare (2011) found that caregiving, parents' aging or death, and the impact of divorce present more severe long-term challenges to women. Researchers have found that divorce can be particularly problematic for women in middle and later life by adding to stressors and changing roles they

typically experience such as an empty nest or caregiving and can also affect women's well-being financially, psychologically, and physically (Crowley, 2018; Green, 2016; Knox & Corte, 2007; Sakraida, 2005, 2008; Steiner et al., 2011).

While Dare's (2011) research may help to challenge the stereotypes of aging women, what is relevant to my study is that changes in women's roles and responsibilities may add additional pressures to an already stressful divorce transition or may lessen those stressors. Brown and Lin (2012) maintained that the combination of multiple stressors might challenge or inhibit the potential for positive changes postdivorce. I was mindful of how the women in my study perceived changes to their life roles and responsibilities through the divorce transition, and whether these changes affected their perceived growth. In the next section, I discuss societal views on aging, including myths and stereotypes, and baby boomers' role in challenging these myths in relation to aging, marriage, divorce, and personal growth (Maples, 2007, Maples and Apney 2006).

Perceptions and Myths of Aging

Historically, aging has been perceived as a period of decline with the notion that it is all downhill once you hit midlife, especially for women (Gergen, 2009). Ditzion et al. (2018) asserted that it is impossible for women to age in the United States without encountering personal, cultural, and institutional ageist attitudes. Deanow (2011) noted that the experience of aging and the common stigma of the "old woman" is pervasive in society and includes the negative notion of women having reduced capacity and energy. One myth of aging, as noted by Laidlaw and Pachana (2009), is that aging is depressing, and there is nothing to look forward to in the future. Additional myths and stereotypes of aging include the following notions: as women age, they are less useful, more forgetful, and less happy (Gergen, 2009). As women become

aware of the negative concept of the aging woman, they begin to identify with it and begin to judge themselves and the appropriateness of their actions, clothing, and activities (Gergen, 2009). Gergen (2009), and later Ditzion et al. (2018) maintained that when women buy into the negative stereotypes, they become ageist against themselves. Because many women believe in society's oppressive view of women, they may withdraw from others for fear of rejection (Deanow, 2011). Gergen (2009) believed that women can either fight against the powerful, negative stereotypes of who or what they may become as they get older or give in to those stereotypes. To counter ageism in a youth-obsessed culture, Ditzion et al. (2018) proposed that women work together to "rethink the aging paradigm and co-create new narratives" (p.134).

Several researchers asserted counselors can employ a constructivist relational theory base to help women face powerful cultural stereotypes and help them transform the biases of aging into new norms for themselves (Degges-White & Myers, 2006a, 2006b; Gergen, 2009). Intertwined with the stereotypes and myths of aging, which women continue to face, are the realities of aging and ageism most women eventually contend with (Ditzion et al., 2018; Saucier, 2004) whether they interpret the myths as their personal story or not. Laidlaw and Pachana (2009) maintained that clinicians who work with adults in later life will need to understand that aging affects men and women differently and may be perceived differently. How divorced women view themselves in terms of aging and the cultural stereotypes of aging, combined with divorcing and being single in later life, is relevant to understanding how they can rise above these myths to achieve growth and development.

Challenging Myths and Redefining Aging

The baby boomer cohort has been defying the myths and stereotypes of old age for decades. Over 25 years ago, Lippert (1997) noted that every woman deals with the realities and

the myths of aging in her own way and that current midlife women seem to defy them. Baby boomers have been instrumental in altering the country's values and beliefs since their youth, throughout their young adult life, and into their midlife years, and will continue to do so into older adulthood (Barnes, 2007; Ditzion et al., 2018; Maples, 2006; Pruchno, 2012). This is especially true when it comes to beliefs about aging and ageism. Pruchno (2012) claimed that the baby boom generation is changing societal views on aging through their redefinition of each stage of life they experience.

Baby boomers, because of their great numbers and their buying influence, have been the focus of marketers throughout their adult years and have influenced most areas of commerce, including changes in retirement planning, housing, vacations, and health and beauty aids (Barnes, 2007). As such, as baby boomers age, the marketing efforts geared towards them have also changed to address their needs and desires (Barnes, 2007). The nationwide advertising campaigns that focus on aging baby boomers portray a generation that has been changing what it looks like to age in America (Barnes, 2007). Although most images in the media are still of young, sexy women, the perception of women and aging has begun to change due to advertising campaigns portraying older women, inspired by baby boomers (Gergen, 2009). Increasing public interest in aging within the media and government will continue to present a more realistic picture of aging and will help reduce misconceptions about older individuals (U. S Census, 2009).

Well-being and Aging

Researchers have noted that transitions in midlife, such as a change in job or a divorce, can represent an opportunity to make new or different choices that may better fit an individual's perceived self (Anderson et al., 2012). It is through social interchange that well-being and

positive outlook are created. This may help dispel and replace the stereotypes of old age and the damaging self-esteem myths of the aging woman (Gergen, 2009), which continue to persist (Ditzion et al., 2018). Social interchange, in turn, may open the door to positive changes that lead to growth and transformation. Clinicians can be instrumental in facilitating these changes by utilizing a wellness approach, such as the holistic model of wellness (grounded in feminist theory) to empower women to face powerful cultural stereotypes of aging (Myers & Sweeney, 2008) that many women have internalized (Ditzion et al., 2018). Fostering women's wellness through addressing ageism and its effects on women is important, especially when considering that women outlive men and tend to be the caregivers and that ageism (along with financial insecurity and illness) is one of the biggest barriers to aging well (Ditzion et al., 2018).

Wellness is an approach to counseling that is proactive, attainable, and inclusive of all people (Fetter & Koch, 2009). Fullen (2016) argued that as the population ages and later life is increasingly thought of as a time when individuals can maximize their potential and quality of life, the use of preventive and strength-based wellness approaches become increasingly important to clients and their families. Clinicians are in a key position to develop clinical approaches and expand wellness research for the aging population (Fullen, 2016). Wellness approaches are a way to combat some of the negativity towards aging and the aged; they promote positive outcomes for women who experience later-life challenges, such as divorce.

It is essential for mental health practitioners who work with baby boomer women to understand how their clients view their own aging, how they interpret concepts such as midlife and later life, and what the meanings of the terms hold for them. Clinicians need to understand the demographics of the current midlife cohort and what being a member of the baby boomer group may mean to the participant. In addition, clinicians need to understand the issues and

challenges of conceptualizing middle and later-life transitions within a given theory base and, more importantly, be aware of how they and their clients conceptualize aging (e.g., as a time of activity and growth or as a time of decline). It is imperative to view aging in a positive light and to consider this time as a period of growth, development, movement, and challenge (Degges-White & Myers, 2006a; 2006b) to counter the negative assumptions that middle and older adulthood is solely a period of decline.

Implications of Divorce for Society

Researchers have found that divorce among middle and older adults may not only affect the individual but also may result in widespread social issues (Brown & Lin, 2012; Vincent & Velkoff, 2010). Brown and Lin (2012) pointed out that the families of divorced middle-aged and older adults may suffer too. For instance, they asserted that when an individual no longer has a spouse to rely on, that person's extended family might be called upon to provide caregiving or financial support. Mather (2016) noted the aging baby boom population could spur "… a 75 % increase in the number of Americans aged 65 and older requiring nursing home care to about 2.3 million in 2030 from 1.3 million in 2010" (p. 2). When more aging individuals experience increased medical needs (e.g., medical services, health insurance, physical care), the country's infrastructure is bound to become stressed (Brown and Lin, 2012). With an already strained economy, Brown and Lin (2012) predicted that healthcare and retirement systems might suffer as well.

Brown and Lin (2012) also predicted that middle and later-life divorcee's mental health and wellness may suffer, which would then require greater investment in mental health services. This is particularly relevant to the counseling field. One of the most common reasons adults seek counseling is that they are having trouble navigating or adapting to transitions involving close

relationships (Anderson et al., 2012), and divorce is one of the most common of these transition issues. If baby boomer women can experience positive changes, including growth and development, and stay productive and healthy in later life, it may help to eliminate some of the strain on the society's infrastructure that Brown and Lin (2012) suggested.

Later-life Divorce and Adjustment

In this section, I provide a selected review of the current research on later-life divorce statistics and demographics (Bair, 2007; Bowen & Jensen, 2017; Brown & Lin, 2012; Mather, 2016; Montenegro, 2004; Stempler, 2017), and divorce adjustment (Amato, 2010; Bair, 2007; Perrig-Cheillo et al., 2015; Pudrovska & Carr, 2008) including postdivorce well-being (Degges-White & Myers, 2006a, 2006b). I focus on issues and implications of divorce for adults (especially women) in midlife and later life, including gray divorce (Brown & Lin, 2012: Crowley, 2018), the midlife divorce transition (Sakraida, 2005; Sakraida, 2008), and divorce after a long-term marriage (Makidon, 2013; Perrig-Chiello et al., 2015; Pudrovska & Carr, 2008; Somerville, 2017, Stempler, 2017). I present factors and influences related to potential positive outcomes of divorce while focusing on personal growth as a potential silver lining (Gregson & Ceynar, 2009; Makidon, 2013; Somerville, 2017; Thomas & Ryan, 2008). In addition, I provide a brief review of research on postdivorce adjustment as a function of finding meaning (Bevvino & Sharkin, 2008; Krumrei et al., 2009, 2011), and a brief description of spirituality (Maples, 2007), and the role it has in postdivorce adjustment (Krumrei et al., 2009, 2011; Sakraida, 2005, 2008; Steiner et al., 2011).

Gray Divorce Statistics and Demographics

According to Brown and Lin (2012), in 1990, approximately 10% of divorces (206,007) were among individuals aged 50 and older compared to approximately 25% (643,152) in 2010.

In the report, *Aging in the United States*, Mather (2016) noted that more older adults are divorced compared to previous generations citing that the number of divorced men aged 65 and older increased from 4% in 1980 to 11% in 2015, while the percentage of divorced women increased from 3 to 13 % during the same periods. Brown and Lin (2012) and Lin et al. (2017) reported that divorce over age 50 was more common among individuals who had remarried, those with lower socioeconomic status, or those who were less educated. Also, rather than remarrying, the individuals who divorced after age 50 were more likely to cohabitate than younger divorcees (58.4% vs. 13.9%), (Lin et al., 2017). It is important to note that baby boomers, who were at the forefront of changing views on cohabitation in their younger years, are getting divorced at higher rates than ever in later life and do not seem compelled to remarry (Brown & Wright, 2017), but instead find that living alone or with a partner (without marriage) is a viable alternative to marriage (Brown & Wright, 2017; Cherlin, 2004).

Although some research has focused on the growth in the number of individuals who divorce in middle and later life (Brown & Lin 2012; Kennedy & Ruggles, 2017; Stempler, 2017), there is limited understanding of the impact on the growing number of divorcees. Crowley (2018) maintained that we know little about the causes or motives, the predictors, or the outcomes of later-life divorce for the individuals experiencing this event. I focus on some of these concepts in the rest of this chapter. I begin the next section with a discussion of divorce as a transition for women in midlife and some implications of this phenomenon.

Women's Midlife Transitions

Current research indicates a changing perception of women's midlife developmental transitions. This suggests that during midlife there is progress toward greater self-realization and a freeing from society's limitations (Anderson et al., 2012). In one of the first studies on

women's specific midlife transitions, Degges-White and Myers (2006a) examined the

relationship among the transitions, wellness, and life satisfaction of 224 women aged 35-65. The

mean age of the sample was 47.33 (*SD* = 7.44). The participants were relatively well-educated,

with stated household incomes of over $40,000 and were predominantly European American

(85.7%) with the majority (77.8%) from the Southeast. More than half (60.3%) were employed

full-time, two-thirds (65.2%) were married or had a partner, 15.2% were single, and 14.3% were

divorced.

Degges-White and Myers (2006b) surveyed the participants using the *Women's Midlife*

Transitions Survey (WMTS; Degges-White, 2003) developed for their study, the *Five Factor*

Wellness Inventory (5F-WEF; Myers & Sweeney, 1999), and the *Satisfaction with Life*

Questionnaire (SWLS; Diener et al., 1995). They found some unexpected results among several

of the noted transitions. The participants indicated their perceptions of the impact of a transition;

how much the event affected their lives; their expectations related to an event (whether the event

was *expected or unexpected*); and the timeliness of the event (*off-time or on-time*, related to their

age when they experienced the event) when completing the W*omen's Midlife Transitions Survey*

(WMTS; Degges-White, 2003) (Degges-White & Myers, 2006a). The researchers found that 84

of the women (42%; *N* = 200) ended a committed relationship (some but not all were marriages

that ended in divorce) at the mean age of 43.7 (*SD* 6.2). The transition, "Ending a Committed

Relationship," had an impact score (how much the transition affected the participant) of 4.5 on a

5-point scale (5 being a "very strong" impact, and 1 being "minimal impact") (*SD* = .9). This is

important to note because divorce and ending a committed relationship other than marriage in

this study was considered an *off-time* event (i.e., an event which does not typically occur during a

particular time or stage of life) (Anderson et al., 2012). Ending a committed relationship was not

perceived as an expected transition for 32.5% of the 84 women who experienced this event.

Upon further analysis of the data, the researchers did not find an overall pattern relating timeliness or expectations to specific transitions, nor did they discover a relationship between timeliness and expectations of transitions and life satisfaction and wellness. However, what is important to note is the number of women who experienced the end of a relationship during midlife as well as the effect the women ascribed to this transition.

Degges-White and Myers (2006a) also found that transitions experienced by the participants reflected events that focused on new activities, personal growth, and change, which historically had not been considered midlife endeavors. The activities were identified by items such as "Returned to school," "Entered into a committed relationship," "Relocated to a new city," and "Voluntarily left a job" (p. 144). Degges-White and Myers (2006a) believed that research such as theirs would help dispel old stereotypes of midlife, particularly of women and aging. Although the researchers viewed the noted transitions as "growth," neither this term nor the term *personal growth* were defined. The events or experiences leading to the growth were not identified either. Nevertheless, this often-cited study was the start of research into changing the perceptions of midlife from a time of decline to one of development and growth for women. Expanding on research such as this can help spotlight how growth can occur in later life through varied transitions, including relationship dissolution.

While there is continued potential for growth and development well into older adulthood, there is also the additional potential for stress-inducing life events and transitions. These may affect well-being and limit positive outcomes. Divorce is one such transition that, whether thought of as a crisis, trauma, or an off-time event (Anderson et al., 2012), can affect individuals' functioning and limit their growth and development. As previously noted, how long an

individual is married before they divorce can also contribute to an individual's postdivorce adjustment in negative or positive ways (Makidon, 2013; Montenegro, 2004; Perrig-Chiello et al., 2015; Somerville, 2017; Wu & Schimmele, 2007). Long-term marriage and postdivorce outcomes are discussed next.

Long-term Marriage

There is some variation in the literature as to what timeframe connotes a long-term marriage. Somerville (2017) described a long-term marriage as a marriage that has lasted 20 or more years, while Montenegro (2004) defined long-term marriage as a marriage of at least 14 years. Regardless of the actual timeframe reported in the literature, Amato (2010) reported that the longer a couple stayed married, the less chance they had of divorce, with the percentages of divorce greatly decreasing by the second decade of marriage and even more so by the third decade. Several researchers (Perrig-Chiello et al., 2015; Pudrovska & Carr, 2008; Somerville, 2017, Stempler, 2017; Sweeney, 2010) have noted that the increasing number of individuals divorcing at age 50 and over has challenged the long-held notion that a couple married for over 20 years is relatively "safe" from divorce. The phenomenon of gray divorce, with the rising number of later-life divorces (Brown & Lin, 2012), is shaking beliefs in the stability of long-term marriage.

It makes sense that people who divorce in later life would have come from longer-term marriages. One, however, needs to consider that the occurrence of divorce for second marriages is higher than for first marriages, and second marriages tend to be shorter in terms of number of years married as well (Brown & Lin, 2012). This suggests that not all individuals divorcing in later life are coming from long-term marriages. Therefore, what is relevant for my study is that the divorce rate has been steadily increasing for individuals who were married 20, 30, or even 40

years (Stempler, 2017). About a third of all individuals who divorced in 2015, at age 50 and above, had been married for at least 30 years, and one in ten were married for 40 years or more (Stempler, 2017).

The phenomenon of later-life divorce after a long-term marriage has the potential for a variety of negative consequences for the baby boomer population (Montenegro, 2004; Perrig-Chiello et al., 2015; Wu & Schimmele, 2007) and as such underscores the need for further research into this area for the women it affects (Dare, 2011, Perrig-Chiello et al., 2015). Although many women who experience later-life divorce are likely exiting a long-term marriage, there is little awareness and understanding of how this phenomenon impacts the individuals involved. Makidon (2013) stressed the need to understand and give voice to women's midlife divorce experiences after a long-term marriage and to put forth this knowledge in professional literature.

Postdivorce Adjustment

Beyond the Average Divorce (Demo & Fine, 2010) was a compilation of two decades of research on families and divorce and presented a view that focused on the "diversity and variation of processes, experiences, and outcomes" (p. 4) of divorce as well as the fluidity of changes inherent in the divorce transition and divorce adjustment process. Demo and Fine (2010) defined *outcomes* as "tangible markers of how well individuals adjust to stressors they have experienced and with which they are currently coping" (p. 5) and *fluidity* as "the frequency and rate of family-related experiences and outcomes over time" (p.7).

Demo and Fine (2010) wanted to understand how individuals interpreted the divorce events: how they made sense of them. What emerged was a rich compilation of narratives that portray progress postdivorce as non-linear with periods of growth and resilience "intertwined and

sometimes concurrent with periods of turmoil" (Demo & Fine, 2010, p.5). They found that how

divorced individuals construed their life stories influenced their adjustment (Demo & Fine,

2010). As previously noted, Demo and Fine's (2010) view of divorce is as a process that unfolds

over time rather than as a single event.

Factors Contributing to Adjustment

Some factors researchers have found that contribute to postdivorce adjustment include

financial status (Crowley, 2018), age (Lin et al., 2017), non-initiator status (Sakraida, 2005,

2008), and infidelity (Steiner et al., 2011). Depending on the conditions, these factors can result

in great variability among divorce outcomes, including negative or positive effects on women's

divorce adjustment and emotional well-being. For instance, Sakraida (2005, 2008) found that

initiators, individuals who initiated the divorce, fared better than *non-initiators*, those who did

not begin the divorce process. Steiner et al. (2011) noted that individuals who were cheated on

were worse off postdivorce than those who did the cheating, and Lin et al. (2017) reported that

younger individuals were better off than older individuals postdivorce.

Sakraida (2005) conducted qualitative interviews with 24 divorced women who self-

identified into the following categories*: initiato*r, those who first decided to end their marriage;

non-initiator, the recipients of the decision to end the marriage; and *mutual decider*, those who

shared the decision to end the marriage. Initiator status or whose decision it is to end the

marriage is an important variable to consider in the divorce process as personal control can be

influential in positive postdivorce adjustment (Sakraida, 2005). The themes which emerged from

the interviews with the initiators (n = 8) included optimism, growth of self, and a sense of

moving forward, as well as a loss of social supports. In contrast, themes that emerged from

interviews with the non-initiators (n = 8) included rumination, a sense of stagnation (i.e., not

moving forward), and vulnerability, as well as comfort from spirituality (i.e., spiritual practices and beliefs). Sakraida (2005) identified no specific themes related to the experiences of mutual deciders (both partners decided to divorce). It is interesting to note that all themes which emerged from the initiators' interviews may be considered positive except one (i.e., loss of social supports), which may be considered negative. The reverse is true with the non-initiators' interviews; all themes were considered negative except one (i.e., spiritual comfort), which may be considered positive.

How distressed or dysfunctional someone's marriage was before the divorce also may play a role in divorce outcomes. Amato and Hohmann-Marriott (2007) utilized data from the *National Survey of Families and Households* (1996) to study high and low-distressed marriages that ended in divorce. The researchers used cluster analysis, an approach to assign people to groups based on similarities across relevant variables, to analyze 509 couples who divorced by the second phase of the noted longitudinal study. Amato and Hohmann-Marriott (2007) identified several variables based on their review of the correlates of divorce and marital distress, then grouped the participants based on the quality of their marriages. Not surprisingly, they found that both women and men in seriously distressed marriages experienced increased happiness following divorce, and those not in highly distressed marriages reported decreased happiness following divorce. I was cognizant of noting any observed differences in initiators' and non-initiators' experiences and perceptions of personal growth in my study, as well as how distressed (or happy) my participants thought they were before (and after) their divorce.

Negative Effects and Consequences of Divorce

We know much about the negative effects of divorce on adults, especially on women. In an often-cited review of the research on divorce trends and developments, Amato (2010) pointed

to several examples of the adverse effects of divorce cited in the literature (especially for women), including damaged self-esteem, feelings of failure, and emotional trauma. Although most of the research on divorce and divorce adjustment has historically focused on younger divorcees as noted by Amato (2010), emerging research has focused on women of varying ages. The divorce process has the potential to cause various negative life challenges for older women, such as financial problems, loneliness, and social isolation in addition to stress and other health issues (Montenegro, 2004; Sbarro, 2015; Wu & Schimmele, 2007).

Financial

The timing of a divorce in later life may affect postdivorce adjustment, including late-life financial well-being for women and especially for those at the poverty level before divorcing (Crowley, 2018; Lin et al., 2017). Crowley (2018) interviewed 40 men and 40 women from a first, second, or later marriage who divorced at or over age 50. The researcher sought to uncover reasons for the participants' gray divorce, explore their current and future financial status, and learn about their social support networks. Crowley (2018) found that women in her study often experienced an "economic gray divorce penalty" (p. 17); they were more likely than men to experience financial problems due to previous breaks in their employment. She noted that women often stay home and raise children (i.e., some do not re-enter the labor force until their children are grown) and are left with few marketable skills. Women who took time away from paid employment were also left without retirement plans and with lower salaries when they did re-enter the workforce. These factors contribute to the financial hardship that women who divorce in later life experience (Crowley, 2018).

Lin and colleagues (2017) studied divorced individuals and found that the financial picture for women who divorce in later life was bleak compared with those who were

continuously married or who remarried; the latter groups typically had more economic resources than divorced women. This is attributed to their husbands' financial contributions (i.e., social security). The researchers maintained that divorce is more common at younger ages (an on-time event) than divorce in later life, while widowhood becomes more likely with increased age. An off-time event, such as a divorce over age 50, is typically associated with poorer outcomes, especially for women, than an on-time event (divorce under age 50) (Lin et al., 2017). Individuals who divorce over age 50 have fewer working years remaining and less time to recoup financial losses than do individuals who divorce earlier in life (Lin et al., 2017; Crowley, 2018).

Lin et al. (2017) maintained that gray divorced women are much more disadvantaged than other formerly married women (i.e., younger divorced women and gray widowed women) and gray divorced men. They found that the percentage of poor gray divorced women (those at poverty level) (27%) is higher than that for early divorced women (19%), gray widowed women (14%), and gray divorced men (11%) and was comparable to women who never married (25%).

Loneliness and Social Isolation

Given women's potential for a longer lifespan as compared to men, divorce may be a source of stress and loneliness for those who have not re-partnered later in life (Laidlaw & Pachana, 2009). The greater numbers of women compared with men add to the odds that women may find themselves alone in older age. Laidlaw and Pachana (2009) noted that change in demographics could reduce *social capital, "*the amount of practical and social support that one can draw from families and friends" (p. 604). As individuals age, their social networks often become smaller. When a divorce occurs in later life, individuals are potentially left without an informal caregiver, if need be (Laidlaw & Pachana, 2009). However, Crowley (2018) maintained

that men are more likely than women to face a "social divorce penalty" (p. 18), a loss of friends and family. She explained that it is often divorced dads who are isolated from their children and have a more challenging time maintaining these relationships, as children typically remain in the house with their mother. Also, women are often more social (than men) throughout the marriage, making plans with family and friends, and keeping the social calendar full. When a divorce occurs, the husband is often left alone without support (Crowley, 2018).

Stress and Other Health Issues

Scully et al. (2000) stated that divorce is one of life's top stressors. Individuals commonly experience stress and trauma before, during, or after a loss, such as a divorce (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). In an often sited study funded by AARP (formerly known as the American Association for Retired Persons), Montenegro (2004) conducted an internet survey of 1147 participants (581 men and 566 women) aged 40-79 who were divorced at least one time between their 40s and 60s. For the study, Montenegro emailed a random sample of individuals through the nationally represented consumer research base, the Knowledge Network. The landmark study was the first of its kind, designed to understand divorce experiences of individuals in middle and later life. Most respondents (73%) divorced between the ages of 40 and 49, 22% divorced between ages 50 and 59, and 6% divorced after age 60.

One finding of Montenegro's study particularly relevant to my study was that women reported higher levels of stress than men when divorcing in midlife. Montenegro (2004) found that while half the individuals surveyed said they suffered more or greater than their usual amount of stress, 63% of women compared with 44% of men suffered from high or unbearable stress, whether or not the divorce was their decision. This may be especially true for older divorcees, as noted by Wu and Schimmele (2007), who described later-life divorce as a "life-

altering, stressful experience" (p. 43). Since many older individuals who divorce in later life are leaving long-term marriages (Montenegro, 2004; Somerville, 2017), there is an increased potential for stress and other adjustment problems (Wu & Schimmele, 2007) as opposed to those who leave shorter-term marriages.

In Amato's (2010) review of the divorce literature, he reported that divorce was commonly preceded by short-term declines in well-being (i.e., psychological, physical, social) among parents but that after a few years most individuals adapt fairly well. The transition out of marriage is commonly one of resilience for most individuals (Sbarra, 2015); however, the transition typically causes substantial life stress even for individuals who describe short-lived turmoil (Amato, 2010). In addition to the common stressors and challenges of divorce, chronic illnesses, physical and cognitive impairment (Brown & Lin, 2012; Dare, 2011) can contribute to the stress of divorce as individuals age.

Sbarro (2015) reported an overall potential for increased illness or impairment in individuals who reach middle and later life, especially if they remain without a partner. Furthermore, divorce may add to the potential for ill health for older adults and may exacerbate pre-existing illnesses and disorders in divorcees (Sbarro, 2015). Montenegro (2004) found that 31% of divorced women compared with 18% of divorced men experienced depression as diagnosed by a doctor; however, it was not noted whether depression had ever been diagnosed before the divorce. Although most people cope reasonably well after their marriage ends (Sbarro, 2015), divorce is considered a risk for poor health outcomes.

Positive Outcomes and Growth

Individuals in middle and later life have the potential for better physical and psychological health compared with older individuals in the past and may live "…longer,

healthier lives, far into old age" (Wu & Schimmele, 2007, p. 1). Divorce does not change this possibility. Researchers have identified factors that contribute to positive postdivorce adjustment for women, such as having a child aged 18 or older (Bowen & Jensen, 2017). Bowen and Jensen (2017) speculated that this might be due to the social support aspect of the relationship; divorce tends to bring women and children closer, whereas men have a more challenging time maintaining relationships with children after divorce. Positive outcomes in later-life divorce included "positive life changes and feelings of autonomy, personal growth, and maturation" (Demo & Fine, 2010, p.121) as well as resilience for women, which was tied to their faith and spirituality along with support from family and friends (Leighman, 2009). The research on personal growth as a focus in the later divorce transition of baby boomer women has been minimal; however, some researchers have identified growth that emerged through the divorce process in the study of general divorce adjustment (Makidon, 2013; Somerville, 2017; Thomas & Ryan, 2008).

Divorce Adjustment and Growth

Thomas and Ryan (2008) explored divorce outcomes and adjustment through their qualitative interview study with women in middle and later life, who had divorced between the ages 21-66. Grounded theory guided the inductive process of the study, the purpose of which was to understand the women's perspectives related to their grief and growth after divorce. The researchers used the descriptive mode to illustrate the "experiences and processes of role socialization, support, and growth." (p. 212). Thomas and Ryan (2008) interviewed ten divorced middle to upper-middle-class Caucasian women from Indiana, aged 48-73 ($M = 60$) at the time of the interview. The participants were interviewed one to two times for 60 to 120 minutes. Thomas and Ryan (2008) used Mezirow's (2000) theory of transformational learning as the

framework to organize and understand findings related to growth through transitions. The researchers asked specific semi-structured questions about the women's lives after their divorce focusing on how they lived, what they experienced and believed, and how they felt through the divorce process.

Thomas and Ryan (2008) identified eight themes that emerged from the women's divorce stories: (1) support/lack of support, (2) self-perceptions, (3) emotions, (4) dating reflections, (5) married life, (6) family, (7) growth, and (8) the future. Major findings suggested that although the participants experienced growth through the grief and loss of their marriage and were often transformed by their experiences, they were frequently not aware of their growth. Many women did not recognize their personal growth until they were interviewed and reflected on their experiences. At that time, they identified growth in almost every area of their lives (Thomas & Ryan, 2008).

Thomas and Ryan (2008) identified growth outcomes experienced by the women that included discovering single life was fun, exciting, and challenging; gaining employment; and managing financial matters. The researchers noted that the participants might have been unaware of their growth because it occurred in everyday life and times of survival (e.g., when they were distracted). The women's growth occurred throughout different stages of their marriages, divorces, dating lives, and current lives. This suggested to Thomas and Ryan (2008) that women can experience personal growth through a divorce transition. However, the nature of the growth and whether the women recognize their experiences as growth depends on what women believe is important. Experiencing growth also depends upon the value women place on themselves as individuals and how they view their life roles. The study's findings indicate various means to help women emerge from the grief of divorce in ways that will promote

personal growth. Findings include gaining a better understanding of gender roles within the context of marriage and postdivorce life and providing mentors who have lived through divorce and changing social stigmas, thus assisting women in their transformation (Thomas & Ryan, 2008). My study expands on these findings by intentionally asking questions to participants who self-identify as having grown; the questions are related to their values, beliefs, life roles, and identity (see my Interview Guide, Appendix A).

Thomas and Ryan (2008) viewed growth outcomes through transformational learning theory and noted that most of the participants did not realize they had grown until they were interviewed. I expand on their findings by viewing growth through a constructivist lens and by focusing on how women who self-identify as having grown through their divorce describe their experiences of growth. In addition, I focus on personal growth as a process as well as an outcome. I tightened the parameters of the sample by focusing on women who divorced in later life after a long-term marriage rather than on a variety of age groups/years married, like previous research. In addition, I expanded on the findings that growth can occur through various stages of divorce up to the participants' current lives. However, I set the time since divorce to a period when individuals are more likely to seek counseling (the early years postdivorce) to better understand the growth processes occurring at this more limited time frame. One limitation of Thomas and Ryan's (2008) study was a lack of socioeconomic and cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity.

Makidon (2013) and Somerville (2017) reported growth as a positive outcome of divorce in their qualitative dissertations focused on women who divorced at various ages. Both women utilized grounded theory in the inductive process of their qualitative interview studies to generate a theory of divorce in midlife and later. Makidon (2013) wanted to understand the overall

divorce experiences (negative and positive) of baby boomer women who divorced in midlife or later, while Somerville (2017) was interested in women baby boomers' successful adjustment to divorce after a long-term marriage. Makidon interviewed 25 baby boomer women aged 50-64, at the time of the interview, all but one was from Michigan, and all divorced at age 48 or older. The women in Makidon's study were married between 11 and 35 years, had at least one child with the man they divorced, and were between 2- and 15-years postdivorce at the time of the interview. Somerville (2017) focused on the relational aspects (i.e., how the divorce affected various relationships) of postdivorce adjustment for baby boomer women aged 49 to 71 at the time of the interview. They all identified themselves as having adjusted successfully to divorce after a long-term marriage. The adjustment included various themes focused on various relationships. The women in Somerville's study were all from the Southwest (Texas) and were divorced from 2 to 45 years before being interviewed.

Limitations for both studies were similar as both sets of participants self-selected into the studies which, as previously noted, is typical with qualitative research. Most of the participants in both studies initiated or co-initiated the divorce (all but one in Somerville's study; 2/3 in Makidon's study). Both sets of participants were not especially diverse in ethnicity (most were Caucasian), education (most were well-educated), socio-economic status (most were middle to upper-middle class), or geographical location (all derived from the Midwest or the Southwest, depending on the study). Several of Somerville's participants were divorced for ten years, with one divorced for 25 years. One-third of Makidon's participants were divorced over nine years at the time of the interview. I believe that nearly ten years or longer postdivorce makes it more likely that other experiences in addition to the divorce spurred the growth, and it may be less likely for individuals to separate the growth that was actually triggered by divorce from other

events. My study focuses on a shorter time period postdivorce and therefore may be more likely to elicit growth processes related to the divorce than the noted studies. I believe understanding growth processes that occurred in a shortened time frame postdivorce will be more likely to benefit individuals who seek counseling through separation and divorce.

Makidon (2013) aimed to understand her participants' divorce adjustment process and used a life course perspective (Hutchinson, 2011) and Bronfenbrenner's Human Ecological Theory (HET; 1977; 1979; 2005) to provide the theoretical base for her study and to interpret the collected data. Makidon considered all the women in her study to be in the final stage of divorce adjustment, characterized by time since their divorces were all at least two years postdivorce as noted. She separated the final stage of divorce into two categories, resolved or unresolved and placed the participants into each category based on their responses during the interviews. Participants were labeled "resolved" if they reported they were currently "at peace," while those that reported they were not currently at peace were labeled "not resolved." Out of the 25 women, ten were unresolved (40%) and 15 were resolved (60%). This indicates that almost half of the women were still in distress for at least a couple of years postdivorce.

Makidon (2013) utilized a semi-structured interview protocol, which included open-ended questions with related prompts. The structure enabled her participants to give a retrospective narrative of their experiences. After an introduction to the study and a review of the demographics, Makidon (2013) began each interview by asking participants about their general divorce experiences and allowed for their stories to emerge (mostly uninterrupted) as a narrative. She asked them to tell her the story of their divorce, from the day the divorce was initiated to the time they considered the divorce to be resolved (when they were at a place of peace in relation to the divorce). Key areas the researcher focused on included: friends, family, and community

support; child custody; social life; effects on work and financial life; and physical or mental health issues. Makidon (2013) asked participants questions to focus and fill in the narrative, such as "Tell me about the resources and people that helped you make it through the divorce process," "Do you think you have adjusted postdivorce?" and "What helped the most?" (p. 356).

Makidon's (2013) participants considered the following helpful: socializing, self-care, support, freedom from control, and a relationship with their ex-husband or his family. Of the 25 participants, 21 reported going to therapy (12 of the 15 resolved; 7 of the ten unresolved). Makidon (2013) organized the data into three overarching themes related to the women's experiences: Emotional, Identity, and Transcendence, as well as three stages of divorce related to when the experiences occurred: Early, Adapting, and Final. The themes were a part of each stage of divorce. This became the model for her *Unified Theory of Divorce Adjustment.*

Particularly relevant to my study is that several participants realized growth during the final stage of divorce adjustment primarily in areas of self, including gaining self-esteem and confidence in terms of finding themselves, becoming more assertive, and becoming more fearless. One participant said, "I have gotten to that point where I know I can make it" (p. 231). Makidon noted that growth or belief in oneself seemed to be a theme running through the narratives of the resolved group of participants.

Somerville (2017) aimed to understand the experiences and relational processes of the women in her study and began each interview by asking the participants to tell her about their "successful adjustment to their divorce" (p. 110). As noted, Somerville viewed the participants and their experiences through a relational cultural lens. While the focus of the research was on the participants' general divorce experiences, the questions the researcher asked were primarily geared towards learning about the participant's relationships and their positive adjustment to

their divorce. Questions such as "What kind of relationships would you say supported you through this time?" and "Did the relationship with your children change…?" (p. 110) portray the relational focus of Somerville's (2017) research.

Three overarching themes emerged from the data. Somerville (2017) related them to three stages of the divorce adjustment process: Frame of Reference, Transformation, and Relational Competencies. The researcher divided the overarching themes into several subthemes. The Transformation stage consisted of the Early Phase [of the divorce], Emotional Journey, and Later Phase (Work Life; Personal Agency; and Finances). Somerville (2017) described Transformation as the time of moving through the divorce and, for some, a time when the formal divorce process began. It was during the Emotional Journey that seeds for growth were planted (i.e., participants began counseling or joined a divorce support group). The Transformation stage, with its subsequent sub-themes, is most relevant to my study, as this is where a few growth outcomes emerged. In the Later Phase of Transformation, most of the participants experienced a sense of personal agency described as moving forward, having a new sense of confidence, and undertaking new behaviors. Some of what was experienced during this time can be considered growth, although it was not always termed as such.

Somerville (2017) concluded the interviews by asking the participants what they considered the most influential factor in their successful divorce adjustment and received a variety of answers including the importance of completing the divorce quickly; self-care; getting into a healthy relationship for support; physical activity such as running; having supportive parents; and having enjoyable work. One participant said that her faith was the most important contributing factor to her postdivorce adjustment; it had not let her down. Another woman said the most significant factor in her divorce adjustment had to do with two girlfriends (whom the

participant considered spiritual) who helped her focus on her self-awareness and forgiveness. Although the studies mentioned in this section minimally discussed faith and spirituality in relation to divorce adjustment, there are a few studies that specifically focus on spirituality and finding meaning postdivorce. I discuss these studies in the next section.

Divorce Adjustment and Finding Meaning

There is some research pertaining to how individuals make meaning of divorce and how making meaning may lead to growth (Bevvino & Sharkin, 2003). There is a limited amount of research on how individuals may draw on spirituality to make meaning of a divorce transition (Krumrei et al., 2011), as well as some research in which spirituality emerged as a theme in the divorce adjustment process of midlife women (Sakraida, 2005, 2008; Steiner et al., 2011). However, there remains little research about the components or factors of spiritual or existential well-being and meaning-making that may aid in the divorce adjustment process for gray divorcees. I was cognizant of references to finding meaning and spirituality and the potential role these concepts may play in the growth narratives of my participants.

In an early study, Bevvino and Sharkin (2003) examined the relationship of finding meaning through a divorce and subsequent adjustment to divorce. Their sample was comprised of 119 men and women aged 18 to 65 in various stages of the divorce process (early separation to 18 years divorced). The mixed-method study included the following qualitative question: "What were the positive consequences of your separation/divorce?" (p. 85), as well as several quantitative scales relating to finding meaning and postdivorce adjustment. In answer to this question, 64% of the female participants ($N = 68$) identified "changes in self and/or new opportunities for growth" (p. 91) as positive consequences whereas 87% of the male participants ($N = 51$) overwhelmingly answered "no response" to this question. The researchers concluded

that women who divorce later in life might struggle with making sense of the transition, like

men; however, women may search for greater meaning throughout the divorce process (Bevvino

& Sharkin, 2003). This may result in personal growth. Since my study focuses on women who

self-identify as having experienced growth through divorce, I made note of learning how the

participants described making meaning of their divorce and any resulting growth (i.e.,

intentional, unexpected, etc.)

Divorce Adjustment and Spirituality

Researchers have found that spirituality helps the self-identity of non-initiator women

who divorce in midlife (Sakraida, 2005, 2008) and may help divorced women cope (Krumrei et

al., 2009, 2011). Sakraida (2005) described spirituality as providing "a strengthening of the self"

and a "spiritual comfort" (p. 241) for non-initiators of divorce. Sakraida (2005) noted that the

unanticipated divorce experience led non-initiators to rely on a "spiritual belief system as a

source of comfort" (p. 241). The researcher reported that personal expressions, such as prayer,

were a means to endure distress, express anger, and find peace. Spirituality has been defined as

"…that intangible essence that brings and maintains meaning in one's life. It is larger and more

encompassing than religion, though religion can be seen by choice as an aspect of spirituality"

(Maples, 2007, p. 4).

There also has been some research examining spirituality's role in divorce adjustment

related to factors and processes that may contribute to the spiritual well-being of divorced

individuals (Steiner et al., 2011) and how spirituality relates to changes in self-identity and

growth postdivorce (Krumrei et al., 2009, 2011). Krumrei et al. (2009) examined the role of three

spiritual responses for psychological adjustment to divorce in a sample of 100 men and women

(55% female). They reported that 78% experienced spiritual struggles; 74% viewed the event as

a sacred loss; 88% engaged in adaptive spiritual coping. The researchers found that adaptive

spiritual coping was related to greater growth following divorce and concluded that "spirituality

seems to offer unique resources and risks for those who divorce" (p. 381). Krumrei et al. (2009)

did not separate the results by gender.

Krumrei et al. (2011) presented the first longitudinal study using a spiritual stress and

coping model "…to predict adults' psychosocial adjustment following divorce" (p. 973). The

sample was comprised of 89 recently divorced men and women who completed various

assessments at the time of divorce and one year later. Most participants reported both "positive

and negative religious coping tied to divorce" (p. 973), as well as spiritual appraisals (Krumrei et

al., 2011). The same categories of spirituality had been assessed in Krumrei et al. (2009), who

found that engaging in negative religious coping predicted negative outcomes (e.g., viewing

divorce as a sacred loss predicted more depressive symptoms) whereas positive religious coping

predicted more growth.

In a frequently cited study, Steiner et al. (2011) examined the relationship between

initiator status, age at divorce, spousal infidelity status, spiritual well-being, and divorce

adjustment among women in three age groups from 21 to 63 years of age. Steiner and colleagues

(2011) tested three hypotheses: (1) how the combined effect of three factors (initiator status, age

at divorce, spousal infidelity status) related to divorce adjustment; (2) the relationship of spiritual

well-being and divorce adjustment; and (3) if the "combined contributions of initiator status,

spousal infidelity status, and spiritual well-being" (p. 39) predicted divorce adjustment. The

researchers chose multiple regression analyses to examine the role of each predictor variable and

for the first hypothesis found that age did not influence divorce adjustment. The researchers

found that initiator status, spousal infidelity status, and spiritual well-being (existential and

religious well-being) combined could significantly predict divorce adjustment and that the

predictor variables explained 38% of the variance. They concluded that spiritual well-being was

a significant contributor to women's overall divorce adjustment. This study did not support

previous research on initiator status and age in which age and initiator status did have an effect

on adjustment (Sakraida, 2005, 2008). This may be due to how Steiner and colleagues defined

initiator status and age or that many of the previous studies on midlife divorce were older

(conducted in the 1990s).

Steiner et al. (2011) discovered that spiritual well-being was a significant predictor on all

subscales of the two measures she used (*Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale*, Fisher & Bierhaus,

2004; *Spiritual Well-Being Scale*, Paloutzian & Ellson, 1982). The five subscales on the *Fisher*

Divorce Adjustment Scale were self-worth disentanglement, age, grief, social trust, and social

self-worth. The researchers found that the women who found meaning and purpose in their

divorce (as defined and measured by the *Spiritual Well-Being Scale*) adjusted better than those

who did not. They also found that spiritual well-being (specifically existential well-being) was a

strong predictor variable for divorce adjustment in women. Steiner et al. (2011) reported that the

Existential Well-Being Scale ($B = .69$) was a substantially stronger scale than the *Religious Well-*

Being Scale ($B = .07$) when predicting divorce adjustment (both overall and for each subscale).

The researchers suggested this may be because women who can find meaning in their divorce

may have a renewed vision (as measured by the existential scale which focuses on vision and

purpose) and adjusted better than those who do not.

Understanding how baby boomer women make meaning of their divorce in ways that

lead to their growth is the key objective of my study. An understanding of spirituality and the

various meanings it can have for individuals may be instrumental in understanding a

participant's journey toward growth after divorce. Maples (2007) asked baby boomer women

who were participants in several ACA presentations on spirituality (2002-2006) to define or

describe *spirituality*. She compiled hundreds of answers and came up with the following

description:

> Spirituality is that intangible essence that brings and maintains meaning in one's life. It is
>
> larger and more encompassing than religion, though religion can be seen by choice as an
>
> aspect of spirituality. Spirituality is global, deeply personal, and intense. It is always
>
> present, but not necessarily consciously acknowledged. Finally, it is that essence that
>
> separates humanity from other aspects of the natural world. (Maples, 2007, p. 4)

I was mindful of any references to meaning-making, religion, and spirituality in my participants'

narratives and was cognizant that while these concepts may be influential to a participant's

growth, they may be very different for each individual.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the literature on divorce in later life, increasingly

referred to as gray divorce (i.e., a divorce at or over age 50). Divorce in later life can be quite

stressful and disruptive, and the transition has the potential for a myriad of negative outcomes

that may affect well-being postdivorce. There is some research that presents aging and later life

transitions as a time for potential growth and development rather than a time of decline and

deficit; however, the literature is lacking in its overall exploration of positive adjustment among

older divorcees and specifically how women may emerge from a later-life divorce in a better

place than before the divorce. Because of this, the overview focused on growth as an outcome

and process for baby boomer women who divorce in later life after a long-term marriage. Since

constructivism provides the conceptual framework for this study, I define and view personal

growth through a constructivist lens, as I described in the discussion of the framework as well as the divorce adjustment literature.

Gray divorce is on the rise and is expected to continue to increase over the next several decades; therefore, I also included a discussion of the aging U.S. population, highlighting the baby boom generation's characteristics and values, middle and later adulthood as related to the baby boom cohort, and an overview of the historical perspective on the changing societal views on marriage and divorce in the United States. These topics are included in the overview. It is important for counselors and other individuals who work with baby boomers to understand the culture and environment that contribute to the increasing divorce among older adults and how this may affect baby boomer women to help them overcome negative outcomes of divorce. Divorce is a transition that can limit an individual's functioning, but it can also be the triggering force for personal growth and development for women in later life. With the rising number of divorces in later life, counselors have increasingly been called on to assist divorcing individuals. Counselors need to be aware of the unique issues and challenges facing baby boomer women so they may facilitate positive divorce adjustment, such as personal growth. In the next chapter, I discuss my methodology, sample population, and provide a rationale for choosing a qualitative approach. In addition, I discuss methods for recruiting the sample and the data collection and analysis.

Chapter Three: Methodology

In this chapter, I describe my study's research design, sample population, and provide a rationale for choosing a qualitative approach. I discuss the methods for recruiting the sample, the sampling procedures, and the data collection and analysis. In addition, I examine my positionality as the researcher and the study's limitations. I begin by introducing my study's focus (the specific research question is discussed later in the chapter).

The focus of my study was to understand participants' experiences of later-life divorce and how they made meaning of the transition in ways that contributed to their personal growth. I had been drawn to conducting qualitative research described by Merriam (2009) as investigating and "understanding the meaning a phenomenon has for those involved" (p. 22). I concentrated on participants' perceptions and descriptions of their personal growth through the divorce process and the experiences they believed supported their growth. As Creswell (2009, 2014) and Merriam (2009) noted, a qualitative approach provided a deep, rich context with which to explore participants' perceptions and experiences.

According to Merriam (2009), the general purpose of qualitative research is to "understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences" (p. 23). In describing a qualitative research study, Merriam (2009) stated, "the focus is on process, meaning, and understanding…the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis and…it is inductive…" (p. 266). My study fit these characteristics in that the focus was on understanding how participants made meaning of their divorce in ways that led to perceived personal growth and the experiences they believed had inspired or facilitated this growth. I was the primary instrument of data collection and analysis (i.e., as the interviewer and through my analysis of the interviews). The process was inductive, with the patterns, themes, and concepts emerging up

from data rather than from any preconceived hypothesis.

Although there are many studies related to divorce adjustment, especially for younger individuals, few researchers have specifically explored how individuals experience growth through a divorce in later life. To address this gap, in Chapter 1 I emphasized the need to explore how baby boomer women perceived and experienced personal growth through a divorce transition in later life. This is important because the research on growth beyond previous functioning through the divorce transition was lacking across all age groups and did not provide a clear picture of what personal growth looks like and what might help facilitate it postdivorce, especially for gray divorcees. In Chapter 2, I reviewed the divorce literature and highlighted the research on baby boomer women and later-life divorce. In this chapter, I present the design of my study, a description of the population and sample, the interview protocol, procedural implementation, and data collection methods and analysis.

Research Question and Research Design

The overarching research question guiding my study was: What are baby boomer women's experiences of personal growth through later-life divorce after a long-term marriage? A qualitative interview methodology was an appropriate approach to my study, given my interest in women's perceptions and experiences of a later-life divorce transition and the meaning reconstruction that might result. The next section refers to my sample and sampling procedures.

Participant Demographics

My sample included ten baby boomer women, born 1954-1963, who had been legally divorced between two and seven years at the time of the first interview. Two years is considered the minimum time required for individuals to experience and reflect on changes made after a major life transition or trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Two years is also the minimum

timeframe often used in other divorce adjustment studies (e.g., Makidon, 2013; Somerville, 2017); however, no maximum number of years postdivorce has been noted in these studies. I believe limiting the number of years since the participants' divorce may have better allowed individuals to identify growth experienced through the divorce process rather than from other life events. Therefore, I aimed to learn how personal growth was experienced within an earlier period postdivorce, as compared with up to 10, 15, or 20-plus years after a divorce, as has been the norm in previous studies (e.g., Makidon, 2013; Somerville, 2017). Considering what personal growth looks like in a more focused time frame postdivorce may enable clinicians to better facilitate personal growth earlier in the divorce process – separation through postdivorce, when clients were most likely to seek counseling,

Requirements included that participants had been in a long-term first marriage, married at least 20 years, before divorcing over age 50. The women self-identified as having experienced personal growth related to their divorce including but not limited to changes in their self-identify, in their belief and values, and in their relationships. Age 50 is identified in the literature as the beginning point of later-life divorce (Brown & Lin, 2012). In addition, as previously noted, age 50 can be a potential psychological marker in a woman's life, especially when considering the implications for physical changes it holds, such as those experienced in menopause (Anderson et al., 2012).

I focused on the baby boom generation, which has an 18-year age span, as opposed to using the entire mid-life population, which has a larger age range and is described by the U.S Census Bureau (2010) as ages 40 to 65 years. Baby boomers' age parameters align fairly well with what some researchers define as late-life or later-life divorce (i.e., gray divorcees), as previously noted (Bowen & Jensen, 2017; Brown & Lin, 2012; Crowley, 2018). Limiting the

study to midlife would have limited the possibility of including older baby boomers and would have included individuals who are younger (i.e., those in their forties) than gray divorcees. In addition, as discussed in Chapter 2, baby boomers can be considered a *cohort*, defined as a group of people that share a common experience or history (Blando, 2011). Blando (2011) stated, "Each of us belongs to a cohort, based on the generation of which we are a member and the shared histories and experiences of that generation" (p. 71). Furthermore, baby boomer culture is different in many ways from other generational cohorts that came before or after them (Maples & Abney, 2006). As such, my study focused on baby boomer women and highlighted the later-life divorce experiences of this population.

My goal was to screen for participants across several demographics, such as race/ethnicity, education, socioeconomic status, education, and geographic location to have as much variety as possible within the sample to address various noted limitations of previous studies. I designed for a range of ages (a balance between the leading edge versus trailing edge baby boomers), as well as including participants of varying initiator status (i.e., initiator, non-initiator, mutual decider). The resulting group of 10 women were fairly homogeneous across race and ethnicity, educational level, socioeconomic status, and geographic location despite efforts to secure a diverse sample (refer to description of participants in Chapter 4).

Sampling Procedures

Once I received approval from the Montclair State University Institutional Review Board (IRB), I began recruiting my participants, which involved a variety of procedures and multiple forms of outreach. I used purposeful, criterion-based sampling to select individuals who met the previously mentioned predetermined criteria. Merriam (2009) noted that a purposive sample is chosen to yield the greatest results specific to what the researcher desires to understand. I used an

online survey for the demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B) to determine whether

potential participants met the criteria noted.

 My sample was a convenience sample in that I accepted individuals who fit my criteria

until I had enough individuals who were willing and able to participate in the study. Following

Creswell's (2014) suggestion regarding sample size for a qualitative interview study, I aimed to

conduct in-person interviews with 10-12 women. However, interviews were conducted via an

online platform (i.e., Zoom) rather than in person due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I continued

interviewing participants until the data reached saturation and no new patterns, themes, or

concepts emerged (Merriam, 2009). Data reached saturation with 10 participants.

I reached out to individuals, groups, and organizations such as AARP (formerly known as

American Association of Retired Persons), a national interest group dedicated to empowering

individuals over age 50 (AARP, n.d.) through recruitment emails (see Appendix C; Appendix

D). I contacted regional and national divorce support, growth, and social groups for individuals

in midlife and older, through social media (i.e., Meetup.com, Facebook.com, LinkedIn) via my

recruitment material (see Appendix C; Appendix D; Appendix E). I also provided a recruitment

email/script (see Appendix D) to colleagues and other local contacts who might know potential

candidates.

Through my search for participants, I sent my recruitment materials to organizers of

diverse websites for baby boomer women and women in midlife. (Appendix E). For instance, I

spoke with the group organizer of a northeast regional midlife divorce support group with over

500 members (most of the members were in their 50's and 60's). The group organizer reached

out to individuals and posted my study request (see Appendix E).

As I received responses, I noticed a lack of diversity. To increase the diversity of my

sample I purposefully searched for additional local, regional, and national groups focused on

women of color. I met with the organizers of a few groups, via Zoom, and posted notices

(Appendix E) on the groups' social media pages.

When an individual contacted me, I emailed her the link to an online demographic survey

(Appendix B) to determine if she qualified. When given a potential participant's name and

contact information from a colleague or other source, I followed up with the individual and

proceeded as above. After reviewing a participant's demographic survey (Appendix B), if a

woman qualified for my study, I contacted her via email. During this initial contact, I emailed the

participant an informed consent document (see Appendix F) to review, sign, and email back to

me. I briefly introduced the study (research title and brief purpose) and asked if there were any

questions. If the participant had any questions, we scheduled a brief call. When I received the

consent form back, we scheduled the first interview. In addition, I asked anyone who participated

in the initial screening to refer other participants to the study, repeating the process described

above (Patton, 2005).

To provide the greatest geographic diversity, I used Zoom (a secure video chat service) to

conduct my interviews. These services are increasingly used in qualitative interview studies and

are described as a beneficial alternative to in-person interviews with the capability of increasing

sample diversity when clients live too far to meet in-person (King & Horrocks, 2010) or when

other circumstances (i.e., COVID-19 pandemic) limit in-person meetings. Ideally, I would have

been able to locate participants from across the nation to maximize geographic diversity, given

the limitations of previous studies consisting of regionalized samples.

Data Collection

Interviews served as the primary method of data collection for this qualitative study. I

purposefully chose several features related to this data collection method, which merit discussion and clarification, such as the format, frequency, and nature of the interviews. DeMarrais (2004, as cited in Merriam, 2009) described a research interview as "a process in which a researcher and participant engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study" (p. 55). In utilizing a qualitative interview format, I was not attempting to infer causality from the participants' experiences. Instead, the purpose of the interviews were to understand how participants made meaning of a later-life divorce transition in ways that led to their personal growth and to illuminate the experiences they believed contributed to this growth. As Merriam (2009) suggested, I relied on the participants' memories and perceptions as they reconstructed and gave voice to their stories. King and Horrocks (2010) suggested that several characteristics serve as defining features of a qualitative interview, including that it is flexible, open-ended, tends to focus on the participant's actual experiences rather than on opinions, and that the relationship between the interviewer and the participant is a critical part of the method. I adhered to their suggestions, as discussed below.

I conducted two in-depth interviews in my study. The first interview focused on the participants' description of their perceptions and experiences of their personal growth, in addition to an account of when these experiences transpired (i.e., before, during, or after the separation or divorce, to the present day), whenever possible (see Appendix A). The second interview focused on ensuring that I understood the key points the participants shared (Appendix A). I asked the women to clarify or expand on topics when necessary, to share thoughts since the last interview, to probe emergent themes that surfaced from the first interviews, and to add anything we might have overlooked. I presented themes from other participants' interviews to see if any of the additional themes resonated with participants. The interviews were semi-

structured in which specific predetermined questions guided the session and where there was also fluidity and flexibility to allow freedom to depart from the interview guide (Appendix A) to engage more deeply in a topic (King & Horrocks, 2010; Seidman, 2013). This flexibility allowed me to add questions as the interviews progressed.

The interviews were approximately 60-90 minutes each (Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2013). The first interviews were conducted with all participants before starting any second interviews. Doing so allowed me to analyze themes for each participant. It also allowed me to share themes identified in the first round of interviews, as well as allowing the participants time to reflect on what they shared in their first interview (Seidman, 2013). I highlighted emerging themes from each participant's interview and brought them to the second interview for discussion. All interviews took place over a period that allowed for additional analysis of the data and potential revising of the interview guide based on initial and continued findings.

As mentioned, I conducted the interviews using a secure Zoom video-chat platform (access provided by Montclair State University) given the state of the nation at the time (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic). Using Zoom enabled me to add potentially add greater diversity to the study; I did not have to limit my sample to local participants. In the initial part of the first interview, I focused on building rapport. However, the process of developing a trusting relationship with each participant began with the first moment of contact and continued throughout our encounters (King & Horrocks, 2010). I explained that I wanted to know what it was like for women who divorced at age 50 or over after a long-term marriage to experience personal growth through the divorce transition. I let the participants know that I wanted to understand what personal growth meant to them, how they believed they had grown through their divorce, and what they had experienced that contributed to their growth.

As King and Horrocks (2010) stated, I asked broad but focused, open-ended questions related to my research question. For instance, I encouraged participants to share important aspects of their journey, such as the positive changes they experienced since their divorce and what they thought had helped them. Specific questions emerged based on what individuals presented as being significant to them in terms of their perceptions and experiences of personal growth. I also used prompts related to specific facets of personal growth if they did not emerge organically (e.g., Were there challenges that they overcame to experience the positive changes?). However, I was mindful of the wording and of not imposing any preconceived definition of personal growth. Following are a few areas of inquiry I addressed during the first interviews.

1. Please describe your growth process as you transitioned through your divorce.

2. Can you describe what you believe contributed to these changes?

3. Can you describe any challenges you faced?

During the second interview, I provided an overview of what the session would entail. I then asked participants what they found themselves thinking about since our last meeting. I posed questions from the previous interview I was curious about and wanted them to expand. I shared patterns of information identified in the first interview and asked participants how closely the patterns captured what they had meant to convey. This is a form of member checking (discussed later in the chapter). In addition, I shared patterns and themes from other participants' interviews to see if anything resonated with them. Following are a few examples:

1. I am wondering what you have found yourself thinking about since our first interview.

2. Does what I just shared with you represent what you expressed in our first interview?

3. Was there anything we missed that is an important part of your divorce transition?

The interview guide (Appendix A) provides a detailed list of questions for both interviews.

The interviews were recorded via Zoom and transcribed verbatim using a secure transcription service (Otter.ai). I ensured that the service adheres to the *Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996* (HIPAA). I also subscribed to a secure password-protected Dropbox account and uploaded the recordings within 24 hours. I created a special folder in the Dropbox account specifically for the video/audio files. Each interview was assigned a code which included the interview date and participant's initials.

Data Analysis

Merriam (2009) maintained that the objective of data analysis is to make sense of the data. To make sense of the data, I employed what Merriam (2009) noted as "a basic inductive and comparative analysis strategy suitable for analyzing data in most interpretive qualitative studies" (p. 197), also called "constant comparative method" (p. 30). In this approach to data analysis, after comparing one segment of data with another and checking for similarities or differences, the data is grouped by similar features, given a provisional name, and then becomes categories, and eventually themes (Merriam, 2009).

Employing a systematic plan for coding data and determining categories and themes was instrumental in the process of organizing and analyzing the enormous amounts of data inherent in a qualitative study (Saldaña, 2016). I used a three-ring binder for each participant to organize hard copies of the interview transcripts and field notes. I began my data analysis by reading and re-reading each transcript as I listened to the recorded interview tape to ensure accuracy. As I corrected inaccuracies on the transcripts, I also marked (i.e., highlighted, underlined, circled) words, phrases, or sections that drew my interest (Seidman, 2013). These identified words, phrases, and passages became initial "code" words (Merriam, 2009, p. 173) which I handwrote in my code book. At some point through this process, I began organizing the copious amount of

coded data in an Excel spreadsheet. I went back and forth between the data and the transcripts, coding and recoding the data in a simultaneous or recursive process (Saldaña, 2016). I continually reviewed and compared emerging codes and categories within the first transcript, then in each subsequent transcript. Through this recursive analysis, I began identifying patterns that emerged within and across the interviews (Saldaña, 2016). When reviewing the transcripts, I was sure to look for segments that answered all or part of my research question (Merriam, 2009).

I began coding the data by using a combination of basic coding methods, discussed by Saldaña (2016) as a "generic approach" (p. 73) to analyzing data. This method allowed the codes to evolve as I developed understanding and allowed me to remain open to changing the codes if they were not generating enough information. Since I had multiple participants and interview transcripts, I began with attribute coding by including the basic description of the participant demographics and interview information (e.g., date, format, setting, etc.) to manage and organize the interviews (Saldaña, 2016). I coded what I wrote about in my field notes and analytic memos with descriptive or topical codes (discussed later in the chapter) (Saldaña, 2016) and added them to the participant binders and my reflective journal.

As I analyzed the interview transcripts, I focused on identifying words or statements that I felt were particularly relevant to my study (i.e., that answered my research question). I noted initial and structural codes (topic or content-based) in the margins of each transcript and allowed the data to lead me (Saldaña, 2016). As Saldaña explained, in vivo coding uses the participants' language for codes, and process coding identifies participants' actions or activities as codes. Both types of coding fit well with my study in that I explored the participants' perceptions identified using their words, and their experiences (i.e., what helped them grow, how they changed, etc.). I remained open to employing additional types of coding in subsequent phases of

data analysis, depending on what emerged from the first phase of coding and analysis discussed above. After initial coding, I began to organize the developing patterns into themes which I entered into a separate code book document. I initially analyzed the data by sorting the emerging subthemes and continuing with the constant comparative analysis as described in the opening above. I discuss my personal and professional connection to the study and how I interrogated my biases and assumptions in the next section.

Positionality

As a counselor, counselor educator, and life-long learner, I am committed to understanding how individuals can grow and develop. I am particularly interested in how some people not only overcome obstacles but also thrive, despite, and possibly because of, adverse life events. Over the years, I have become increasingly interested in women's growth through transitions in middle and later life. This interest ultimately led to the topic of this study and my research question.

My curiosity about how women manage after a divorce began over 15 years ago when I experienced a major crisis in my marriage of 12 years. Although this experience did not lead to my divorce at the time, it did lead to an increase in my interest in how women deal with divorce. My professional interest grew as I talked with many women who had been divorced. Some of these women were bitter and angry. Although they had divorced many years before we talked, they still seemed to be going through the pain and suffering they experienced in their marriages and throughout their divorce transitions. They remarked, "I can't get over it," "I still can't believe he did that," and other such statements. It appears the negative thoughts and feelings were foremost in their lives.

Some of the women I spoke with had new partners and spoke of new homes and exciting

careers; however within minutes of discussing their divorce, it was as though they were back in the middle of it. Conversely, I also encountered women who, although they experienced pain and suffering throughout their divorce, appeared to have emerged from the process emotionally and psychologically well adjusted. When these women spoke of their experiences, many of them said they were "much better off," "had grown tremendously," or that they were "transformed." I began to wonder how these women were able to move on, overcome obstacles, and continue to grow and transform, while others were stuck in their negative experiences.

My curiosity about how women might navigate the divorce transition and emerge with less anger and bitterness continued to grow throughout the years. Through my doctoral studies, my personal and professional interests merged and evolved into my current interest in how women could experience personal growth through the divorce transition. I became curious about how counselors might help women through the journey of divorce in ways that would help them move past pain and suffering and emerge with positive changes. In the meantime, I experienced my own subsequently lengthy separation.

My professional and personal connections to the study are strong. As a constructivist, I believe people create their own realities, and that meaning is intentionally sought and discovered. Professionally, as a counselor and counselor educator, I believe individuals can deliberately change and grow and can be encouraged and supported in their efforts. I also believe that individuals can change for the better through, or even because of, adverse life events and that people are never too old to experience growth. I value life-long learning and hold that education, whether formal or informal, is a major pathway to personal growth. I see myself as an insider in this study in some significant ways. As a baby boomer woman, I am a member of my sample's generational cohort. In addition, although I am not divorced, I was married for 24 years before

my husband and I separated. I believe that because of these reasons, I may share many of the same experiences, values, and beliefs of the population I am studying.

I am aware of how my professional and personal experiences, beliefs, and assumptions may influence my interpretation of data, and potentially affect the outcome of my study. I therefore employed reflexivity and reflective journaling (discussed later in the chapter) to interrogate any personal or professional biases and assumptions to ensure the study's trustworthiness, credibility, and validity. In addition to reflecting on my own separation and ongoing transition in my reflexive journal, I processed my personal experiences with others, such as my dissertation chair and my critical friends (discussed in the next section).

By being reflective and writing about my thoughts, feelings, and experiences I encountered throughout the process, I interrogated myself so that I could better understand how my personal and professional experiences and beliefs affected my understanding of my participants' experiences. I was mindful of my biases and assumptions from the first contact with the participants and throughout the interviews, through data analysis, to the end of the study. I also turned to the members of my dissertation committee and my critical friends for assistance in helping to minimize the impact of my biases on my data collection and analysis. Tools such as the use of critical friends, reflective journaling, member checking, and an audit trail helped me manage my biases and assumptions. I discuss this further in the following section on trustworthiness.

Trustworthiness

Merriam (2009) maintained that a qualitative study is trustworthy when a standard of rigor has been applied. Similarly, Creswell and Miller (2000) noted that rigor could be determined by ensuring that a study is credible and reliable. Credibility, dependability,

transferability, and confirmability are connected and used in qualitative research to establish

trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and to demonstrate that inferences drawn from study

findings are accurate (Creswell, 2009; Creswell, 2014) and consistent with the data collected

(Merriam, 2009). Having multiple viewpoints promotes trustworthiness in qualitative research,

such that participants and individuals outside the study serve as means to continually check and

recheck the researcher's interpretation of data, biases, and assumptions (Creswell & Miller,

2000). To ensure that my study is credible and dependable, I began by employing a multi-lens

approach, which Creswell and Miller (2000) noted includes three viewpoints: the researcher

(e.g., me), the participants, and outside individuals (e.g., my dissertation committee, critical

friends).

To ensure credibility and dependability, I employed reflexivity and reflexive journaling

to reflect on how the research process was affecting me as the researcher (e.g., the first lens)

(Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I employed *member checking*, bringing data

back to the participants, to confirm that I interpreted their statements correctly and to ensure their

views were included in the analysis of the data (e.g., the second lens; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I

did this with all participants during the second interview. Members of my dissertation committee

(e.g., my dissertation chair) and my critical friends (see below) provided the third viewpoint for

my study. This third lens involved the use of an audit trail to review and reflect upon various

aspects of my research, including but not limited to my analysis of my data and any biases and

assumptions that may come to the reviewers' attention (Creswell, & Miller, 2000; Lincoln &

Guba, 1985).

Reflexivity

As a researcher, I interrogated and reflected on my biases, assumptions, and beliefs

regarding my study and how I was interpreting the data (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Merriam,

2009). I reflected on my worldview and described and reported on social, cultural, and historical

influences through my reflective writing upon entering into the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

I was aware of who I was as a researcher and what my level of subjectivity entailed in relation to

the collection and analysis of the data. For instance, I needed to be open to whatever themes

emerged from the data even if they did not "support" my enthusiasm for the process of personal

growth following divorce. I was cognizant of not trying to "force" the data into Mahoney's

(2003) constructivist themes or my definition of growth, as well as any of my own experiences

or those of my students, clients, or friends. I also needed to be open to various themes of

personal growth that emerged from the data that did not reflect my operational definition of

personal growth or any other preconceived definition of growth.

It was important that I was mindful of potential similarities (real or perceived) that I had

with the participants of my study and of the possibility of forming too great an alliance or of

providing leading questions or statements. While my goal was to establish rapport, I needed to

ensure that I maintained boundaries between the participants and myself (as the researcher) so

that the roles did not blur (e.g., as could happen if the participant and I became too familiar, such

as with a "friend"). At the same time, I was aware of expectations that I had of the participants,

for instance, assuming that they would think or act in a particular fashion since we might be

close in age and have similar experiences. I also was aware of how any professional biases and

assumptions might have affected my interpretation of the data.

To address potential professional biases and assumptions, I employed reflexivity in my

position as a researcher and a counselor regarding how my role could influence what participants

told me. For example, participants may tell researchers what they think they want to hear and

gloss over certain experiences. To counter this, I encouraged the participants to speak about

positive and negative experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and practices related to their experiences of

growth and the growth process. I was aware of my status as a counselor and a counselor educator

and did not take on either role with the participant. I posed questions to my critical friends (see

below) and asked them to provide feedback on my data and my interpretations to help limit the

possibility of researcher bias.

Critical Friend/Peer Support

A critical friend or peer reviewer is someone external to the study and who provides a peer

review or examination of the study and works closely with the researcher to provide feedback

and challenge biases and assumptions (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985;

Merriam, 2009). I met by phone or video chat with two critical friends/peer reviewers who had

access to my transcripts and analytic memos (i.e., interview journal). We met approximately

every other week, beginning with IRB approval, and ending when the data had been analyzed.

My critical friends are colleagues who have earned their doctoral degree in counselor education

from Montclair State University (one completed a qualitative interview dissertation; the other a

quantitative dissertation). Both were familiar with some of the literature on baby boomers but not

with my research topic before we began engaging in conversations. Both critical friends provided

support throughout the dissertation process and specifically assisted me during the data analysis

process by reflecting on codes, patterns, and themes that emerged from the data.

Reflexive Journaling

I kept a research journal to reflect on my thoughts, feelings, impressions, reactions, and

anything else that emerged throughout the data collection and analysis process. I reflected on my

biases, assumptions, and personal experiences related to what the participants said and recorded

anything that crossed my mind during or after the interviews. Through my journal, I disclosed and reflected on assumptions, beliefs, and biases I held related to my position as counselor and counselor educator and my role as the researcher (discussed in the previous section on positionality) (Merriam, 2009).

Audit Trail

An audit trail provides a measure of credibility by providing an external auditor to review documents such as interview journals or field notes (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I wrote analytic memos to document thoughts and questions I had through the process, constantly read and reread interview transcripts, and discussed these thoughts with my critical friends. Maintaining an audit trail and discussing my reflections assisted in helping me check my assumptions and biases. Items in my audit trail included the demographic forms, interview guides, field notes, participant narratives, and a reflective journal.

Member Checking

Creswell and Miller (2000) maintained that one way to establish credibility is by utilizing the participants' viewpoint (the second lens) to check the overall accuracy of the data. As the researcher, I brought raw data from the first interviews and my initial impressions and interpretations of the data to the participants, so they could confirm that what I had identified accurately depicted what they meant to convey. I aimed to ensure trustworthiness by having participants review key points and patterns that I identified to further ensure that I understood and correctly interpreted what they described. I repeatedly reviewed the data and received feedback on my analysis (Merriam, 2009). I then discussed the themes I identified across the first interviews with the participants (their own; other participants).

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Summary

</div>

In this chapter, I described the research design and provided a rationale for choosing a qualitative interview approach and for choosing the study's population. I explained the method for recruiting the sample and discussed my interview protocols, as well as procedures for data collection. In addition, I described methods for data analysis, discussed my position as the researcher, and identified potential biases I might have had as an inside member of the population I planned to study. I ended the chapter with a discussion of various methods to ensure trustworthiness.

Chapter Four: Findings

The goal of my study was to explore baby boomer women's experiences of personal growth post later-life divorce, after a marriage of 20 or more years. In this chapter, I present the findings from my study, which included two rounds of individual semi-structured interviews (60-90 minutes each). I first present a detailed description of the ten women who participated in the study. I provide a summary of the themes and then an in-depth analysis of how I analyzed the data including identification and description of overarching themes and categories from the two rounds of interviews.

Description of Participants

I conducted individual interviews with ten female participants: nine identified as White and one identified as Hispanic. All participants were divorced from a long-term first marriage (i.e., 20 years or more) and expressed experiencing personal growth through their divorce transition. The participants were married 23-37 years and were between 52-63 years of age when they divorced. The women, all baby boomers, had between 1-3 children with their ex-husbands. At the time of the first interview, the participants were aged 60-65 and divorced between two and seven years. Half the participants said they initiated the divorce, three said their ex-husband was the initiator, and two said the divorce was mutual.

The participants were a homogeneous group of educated women of middle socioeconomic class. All participants reside in the United States: Nine in the Mid-Atlantic region (New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania), one the Southeastern region (Florida). Every participant held an undergraduate degree, and two held a master's degree. All but two of the women were employed full-time at the time of the first interview (one was a volunteer, and one was unemployed due to the COVID-19 pandemic); however, all were employed at the time of the

second interview. See Table 1 for a detailed description of the participants including birth year,

age at divorce, number of years married prior to divorce, number of years separated, initiator

status, employment status, educational level, and race/ethnicity. To ensure anonymity, I assigned

all participants pseudonyms when referring to their quotes and individual participant statements.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Name	Year Born	Age at Divorce	Years Married Before legal divorce	# Of Years Divorced At time of First Interview	# Of Years Separated Before Legal Divorce	Initiator Status	Race Ethnicity	Work Status At time of first interview	Home State	Education-Level	# of Children
Anne	1956	63	34	2	2-3	Initiator	White	Volunteer	NY	Graduate Master's Level	2
Barbara	1960	53	28	7	4	Mutual Decider	Hispanic	Full Time	NJ	Under Graduate	3
Connie	1959	57	31	3	Less than 1	Non-Initiator	White	Full Time	NJ	Under Graduate	2
Debra	1963	53	34	5	1-2	Initiator	White	Part Time	FL	Under Graduate	1
Elizabeth	1958	59	35	3	2	Non-Initiator	White	Full Time	NJ	Graduate Master's Level	2
Frances	1959	55	23	7	3-4	Initiator	White	Part Time	NJ	Under graduate	3
Gail	1954	63	37	4	8	Mutual Decider	White	Part Time	NY	Under graduate	2
Helen	1960	52	26	7	2-3	Initiator	White	Full Time	NJ	Under graduate	2
Irene	1961	55	33	4	2-3	Non-Initiator	White	Full Time	NJ	Under graduate	2
Janet	1959	57	23	4	Less than I	Initiator	White	Full Time	PA	Under graduate	2

Introduction to the Themes

Through this study, I identified two overarching themes: *Getting "There"* and

Reconceptualizing the Self which highlight participants' experiences of personal growth through

their divorce transitions. These two overarching themes represent a complex process wherein the

themes are symbiotic and build on one another; however, some aspects of the themes may occur

simultaneously. What resulted is a somewhat non-linear process which best illustrates

participants' experiences of growth through post later-life divorce transition. Narratives began

with portrayals of challenges and key junctures the women encountered within their decades-

long marriages and through the divorce process. These experiences are illuminated in theme one,

Getting "There," through decisions made and resulting emotions that ensued. Theme two focuses

on participants' reconceptualization of themselves and the emergence of changed world views,

self-identities, and relational connections. Notwithstanding decisions made and obstacles and

challenges faced in exiting long-term marriages, participants' stories reflected numerous

instances of personal growth experienced across areas of life or *life domains*: psychological,

emotional, social, physical/environmental, financial, and spiritual.

Getting "There"

Theme one, Getting "There," is multifaceted and highlights the participants' experiences

of *getting* to and through later-life divorce and *getting to* personal growth along the way.

Participants shared their complicated journeys exiting long-term marriages through narratives

that emphasized numerous experiences of personal growth. Both processes, exiting the marriages

and experiencing growth, were inextricably intertwined. For example, the ability to extricate

oneself from a decades-long marriage was considered growth by a few of the women. Divorce

was an extremely complex process for this group of baby boomer women who had been married

between 23-37 years before their divorce was final. They described challenges, triggers, turning points, and a myriad of emotions as they exited their marriages. The women experienced the divorce process and their journey towards growth in various ways. A few of the participants began their journey toward divorce 10 or more years before signing the divorce documents (i.e., legal divorce) as they contemplated the issues and obstacles they may face leaving their marriages. For others, the process was quicker, although still fraught with strife.

When asked to describe the personal growth they experienced through the divorce process, participants began their narratives with descriptions of their journey out of their marriages. A few women spoke of intentional choices that kept them in unfulfilling marriages for years until either the time was right to leave or unexpected triggering events led to decisions to finally exit their marriages. Others spoke of realizations and decisions made during the divorce process.

Making Decisions and *Working Though* highlight two processes within theme one demonstrating that divorce and personal growth are connected through the adversity the participants experienced. It was evident from the women's narratives that getting a divorce did not begin when the legal documents were signed. Moreover, the participants' stories reflect that divorce and growth are processes that take time and can affect all areas of life.

Making Decisions

Getting through challenges and obstacles to divorce involved making significant decisions while still married and throughout the divorce process. Despite pervasive unhappiness, several women spoke of intentionally choosing to remain in their marriages while contemplating to leave when the time was right. For many, unexpected triggering events led to decisions to finally exit the marriages; and for a few, decisions made by their ex-spouses led to important

choices of their own. Regardless of whose decision it was to end the marriage, all participants made intentional decisions and choices related to how they would experience the divorce transition and all made decisions that led to their personal growth.

Finally Enough and *Staying Put* highlight two areas within the category that showcase decisions that ultimately led to personal growth. Narratives demonstrated that decisions to stay, when to leave, and how to navigate the divorce transition whether it was their choice or not, took time and affected multiple domains of life. Participants described poignant occurrences such as infidelity, accusations of domestic violence, and mental health issues, which led to decisions made by them and/or their spouses, to dissolve their marriages. Several of the women identified growth resulting from some of these decisions.

Finally Enough

Triggering events served as turning points for several participants in decisions to exit their decades-long marriages and in decisions made through the divorce process. The decision to finally end their marriage was considered growth for participants who struggled with the thought for years and had to fight against pervasive fear and anxiety. For example, Anne described an intense incident when her then spouse falsified a domestic violence claim against her leading to her arrest. This incident triggered an acute awareness of how she was living and was the final straw that put an end to her 30-year marriage. She immediately filed for divorce. Anne had become vigilant in her quest to live in alignment with her values and beliefs. She explained that she and her now ex-husband were "180 degrees apart." Without this experience, Anne explained she could not be certain she would ever have had the courage to leave the marriage, despite her persistent unhappiness for over three decades. Her decision to divorce was the first of many

through the divorce process that signified she had enough of her ex-spouses manipulation and control.

Although the narratives varied, most of the participants described specific situations that signaled to them that they finally had enough at some point during their marriage or through the divorce process. For Gail, Irene, and Elizabeth, the event that caused them to believe they had enough was their husbands' affairs. However, although the affair was the *antecedent* to the divorce for the three women, what constituted the actual reason for exiting the marriage varied depending on the circumstances surrounding the affairs, including the spouses' behavior and the participants' perception of the infidelity. Specific circumstances participants experienced included a spouse's pervasive lying and cheating over many years (Gail), a shocking admission of guilt with a request for divorce (Irene), and a betrayal of a husband and a best friend (Elizabeth). All three women experienced a loss of trust and a sense of betrayal resulting from their husband's infidelity; however, their journey towards divorce, deciding they had finally had enough and their subsequent growth varied. Decisions to exit long-term marriages were deliberate and intentional for some, and unexpected and forced for others. However, for all, what was meaningful was which path to take when they reached that crossroad and how responded moving forward.

For Gail, the serial nature of her husband's affair, with his repeated cheating and lying over many years, indicated a pervasive dishonesty and lack of integrity that she had not previously attributed to him. The lying was the trigger. Gail described the circumstances of her divorce like this:

    I initiated because I had found out he had been cheating. I saw this picture. And

    so I initiated, you know, so of course, I woke him up in the middle of the night.

He had his story all ready. But I didn't know...he was a lot of things but he was

never a liar…he never lied. Even when he would go out and drink and he knew I

was going to be upset. He would always tell me. But something switched in

him… Because all of a sudden, he became this huge...liar. He lied about

everything. He lied to the kids. He lied to me. And…he was a lot of things. But he

was never a liar. So…the circumstances of my divorce was...there was no

question about the divorce. He had been cheating on me for years, he had a kid

with another woman. There was no way [could stay in the marriage]. Once I

found out that…you know.

Gail finally reached her limit. The lies were too much to handle and when she found out about

her husband's betrayal she could not continue in the marriage. Gail's *decision* to divorce, to live

a life that was aligned with her values, was growth for her. Gail, like Anne, valued honesty and

integrity and could not stay in a marriage that was based on lies. She had finally had enough.

Several participants described marriages that had been over many years before their

separation and eventual divorce. As noted, a few participants made intentional decisions to end

their marriage when they had enough; others realized they had enough at some point through the

divorce proceedings. Irene story exemplified the later, Irene said she was "happily married for 33

years," although she also said she "did not have a voice" during her marriage. However, that

changed when her husband asked for a divorce. Irene said she was "shocked" and explained:

…if something happens, and you're…a little annoyed, or a little not happy with it,

a little pebble goes in your backpack, and then…life goes on. Then maybe another

pebble goes in and then every now and then a rock goes in, and then pebbles go

in…and all of a sudden, one day you find your vomiting rocks…your backpack is

just filled up. And that's, I feel like…what happened to me. There were some little

things that obviously bothered me because…BOOM…they came to mind when

he told me he didn't want to be married anymore. And…it all came out. Like, in

24 hours, blahhhh!

Unlike Gail, when Irene found out her husband had an affair, her marriage was not

immediately over. For the first year of their three-year separation, Irene decided to take her

husband back several times. She explained:

…it was kind of complicated because I took him back. So I had... a whole year

basically, of bouncing back and forth of him coming back and me taking him in

…so that year was kind of a lost year.

Irene thought she had a "good marriage." Although it was not her decision to divorce, she had

finally had enough of being silent. Through the divorce process, she began to voice her needs.

Her decision to self-reflect and look inward, triggered through her divorce proceedings enabled

her to finally have a voice. For her, the realization that her marriage was not what she thought

and accepting that it was over took time, therapy, and a good amount of self-reflection. This was

Irene's process towards growth. She found her voice through her divorce.

A few participants could no longer endure the abusive, combative, and overall negative

environment they had been living in for years, or even decades. However, areas of strife and

unmet needs within the marriages were the antecedents to participants' personal growth. For

Elizabeth, her husband's affair was her wakeup call. Elizabeth explained the beginning of her

growth process though the transition out of her 35-year marriage:

I would say that my growth process began before I actually got divorced. You

know, you can be alone, and in the marriage, we had struggled for a long while.

He was not really willing to admit that and then in 2010, he committed the

ultimate betrayal by cheating with my best friend who was married to his best

friend. And I went through some therapy, that was my first step, I went through a

year of therapy [while still married] and I think I'm not unusual in that, you know,

women in particular, when somebody leaves them, or betrays them, or whatever,

they do this self-blaming kind of thing. And, you know, I really needed help to

kind of overcome that, because, you know, you can't control this other person.

The triggering event in Elizabeth's marriage (her husband's affair) prompted her to

finally address long-time issues (i.e., feelings of isolation) she had been experiencing in her

marriage. Thus, Elizabeth began the journey towards psychological and emotional divorce, pre-

legal divorce. Addressing these painful issues in therapy began the journey towards growth for

Elizabeth. It is interesting to note that Gail, Irene, and Elizabeth varied in their identified initiator

status. Gail initially said that the decision to divorce was mutual (although when interviewed said

she was the initiator). Elizabeth and Irene identified as non-initiators for the divorce. Yet, all

experienced growth through self-reflection and awareness of their feelings, thoughts, and

behaviors within their marriages. Regardless of the triggering event, all had finally had enough at

some point in the marriage or divorce process, which was instrumental to their journey towards

growth.

Like Elizabeth, when asked how they believe they have grown through their divorce, a

few of the women began their narratives by describing pervasive challenges and struggles they

had *within* their decades-long marriages. For these women, finally getting out of the troubled

marriage was considered growth and paved the way for further growth. For instance, over the

course of her marriage, Debra said she "lost herself." She described falling into a deep

depression, "…that feeling…I'd never had that feeling before in my life. Empty, dark, lonely. I

asked myself 'Why am I even here? What is this marriage even about?'"

Debra, like Elizabeth, experienced a sense of isolation and loneliness within her

marriage. For her, this pervasive disconnection eventually led to deep despair and depression.

Debra explained the triggering event that signaled she finally had enough, "I remember, I woke

up in bed one morning, curled up in a ball, and I couldn't think of one reason to get out of bed.

My life was so not there anymore." Debra's growth ultimately began with her decision to leave

the marriage and get an apartment on her own.

Staying Put

Several participants discussed decisions to stay in unhappy or unfulfilling marriages due

to financial challenges and demanding family circumstances. Staying in the marriages allowed

them to mitigate some of the obstacles they believed they would face if and when they were to

leave. A few of the women went back to school or trained for new careers; they prepared for a

future when they might be on their own. Family obligations kept most of the women in unhappy

marriages for decades. This was true for Anne, who said she and her husband lived separate lives

for at least a decade before divorcing. Anne said she was thinking about divorcing when her son

was only three years old, but then learned he was autistic and decided to stay put. Since she

wanted to "stay home and care for him," Anne stayed in the marriage until he was an adult. Her

divorce was not finalized until her son was in his late twenties when he was eligible to move to a

residential home. Anne elaborated on this by saying that while most moms were caretakers until

their children were teenagers, she was in this role until her son was 27 years old. Although this

was a long time to be in an unhappy marriage, it was not uncommon for the women in this study

to be in unfulfilling marriages for a decade or more before separating.

Like Anne, Irene and Frances were also stay-at-home moms with children who had special needs. They also remained home with their children until they were eligible to transition to a group residence. Irene's former husband traveled frequently for business throughout the years of their marriage. She said she held "down the fort," taking care of the children, including an autistic son, by herself. Issues in Frances' marriage increased after her middle daughter was born with a physical disability. Like Irene and Anne, caring for a child with special needs nearly around the clock left Frances unable to secure outside employment. Increased family obligations and a one-income household spurred financial struggles along with increased stress. Deciding to stay put was a strategic decision for these women and set the stage for future growth, as they had time to consider if, when, and what their next steps would be.

As noted, financial considerations played a huge role in the divorce transitions for nearly all participants. Participants' financial issues were related to their employment status during their marriage, age at divorce, and subsequent earning potential. Putting careers on hold and focusing on family needs had financial implications for most of the women, postdivorce. A few participants, especially those who had not worked in 20-30 years, felt they were worse off financially than their husbands. Many of the women described postdivorce financial changes as one of the most difficult challenges that they faced and needed to overcome through their divorce transition. Gail spoke about her delay in leaving the marriage after she found out her husband was having an affair:

> I didn't make any real money. So, no way I was walking out the door and
> supporting myself on that. And at that time in my life, I didn't realize how much
> more I was worth [financially]. Boy I ended up finding out I was worth a hell of a
> lot more. I finally [during the divorce transition] got involved in something else

that led me to the appraisal stuff. I worked part time, you know when they [her

children] were little, so I could be home when they got off the bus. Oh, yeah, my

husband wanted me to work…So he kind of pushed me to go do something. But I

look back at it now and how…little money I made.

Gail did not realize her financial "worth" until after she and her husband separated. Similarly,

Connie did not realize her monetary worth during her marriage, either. She had volunteered

throughout her marriage and did not recognize her financial potential until her daughters began

pointing out the skills she developed as a volunteer. She explained:

Interestingly, they have said, 'you know, Mom, you talk about professional

accomplishments, but we also look at you over the years of all the things that you

accomplished outside of the home in terms of all your volunteer work, leading

organizations doing other things.' So while I parsed…I had this focus on the

difference between paid and unpaid work. They didn't have that same view.

Connie parlayed the volunteer skills she honed over decades of service into a rewarding

career. Neither Gail nor Connie was confident in their employment skills while married;

however, divorcing caused disruption in their world, forcing them to reevaluate their abilities.

Similarly, Helen's choices during the decades of her marriage affected her earning potential at

the time of divorce and well into the future. To combat this, Helen, like many participants,

retrained and transitioned to a new career with better earning potential. All but one of the women

changed jobs or careers through their divorce transition (one participant was not employed

predivorce).

Janet's employment situation was unique since she was the breadwinner in the family

during the marriage. Janet explained, "I had a kind of unusual situation. My husband was 'Mr.

Mom' for most of the years of our marriage. I was the main breadwinner." However, despite her earning power and financial position in her family, she was not in charge of the finances and believed she lacked financial stability during her marriage. Janet shared that her husband managed the finances and invested their money. This caused strife in the marriage when he lost a large sum of money. Becoming financially savvy was a challenge Janet faced when divorced. Other participants had similar experiences. Like Janet, Debra shared that she had financial issues in the marriage because her husband was unable to provide a steady stream of income. By the end of the marriage, Debra was planning an "exit strategy," by training for a new career. Although her choice to stay in the marriage while she attended school was intentional, her exit out of the marriage was delayed as she was often the only one working.

Despite the reduced financial status and security for several of the participants, most described being "richer" postdivorce and "better off" in a multitude of ways, which they said would not have been possible had they not divorced. For instance, although Frances spoke of experiencing "great monetary loss" through the divorce, which she will not be able to recover before she retires, she also spoke of being in a much better place "emotionally and psychologically."

Working Through

Working Through refers to the various emotions and emotional dysregulation participants experienced as they navigated later-life divorce. The women experienced a myriad of emotions as they transitioned through the divorce process, including anger, resentment, jealousy, loneliness, grief and loss, depression, fear, anxiety, and guilt. This section includes participants' experiences working through anger at ex-husbands to achieve amicable relationships, and their desire to become role models for their children. Also highlighted are narratives depicting the

notion of becoming unstuck through self-reflection, determination, and efforts to continue to move forward. All participants, including the initiators of the divorce, struggled with painful and intense negative feelings related to the dissolution of their marriage, especially early on in their journeys. Helen, like the other participants, described her emotional journey through her divorce. She said that knowing she could get through what she did gave her strength and the confidence to know she will be ok. She explained, "I went from the sadness, the anger, the frustration, and I took all of that, and I became empowered."

Like Helen, all the women described their emotional state through their journey and pinpointed areas of intense emotions and subsequent growth. For example, participants spoke of instances where they had to rely on themselves. This increased their self-confidence which, in turn, led to feeling empowered. As I listened to their narratives, it became clear to me that the dysregulation participants experienced during times of intensified strife and heightened emotions was lessened by their self-awareness, determination, and continued efforts to have a positive mindset. Most of the women spoke of what they did to work through particular emotions, first by noticing what they were feeling, and then by figuring out and working through ways to reconcile their negative responses. However, the women also talked about how they simply needed to accept some of their feelings and move on. They worked to change what they could and realized early on that they needed to accept what they could not change. Nowhere was this more apparent than when they discussed working through their anger, especially in relation to their ex-husbands.

Dancing with Anger

Not surprisingly, many negative emotions participants experienced throughout their divorce transitions resulted from interactions with their ex-husbands. Anger, bitterness, and

jealousy often were triggered by ineffective communication or a lack of communication with their ex-spouses. Most of the women decided early in the divorce process that they did not want to hang on to negative emotions and actively worked on coping skills, anger management skills, mindfulness and other modalities to regulate their emotions, often heightened though conversations with their ex-spouse. Many of the women's relationships with their ex-husbands had been ruptured many years prior to beginning the divorce process. Repairing these disconnections was important for the participants' growth moving forward. The majority of the women were determined to have a better relationship with their ex-husband postdivorce than when they were married and were intentional in their quest. For example, Helen described a strong desire to have an amicable relationship with her ex-husband and explained that to achieve her goals she needed to learn better communication skills and needed to continually practice forgiveness. Resolving, accepting, and working though anger and other negative emotions was the pathway to growth for these women.

The women consciously sought opportunities to improve and develop skills they believed were necessary to better these relationships. Focusing on what they could change within themselves (i.e., emotional reactions, communication styles) was instrumental in achieving a more harmonious relationship with their former spouse. A few participants, like Helen, spoke about having to learn how to let go of the anger and bitterness they felt towards their ex-husband; in essence, how to "forgive" them. Learning and working on coping skills was instrumental to managing and eventually eliminating anger and bitterness. Through psychotherapy and self-help resources, participants learned how to deal with and better manage emotions that would bubble up. For instance, Irene's therapist recommended a therapeutic workbook on managing emotions which she found very helpful. She explained:

One of the things that it said in the book was on anger. It said that you want to try

to turn your anger or an incident from anger to annoyance…to go from being

angry about something or someone or whatever, to being annoyed. And I thought

that was a really good thing for me to understand.

As noted, several women practiced communication skills so they could communicate less

aggressively or more assertively with their ex-spouse, depending on the individual. Helen

described learning about the importance of the "power of the pause." Instead of saying the first

thing that popped into her head, she would wait and count to herself. She needed to learn how to

listen to her ex-husband and refrain from always trying to "win the argument." Helen explained:

….and also just to accept that growth is continual. I'm constantly wanting to learn.

I'm constantly saying to myself, 'How could I have done that better?' You know,

after a conversation whether it's with my ex…I'll always reevaluate, say, 'Okay,

that conversation went well.' And now he's bothered me when he went on this

rant, but I handled it really well…because I let him talk and I didn't flinch…So, I

am kind of looking at my mirror and evaluating how I'm doing.

Irene also wanted to change her communication style with her ex-husband. However,

Irene was different from other participants; she needed to learn how to express her anger rather

than stuff it. When her therapist told her she "lacked confidence," she was shocked and said her

friends would not think so. However, during her divorce mediation, she became acutely aware

that she had always been a "pushover" with her ex-husband. As an "expert negotiator," he

refused to provide enough child custody support to care for their child with special needs. As

previously mentioned, becoming assertive and finally finding her voice were challenges Irene

successfully met and put into practice over the years whenever her ex-spouse attempted to reduce

the childcare funds.

Helen spoke at length about having to let go and work through the anger and jealousy she felt towards her ex-spouse when he would do things with his new partner that he had not done with her. She spoke of forgiveness and said that she achieved this:

> …by not holding any animosity or hatred…working hard to understand that this part of the journey resulted in growth for him… the way he couldn't grow within our marriage.

Helen believed her ex-husband's journey toward growth would help him be a better "role model" to his children and would help improve their relationship with him, which was important to her. She believed that being able to communicate with him and help him on his own path, not only benefited the children but was also instrumental to her own growth. As she worked to repair this long-standing ruptured relationship in her life, she was able to let go of painful emotions and disconnection that had been holding her back. Although this was not always a linear process, growth was something she said she needed to continually strive for.

When asked about their relationships with their ex-husbands, a several women said they strove to be "role models" for their children, most of whom were adults by the time of the divorce. Participants worked towards this by modeling appropriate communication skills when speaking with their ex-husbands, whenever possible, and by making sure they did not put their children in the middle of their issues. A few of the women spoke about "taking the high road" when communicating with their ex-spouse and in doing so they were determined to refrain from speaking negatively about him to their children. This was often an important step in their personal growth.

A few women spoke of helping to repair damaged relationships between their ex-

husbands and their children. For instance, Barbara said she became the "mediator" throughout her divorce transition and strove to keep the relationships between her adult children and their father as intact as possible. Barbara was proud of her ability to successfully manage her communication with her ex-spouse and considered this growth.

Helen said she was instrumental in repairing the relationship between her children and their father. Furthermore, she spoke about seeing how her efforts in striving to develop an amicable relationship with her ex-husband were reflected much later in her adult children's own relationships in how they communicated with their significant others and how they managed disagreements. By working through her negative feelings Helen had changed her behavior to better reflect the person she wanted to be. She believed this was tremendous growth.

Connie and Janet spoke about their strong desire to be role models for their daughters and were concerned that they fell short throughout their marriages. This caused much distress for them. It was especially important for their actions and behaviors to match their goals postdivorce. Connie stated:

> …having daughters and wanting to be a role model for them and feeling like we
>
> raise our daughters to be strong and accomplished and to be accomplished
>
> professionally, and to be able to have the kind of personal lives they want,
>
> whether they choose to have families or not. And I felt like I was not a role model
>
> in that sense. And so that always concerns me.

Janet also spoke about wanting to be a role model for her daughters and she regretted not calling her husband out on his behavior saying she should have made him accountable for how he treated them. She lamented:

> I think that was a terrible example to my daughters. So now, hopefully through

my actions and my support, and what I talk about…because I'm often honest with

them…I said, 'I shouldn't have done the things that I did, to try to make things

work. I should have been willing to stand up for myself and willing to stand up

for you, and to call your dad out a little bit more.' I don't mean to do that to drive

a wedge between the two of them [and their father], but I want them to understand

that I am ashamed…of the home that I brought them up in. I could have done a lot

better for them.

Both Connie and Janet shared that they needed to accept the past and do the best they

could going forward. This was a part of their process in working through issues and getting to

growth. Both women changed their communication styles with their ex-spouses, including how

they reacted and responded to what they said to them. Like Helen, Connie, and Janet, most of the

participants experienced *cognitive dissonance* when their behaviors and actions (i.e.,

communication) were not aligned with their values and beliefs within their marriages. As

participants emerged from the constraints of their marriages, they were better able to reflect on

their behaviors and actions**.** Working toward *cognitive consonance,* where their thoughts,

feelings, and behaviors were aligned, signified tremendous growth for the women in this study.

Grappling with Grief

Besides anger and bitterness, the loss of the marriage and of the intact family unit

triggered powerful feelings of loss and grief for most of the participants. In addition, these

formidable losses were devastating for a couple of the women, plummeting them into a deep

depression. It was necessary for the participants to manage and work through the pervasive loss

and grief so they could move forward. Some women grieved for what the marriage had been (at

one point in time); some grieved for what the marriage never was; some grieved for the "Happily

Ever After" they would never have; and some grieved for the other relationships lost through the process.

A few of the women described an agonizing grieving process and the growth which ensued. For example, Frances, described being devastated throughout her four-year separation and described the eventual divorce as the "last act." She explained:

For a little while, I guess I found it to be a very traumatic and painful transition. I was upset…I was taking antidepressants. And so I had to be under the care of a psychiatrist and my psychiatrist was like, 'What's the big deal? You know, the divorce rate is like, 50%' so you know, 'get over yourself.' No support there. So, I don't know, I just felt like, I can't imagine doing it more than once. After going through one divorce. I just can't see how people can have multiple divorces. But I don't know. Hindsight like now, I guess I do feel like there certainly was growth, however painful, painful, and traumatic…you know, the, healing and the growth certainly overlap. But I guess, I didn't feel aware of any growth until probably, like, a year after my divorce. Okay, then I started to feel like it's more like a good development was happening.

Participants worked through their grief, loss, and depression through assessment and redesign of their family unit. Communication and collaboration were necessary components of their redesigned family structure. The participants each decided how they wanted to manage their marital break-up with their ex-husband, and how their new family composition would look. Janet described the loss of the familiar family structure:

I think that women in the beginning are just so just devastated by the loss, I can remember being devastated by the loss of the family, because that's what you're

used to…is your little, you know, your people, your people around you.

Depression and pervasive sadness were emotions a few women experienced through the end of their marriages and postdivorce journeys. For example, Frances believes her growth was hindered for a while; especially when she fell into a "deep depression" for "a long time" within her marriage. However, she later found divorce was "liberating." Debra's experience was similar to Frances'. As previously noted, she had fallen into a deep depression within her marriage. She explained:

I don't know where it happened. But somewhere within that 35 or 34 years of marriage I lost myself…But I think the thought of losing myself as far as I had, scared the crap out of me. And I wasn't able to get it back being around him. I needed to separate. So I could see what pieces of me were because of him. And what pieces of me were because of me.

Debra shared that discovering the local Women's Resource Center was a turning point for her. It was the support she needed to work through her issues and begin her journey towards growth. Debra said:

…being around other women who are going through the same things; however, in a positive environment, not where you're sitting around whining, because that doesn't get anybody anywhere, that negative energy just, it just shuts you down. You know, it needs to be an environment of empowerment.

Irene described her depression when her husband said he wanted a divorce. She said she "went from being…very depressed and overwhelmed and all-consuming, inside my head, to where now, you know, it's not as all-consuming." Irene shared that the "trauma of losing the family unit concept" made her "crash." Once she emerged from her depression, she said she

grew to be "healthier and learned how to communicate in a healthy way." A few participants said they were devastated by the divorce and referred to it as a "tragedy." This was mostly in relation to the loss of the "family unit."

Anger, grief, and depression were not the only emotions the participants needed to cope with. Several women described having to overcome the guilt they felt about wanting more out of life, before they could even think about focusing on themselves. Despite the fact that it was their decision to stay home with the children and not seek outside employment during their marriages, several participants felt they were missing something. Some had grown to resent being stay-at-- home moms. This resentment connected or coincided with the unhappiness in the marriage. They loved their children but needed more for themselves.

Conversely, Janet, the only participant who worked full-time throughout her marriage, shared that her adult daughter could not understand how she could have stayed in the combative, verbally abusive marriage for so long. And neither could she. Janet, married 23 years before divorcing, was embarrassed that she did not leave the marriage years earlier. She reflected on the importance of being an inspiration for her daughters and the regret she felt when she did not measure up to her ideals. Janet shared, "I'm really kind of ashamed of myself, for... I'll call it 'tap dancing' for all those years. Trying to distract him, my ex- husband, from being an awful human being."

Janet was the "breadwinner", and her ex-spouse was a "stay at home dad" who managed the finances. When he lost a huge sum of money in one day, that was the last straw. She knew she needed to get out of the marriage. Janet, reflecting on why she did not leave sooner, explained that she did not think she could make it on her own, especially financially after splitting their assets. Her fear and anxiety kept her stuck.

Becoming Unstuck

Becoming unstuck involved working through various issues, during the marriage, through separation, and the ensuing divorce transition. Often transitions out of the marriage began several years before the actual separation and divorce. Transitions through the domains of divorce (i.e., psychological, emotional, social, financial, physical) started slowly in the latter years of the marital relationship as participants worked through challenges and obstacles. All participants cycled through these domains differently. For several women, struggles, and the ensuing growth began years before the divorce and ebbed and flowed throughout an often-lengthy separation and divorce process. Participants in this study were separated for less than one year to eight years before the divorce papers were signed. With such a wide range in time separated before legal divorce, I wanted to understand what this meant to the women. As I listened to participants' description of their journey towards divorce, it became abundantly clear that there was more than one way to "divorce" for this group of women. A few of the participants experienced delay in signing the divorce papers due to financial considerations (i.e., they needed to sell the family home), resulting in longer than anticipated separations. This delay held a couple of the women back psychologically in terms of their personal growth. However, a couple participants explained their reasons for waiting years before signing the divorce papers and clarified that not moving forward with the legal divorce sooner was intentional. It became clear that there can be intentionality and logic in delaying the legal divorce (i.e., not signing the divorce papers) that was in some of the women's best interests. Gail's story, discussed next, is a prime example.

Gail was separated eight years before divorcing from her husband of 37 years. She reflected on why it took so long to exit her marriage even though her husband cheated on her and they mutually agreed to divorce. Gail explained that her very lengthy separation was her choice

mainly based on financial considerations (most notably, to maintain medical insurance). Throughout the divorce negotiations she would say to herself, "Wait a minute, is this in my best interest to be doing this now?" If it was not the case, she postponed the decision. Although Gail was separated, the financial choices she felt were in her "best interest" deemed she would stay legally married and not free to divorce for many more years. However, she had transitioned out of her marriage in important ways: physically (i.e., she was living in her own home) and socially/emotionally and psychologically (e.g., she did not socialize with her husband; she no longer thought of them as "we"). Even though the divorce papers were not signed, Gail felt she was in control. Working through financial issues and negotiating some financial security until she reached age 65, when she could afford her own medical insurance, was important for her peace of mind and for her ability to move forward. Gail considered this the beginning of her growth process.

Marriages were emotionally and psychologically over for a few of the participants 10 to 15 or more years before they physically separated. These women began planning or visualizing a way out of their marriages years before any mention of divorce. Barbara, married 28 years before divorcing, explained that her desire to grow began while still in her marriage, long before the divorce papers were filed. She shared that she continually wanted to learn and try new things throughout her married life and that she has been "a student of personal development" for over 10 years. However, although Barbara's divorce was ultimately a mutual decision between her and her ex-spouse, she regretted not initiating the divorce much earlier in the marriage. She explained that she had helped her husband run his business; he relied on her for the record keeping and she believed he would not be able to function properly without her involvement. Although Barbara values education and loves learning, she felt stymied within the marriage. She

attributed this to her focus being split between her then spouse and his business and their children, leaving little time for her own pursuits. Once she began the divorce process and was able to focus on herself, she said her growth "blossomed."

Like Barbara, other participants also felt stifled or stuck in their marriages and unable to move forward until they divorced. A few participants, regardless of initiator status, spoke about growing and changing within their marriages (or striving to), but felt their husbands were not. Connie, whose husband initiated the divorce, explained that his presence was a "downer." Like Barbara, she felt stifled. She said, "I had to walk on eggshells a lot… [he was] being dismissive of my feelings." Although Connie was extremely unhappy in her marriage, she did not initiate the divorce; however, she spoke about the importance of others being proactive in their marriages. When reflecting on what she believed was necessary for growth, Connie said:

> People stay together, stay married, unhappily. And this recognition of the
> difficulty allows one to take, you know, be proactive…to end the relationship and
> build better lives for each of them.

Janet described her experiences dealing with negativity in her marriage and how it took a toll:

> My ex- was very negative. And it just is a really different way of looking at the
> world. And I got sucked into that a little bit. Where I was a lot more hesitant
> about trusting others, definitely a lot more hesitant. I was always questioning
> people's motives. I was just double thinking everything in a lot of ways, where
> now, like I mentioned earlier, I kind of go with my gut. And I truly do believe that
> people are good. And that you have to give everybody the benefit of the doubt
> until they prove that they don't deserve your trust and respect. Where I wouldn't

start out that way. And I attribute that to just, you know, the environment that I was living in…a lot of distrust. He used to call my family, *The Brady Bunch*, like, yeah, 'nobody gets along that well'. You know, like you're being phony.

Although growth began for several participants during the last years of their marriages and continued throughout the separation and divorce, several women explained that they could-not move forward and "grow" until they experienced a specific occurrence. For several participants, being able to move forward was related to their home environment (e.g., selling the family home, buying their first house, living alone for the first time). For others, it involved being able to support themselves (e.g., being gainfully employed for the first time in 20 years). For example, one participant reported that she did not feel like she could really move on until they signed the divorce papers. This symbolized, literally and figuratively, the end and a new beginning for her.

For a few participants transitioning from the family home, whether to a rental property or to a newly purchased house, was a slow process as they negotiated divorce proceedings, waited for the house to sell, or waited for children to leave the "nest." A few women felt they could not psychologically move on from their marriages, (which signified growth to them) until they were out of the family house. Selling the family home was physically and metaphorically freeing for several of the participants. One participant said she felt like she had "cut the cord" when she and her adult children moved out of the family home. Another participant felt she was only able to grow once she finally moved from the family home. Irene, married 33 years before her divorce was finalized explained:

> Once the divorce was final, and then it looked like…then the house didn't sell for
>
> another two years. So that… that was a bit of a holdback in development to still

be in the marital home. And, you know, just wanting to move on... not knowing

where I was going to be living. Once, once I moved out of the house, and you

know, the house sold and I got myself settled, then it became a lot better.

Selling the marital home seemed like a steppingstone from an unhappy past to a hopeful future

for this group of baby boomer women, most who had never lived on their own before divorcing.

Several of the women went from being dependent on their husbands to being independent for the

first time in their lives. To most participants, living on their own and "stepping out of [their]

comfort zone" was growth.

Facing Fear

The prospect of living on their own for the first time in over 20 to 30 years combined

with having to support themselves triggered fear and anxiety for several participants. This

apprehension and unease hindered the women's ability to leave and kept them stuck in

unfulfilling marriages. Regardless of the path toward independent living postdivorce (i.e., renting

or buying their own apartment or house for the first time; living alone in the family home) this

transition was also a tremendous catalyst for growth for many of the participants. Gail, 63 years

old when she divorced, now loves being on her own and relishes her time by herself; however, it

was not always that way. She explained her biggest postdivorce challenge:

…It's [living alone] a big change, because before…especially when we first

separated and everything, I literally had never lived alone. And so that was how I

got involved in doing things [i.e., social groups] because I was very

uncomfortable being alone.

Elizabeth discussed how the fear of having to support herself and her children kept her

immobile in her marriage:

There was fear, there was fear. So it's something, it's funny, I would not have at

the time, called it fear. But I recognize it now for what it was because I see it now.

I said to somebody the other day, and this is how simple fear can be. And we don't

always know to call it that. One of the things that I discovered through therapy,

which was since 2017 to now, was how much fear kept me from moving on in my

marriage earlier. Like, if I hadn't been so afraid of that…I didn't know how I

would support myself, I didn't know how to take care of my children. I didn't

know how vindictive he would be. I would have moved on earlier.

Gail and Elizabeth's sentiments were echoed throughout this group of women. For

instance, Helen said she believed the "fear of being alone" kept many people in miserable

marriages:

I mean, there are people that stay together because they're too scared. You know,

when you think about people like me…anybody that's been through this…we are,

we're like of another species. To be able to take this very brave, scary step, no

matter how long you've been married, or how not long with kids without kids. It's,

it's scary.

For some, there seemed to be a pervasive hesitancy to move forward with the divorce.

Most participants spoke of their growth being thwarted in some way by staying in their

marriages far too long. Anne said she was in her marriage for so long that it "stunted [her]

growth for decades longer" than she would have liked. Janet said staying in her marriage kept

her from growing because she would not have pushed herself to achieve the things she did

postdivorce (i.e., move out of state for a better job, bought and sold a home on her own). Barbara

explained that she was able to do more of what she wanted to do when she was free from her

husband's "negativity and anger." She said it took a very long time to "come into her own personality." As she grew in her anger and resentment within the marriage, her husband warned her she would be a "bitter" divorcee. She thought he might be right; fear kept her stagnating. However, it turned out once she was free from the marriage, she was not bitter; she found that she was actually happy and that there was life after divorce, even for an "older" woman.

Theme One: Summary

The participants faced considerable struggles transitioning out of their long-term marriages, regardless of who initiated the marriage. The divorce process varied for this group of baby boomer women physically, psychologically, emotionally, socially, and financially. For example, several of the participants went through emotional and psychological divorce while still in the marriage, long before they experienced physical separation and legal divorce. Self-limiting beliefs contributed to delays in leaving troubled marriages for a few of the women, initially inhibiting growth in various areas of their lives. However, despite numerous obstacles, all the women in the study expressed that they experienced growth by facing and working through the issues and challenges they encountered.

Several narratives depicted a positive growth orientation as participants spoke of being focused on personal development for many years prior to their separation and divorce. All the women possessed a "can do" positive attitude that appeared to lead to their perceptions and experiences of growth. When asked what was most instrumental to their growth, the top two responses from participants were a "positive attitude" and support from family and "like-minded" women (discussed next in theme two). Most of the women came to the realization of the importance of having a "positive attitude" and being "forward thinking" at some point in their journey. Without being positive and working through issues they would have remained

stuck in the past and unable to move forward. It seemed this positive attitude set the stage for the ensuing growth.

As noted, there were similarities in the transitions and the personal growth experienced across the participants' stories, as well as differences, including whether the growth was intentional: the women set out to grow; were aware of their growth and development; and/or had a positive initiative-taking attitude. Some of these limitations were self-imposed, some were other related, and some were ingrained in cultural norms of the era in which the participants were born and raised (i.e., as members of the baby boom cohort) discussed in the next theme *Reconceptualizing the Self.*

Reconceptualizing the Self

Reconceptualizing the Self is the second major overarching theme I identified. This theme focuses on participants' reconceptualization of themselves and the emergence of changed world views, identities, and relationships. Perceptions, values, and beliefs related to the participants' families of origin, marriage and divorce, life roles and routines, along with their relation to themselves and others were challenged as their worlds were turned upside down through their divorce transitions. Automatic, ingrained thought processes, gave way to shifted and sometimes transformed thinking. As the women exited the boundaries of their marriages and their marital roles, they found themselves in unfamiliar territory. Each woman's sense of self was disrupted as they transitioned through the divorce process. Participants' overarching perceptions of themselves, held for decades, were no longer valid. No longer one half of a couple after 20-30 years or more, the women were left wondering, "Who am I now?" This section helps explain how the participants addressed that question as they reconceptualized who they were in the face of all they have been through. Journeys fraught with obstacles and challenges paved the way for

the women's positive changes and personal growth. Here began the process of solidifying the beginning sense of new identities.

I have organized this theme into three sections: *Facing Cultural Constraints, Reframing Self,* and *Relational Connections.* Participants' reconceptualization of themselves in the face of cultural limitations and stereotypes related to marriage, divorce, and women and aging is addressed in the first section, Facing Cultural Constraints. Highlighted in the second section, Reframing Self are participants' changes in self-identity – descriptions of how they view themselves now postdivorce, development of competencies, and discoveries of purpose and meaning. Participants' reconceptualization of themselves in relation to others is explored in the third section, Relational Connections. The women's personal growth experiences are highlighted and brought to light throughout theme two.

Facing Cultural Constraints

Facing Cultural Constraints centers on the cultural environment in which participants were raised and highlights influences and norms of the era, as well as their cultural milieu. It is important to keep in mind that as educated women, of middle socio-economic status, they share a particularly homogeneous cultural circle. As noted, in this section I focus on the women's reconceptualization of themselves in the face of cultural limitations and stereotypes related to marriage and divorce, women, and aging. The women discussed myths and stigmas of the divorced, aging woman; changing roles and routines (caretaker vs. newfound focus on self); and overcoming biases (their own and others), with a focus on their personal growth throughout. Participants reflected on their past choices and spoke of their families of origin's influence over those choices and what that meant to their adult selves. Narratives focused on what it meant to be a baby boomer woman and experiences of growth related to these areas.

Social-cultural Circles

Despite coming of age during the feminist movement and receiving messages that women could become educated and "have it all" (i.e., a marriage, family, and a career), this proved not to be the case for most of the participants in my study. All the women attended college before getting married and most were employed outside the home prior to having children. However, during their marriages, especially in the years when their children were young, only one woman worked full-time outside the home. Half the women were not employed outside the home; three worked part-time (two in the family business); and one worked full-time from home. These were the verbal "contracts" this group of fairly privileged women entered into with their spouses early in their marriages. Whether or not the women worked outside the home, the majority put their own needs on the "back-burner" for 15 to 20 or more years of marriage and focused on their children and husbands instead. However, their sacrifice was not without benefits. The choices participants made at the time "worked" for them and their families. They were able to care for their children and the household without the pressure of outside work. The reality that they had these choices and were still able to maintain middle class lifestyles was a privilege not lost on them. All the participants discussed their choices, reflecting on the far-reaching effects of decisions made decades ago.

Three of the five stay-at-home moms (Anne, Frances, and Irene) had children with special needs, which made working outside the home extremely difficult. As they shared their stories it seemed as though they believed they had to justify why they chose to stay home to me, and perhaps to themselves. Connie, the fourth stay-at-home mom, cared for her children and ran the household while her husband traveled for his job. Connie said she wanted to be there for her children, and the thought of adding a full-time position to her already full schedule was just "too

much." Elizabeth, the fifth stay-at-home-mom, whose husband also traveled frequently for work explained her decision to stay home with their children:

> I loved my children, I thought it was important for me to stay home with my children, but there was a piece missing from me personally. And would it necessarily have led me to be able to be self-sufficient? I don't think I was thinking that far ahead at the time. [Me] working, would not end his travel…we would have a life that would have fallen apart.

As young married women in their 20's and 30's, the participants experienced societal pressures and challenges related to social expectations and norms of the cultural circles in which they were raised and spent their married lives. Irene, born in 1961, shared her view of the era and social climate she was raised in:

> As baby boomers…I'm at the end of the baby boomers. I think there's still a little bit of that traditional idea of a husband and a wife, following your husband's career over your own. Maybe even though I did grow up with the women's lib thing, but as opposed to now, what I see with my daughter, you know, and her husband, looking for more equality in their relationship.

Janet, born in 1959, shared her perceptions about growing up as a baby boomer who was white and middle class:

> Well, I think that we were, you know, growing up in the 60s and early 70s, that was my childhood time, you still had that, you know, goal of a marriage that lasts forever. And that's your role. And that's your path to happiness. It was always that they [women] were kind of lost souls without their husbands, you know? So, like I mentioned, there's women who are my age who can't imagine having any kind of

independence and being happy with it. Because that's all they knew. It's what they

saw from their parents and grandparents.

Decisions made as a couple early in the participants' marriages led to sacrifices many of

them made for their families. A few participants' early decisions led to renegotiation later in their

marriages, when their children were older. For others, the stage was set for challenges they

would experience decades later when they divorced. Elizabeth summed up her sense of the

prevalent beliefs of the time:

It was you either stayed home with your kids. Or you went back to work and you

kicked ass…like there was kind of no in between back then.

Most of the participants stayed home, and with that choice they became primary caretaker

for husbands and children. Despite any negative effects and challenges spurred by the

participants' long-ago decisions, it is important to keep in mind that the ability to make these

choices is one that was not afforded to all women.

Family Values

Overarching family values and beliefs had been ingrained in several of the participants'

psyches throughout their childhoods, and these powerful beliefs carried into their adult lives

(consciously and even subconsciously for some). One such particularly strong belief which

reverberated throughout several of the women's narratives was that "You don't get divorced,"

and "Divorce was bad." Elizabeth, divorced at age 59, after 35 years of marriage said this about

her family:

You don't get divorced. You don't get divorced. So among all of my cousins, my

parents, you know, all that kind of thing. I'm only the second to get divorced.

…look how long I was married before I got divorced. I'm only the second. And so

like, it was it was almost like a failure. Do you know what I mean? You got

divorced, you failed kind of thing. So culturally, for my family, that was like, sort

of a taboo and, and I internalized that. And, you know, I'm gonna do everything I

can to make this marriage work…that kind of thing, right? I internalized that.

Several participants spoke of family beliefs, such as Elizabeth's, which weighed heavily

on their decisions to stay married for much longer than they believe they should have. Such

decisions hindered the participants' ability to move forward with divorce, especially early in the

marriage. This resulted in several of the women staying for years and even decades in unhappy

marriages. This group of baby boomer women followed the traditional cultural and societal

norms of the circle they grew up in. Most of the women in this study were raised in households

with parents in traditional gender-based roles, and they followed suit. A few participants spoke

of not having a role model who was divorced. Some, like Elizabeth, were one of the first in their

family to divorce.

Several women struggled with the views and perceptions of divorce instilled in them

through their Catholic family upbringings. For instance, Frances was raised to believe that it was

"bad" to get divorced and that you "stayed together no matter what." She spoke of staying in her

marriage for much longer than she should have because of what she learned through her family.

Frances explained how her upbringing affected her perception of divorce and her feelings about

herself, which took a long time to resolve.

I think that's what made the marriage last so long. Just because in my time, with

the parents I grew up with…getting divorced was a sin. Although neither one of

us really did practice [Catholicism] because we don't buy into it. We still had

those voices in our head that it was going to be a disapproval from the parents

and, and truthfully…Oh, you know what, and I didn't get divorced until my

mother died! I don't know. I mean, I'm sure there was a lot of guilt there too. You

know, maybe too, it was like, I guess in my mind, being married had a certain feel

about it. As that is a "good" thing. And once I became…before divorce, I guess I

felt like it…I…was a 'bad' thing. Because divorce was bad. So I was a bad

person. I think that had a lot to do with it. And religiously. I mean, I'm a

recovering Catholic.

Notice when she said, "Oh, you know what, and I didn't get divorced until my mother died!",

Frances came to an epiphany through our conversation of how deep her belief system was

ingrained in her psyche, even though she did not follow Catholicism. Subconsciously, once her

mother had passed away, she was released from the hold and she was "free" to divorce. Janet and

Debra, like Frances, also had Catholic upbringings. Similar to Frances, Debra did not follow

Catholicism, and although Janet referred to herself as "Catholic," her beliefs about marriage

were not aligned with the Catholic faith. She explained:

I was raised Catholic. I'm still a Catholic. so divorce is just, it's, it's a big, big step.

Especially with Catholics, you know? I'm the only person in my family who's divorced.

And I think... no one is divorced, and I have a big family. So, for me, I didn't buy into the

whole thing that, you know, marriage is forever.

Debra, now a Reverend, explained how she is not aligned with her very "Catholic" family's

religious beliefs, although she considers herself spiritual and religious:

My Family is very Catholic, which I am not. So anytime you go against anything

that the Pope decrees or the Bible decrees, you know, it's, 'you're insane,' or

'that's crazy,' or, you know, 'you're just not going to be safe from' [evil]. Well,

I'm already a Reverend and I'm safe! I mean, even if they're unhappy, they will

stick together no matter what, they're 'good little Catholics.' Yeah. And I just

wouldn't do it.

Stereotypes and Stigmas

As divorced women in their fifth and sixth decades of life, the participants experienced

challenges related to cultural stereotypes of the aging women and divorce. A few participants felt

stigmatized, invisible, and cast aside. Anne, born in 1956, and aged 63 when she divorced,

relayed her experiences being an older divorced woman in the suburban Northern New Jersey

town where she lived in her marital home for three years postdivorce. Anne explained:

[Town name], that's a bedroom community. The divorced woman is like, it's like

a scarlet letter. Yeah. I kind of thought moving to [town name] would be

different. So a little bit artsy, a little edgy. It's the same scarlet letter - it's just not

as blatant. And then I kind of wonder as I get older…there's a real stigma.

Conversely Janet, born in 1959, aged 57 when she divorced, the only participant to have worked

full-time throughout her marriage, shared:

You know, I'm kind of a younger baby boomer. So I don't know that I had the

same constraints that some of my friends who are 10 years older or 15 years older

than me had. As far as culturally, I find people are mostly supportive. And don't,

you know, I've never felt anything negative or unsupportive from people around

me. And that's people who are close to me as well as work colleagues or people

that I'm not as close to. So I would have to say that I have not had that experience

that, you know, that feeling of pressure.

Several women initially struggled with negative comments and opinions from friends,

family, and co-workers while they were contemplating divorce and/or going through their

separations. Some of these comments were directed towards women who were the initiators in

the divorce and were related to their age at divorcing (i.e., "be prepared to be alone for the rest of

your life," "you may never find anyone"). Some of the participants expressed frustration at

comments from others who they believed were feeling sorry for them or pitying them. Barbara

described a conversation with a co-worker when she was separating (at age 60):

> I know my coworker meant well, but when she found out that I was separating she
>
> proceeded to try to talk me out of it…She said there are 'no men out there,' 'men
>
> want women 20 years younger,' and 'you've been married for 23 years, can't you
>
> just stick it out?'

Elizabeth's close friend also questioned why she would want to get divorced after 35 years of

marriage. Several women were asked similar questions by long-term friends and family who

knew of their profoundly unhappy marital situations.

> Irene felt that her married women friends were fearful of her (e.g., divorce would rub off

on them or she would try to steal their husband). She began to believe it when she started being

excluded from previous Saturday night gatherings that she had gone to for years, albeit with her

now ex-husband. Connie's experience was similar:

> I think that yes, people do look at individuals who are divorced in a different
>
> light. I do. There have been times where I've been in a situation with people,
>
> couples that I've known for a long time, and got weird vibes from the guys, you
>
> know, one or two of the guys, and I made sure I was not alone in a room with
>
> them. I think some people view you in a different way.

This experience sums up similar experiences other participants have had. For instance, a couple

of the women discussed stereotypes and terms referencing older divorced women, such as

"cougar' (i.e., referring to older women on the prowl for younger men). Ironically, most of the

participants heard many of the negative comments and warnings related to aging and being a

"divorced woman of a certain age" from friends and family *before* they divorced. After they

divorced, they did not actually encounter much of what they had been "warned about." For

instance, several of the women who had dated (or were dating) found that there were nice,

available, successful men their own age.

Dating and Stereotypes

Nonetheless, dating was an area where stereotypes sometimes did come into focus. Anne

reflected on the traditional roles of men and women in dating versus the climate today:

My experience as a coach with clients…I speak to these men who were 65, they're

going out with a woman who's 60. On the first date, she doesn't make a move to

her wallet. And I coach people and I said, first of all, the first date is a meet and

greet. And where were you 45 years ago that you think that you should find a man

who's going to pay for you? So my feminism and my sense of being in charge of

your life and not indebted and not taken "care of" with air quotes there. It's

astounding. What I'm finding is there are women my age who don't have that

independence financially or emotionally. Where they still want to be taken care of

by a man. I do not. I'm kind of a younger baby boomer. So I don't know that I had

the same constraints that some of my friends who are 10 years older or 15 years

older than me had!

The participants' experiences and whether they wanted to date varied; however, what was

common to most of the women was that they did not desire to remarry, live with someone, or

even see them every day. A few of the participants were in committed relationships but they

spoke of being "independent" and having their own "lives." I found the dialogue around dating

interesting for a couple reasons. First, it was contrary to the way the women had lived most of

their lives. Before divorcing many of the women were dependent on their husbands and were

full-time caretakers. Second, these findings ran contrary to common stereotypes and stigmas of

the divorced woman "of a certain age" (e.g., they are lonely, 'on the prowl', etc.) which

participants had discussed. Connie stated the available men wanted full-time partners and she did

not want that. She discussed her views on dating and age:

> …it was challenging partly because I had no interest. And then when I started to
>
> have an interest, I found myself in a funny age category. I was 58. A lot of men
>
> date significantly younger, like they wanted to date my older daughter, not me. So
>
> let's take a third of the men out there who think they actually can do that. And
>
> then there was a third of the men who were dating a little bit more, in my opinion,
>
> age appropriate, but they were retired and looking for somebody who could travel
>
> with them, and you know, just kind of be a full-time 'playmate.' And that wasn't
>
> something I could do… both because I needed to go to work, and because I really
>
> didn't want to live with anyone or be with anyone for that extensive period of time
>
> on a day to day, weekly basis.

Some of what Anne and Connie shared was echoed in the narratives of several of the

participants. A few women discussed being confused as to the "new" dating rules: the roles and

expectations of dating. However, this group of women was very independent by the time of these

interviews. It did not seem that any of them had the outdated expectations of men and dating

Anne spoke about. Overwhelmingly, the participants did not want to live with a new partner and

were not interested in being with someone every day or having them "take over" their life. I found that even the four or five women who had steady relationships at the time of our first or second interview strove to maintain distinct and separate lives from their partners. This was interesting when considering the cultural stereotypes of the "lonely old woman," and the "bitter divorcee" the participants discussed.

Romantic relationships were a key focus in how participants reconceptualized who they were postdivorce. It seemed that this group of women, who had spent their lives taking care of others, were not willing to give up their newfound ability to focus on themselves. They had left behind the caretaker role and emerged from the wreckage of their marriages with new identities. They were happy in the development of their new lives postdivorce and they wanted to maintain their freedom. This was growth for this group of women.

Roles and Routines

Views and beliefs pertaining to traditional societal norms (i.e., the woman's role is to care for their children and husband; the husband is the breadwinner) guided most of the participants' marriages. All the women, even those who worked outside the home, focused on their husbands' and children's needs. They took little time for individual pursuits. With divorce came major changes in the women's long-held roles and routines. It is important to mention that several changes participants discussed, such as "having more time to focus on oneself," and "feeling free" are commonly experienced by an *empty nester* (i.e., when adult children leave the household) and occur whether or not an individual is divorced. However, what stood out for this group of women was their focus on "getting away' from their ex-spouse (i.e., not being around their negativity or their controlling behavior). The freedom and "lightness of being" they spoke of often was directly related to not being in their ex-husband's presence. After decades of

marriage, participants found themselves with more time to focus on themselves, their goals, and their plans for the future. The following metaphor that Anne shared sums up this *other* focused mentality:

> In the marriage…I had a huge number of filing cabinets. I ran my husband's business from home and was a caregiver to my special needs son and my daughter. I had files and files and files when everybody moved out and I was trying to organize my papers to pack my personal stuff, and I'm kind of OCD and organized. Indeed. My personal stuff was in piles, upon piles, upon piles. A friend who's really good at that [organization]came over and said, 'Anne there are no files with your name on it. There are no Anne files. There's no Anne medical. There's this one medical and that one medical and this one finance, and this one's credit cards. Where's your stuff?' I was the caretaker and in the marriage… so [now] I made my own files and it's sort of a great metaphor. Because I have files. I have a life. I have agency.

Anne's role was the caretaker in the marriage; the focus was not on herself. Postdivorce her focus shifted to herself.

Participants' roles and routines within the marriage restricted the growth process for many of them. Though it was their choice not to work outside the home, a few of the women, like Connie, struggled with their decisions. Not utilizing their college education was a palpable tension, causing doubt and leading to low self-esteem. This internal struggle ensued for years for many of the women, despite what they told themselves and their belief that it was best for their families. Connie said this of her choice to be a stay-at-home-mom:

> Growing up, education was always a really important piece. I also grew up at a

time when there was more and more opportunity for women. I had always

excelled academically. There would have been no organization or anything [in the

house if I worked]. Since I stopped working [to raise the children], I have

questioned my own accomplishments and achievements in life. And not that I

compare myself to others. Looking at those earlier expectations that I had for

myself, and what I had or had not accomplished.

Once Connie, like most of the participants, was free of the wife/caregiver role (i.e., focusing on

their husbands' needs), she could focus on herself and was able to move forward. Several

participants viewed the ability to focus on themselves as growth, which they believed contributed

to additional growth.

As newly divorced women in their 50's and 60's, participants found themselves

wondering how to navigate a new existence now that they were no longer married women. Their

life-roles and routines were disrupted. Participants spoke about being unsure of who they had

been in the marriage and wondered if their self-identity was a result of being with their ex-

husbands for over two to three decades. Several women were excited to discover who they

"could be" without their husbands, as opposed to who they were within the relationship. For

instance, Frances said she has been rediscovering who she was before she married. Anne, Helen,

and Barbara said they were "reinventing themselves"; they were no longer the 20- or 30-year-

olds they were when they got married.

Divorce in Later Life

The majority of the participants thought their age at divorce was generally not a

hindrance to their personal growth. It seemed being in their 50's-60's did not adversely affect the

participants as they moved through the divorce process and may have aided their ability to

manage other challenges instead. For instance, Connie said that divorcing later in life provided

her and her ex-husband more resources than they would have had if they divorced at age 40:

> I'm very lucky because I am a woman who, you know, got divorced later in life,
>
> but I have resources. We had a level of financial security and obviously, I only
>
> have half of those, but managed properly and being cognizant of my choices, I
>
> should be fine.

Participants said they were wiser, more confident, more decisive, and more able to

verbalize what they wanted than when they were younger, mainly because of their life

experiences. For example, Helen asserted:

> I think that age gave me experience and wisdom that if the same thing were to
>
> happen when I was much younger, I would not have been able to apply.
>
> This was an interesting development as it seems to go against stereotypes of older women

and divorce. The women, aged 60-65 at the time of the first interview, were confident in their

abilities and decision-making skills and appeared self-assured. Most of them talked about being

more "self-reliant" than they were when they were married. The takeaway was that age at

divorce seemed not to negatively affect the postdivorce growth experiences for this group of

women. However, when discussing age and divorce in general, perceptions were not all positive,

at least not initially. For instance, Irene reflected on her thoughts when she first divorced:

> It was a little scary because I never thought I would be, you know, 55 and alone.
>
> Yeah, I remember at the beginning thinking like, you know, 'oh, my god, I can't
>
> believe like, I'm in my 50s. And I'm divorced.' Who would have ever thought,
>
> this is where I would be at this point in my life?

Most of the participants shared this belief. Elizabeth expanded on this topic:

I started allowing myself to be in a position of vulnerability with other friends that

I, you know, perhaps hadn't before…I hadn't opened myself up to making more

friends. Like, one of the things that I found…I don't know if this is the experience

that everyone has had…but you know, you're suddenly 60 years old…No one

needs a new best friend.

Frances commented that aging "wasn't easy whether you are married or not." Frances,

like a few of the participants, struggled with reconciling who she was in her marriage and who

she was now "on her own." She discussed age and divorce in terms of losing *social standing* and

what that meant in terms of her growth.

I think that a real downside [to divorce] is the loss of like, social standing, I guess,

in a sense, like, when you're a divorced woman, especially a middle-aged,

divorced woman, to me, I feel like you're even more invisible than you were

before. And I don't know, I guess I feel like I have strikes against me because of

it. That's my… my feeling. It might just be how I feel. I don't know. So I've

learned to, you know, enjoy my own company, and I've strengthened my

relationships with my girlfriends. So that's been a growing… nice thing.

All but three of the participants' children were young adults by the time they got

divorced. This was intentional for a few. For others, it was an unintended benefit. Those whose

children were adults at the time of the divorce said they were grateful they did not have to deal

with custody battles and children going back and forth between households. Several of the

women believed this was a key benefit of not divorcing earlier in the marriage. Divorcing earlier

would have put limits on the growth the women experienced, as having young children would

have greatly limited the time they had to focus on themselves and their own needs (as it did

throughout all their marriages).

Regardless of the choices they made, all participants needed to overcome barriers related to stigma and stereotypes before they could move on (i.e., experience growth). To counter the stereotypes and negative societal influences, intentionally fostering a positive growth-oriented mindset was instrumental in participants' ability to experience growth. Several participants were able to overcome these challenges by reframing divorce and what it meant to them. Focus was on how language presented a culture of disconnection which was a barrier to growth, both externally and internally, discussed in the next section.

Reframing Self

Reframing Self highlights changes to self-identity in personal and professional realms and includes developing new competencies and discovering purpose and meaning. Participants' discovery of purpose and meaningful pursuits emerged through work and new careers, spirituality, religion, volunteering, and helping others. The women in this group reconceptualized themselves through changes in their roles and routines and through their self-descriptors. It was important for many of the participants' growth that they changed their conceptualization of divorce, the labels they used to describe themselves, and in turn their perceptions of themselves. This section includes participants' descriptions of their emotional and psychological state, as well as their characteristics. All changes related to the category, reframing self, played a role in participants' reconceptualizing themselves.

Removing Labels

For some participants, their own beliefs about what it meant to be a divorced women made ignoring the comments and reactions from others much more challenging. Several participants discussed having to face their own biases and stereotypes about divorce before they

could move on and experience growth. A couple of the women recognized their own biases as we spoke. Internalized views ingrained in their psyche as children plagued their thoughts. Thoughts such as "divorce is bad; therefore, I am failure" and external biases such as "I will be alone forever" weighed on the women as they struggled to keep positive and move forward through the divorce process. Irene, for example, had a strong negative reaction to the concept of being divorced when she was married. She would think, "Divorce was something that happened to other people…that would never happen to me." During our conversation, she realized she had been very judgmental, and that her previous lack of empathy had initially hindered her growth. She said she felt sorry for women who divorced, but when it happened to her, she was forced to reconsider her perceptions about divorce. Irene, who was not the initiator in her divorce, realized she could either fight against her new status in life and be miserable or practice acceptance. Irene defined personal growth as "...coming to a point of acceptance of your situation." Irene had to accept being a divorced woman in her mid-50's before she was able to grow and move forward.

It is interesting to note that Anne and Barbara, the first two participants interviewed, spoke of their dislike of the word "divorce," and choose to refer to themselves as "single." They did not like saying "I'm divorced." When I asked them to elaborate, both said that it had a negative connotation. Both women also believed referring to themselves as single rather than divorced was a more positive way to view themselves and their status. This positive mindset seemed instrumental to their growth. Anne explained:

I'm saying I'm single, not divorced. People look at a divorced woman in their 60s

very differently from how they look at a widowed woman in their 60s.

Barbara shared Anne's perceptions. After hearing this strong reaction to the word divorce, I asked subsequent participants if there were other terms they disliked or avoided and how they

managed these challenges. I found that most of the women believed the word "divorce" was

associated with negative stereotypes and perceived it as a "negative label." Frances explained her

feelings about the word, attributing it to her perception that divorce was "bad."

> I didn't like having to fill out…all the forms asked you. And to me, I feel like
>
> well, why did they need to know that? I don't know. It just it just felt like…I
>
> didn't like that.

> A few of the participants said they were frustrated with medical forms and other

demographic instruments that asked for their marital status. Irene stated that it was "none of their

business. Why would anyone need to know if I'm married or not?" Frances agreed and

expanded this perception:

> I wonder too, like, when you're with insurance companies…what difference does
>
> it make, whether you're single or divorced…with or without a partner? I don't
>
> like that. I feel kind of separated out in a negative way. It feels negative to me. It
>
> does.

When I asked Helen if there were other terms she felt strongly about, she maintained that words

like "adversary" carry with them negative connotations. Inclusive language was considered

important to all the participants. The women believed being referred to as a "divorced woman"

separates them from women who are not divorced. Language that connects women rather than

alienating them was a thread that ran through the narratives. This positive orientation and

mindset were reflected across the participants' stories regardless of the topic.

New Competencies

This section highlights participants' personal growth related to self-development. The

focus is on acquiring skills and knowledge through various means, including informal and formal

education. Participants developed new competencies and explored new pursuits across a variety

of life domains. All the women identified growth in both personal and professional realms.

Through experiencing new pursuits, participants' confidence and self-esteem slowly increased.

With new experiences came new perceptions of themselves. As the women reframed prior

beliefs, an ongoing process of developing new identities became evident.

Participants shared what proved helpful and supportive to their personal growth (i.e.,

books, podcasts, webinars, blogs, workshops.) They talked about learning how to do things

around the house, learning new skills, and participating in new activities. Formal education

included enrolling and completing post-graduate certifications, professional certifications, and

other training programs. Many women turned to self-learning (i.e., read self-help books and

blogs, listened to podcasts, watched webinars, Ted Talks, and lectures). Connie's statement sums

up what most participants said.

> …there was no question that I availed myself of information. A little bit with
>
> books, a lot with the podcasts and I think it's like parenting, you read a lot. You
>
> hear a lot. You take away what makes sense for you.

Participants attended workshops, trainings, and spiritual retreats. Several of the women

shared book titles, websites, podcasts, and other material they found instrumental to their growth.

During the first interview, Barbara revealed that she has a list of 125 self-help and other

inspirational books she has found tremendously helpful and provided a three-page list of

resources to share with other women. Barbara explained:

> I think I spent the last six or seven years acquiring a lot of knowledge. If I tell you
>
> the number of books I've read on everything from you know, habits, what are the
>
> best habits, health, what are the best supplements, self-awareness, meditation…all

the things that supposedly make up a 'good life' and all of the practices and the

rituals. I spent a lot of time reading and absorbing a lot of knowledge. And…but I

haven't put a lot of it into practice.

Although Barabara has focused on her personal growth for many years and is a voracious

student of personal development, her comment that she hasn't "put a lot of it into

practice" highlights that, while she has taken numerous steps towards growth, she is still

"a work in progress." This is true of all the women in this study. They are taking steps

towards growth and may even take a step back on occasion, but they keep moving

forward, despite the struggle.

Most of the participants discussed growth related to taking care of things in their living

quarters which they had never done before. This was experienced across participants whether

they stayed in the family house or were in a new house or apartment. For instance, Barbara spoke

of "…cleaning the gutters, fixing things that were broken, and using tools like hammers, drills."

Things that her ex-spouse done. Doing these things gave her "confidence" and made her feel

"proud." Like Barbara, many of the participants felt a sense of accomplishment and

independence when tackling chores in their home that were their husbands' responsibilities when

they were married.

Educational pursuits, personal and professional, were a prominent path to growth and

development experienced by all participants, and a key way the women reconceptualized

themselves. All the women spoke of formally and informally gaining skills and knowledge.

Formal learning included both professional and personal pursuits such as professional

certification programs (i.e., life-coach, divorce-coach, divorce mediation, reiki master) and

informal pursuits) (i.e., workshops, trainings, spiritual retreats). Informal learning included

reading self-help books, listening to podcasts, webinars, Ted Talks, and other social media avenues. Barbara shared that when she first separated from her marriage, she enrolled in a life-coach course. Though she did not pursue coaching as a career, she maintained that what she learned was "an immense" boost to her own personal growth.

Although Anne had received her master's degree in social work in the early years of her marriage, she never worked in the field. She explained that she would have had to go back to graduate school in addition to getting further experience in the field prior to getting licensed as a social worker. Instead, she enrolled in a divorce coaching certification program. Her goal was to help individuals in middle and later life navigate the difficulties of divorce. Anne explained:

> I think it's [gray divorce] really, really growing…I want to help people navigate
>
> the rough spots of divorce, and especially women move on with hope and joy and
>
> feel that this is the next chapter. So that's what I'm excited about. I think there's a
>
> real need for that.

Connie shared that she "did a lot of different things" as she was preparing to look for a job. She explained:

> I have postdivorce returned to school to get two certificates, one was in project
>
> management, and one is basically in philanthropy. I post some tidbits [now] from,
>
> you know, the Women's Center. I also actually took Word, Excel, and PowerPoint
>
> classes at the Women's Center, they were pretty basic, they didn't really get to
>
> what I needed.

Free to Be

Free to be refers to the participants' ongoing development of their authentic self' as they traversed the winding, and at times rocky, paths from long-term marriage to single life. The

roads traveled were unique to each woman, some longer than others, some winding, some ending in dead ends, or u turns. However, most of the participants had the conscious intent on becoming one's "true" self in common. Several women spoke about getting back to who they were before they were married; some about becoming who they "were meant to be." It is interesting to note that many of the participants lost themselves in marriage; in divorce, they found themselves by creating a newly rediscovered self.

When asked to describe who they were postdivorce, all the women identified themselves using positive, growth-oriented terms. They described changed emotional states (i.e., happy, optimistic, positive) and changed characteristics (i.e., empowered, strong, resilient, confident, independent). The women's descriptions of themselves indicated that dealing with the challenges they endured and overcame changed them in positive growth-oriented ways. What's more, most of the women were able to find silver linings in the obstacles. For instance, participants said they were stronger and more self-assured than they had been before they divorced. Breaking free from the confines of their unhappy marriages eventually led to tremendous changes in the women's emotional, social, psychological, physical, and spiritual selves.

Participants described finally being free to focus on themselves despite the challenges and losses experienced through their divorces. After decades of putting themselves on the "back burner" as caretaker to children and husbands, they seemed to finally allow themselves to live their own lives. Freedom was a benefit and outcome of divorce experienced by all participants. Various terms were used to describe this state of being. Participants said the "heaviness was gone," they "felt free," "lighter," and had a "newfound sense of freedom." Anne described a "lightness of being":

I laugh more. There's a 'Lightness of Being.' It has a lot to do with where I'm

physically living in my space, and it being my space versus his space. I guess there's still a huge amount of oppression until you literally get a moving truck and are elsewhere. But the 'Lightness of Being' that I'm describing I did not have in that beautiful house in [town]. I did not have it there.

Frances described some of the changes she experienced.

I do feel like, it's nice… freedom…got to say, I mean, there's downside, certainly, but one of the upsides is just like a more peaceful, tranquil existence, it's just much less stressful in that sense. I guess, you know, once you go through trial, you kind of feel a little bit more like you can handle other things, because you've been through this type of thing. So I guess it [the divorce] fostered a little bit of resilience.

Finally able to focus on themselves, participants described being aware of their own likes and dislikes (often for the first time in their lives). Frances explained:

I didn't realize how much I was putting everybody else's opinions and things before me until being by myself and having to make those choices by myself. And then I realized different foods that I ate... because I liked them. I didn't have to have food because somebody else liked it or not having because they didn't like it, like music, music is a big thing. Because Ah, I always listened to everybody else's music, my kid's music, my husband's music. Their music was always on... I didn't even realize I liked other different kinds of music until I was by myself, and I started like, oh, let's try this. So now, there's, I like some country music. I love instrumental music. I like classical music. I think I even like some hip hop (laughs).

Rituals and New Routines

Rituals and routines were important to all the participants and were pathways to growth (and were also growth in itself). As discussed, the ability to focus on themselves was considered growth. Several participants described their self-care rituals which included changing their appearance (i.e., changed hair style or color, changed diet, lost weight) and adding fitness routines to their schedule (i.e., joined a gym, walked, cycled, added spiritual pursuits). The women made these changes for a variety of reasons: to look more professional for a new job, to feel healthier, to be their best self, to start their new life. Connie talked about letting her hair go gray and how *"freeing"* it was. She said she felt like she was being her "authentic" self. Connie was proud of her age and did not want to hide who she was now. This felt like growth to her in that she used to be very self-conscious about aging.

Being one's "authentic self" resonated throughout the women's stories. Participants presented as vibrant, dynamic, independent women. They described feeling physically better than they had in years, and physical changes extended into emotional and psychological domains. These findings challenge stereotypes of the aging, lonely, divorced woman that several participants mentioned hearing, and believing, when they were considering divorcing. As the women transitioned from familiar roles and routines, reflecting on who they were within their marriages, they began or continued the process of defining who they wanted to be moving forward. Changes in their routines paved the way for further growth.

Baby boomers were raised during a time of cultural change: greater acceptance of divorce, mothers in the workforce, and freedom of expression. As baby boomer women, many of the participants did not necessarily embrace these attitudes throughout their marriages. However, most participants, once free from the constraints of their marriages, began to challenge previous

perceptions and stereotypes, internal and external.

Purpose and Meaning

Most participants spoke of discovering their purpose and all made meaning through one or more of the following pursuits: self-care, spiritual/religion, promotions/new career, volunteering, and/or mentoring helping others. A few participants experienced changes in their professional lives relating to returning to the workforce after 15 to 20 years or more. In addition, a few women transitioned to new careers or were promoted in their current field; a couple started new businesses; one was not working at the time of the interviews.

Paying it Forward. I noticed an interesting commonality in the participants' narratives related to what they learned through their divorce transitions and the meaning-making that transpired. The women's experiences triggered powerful urges to help other women who were going through challenges. Many of the women parlayed newfound strengths and competencies into supporting other women through divorce and other life transitions. Several of the women spoke about being more empathic towards other women and wanting to impart knowledge and lessons they learned. It seemed that the participants wanted to provide for others what they had difficulty finding. The women accomplished this by mentoring, volunteering, and helping women in various other ways. Participants spoke about finding meaning in helping other women through their own new careers (i.e., divorce coach, divorce mediator, reverend and spiritual advisor), mentoring friends and associates, or passion projects (i.e., social media blog; meet-up group support group).

Religion and Spirituality. Religion and spirituality played an important role in several participants' lives through their divorce journey, serving as a comfort and a support. A few women rediscovered the faith they lost or put aside; others discovered new spiritual pursuits.

Spirituality and religion provided meaning-making pathways. Meditation, yoga, reiki, and other

mindfulness practices (i.e., visualizations) were among spiritual endeavors pursued by several

participants, as was hiking and additional ways of communing with nature. Frances and Helen

discussed renewed participation in religious pursuits. Frances discussed meaningful changes in

her religious practices since her separation and divorce. She spoke about changed religious

beliefs (from Catholicism to Christianity) and a deeper commitment to the later. Her story is one

of growth and change and reconnection to parts of her former self. Frances shared:

> My husband decided not to go to church much after Deborah was born. And he
>
> pretty much told me that, you know, there isn't a God, if this can happen, there
>
> isn't one. And I think in having our daughter who is handicapped, I think that
>
> really affected his fate in a very negative way. And he, basically…he's a
>
> confirmed atheist now. And I think…with me, it drew me more closely to my
>
> faith in God. My church has been… a very…ever present kind of thing. I just feel
>
> like it's always there. Whether or not I'm in church or what and both the
>
> community and God individually, and...I think that my divorce definitely made,
>
> you know, deepened my faith, quite honestly.

World of Work. The divorce transition spurred many changes related to the professional

lives of the majority of the participants. Major career changes, promotions, and getting back into

the workforce after lengthy absences spurred much personal growth. For instance, Debra

combined spiritual interests and beliefs with a new career she is passionate about. She had run a

successful accounting practice during her marriage. By the time she divorced, Debra was no

longer working outside the home. Like other participants in the study, her focus was not on

herself during her marriage; however, Debra said what she wanted for herself postdivorce was

vastly different. She explained:

> I didn't start establishing 'me' until after raising my daughter and getting
>
> divorced. I didn't really start paying attention to who I was. I was busy taking care
>
> of everyone else, then later in my spirituality practice, teaching women, the mind,
>
> body spirit, the things they need to do in order to stand in their authenticity and
>
> fill themselves up before they start giving themselves away. And establishing
>
> boundaries. Well, I'm always interested…my big journey of 'what is
>
> empowerment of women,' so I'm very much into helping women empower
>
> themselves standing in their strength in their authenticity and just not taking a lot
>
> of crap anymore.

Debra was not the only one to discover meaning and purpose in a new career. For instance, as Anne transitioned out of her marriage, she transitioned from stay-at-home mom for over 30 years to becoming a divorce coach. Anne described what she does:

> It's not a lawyer, not a therapist, it's somebody to do the CIS [Family Case
>
> Information Statement]. 'It's okay that you don't have all the documents, we can
>
> get them.' And then also, 'what do you want to do?' 'What do you want to be
>
> now?' So that's where my focus is right now. I feel empowered. And I think that I
>
> coach, I mentor, I try to help people figure out how they can also be a happier
>
> divorced person and get through it as painlessly as possible. And I think I am, I
>
> love it.

The participants' relationship to work was instrumental in their reconceptualization of themselves. A few women, like Anne, were uniquely connected with their work, and their work was reflected a new sense of self. Anne helped others untangle their divorces and she grew

stronger and more confident along the way. As participants traversed new careers or attained

promotions, they reevaluated themselves and their potential. Gail, who had not realized her

employment potential before separating, discussed her employment status:

> They just kept promoting me. And suddenly, you know…I now have 25 people
>
> under me. And it made me realize no wonder I hated those [previous] jobs. I was
>
> so bored with them; I could do so much more. And I just never had given myself
>
> the opportunity or even realized it.

In summary, all but one of the participants gained additional skills to transition to new

fields, new jobs, or new positions. Frances shared that she has not yet found a career path she is

passionate about; however, her spiritual and religious practices give her life meaning and

purpose, which she did not find possible when married. Helen had changed career paths a few

years postdivorce. She added the role of divorce mediator to her current position, and she now

helps others transition from their marriages. Janet discussed her promotion and move to another

state, not possible without divorcing.

Relational Connections

Relational Connections manifested as a process through overcoming challenges and then

building supports. Participants' long-standing and newly formed relationships with others are

discussed in terms of changing, maintaining, growing, developing, and helping relationships.

Participants reconceptualized their relationships to fit their new lives and to better reflect who

they are now. Developing relational connections was tremendously important to the women as

they navigated through the divorce transition. This section focuses on the important role

participants' relational connections held in their reconceptualized selves. Authentic connections

to self and others emerged from the women's narratives as one of the two most important

foundational supports from which growth developed; the other was self-oriented and included having a growth-oriented positive mindset, as previously mentioned.

Participants spoke about various relationships highlighting the ways they supported their growth. Emphasis was on shifting relationships with children and other family members, maintaining relationships developed throughout 20-30 years of marriage, developing new authentic relationships with like-minded women, and helping relationships (i.e., counselors, therapists, coaches). Participants discussed shifts and changes in their relationships with their adult children and long-standing relationships with their ex-in-laws. Maintaining and fostering positive changes in family relationships were found to be supportive of and instrumental to participants' growth.

Dating

Romantic relationships were discussed in terms of their effect and on the participants' growth. Half of the women engaged in long-term relationships at some time since their divorce; a few were currently in long-term relationships; none were remarried. None of the women were cohabiting with their partners, nor did they intend to any time in the near future. I was initially a bit surprised to find that overall the women were the ones to put limits on their relationships, based in part on the divorce adjustment literature (i.e., more divorced women than men and the number goes up as age increases; less potential for women entering into committed relationships as they get older). Several of the women broke off relationships with men they had been seeing for one to ten years when their partner wanted to spend more time with them, move in together, or get married. It was at these points that the women reevaluated what they wanted in their lives. It was clear they did not want to lose their newfound freedom; however, it was more complex than that.

A few of the participants said they would "love to" have a true partner but were not about to "settle." A few women said it would "be nice" to have a partner; however, they described full, active lives with what seemed like little room for someone else. This finding challenges stereotypes about aging women and postdivorce loneliness. Most participants spoke of a variety of dating opportunities such as social media sites, dating apps, and matchmaking attempts by others. They seemed to have a plethora of dating opportunities if they were interested. None of the women described themselves as lonely. Nonetheless, postdivorce dating life was not without challenges for most of the participants. Several women discussed not knowing how to date; they had not dated in 20 to 30 or more years. They relayed that dating looked very different from when they last dated in their 20s. Some women had no interest at all in dating, some dated casually, some entered relationships to end them soon after because they felt they took too much time away from focusing on themselves. Frances reflected on what dating was like for women like her and other women in their 50s and 60s:

> It seems to me just in talking to the divorced women my age…that the men like to get married at that age and the women I don't think so. Because at this age, usually your children are…usually adults…you're not needed then so much by your children and not having a man to have to…serve or help or be with. I mean, it just…it frees you up enormously not having that.

A lack of authenticity was another issue with the new dating culture that several women spoke about. Anne's experiences with online dating applications were echoed throughout the participants' narratives. Anne shared her first foray into the online world:

> I started looking as I think everybody divorcing does. They're looking online, because everybody wants to know what's out there, just in case, you know,

everybody gets weird. And they start looking. I like authenticity…so with the

online dating stuff…the very first date I went on, the guy showed up, he was 10

years older than he said, and 10 years older than his picture. And I said, I just

have time for a drink, you know, got to get home. Before we had the drink he

said, 'I have to tell you something. I'm actually 10 years older than I said, Can

you believe it?' I said, 'Yeah, actually, I can. And I have no idea why you would

want to be inauthentic in this situation.'

The participants discussed their views on dating and relationships in reference to their

changed beliefs and values. They spoke about how having a relationship affected, or may affect,

the path they were on. It was evident that the women were cautious about relinquishing their new

found sense of agency, their newfound sense of control over their lives. Only Helen mentioned

dating as a specific impetus for her growth. She described a past relationship which spurred

further growth in unexpected ways. She was dating a man for six months when he ended the

relationship. She was "blindsided" and "deeply hurt." Her hurt turned to shock when he told her

he was very bothered by the fact that she limped (due to a recent car accident) and that her

allergies were also bothersome to him, but he was more bothered she was not doing anything

about them. Helen said she took a good look at herself, and as reflected on her situation, she

admitted to herself that he was right. She found a doctor who was able to diagnose and treat her

limp and after having surgery she walked fine; then she began seeing an ENT doctor for her

allergies. Helen explained that she had delayed seeking medical help for both concerns partly

due to spending much of her free time with her boyfriend. Afterwards, she called the man and

thanked him for helping her. She said her former boyfriend was now the one who was shocked.

It appeared that Helen gained an enormous amount of growth and satisfaction from how

she handled what her ex-boyfriend had said. She described having to change the way she thought

about things. She said she never would have been able to turn the situation around had she not

been intent on having a "growth-oriented mentality." Helen, like several of the others, has

become more self-aware and reflective of choices, behaviors, and actions.

Universal Condition

Participants had a strong desire to connect with like-minded individuals. A sense of

belonging and a desire for connection was a prominent theme in the participants' narratives as

they strove to find and develop authentic relationships. The participants wanted to meet other

women like themselves; it did not matter if they were single or divorced, but the women

generally needed to be "positive." When Gail separated, she had never lived alone before and

she was "trying to find people" that were in her "situation." Frances said she was able to meet

new friends when she moved, since there were several single and divorced people her age. She

said:

> I'm enjoying it. It's been good. Just spending time with my friends. And as matter
>
> of fact, I'm doing a girl's night every month…It was, it was fun to see how much
>
> people were looking forward to coming, like the response. They genuinely really
>
> want to come. I didn't really…I guess I kind of looked at it more like, oh, I need
>
> company. You know, I want my friends over. But I guess I didn't really look at it
>
> the other way that they're…wanting to connect, as well. Yeah, it's been…nice. It's
>
> been really quite nice.

Frances, like most of the participants, craved authentic connection. What was not at first

clear to her was that so many others did, as well. It was an important concept for the women as

they transition from a life and a self-identity formed for over two to three decades to a different

life and a changed version of themselves. The desire for connection with likeminded individuals

was apparent throughout the participants' narratives when discussing their relationships with

others.

New connections and relationships were important foundational supports for the

participants' personal growth. Most of the women, like Irene, joined social groups, seeking

authentic connections. However, it was not always easy for the participants to find likeminded

women. For instance, Barbara and Irene separately joined social groups (i.e., Meettup.com;

Facebook.com) desiring to connect with other women their age group who were single,

separated, or divorced. They were hoping to find supportive, positive, growth-minded women

with whom to begin the next phase of their life. Instead, they found that often the women in the

groups would focus on the negative experiences they were going through (i.e., in their marriages,

divorce transitions) rather than having a positive approach. Both women soon organized their

own women's groups hoping to keep the focus positive and growth oriented. While Irene's

experience was positive overall, Barbara found running the group was a challenge. She

explained:

> I remember, starting this group, and like I said, I'm an introvert. So that was a
>
> stretch for me… even in a small group, that's not something that I'm comfortable
>
> with, what I wanted to get comfortable with, because I felt like I just wanted to
>
> connect. I think I was trying to be the person that I wish that I could find. And I
>
> didn't find that person. But you know what they say about imposter syndrome?
>
> Here I was trying to come across like I've got it all figured out when I really
>
> hadn't. So I don't think that anybody there really felt like I was empowering them
>
> or that I really was someone that had gotten it all together and now had something

to teach.

Several participants described their relationships with their children postdivorce as more open and honest, freer, calmer, and more supportive. Janet said her children were "so supportive" of her divorce because "they knew I was in a bad situation and encouraged me to make changes." Daughters served as staunch support systems for a few of the women by helping to build their confidence, identifying their growth, and motivating them to do things they had not done before. For example, Connie's daughter was instrumental in helping identify her tremendous growth:

> I think that for my girls…a level of respect for the changes I've made and the
>
> things that I've done. My younger daughter has talked about all the things, and I
>
> guess I didn't really think of it as growth. 'But Mom, look, you got divorced, it
>
> wasn't easy. You sold the house, you moved, you renovated your new place, you
>
> got a job after being out of the workforce for it could be 25 years.' I'd have to sit
>
> and calculate. But um, I think that when we're in the throes of it, we don't always
>
> identify the changes and reflect upon the changes.

Maintaining

Participants spoke about maintaining significant relationships with in-laws mutually forged through decades of marriage. For many, continuing these relationships despite no longer being with their spouse was important for their growth. The relationships participants sought to maintain included relationships with their ex-husband's family and friends they socialized with during their married life, as a couple.

An interesting thread throughout the narratives was the importance placed on continuing relationships forged with in-laws. Several participants had been very close to their ex-spouse's family for 20 or 30 years or more, and it was important to them to continue these relationships

despite no longer being married. It makes sense that the participants would not want to lose these relationships, considering they were developed and maintained over decades. It was interesting to note the role the ex-in-laws played in some of the participants' lives.

Often, there was unexpected support found in these relationships. Elizabeth, one of the two participants who had children in grade school at the time of her divorce, was surprised to find her ex-father-in-law to be one of her biggest supporters. He offered to help care for his grandchildren when she went back to graduate school. Elizabeth stated:

> My ex-husband was zero help. My father-in-law, I could never, ever have finished
>
> graduate school without my father in-law. He picked my kids up from school, he
>
> would take them out to dinner once a week.

This relationship directly allowed Elizabeth to experience personal growth through development of her professional skills as she embarked on a new career. Connie explained her ongoing relationship with her mother-in-law:

> I'm still very close with my mother-in-law, my mother-in-law still considers me to
>
> be her daughter-in-law and still introduces me that way to others. We speak
>
> regularly, not you know, weekly, pretty much monthly.

Mentors

The concept of mentors and mentoring was a salient thread woven through the narratives. Several participants spoke about wishing they had someone to help them navigate through the divorcee process, a mentor who had walked the path before them. Some sought mentors or role models who could help point them in new directions. Helen spoke about learning from "collective mentors." She said she was looking to grow in emotional maturity and a mentor, who had been through a divorce, helped her sort through conflicting emotions. Elizabeth was one of

the few that had a "true" mentor. She spoke of the support and inspiration she received from the

women she worked for.

> Well, my decision to go to graduate school was really inspired by the woman I
>
> worked for, who was the director of the library at the time. She was the one who
>
> saw something in me in 1999…she said, 'you would be a good asset to this library
>
> and hired me without [there being] a job.' And then as time went along, she kept
>
> saying, 'you would be really good at this, you would be really good at this, if you
>
> want to go to graduate school, I'll support you.' You know that kind of thing. And
>
> she actually allowed me to adjust my schedule…in order to be able to move
>
> forward in that way.

 A few other participants discussed that it would have been advantageous to have a

mentor for support in changing careers, especially for help with evaluating skills and deciding

next steps. There were additional reasons for desiring a mentor, as well. For instance, Connie

said, "I think a mentor helps push us to confront realities or question perceptions we have of

ourselves and others." Perhaps Connie and the others wanted a mentor for an honest evaluation

of themselves. Connie spoke of always being seen as a "resource for others." In the second

interview, she shared that although she had focused on herself as a mentor (in the first interview)

rather than having a mentor, after some reflection, she realized that there were a couple of

women she believed filled this role for her. She had a network of female friends (i.e., married,

single) who were there for her throughout the divorce process. However two stood out:

> …it would be nice to have a mentor even now, which I feel that I do have. There
>
> were definitely two women, one who had been divorced within the year before
>
> me, and one who had been divorced maybe 10 years earlier, who really were great

sounding boards for me, and we really understood each other and similarities,

differences and just kind of validating experiences and sort of being there as

cheerleaders and support.

Often, by the time the women separated, what they needed and wanted most, especially

the initiators and mutual deciders, was guidance through the realities of living life on their own.

Several participants had been struggling with psychological and emotional separation as they had

envisioned the divorce for many years. What they most needed was help with the "physical"

divorce. It seemed mentors could guide them through the realities of living life on their own.

Like Barbara's quest, most of the participants wanted guidance from individuals who had walked

the path before them. When the women could not find mentors to show them the way, they

became those guides for others. Janet, the only participant who did not seek therapy, summed it

up:

[Divorce is]… like a death, if I had seen someone [i.e., a therapist] I would have wanted

them to commiserate with me in the beginning, death of everything that I was losing and

then help me see that it's going to be okay... different, but it's okay.

Summary

Theme one, Getting "There," focused on participants' experiences through the various

domains of divorce: psychological, social, emotional, financial, and physical and in the growth

experiences though each domain. Theme two, Reconceptualizing the Self, centered on the

women's cultural influences and positive changes in their self-identity and their relations in the

world. In Getting "There," participants experienced the domains of divorce at different points

through the divorce transition. The women faced numerous challenges through the divorce

process and most considered these challenges personal growth when successfully met.

Challenges included making difficult decisions, such as when to stay in the marriage and when to leave and working through painful emotions such as anger and resentment, grief and loss, depression, fear, and anxiety.

In Reconceptualizing the Self, all participants examined and reflected on beliefs and values held predivorce through separation and legal divorce and shortly after. The journey toward growth included reconciling perceptions about marriage and divorce and overcoming cultural limitations and stereotypes. Participants reflected on beliefs and values instilled through their upbringing and in the cultural environments in which they were raised and the social circles they lived in throughout their marriages. The women discussed their growth related to areas highlighted throughout both themes.

Participants' family relationships were found to be supportive of and instrumental to their growth. Included was the importance of developing authentic relationships, maintaining long-standing relationships with their ex-in-laws, the wish for mentors. Awareness, a positive mindset, and acceptance were key determinants in the participants' ability to move forward and experience growth. As participants grew towards divorce, the pathway was paved for future growth. Next, in Chapter 5, I will discuss the findings in relation to the literature, implications for practice, suggestions for future research, and limitations of the study.

Chapter Five: Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore baby boomer women's self-reported personal growth through a later-life divorce transition after a long-term marriage. After analysis of two rounds of interviews, it was apparent that the ten participants' narratives held many similarities while also being unique and personal to each. Similar to Crowley's (2018, 2019) findings, this group of later-life divorcees experienced negative consequences post later-life divorce including financial loss, loss of intact family units, and a loss of self-identity through their divorce transition. They also experienced physical and mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and stress (Sbarra, 2015; Sbarra, & Whisman, 2022). Participants described challenges and obstacles through the divorce process which began during the marriage and continued through separation to legal divorce, when the divorce documents were signed. However, regardless of the copious challenges and issues this group of baby boomer women faced getting to and through the divorce process, personal growth was emphasized throughout all their narratives. Growth was experienced in the following realms of life: emotional, financial, psychological, physical, social, and spiritual.

All participants were divorced between 2-7 years at the time of the first interview. The findings are aligned with results from the adversarial and post-traumatic growth literature, which identify that individuals typically require a minimum of two years post-trauma (or other major life-transition) to process the event and reflect on positive changes (Joseph, 2009; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). However, I could not find reference to an ideal end limit for reflection of positive changes and personal growth in the post-traumatic and adversarial growth literature. While previous studies highlighted women's narratives up to 43 years postdivorce, this study's shorter time postdivorce may better reflect positives changes specific to transitioning through the

divorce process, rather than from other life events experienced over subsequent decades.

As noted all participants' narratives were replete with examples of challenging experiences affecting various life domains. These adverse conditions were harmful, unfavorable, or contrary, and had the potential to illicit "an impact, effect or reaction" (Merriam-Webster, n. d; dictionary.com). The adversity the women experienced often led to intense emotional reactions. If ignored, these deleterious conditions could have impeded the personal growth the participants spoke about. However, as noted in the findings participants actively worked towards countering these challenges. While the women's stories of adversity varied, what was prevalent across the narratives was the women's intentional decision-making at key junctures throughout the divorce process, whether before, during, or after the legal divorce. These choices and decisions ultimately were growth-inducing.

Several of the women spoke of being "over" their marriage years before their divorce was finalized. Working through emotional and psychological issues related to leaving long-time unions was considered growth to these women. Many of the participants were in troubled marriages for many years before divorcing and the time prior to legal divorce allowed for space to conceptualize and even prepare for a potential future as a single women. A few participants described growth stimulated by attending therapy, or furthering their education, which they experienced within their marriages as they contemplated divorce. Experiences such as these, in which participants were involved in predivorce also led to future growth postdivorce. For instance, it makes sense that narratives' of women who went to therapy prior to their divorce transition reflected beliefs that they were better able to manage emotional dysregulation and those who furthered their education believed they were better prepared to meet their financial needs postdivorce. The participants' predivorce experiences seemed to help mitigate typical

challenges faced by women experiencing later-life divorce. As previously noted, financial loss and mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, are common consequences of gray divorce, especially for women (Crowley, 2018, 2019; Sbarra, 2015; Sbarra, & Whisman, 2022). These findings indicate that strategic experiences of growth predivorce can be instrumental to how women navigate a later-life divorce.

Personal Growth

Most formal descriptions of personal growth stem from the posttraumatic growth literature and involve a trauma, major transition, or challenge as the triggering event for the positive changes that spur personal growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013; Joseph, 2009), such as experienced by the women in this study. In addition, some researchers believe that achieving personal growth involves intentionality and decision making (Anderson et al., 2012; Corey et al., 2018; Dweck, 2016), while others have implied that intentionality is not necessary for personal growth and can occur without the individual setting out to grow or even without the individual's knowledge. My participants set out to intentionally achieve nearly all of the personal growth they reported experiencing; however, there were also some instances of growth they came to light during the interviews.

Participants' descriptions of personal growth aligned with the conceptualization of personal growth as described by multiple researchers: positive changes in individuals' sense of self or self-identity, their relationships, and how they view the world (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013; Corey et al., 2018; Joseph, 2009). The women experienced personal growth in the above noted areas and in various life domains through heightened awareness, self-reflection, and changes in perceptions, beliefs, and values. For example, similar to the research on adversarial and post-traumatic growth, the participants identified as having stronger self-identities,

discovered strengths and positive characteristics, reported a more positive view of themselves, developed healthier and more authentic relationships (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013; Joseph, 2009; Tedeschi & Calhoun). In addition, the women also experienced growth because of specific experiences, and at times, without intentionally seeking to grow (Gladding, 2011). A nuanced look at the personal growth experienced follows. Participants experienced personal growth:

1. by facing and working to overcome challenges and issues encountered through exiting long-term marriages–making difficult decisions, developing agency, managing and releasing painful emotions, and cultivating acceptance, as highlighted in theme one, Getting "There."

2. through reconceptualizing themselves as they restructured their worlds: including changes in perceptions related to marriage and divorce, women and aging, roles and routines, stereotypes, and values and beliefs stemming from family of origin, as identified in theme two, section one, Facing Cultural Constraints.

3. in developing a new sense of identity, discovering authentic selves, establishing new roles and routines, developing new competencies, and discovering meaning and purpose, as identified in theme two section two, Reframing Self.

4. in relating to others, maintaining extended family relationships, developing authentic relations, and developing relationships with like-minded individuals, as identified in theme two, section three, Relational Connections.

In this chapter, I discuss the findings of my study in relation to constructivism, my theoretical framework, and professional peer-viewed literature. I provide the limitations of the

study, implications for practice including recommendations for counselors and other mental health professionals, and for counselor education and advocacy. I end the chapter with suggestions for future research.

Constructivist Framework

As constructivism provided the framework for this study, participants' stories of personal growth were viewed through a constructivist lens. The women's narratives reflected the five themes in constructivism: order, activity, identity, relationship, and development (Mahoney, 2003). To begin, the routines (i.e., order) in the women's lives were disrupted through the divorce transition. In response to issues and obstacles encountered, all participants' actively worked towards creating order in their disordered lives. As the women faced challenges they made decisions, worked through problems, managed emotions (i.e., activity), and also worked toward personal growth. Decisions participants made were instrumental to the personal growth they experienced. For instance, through their challenges, this group of baby boomer women made meaning of their experiences in ways that led to positive changes in themselves as they reframed their self-identities. They maintained long held relational connections and developed new ones as they sought to reconstruct their world (relationships). Furthermore, the women considered the changes they experienced within themselves, in their relationships, and in their beliefs and values, personal growth.

Exiting a marriage after over 20 or 30 years was a process that took years for most of the women in my study. For a few women, the process began a decade or more before the divorce papers were signed. Their worlds were turned upside down as they transitioned through the divorce process. Roles and routines held for decades no longer applied to them. Mahoney (2003) maintained that individuals "seek order" and strive to create meaning when faced with

challenges to their life "order" (p. 50). This was demonstrated by the participants' narratives, as they spoke of challenges, obstacles, decisions made, and the emergence of new identities. Participants explained what it was like leaving one set of roles and routines and entering new ones where they did not yet know the "rules." As the women spoke, the gravity of this major transition and the meaning it held for them going forward in their fifth and sixth decades of life became apparent.

Participants decided where to begin their stories, the language they used to describe themselves and their experiences, and what to include to highlight their personal growth. Brott (2005) maintained that clients are active participants in exploring their narratives and their life roles. The participants echoed this assertion as they shared their stories of transition and reflected on the decisions and changes in their lives. Although some researchers believe that setting out to grow involves intentionality and decision making (Anderson et al., 2012; Corey et al., 2018; Dweck, 2016), others have maintained that personal growth need not be intentional and can occur without the individual "setting out to grow" or even without the individual's knowledge. For instance, Gladding's (2011) description of personal growth highlights development resulting from experiences, such as travel or other activities and interactions. The participants' narratives portrayed growth through experiences and interactions related to their sense of self, their relationships, and their values and beliefs. Most experiences of growth were intentionally sought; however, participants also uncovered unexpected areas of growth, through our discussions.

My role as researcher was to ask open-ended questions, listen to the responses, and ask probing questions when warranted. Although nine out of ten of the participants had been in therapy through their divorce transition, all uncovered experiences not previously reflected on or discussed, including those related to the environment in which they were raised and what it

meant to be a baby boomer woman. As the participants described their journeys, they often gained new insights, made meaning of the divorce process, and discovered areas of growth not previously considered. As I listened, it became clear that although much of the personal growth experienced was intentional, there were times when the women did not recognize experiences as growth until I asked probing questions or shared themes from other interviews. At times, other people indicated growth in participants' lives that they had not recognized, such as when one participant's daughter reminded her about all the skills she cultivated through decades of volunteering. Through data analysis within and across the two sets of interviews, the two overarching themes, Getting "There" and Reconceptualizing the Self, provide structure in framing the findings, highlighted in the next section.

Getting "There"

Getting "There," the first overarching theme I identified, is multifaceted and encompasses the participants' journey getting to divorce and the journey towards personal growth experienced along the way. The women described emotional and life-changing experiences exiting out of their decades-long marriages. Differences in priorities (e.g., work/life balance), needs (e.g., sexual, emotional, intellectual), beliefs, and values, along with powerful triggering events, such as infidelity and emotional and psychological abuse, spurred the dissolution of the participants' over 20-to-30-year marriages.

A few participants' journeys Getting "There" began 10 or more years before their legal divorce (i.e., when the divorce papers are signed), as they contemplated the challenges and obstacles they would face leaving their decades-long marriages. For others, the process was quicker. Although the stories varied, the findings are aligned with prior studies portraying divorce as a process, not a single event (Amato, 2010; Crowley, 2018). What was also evident

was that there were several areas or domains of divorce (i.e., emotional, psychological, financial, social, physical) in addition to legal divorce. Crowley (2018) identified similar life areas as *types of divorce*. The findings indicated that participants transitioned through the domains of divorce at different times through the divorce process, often years before the divorce became "legal." For instance, emotional or psychological divorce occurred when women detached emotionally or psychologically from their marriage and their spouse. This process evolved over five to ten or more years before the legal divorce for a few of the women.

Participants shared their emotional, and for some, traumatic experiences exiting out of their decades-long marriages. The women described divorce and the divorce process as stressful, traumatic, and emotionally and financially draining. Though the narratives varied, the women identified similar emotional, psychological, financial, and social challenges getting to divorce. Nevertheless, these challenges, discussed in the literature (Amato, 2010; Crowley, 2018, 2019; Sbarra, 2015), along with determination and perseverance, eventually led to participants' reconceptualized selves. Emotional journeys traversed through later-life divorce affected every aspect of the participants' lives. The women's emotional experiences of grief, anger, jealousy, depression, and other mental health issues eventually led to participants' experiences of growth in multiple domains of their lives. Despite the obstacles, and perhaps because of them, the women in this study began to perceive gray divorce as a "new beginning."

In Getting "There," growth was achieved in various areas, which also paved the way for future growth. One area discussed by all the women was their relationship with their ex-husbands. Based on my findings, all participants desired to have a more harmonious relationship with their ex-husband. Having an amicable relationship with their ex-spouse often went beyond forgiveness which supports and expands on prior research, where "redeveloping a positive

relationship with ex-husband" and "forgiving" their ex-spouse were very important (Makidon, 2013). The ten women in this study self-reflected and assessed what they could change and work on to improve their interactions with their ex-husbands. All the participants spoke about doing what they could to mitigate disputes in these ruptured relationships. This is aligned with Relational Cultural Theory, in which disconnections provide opportunities for growth when actively worked on with intention (Jordan, 2010). Most of the participants actively worked towards a better relationship by practicing acceptance and forgiveness, and a host of coping skills. Some women worked on their communication skills, some worked on managing anger. It was important to the women's mental health that that did not carry this anger with them. Resilience was required when participants' experienced challenging interactions with their ex-spouse. Despite their desire and willingness to have an amiable relationship with their ex-husbands two women had not yet reached this goal by the first interview.

Learning and practicing communication skills, listening skills, anger management, and assertiveness enabled the women to better communicate and manage emotions with their ex-spouse during potential times of strife. These skills spilled over into other areas of their lives. Several participants believed learning these skills was important for their own health and for peace in their family. A few of the women believed it was important for them to able be to model appropriate behavior and communication skills for their children (teenagers and young adults by the time of the divorce). One participant said learning better communication skills was helpful when she interviewed for a job The women practiced acceptance, forgiveness, and patience. Growth in these areas increased their agency; increased agency led to more growth and vice versa.

Many of the participants spoke to a lack of authenticity and disconnection from their

husband when they were in their marriages, and even to themselves. It was apparent from the women's narratives that the lack of connection and ability to be their authentic selves in their marriages created an environment which was not conducive to healthy development or personal growth. Rather than stay on this stagnate path, participants sought more alignment with their "true self." As the participants transitioned out of their marriages and from roles and routines held for 20-30 years or more, they reflected on past experiences, values, and beliefs, and were free to focus on themselves and to seek authentic connections with others and the world.

Reconceptualizing the Self

Reconceptualizing the Self, the second overarching theme I identified, is comprised of three sections Facing Cultural Constraints, Reframing Self, and Relational Connections. Participants' reconceptualization of themselves in the face of cultural limitations and stereotypes, and beliefs about marriage, divorce, and women and aging is addressed in Facing Cultural Constraints. Highlighted in Reframing Self are participants' reconceptualization of self in relation to changes in self-identity, development of competencies, and discoveries of purpose and meaning. Participants' reconceptualization of self in relation to maintaining relationships and developing new relationships is identified Relational Connections.

As noted, authenticity was a strong concept that surfaced in most narratives and ran through both themes. Participants strove to make or develop authentic connections. It was evident that this meant first acting and behaving according to their values and beliefs. In effect, participants strove for cognitive consonance (e.g., aligning behaviors and actions with beliefs and values). Several women said they were not "themselves" throughout their marriages. Words such as *true self, genuine, authentic,* came up in all participants' interviews. It seemed that this desire to be "who I am supposed to be" stemmed directly from "losing themselves" in their

marriages, some for decades.

Participants discussed beliefs and values instilled through their upbringing and in the cultural environments in which they were raised and lived throughout their marriages. Their narratives focused on growth related to areas highlighted throughout both themes, as they reconceptualized themselves and their relations. Awareness, a positive mindset, and acceptance were key determinants in the participants' ability to move forward and experience growth.

To move forward through their divorces, the women first needed to become aware of their beliefs and separate them from what they were raised hearing. Many of these messages were in their subconsciouses. The participants reflected on choices and made decisions as a process through which a reconceptualized self eventually emerged. Most of the participants described a sense of loss and identity related to previously held life roles, aligned with Crowley (2018) maintained that gray divorcees may experience a loss of self-identity and self-esteem. However, this group of baby boomer women also gained an enhanced sense of self not previously experienced in their married lives. The identity that was lost through their divorce was not one they always felt connected to. Several women spoke of not being able to be their true selves in their marriages.

What was striking was the self-reported deep and lasting personal changes and transformations experienced and discussed by all the women. The women experienced personal growth through reconceptualization of themselves: through their values and beliefs, in relation and connection to themselves and to others. Personal growth identified included positive changes in demeanor, characteristics, emotional states, perceptions related to how they experience life and view themselves. Interestingly, most of the participants spoke of "losing themselves" through their decades-long marriages and "finding themselves" and finally being who they "were

supposed to be" through their divorce.

Baby Boomers – Socio-Cultural Constraints

Participants re-conceptualized themselves as they re-evaluated long held beliefs and values. They self-reflected as they focused on adverse cultural issues and overcoming biases, (their own and others) experienced through the divorce transition. Constraints included those instilled through the family of origin, baby boomer culture, current social norms, social circles. (e.g., influence over). Challenges included deeply ingrained traditional and religious family values, beliefs about marriage and divorce, and traditional women's roles.

The baby boom cohort is portrayed in the popular media as "trailblazers," and as Pruncho (2012) claimed, baby boomers have "redefined each stage of life as they experienced it…and [have] influenced education, music, race, relations, sex roles, and child rearing" (p.149) in ways that were very different than their parents' traditional, conservative views. Many individuals who have lived through this era experienced some or all of this. However, not all baby boomers have lived their lives embracing a nontraditional, free spirited culture, as demonstrated by most of the women in this study. Several participants described themselves as feminists despite choosing more conventional paths during their married lives. Most of the women painted a picture of nearly a lifetime following traditionalist beliefs and values, forged decades ago though their families of origin. Several participants stayed in unhappy marriages, in part because messages like "divorce is a sin" and "divorce is bad" reverberated in their minds, subconsciously for some. A couple of women came to this awareness during our interviews. One participant, who was raised Catholic, explained that she did not get divorced until her mother had passed away. She was shocked that prior to our conversation she had not realized how the past was keeping her stuck, especially considering she had been in therapy.

The participants battled with their own biases pertaining to cultural norms of the era in which they were raised. As noted, several women struggled with internal and external perceptions pertaining to being a divorced woman in their 50's or 60's. Similarly, Anderson et al. (2012) found that women in midlife career transitions faced comparable struggles. This similarity highlights the importance of addressing thoughts and feelings about work and changing jobs or careers, as did the majority of the women in this study. Over two decades ago, Degges-White, and Myers (2006b) suggested that perceptions of midlife have slowly changed as myths dispersed. It is interesting to note many of the myths and stereotypes of midlife, at least when it comes to divorce, are still fairly prominent in many of the participants' lives, and in their thoughts.

Reframing Self

Reframing self refers to reconceptualization of self in relation to self-identities. The participants reconceptualized themselves through personal growth experiences such as learning new skills (i.e., self-learning, professional development, formal education) which paved the way for further self-growth. They discovered meaning and purpose through a variety of pursuits. As a result, several women discovered meaningful connections to themselves through formal and informal learning. These learning experiences spurred self-connection and were considered supportive to the participants' growth.

Through learning new skills, the women gained agency over their lives. For example, several participants reflected on their financial situations while contemplating divorce, when separated and postdivorce. The participants consulted with financial advisors, participated in workshops, or listened to webinars and podcasts to increase their financial knowledge and gain some control over their finances. In addition, to offset financial loss, some participants enrolled

in professional programs which eventually led to new careers they described aligned with their values and beliefs and enabled them to better support themselves financially. This is just one example of how learning new skills, growth in itself, laid the foundation for further growth.

Several of the women discovered purpose and meaning in helping other women who were going through a separation or divorce. The women approached this desire to give back in various ways. Several of the women choose to be a mentor to other divorcing women (through social networking groups); a few led or formed women's divorce support groups. A few participants spoke of newfound empathy for other divorced women and incorporated these new insights into their relationships and in current roles at work. Several of the women changed career paths (i.e., spiritual healer, divorce mentor, divorce coach, life coach) or sought out new roles in their current jobs which enabled them to better help women in various stages of divorce transition. Career was a powerful expression of self and a pathway to growth for the women in this study. The findings of this study suggest that although divorce in later life after a long-term marriage is fraught with unique challenges, these challenges can be the impetus for growth for baby boomer women. Despite describing their experiences as "gut wrenching," "traumatic," and "stressful," all participants in this study reported they believed that they had grown tremendously through their divorce transition.

Relational Connections

Relational Connections focuses on participants reconceptualization of themselves in relation to others. A prominent thread that ran through all the women's narratives was a search for authenticity. Participants sought authentic relationships with like-minded women. They developed new relationships and maintained long-standing relationships with their ex-in-laws. Universality was a prominent theme in the participants' narratives as they strove to find and

develop connections with like-minded women.

Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) suggests that people create their lives through connection with others (Jordan, 2010). This study's findings underscore the relevance and necessity of solid support systems and authentic connections and relationships for baby boomers' post later-life divorce. Research in psychology and the social sciences confirms the belief that a relationally based perspective which allows for growth fostering relationships is central to healthy human development (e.g., Deanow, 2011; Jordan, 2010).

As noted, the majority of the participants discussed wishing they had found positive growth-oriented support groups. This is in line with Deanow (2011), who stressed that postdivorce counseling should focus on the relevance of connecting individuals with support systems and in expanding their relational worlds. When the participants did join support groups, they were often led by peers, not clinicians or other professional facilitators. Participants often struggled in their search for like-minded women, finding many of the women in the groups they attended negative, angry, and bitter. The groups often turned into complaint sessions, as noted by several participants.

Anderson et al. (2012) maintained that a woman's "sense of self" and self-identity is related to connectedness and relationships, whether in work, family, or in social areas. Relational connections (i.e., friends, family, professionals) were tremendously important through the changes in women's life roles and self-identity. They also spoke about the importance of developing new authentic relationships, which aligned with their new identities and their reconceptualized selves. What was surprising was that a few relationships that emerged as important to growth were neither typical nor expected. One woman found support in an unexpected mentor (a 90 year-year-old woman); another, with her ex-father-in-law. In fact,

several women discussed their desire to maintain decades-long relationships with extended family (e.g., former in-laws). Green (2009) maintained that it is through social interchange that well-being and positive outlook are created and this in turn can help dispel and replace the stereotypes of old age and the self-esteem damaging myths of the aging women. When the participants experienced social interchange through authentic connections, doors opened to positive changes that led to their growth and transformation. This was portrayed in the stories the participants shared about the authentic connections they made and the insights they uncovered along the way, although it was not always easy. In the next section I provide implications for practice and suggestions for approaches and interventions that can be integrated into the counseling protocol and best practices for women in later-life divorce transition.

Implications for Practice

Mental health counselors and other professionals working with baby boomer women through later-life divorce can explore how socio-cultural forces have helped shape the women's identities and influenced their views on marriage, divorce, and aging. As demonstrated, family of origin, generational cohort, and socio-cultural circles were powerfully influential in the participants' reconceptualization of themselves and therefore in helping shape their self-identities, beliefs, and values. Facing constraints presented by these forces proved a pathway forward out of long-term marriages and toward growth for these women. Clinicians can help baby boomer women explore deep-rooted or conflicting beliefs that present as obstacles to growth and to moving forward for gray divorcees.

Feminist counseling theories provide an optimal lens for viewing such issues "as the goal of [feminist] counseling is to increase wellness though positive individual and social change" (McAuliffe, 2019, p. 251). Mental health counselors can help women understand how cultural

influences such as gender role socialization, oppression, and marginalization affect their self-concept and self-esteem (Coogan & Chen, 2007) as they go through a divorce transition. Women's own views on divorce and marriage should be examined, as demonstrated by the participants stories. As discussed, one participant, was told by her therapist that it was not "a big deal" to get divorced, "half of all marriages end in divorce," and she "should get over it." As common and socially accepted as divorce may be in this nation, the previous example can serve as a reminder to approach all individuals with a curious and open mind. It also indicates a need for mental health professionals to understand the lived experiences of their baby boomer clients.

Clinicians can work with women in later-life transition by focusing on significant changes in the women's life-roles as demonstrated by the participants in this study: from married woman to single for the first time in over two to three decades; from stay-at-home mom to seeking employment; to changing careers in their 50's and 60's or later. By utilizing a relational-cultural approach that focuses on women's identity and how they relate to others, counselors can help baby boomer women solidify and strengthen their self-identities in relation to their new life roles. Relational cultural theory posits that women grow through connection and that disconnection can provide an opportunity for growth when repairing ruptures in the relationships (Jordan, 2010). Most of the participants in this study stressed the importance of having an amicable relationship with their ex-husband and their stories provided ample evidence of the growth experienced as they worked on repairing these long-standing disconnections.

Several researchers maintained that counselors can employ a constructivist relational theory base to help women face powerful cultural stereotypes and help them transform the biases of aging into new norms for themselves (Degges-White & Myers, 2006a, 2006b; Gergen, 2009). Therapists can start by asking women going through a later-life divorce transition, what their

family life was like as a child. They can help them uncover perceptions of what it means to be a baby boomer women and how long-held beliefs and values may keep them stuck. For example, although the majority of the participants saw therapists throughout their divorce transition, many had not reflected on what it means to be a part of a generational cohort and how that relates to their new identity as a divorced woman. Counselors can pay particular attention to how the women conceptualize themselves and the words they use, whether negative or positive and can help them reconstruct their narratives and reframe their identities. For instance, several women in this study did not like the negative connotation of the word "divorce." Instead of referring to themselves as divorced they said they were "single." It was a simple but effective change in their perceptions of themselves.

Intertwined with the stereotypes and myths of aging which women continue to face are the realities of aging and ageism which most women eventually contend with, whether they interpret the myths as their personal story or not (Ditzion et al., 2018; Saucier, 2004). Laidlaw and Pachana (2009) maintained that clinicians who work with adults in later life will need to understand that aging affects men and women differently and may be perceived differently, as well. It is important to access how women who are going through the divorce process view themselves in terms of aging, cultural stereotypes of aging, along with how they perceive divorcing and being single in later life. Understanding perceptions of women experiencing later-life divorce is relevant to understanding how they can be encouraged to rise above the challenges and obstacles they may encounter when faced with a gray divorce, as demonstrated by the participants in this study.

Women contemplating divorce or going through a divorce transition may approach a therapist at various times throughout the process. Clinicians working with baby boomer women

through later-life divorce can encourage their clients to deconstruct problem narratives, when the timing is right. This can be approached by carefully listening to the language the women use by asking probing questions and paying particular attention to words and phrases (McAuliffe, 2019) they use to describe themselves and their worlds. Therapists can pay particular attention to how the women conceptualize themselves and whether their overall tone is negative or positive.

Intentional questions and probes like those asked in this study, what divorce, marriage, being a baby boomer, and being an aging divorced woman in this society means to them (see Appendix A), can allow for deeper meaning making to occur. In helping baby boomer women deconstruct their stories, mental health professionals can ask questions related to the cultural environment they were raised in; the social norms of the era; and how their perceptions may have changed over the years (McAuliffe, 2019). Clinicians can then help clients reconstruct, or re-author, a different more positive, growth inspiring narrative.

Clinicians can conceptualize women in divorce transition through a holistic model of wellness (Myers & Sweeney, 2008). This framework, grounded in feminist theory, would allow the mental health professionals to be particularly cognizant of cultural stereotype (Ditzion et al., 2018; Myers & Sweeney, 2008). For instance, clinicians can listen for language of disconnection in the women's stories and explore what it means to the client. They can ask about their experiences of bias and disconnection, and what it means to be a divorced woman at this point in their life. Clinicians can utilize this collaborative approach as well as other feminist approaches to help women face powerful cultural stereotypes to facilitate the client's empowerment and help transform the biases of aging into new norms (Degges-White & Myers, 2006a; Degges-White & Myers 2006b; Gergen, 2009; Ditzion et al., 2018).

Clinicians working with women through major transitions during midlife need to

consider the entire period as a period of growth, development, movement, and challenge (Degges-White & Myers, 2006b) and need provide interventions that provide support through these transitions. The women in this study faced challenges such as starting new careers, providing for themselves, and learning how to live alone the first time in their lives, amidst the emotional fallout of the dissolution of their marriages. Mental health counselors need to understand the importance these transitions hold for their clients experiencing later-life divorce. For example, work and career was a main focus for most participants in their postdivorce journey. Career was a powerful expression of self and a pathway to growth for the women in this study; however several participants discussed a lack of career-oriented interventions for women in later-life transitions. Mental health counselors need to understand the importance work and career can hold for baby boomer women to help guide them through these challenging transitions.

Experiencing a later-life divorce transition was replete with the unknown for these women. Understanding that midlife and later is often a time of transition and growth will allow counselors to normalize the dissatisfaction some women may experience during these potentially unpredictable stages in a woman's life (Degges-White & Myers, 2006b; Anderson et al., 2012). Normalizing transitions in mid and later life and working towards a positive focus and a growth enhancing mindset can help lessen negative emotions and cognitions for women going through gray divorce.

Counselor Preparation

Graduate counseling programs provide education in a breath of mental health and wellness issues related to various populations throughout the lifespan. Counselor educators, through didactic and experiential activities, train students to become more self-aware and to

reflect on their bias. Courses in counseling and counselor education programs, such as Human

Development, Counseling Through the Lifespan, and Career Development and Counseling can

include separate units focused on women and aging, diversity, gender and social-cultural bias

and stereotypes in older adults, personal and professional transitions in middle and later life, and

personal growth.

The opportunity to include didactic and experiential learning focused on the mental

health and wellness needs of the increasing population of older adults presents across various

curricular areas required in graduate counseling programs (refer to CACREP, 2016, 2024).

Material that focuses on later-life transitions, encouraging growth orientations in older adults and

differences in generational cohorts, can be included in counseling courses such as Counseling

Across the Lifespan, Multiculturalism, Marriage and Family Counseling, Career Counseling and

Development, Human Development, and Counseling Theories (CACREP, 2016). For example,

Relational Cultural Theory (Jordon, 2011, 2017), which focuses on how individuals grow in

connection, and other feminist models and theories (McAuliffe, 2019), can be highlighted in

Counseling Theories and Multicultural Counseling courses. This would allow a deeper

understanding of authenticity, empowerment, and connection to self and others (Jordan, 2010),

demonstrated as important to personal growth by the women in this study.

Feminist counseling theories, by definition, are politically focused by "addressing how

social and cultural factors are contributing to clients' current difficulties," (McAuliffe, 2019,

p.261). Participants demonstrated that current socio-cultural influences affected their experiences

though their divorce transition. In addition, participants' long-held values and beliefs from their

family of origin, and generational cohort influences had affected a lifetime of choices. Teaching

approaches grounded in RCT and other feminist counseling modalities provide context to

reframing, an empowering method "of helping client shift frame of reference from which they view their clients." (McAuliffe, 2019, p. 251). My findings indicate that the participants were regularly shifting their perceptions about their experiences (e.g., beliefs about divorce) by deconstructing previous stories and reconstructing new narratives as they worked through their divorce transition, reconceptualizing themselves along the way. Learning and practicing empowering theoretical orientations and approaches can provide counselors-in-training with a foundational base to challenge clients' long-held-beliefs about themselves.

Discovering meaningful work was an important pathway to growth, for the majority of the participants. The women spoke of the lack of resources in helping them transition from being a stay-at-home mom or working in part-time positions to full time employment in which they felt connected and could support themselves. The transition model, developed by Schlossberg (1981, 1984) and revised by Anderson et al. (2012), provides a framework for helping individuals in transitions throughout the lifespan. This model, comprised of three parts: (1) Approaching transitions: Transition identification and transition process; (2) Taking stock of coping resources; and (3) Taking charge: Strengthening resources (Anderson et al., 2012) can be taught in career counseling courses for use with women who are changing careers or getting back into the workforce after divorcing. In addition, various topics such as exploring values and beliefs, and helping clients discover meaning and purpose can be included in specialized courses focusing on counseling women and girls or counseling older adults. Activities can include reflection journals, self-assessments, and case conceptualizations. Concepts and topics related to my findings, including developing a positive, growth orientation, can also be presented for online discussion or for extra credit in counseling courses or in workshops and seminars for current counseling students and for professional development for counselors in the field. These are only a few of the

ways to address the needs of the growing older population of divorced women through counselor education.

Counselor educators can emphasize that students explore older women's work lives and the meaning it holds for individuals experiencing transitions, career related or not. Savickas' (2011) career construction interview can be taught and can provide practice in utilizing this narrative storytelling assessment in Career Counseling classes. Students can role play being an older woman in later-life divorce or career transition. By underscoring that purposeful work is meaningful to many baby boomer women and important to their self-identities, mental health counselors in training can be encouraged to view clients' work lives from a positive growth-oriented prospective and as a normative transition.

Counselor educators and mental health clinicians can follow a wellness perspective and can facilitate growth by evaluating how individuals are progressing through the divorce transition. The domains (or types) of divorce can be compared with the areas of life as identified through the Indivisible Self, an evidence-based model of wellness (Degges-White, & Myers, 2006a, 2006b; Myers & Sweeney, 2004). The Indivisible Self can be used as a model to assess where the divorced individual is in terms of the divorce process and what areas of life they need to focus on. For instance, an individual can be assessed where they are in terms of the "emotional" divorce (i.e., Are they angry; do they need to work on anger management skills?).

Graduate students often come into counseling programs with the desire to work with particular populations upon graduating. As the population ages, divorce and other life transitions are predicted to continue to increase for older adults. Counselor educators can provide didactic units on later-life development in human development classes, and they can encourage students to research, populations of older women, their challenges, and barriers to healthy well-rounded

lives. Case conceptualizations for diverse women in transitions such as later-life divorce can be provided in various classes of career counseling, multicultural counseling, counseling older adults. This will prepare students to be able to recognize issues that can occur for this population. As demonstrated by the women in this study, meaningful work, breaking free from long-held beliefs, battling ageist and sexist stereotypes that still prevail were the pathways to growth for the women in my study. Several participants discussed a lack of career-oriented interventions as they transitioned through divorce. The women in my study specifically mentioned that they could not find any positively oriented divorce groups and everything they experienced was an outlet for negativity. Students can develop divorce transition groups during Group Counseling classes and then be encouraged to seek experiences in field work where they can work with this population. Students can also to do research and explore stereotypes of aging women and divorce, especially across cultures, in research, and in multicultural classes.

Limitations

I believe this study's findings will benefit professional counselors and other mental health clinicians. Yet, as with any study, there are several limitations that warrant mentioning. In this section, I first discuss the study's limitations related to my role as researcher combined with my life experience and the potential for bias. I discuss a second limitation in terms of the participants' demographics as a small homogeneous sample. A third limitation is inherent in the qualitative design of the study.

Positionality

As a baby boomer woman with a similar demographic makeup as my participants, I am an insider in my population of study. I began transitioning out of my marriage of 24 years during my doctoral studies, further aligning me with my participants. Although various steps were taken

to limit the impact, it is still possible my positionality could have influenced the findings. With a connection such as I have, there is the risk of researcher bias. For instance, an insider may be too close to the phenomenon under study and may be unable to stay neutral and provide objective interpretation of the data. I hold a paradoxical perspective: being a member of the population I am studying is an asset enabling connection and rapport with the participants, while conversely it can pose a threat to objectivity. Steps were taken to minimize negative impacts, as discussed in Chapter 3.

Sample Diversity

The sample for this study was a homogenous sample of ten educated, middle socioeconomic status, mostly white women, the majority, from the northeastern United States. As discussed in Chapter 3, my participant sample lacked the diversity I strove for. A more heterogeneous sample may have provided a cross-cultural lens as to how baby boomer women of various ethnicities, races, educational levels, and SES experienced personal growth through the divorce transition in later life and their challenges and supports in getting there. It may have provided a more in-depth view into how various ethnic groups perceive being a baby boomer and their beliefs and values related to being a woman, to marriage, divorce, and aging.

Study Design

Qualitative studies have inherent limitations within their design related to the potential of a subjectively small sample size and researcher bias. As a qualitative study, there are a few limitations inherent in my study's design. To begin with, one cannot extrapolate from the target population to the entire population. In addition, the small sample size (N=10) and homogeneity restricts any generalizability to a narrow group of baby boomers rather than a whole population. Participants also self-reported personal growth and self-selected into the study (inherent

subjectivity) which can result in participant bias and the inclination to provide socially desired responses.

Future Research

Professional counselors and other mental health professionals often provide support for individuals at multiple points throughout the divorce transition, from contemplation, through separation, to postdivorce. However, there is an overall lack of empirically based research supporting counseling best practices for women who divorce in later-life and a noticeable dearth when considering research that focuses on potentially positive outcomes such as personal growth that can occur for this population. As the population ages and the number of later-life divorces continue to rise, so does the need to better understand this phenomenon, and what it means for those involved. It is imperative that mental health professionals are knowledgeable about older generational cohorts, so they are prepared to help individuals navigate this challenging transition. For example, it is important to understand the how older women experiencing a divorce perceive themselves, given that myths and stereotypes of aging and divorce were prominent in many of the participants' lives. As a nation with vast cultural, educational, and geographic differences, combined with increasing racial, ethnic, and gender diversity, it is important to understand how all individuals are affected by later-life transitions such as divorce. Additional studies can further this understanding.

Future research can explore in-depth narratives of diverse groups of baby boomer women in terms of sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, educational level, socio-economic status, and geographic location. Understanding how diverse women perceive and experience personal growth through later-life divorce, what challenges them, how they manage obstacles, and what supports them in their journey will aid in the development of equitable services for all through

this challenging life transition. With so little known about how this population experiences growth though later-life divorce replicating this study with a more diverse sample can help to better understand perceptions and experiences of personal growth across culture, race, ethnicity, gender, educational level, geographical location, and socio-economic status. Understanding different groups' perceptions and experiences could provide a richer understanding of the nuances of personal growth and of the process of growth through this later-life transition and can inform interventions for practice and policy for a greater number of individuals. Developing community connections with key leaders and stakeholders in diverse communities may allow for success in securing samples across diverse groups of individuals.

Women's personal growth through later-life divorce can be approached by conducting large scale surveys focusing on personal growth as a construct and an outcome. The conceptualization of growth identified as a model for this study (i.e., positive changes in self/self-identity, relationships, and worldview) can be modified to a more focused description of personal growth specific to my study's findings, which can then be used in future studies. Based on my findings, one conceptualization of personal growth for baby boomer women who divorce in later life could be: transforming values and beliefs, remaking self, and growing relational connections. The components can be studied to determine if there are relationships between and among these components of personal growth and various other constructs identified in my findings, such as: relationship with ex-spouse, acceptance, authenticity, purpose and meaning, and spiritual pursuits. For instance, researchers can seek to discover the relationship between acceptance (i.e. amicable relationship with ex-spouse) and personal growth for individuals who divorce in later life after a long-term marriage. The better the full picture of this phenomenon,

the better prepared clinicians will be to help the increasing numbers of individuals experiencing this later-life transition and to provide interventions based on empirically based research.

Conclusion

Divorce, although typically stressful and challenging for all involved, comes with different challenges and stressors for women who divorce in later life after long-term marriage (Crowley, 2018, 2019). Yet, as demonstrated by this study, it can also provide an opportunity for positive changes leading to personal growth affecting all life domains. My findings provide a nuanced in-depth view of one group of women baby boomer's perceptions and experiences of personal growth through later-life divorce transition. These findings highlight obstacles and supports the women encountered as they journeyed though the dissolution of their decades-long marriages.

As the population ages and continues to rise in numbers, it is important for mental health professionals to understand what Santrock (2015) referred to as the "cohort affect." An individual's generational age and gender cohort can have a far-reaching hold on their perceptions, beliefs, and values, demonstrated by the findings in this study. It is important for clinicians and counselor educators to recognize all form of bias and stereotypes, and to challenge their and their client's biases including those related to women and aging.

As gray divorce continues to rise in the United States (Lin & Brown, 2020; Brown & Lin, 2022), it is imperative that professional counselors have the knowledge and skills to offer positive support and outlooks, effective ways to conceptualize divorce in later life, and the ability to confront ageism, stereotypes, and bias, especially for women. It is necessary to work from theoretical orientations aligned with growth through adversity (Joseph, 2009) and to develop and utilize empirically based models and interventions which promote growth and finding meaning

and purpose through later-life transitions, such as the transition model updated by Anderson et al. (2012). It is important that these interventions focus on the challenges surrounding later-life divorce for baby boomer women, such as: career transitions and career planning; processing grief and loss and other emotional fallout; developing authentic connections; exploring family of origin and cognitive distortions; understanding values and beliefs of generational cohorts; exploring life roles and self-identity and how to promote a growth orientation and mindset.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Participants engage in two individual, semi-structured interviews, 60 to 90 minutes in length, via Zoom (an online video platform). I begin the first interview by reviewing the informed consent document (Appendix E) and ensuring that the participant is comfortable continuing in the study. In the initial part of the first interview, I focus on building rapport. After sharing a bit about myself and how I became interested in the study, I ask the participant to share what drew her to the study. Using open-ended questions allows me to focus on understanding how the participant describes personal growth for herself. The objective is for participants to share their experiences related to their growth through the divorce. I encourage the participants to share how they believe they have grown, what they believe facilitated their growth, and challenges they believe they overcame on their journey. Specific questions emerge based on what individuals present as being significant to them in terms of their experiences.

First Interview

The first interview focuses on gaining an understanding of how the participants believe they have grown through their later-life divorce, including positive changes in their self-identity, relationships, and their beliefs and values. A main objective is to uncover how the women believe being a member of the baby boomer cohort and divorcing at age 50 (or older) after a long-term marriage has affected their growth. Another goal is to highlight experiences that supported, inspired, and contributed to the participant s growth through the divorce process, including how overcoming specific challenges may have led to growth. I begin the first interview by saying:

I want to understand how women who divorced at age 50, or over experience personal

growth through a divorce transition after being married for 20 or more years.

➢   Please describe your growth process as you transitioned through your divorce.

> Prompt: Can you describe positive changes in yourself since your divorce?

Follow up: Can you tell me about anything or anyone that inspired or supported your growth?

➢   Can you describe any challenges you believe contributed to or affected your growth.

Baby Boomer: This study is focused on baby boomer women. Baby boomer is a term that used to describe individuals born in 1946–1962.

➢   Can you tell me what being a baby boomer woman means to you?

Follow up: Do you believe that being a baby boomer has affected the changes and growth you spoke about?

Relationships:

➢   Please describe any changes in your relationships since your divorce.

Beliefs, Values: We often have beliefs that we live by or thoughts about how things "should be."

➢   Please describe any changes in what you think is important.

➢   Can you share what you believe has contributed to the growth you just spoke about.

> Prompt: Anything (books, movies, quotes, workshops, religious or spiritual practices, etc.) that inspired or supported these changes

> Prompt: Anyone who has inspired or supported these changes.

➢   Please tell me about any challenges that have contributed to this growth.

Follow up: Can you describe how you overcame these challenges?

Divorcing in Later-Life after a Long-Term Marriage: I want to know how folks think divorcing at 50, 60 years old after being in a long-term marriage affected their growth.

➢   Can you describe how you think your age may have affected your growth?

➢   I'm curious if you think divorcing after XX years of marriage has impacted the growth you spoke about?

Anything Else: Thank you for sharing about the ways you have grown. I am wondering if there is anything that you would like to add?

Second Interview

I begin the second interview with a check-in to see how the participant has been since our first meeting and ask if she has anything she would like to add. l check that I accurately understood what the participant talked about and the meaning she wanted to convey (i.e., member checking). During this interview, I ask participants to clarify and expand on concepts and themes that became known in their first interview. I also share concepts and themes which have emerged across the interviews and encourage participants to discuss anything that resonates with them. After each interview, I revisited the questions, analyzed the results, and revised the questions as necessary. The following are specific questions I ask the participants. Questions relating to the themes are asked if the information was not shared during the participants' first interview. I also ask all participants the new questions and those that emerge along the way.

Anything We Need to Add:

➢ What have you found yourself thinking about since our first interview?

> Prompt: Is there anything you want to add to what we initially talked about?

➢ **Within Interview:** I'm going to share some concepts and themes that have come up in your first interview. [These questions will change depending on the participant.]You mentioned_____. Could you expand on that a bit more?

➢ These are some concepts and themes that came up in your interview

Follow-up: Does that sum up what you want me to most understand about your experiences?

> Prompt: Is there anything you want to expand on?

Across Interviews: I'm going to share some selected concepts and themes that have come up in interviews I've had with other participants. I'd like to know if anything strikes a chord with you.

Challenges: Some folks faced obstacles or challenges through their divorce transition and believe moving beyond these roadblocks was essential for their growth.

➢   In a few words, describe the biggest challenge you have overcome. Any others?

      Follow-up: What one thing helped you through this challenge the most?

➢   Some women spoke about what it was like being a divorced women in her 50's-60's. Can you speak to that?

➢   Some folks spoke about their family life when they were young. Can you tell me about what it was like growing up in your household?

➢   Some women heard negative comments about being a divorced older-women, or they had their own negative perceptions of divorce (i.e., men want women 20 years younger, you'll be alone for the rest of your life). Does this resonate with you?

      Follow up: Can any you tell me about any stereotypes you've had to overcome to experience the growth you discussed

➢   A few participants said they thought differently about divorce now. Can you describe any changes in how you view divorce since you were first separated.

➢   Follow up: What do you think of the word "divorce"?

            Prompt: Participants used alternative words to describe themselves.

➢   Some women changed their appearance in significant ways through their divorce transition – does that resonate with you?

      Follow-up: Help me understand what that means to you in terms of your growth.

➢   What words best describe your relationship with your ex-husband, now?

            Prompt: Several participants believed developing an "amicable" relationship with their ex-husband was instrumental to their growth. Can you speak to that?

➢   How would you best describe your dating life?

      Follow-up: How does that relate to the growth you described?

Supports: All women talked about the importance of support and described this in various ways.

➢   Can you tell me what your relationship with your ex's family is like?

      Follow-up: Does this relate to your growth in any way?

➢   What is your relationship with your children like?

> ➢   Can you tell me who supported you the most through divorce transition?

> Follow up: did you have a role model or a mentor?

> ➢   Have you received any professional help through or postdivorce?

[New question for all]

> ➢   What kinds of things do you think would be most helpful for counselors to know who are working with women separating and divorcing?

Added after a few interviews I added:

> Follow-up: What do you think is the most important thing counselors should know about older women who divorce in later life?

Self-Identity: Some women spoke of "re-inventing" themselves, becoming who they were "supposed to be." They accomplished this in various ways. Does this resonate with you?

> ➢   When thinking about yourself now, postdivorce, what words best describe you?

> Follow-up: Help me understand what those words mean to you.

> Follow-up: In one sentence…who is _____ now?

Work life: Some folks changed careers, some went back to for the first time in 15-20 years.

> ➢   Have there been any changes in your work life?

Spirituality: A few of the participants reconnected with their religious and/or spiritual beliefs they held before marriage and had put aside. Others discovered newfound meaning in spiritual practices. Does that resonate with you?

> ➢   Has there been changes in your spiritual/religious practices since your separation/divorce?

More Questions for Everyone:

> ➢   What is the best advice you received when you were going through your separation and divorce?

> ➢   Do you have a motto or saying that has helped you on your journey?

> ➢   Thank you for sharing your story with me. As we have talked about your experiences today, has anything new come up for you?

Appendix B: Demographic Questionnaire

Title of the Study: Women Baby Boomers' Experiences of Personal Growth through Later-Life Divorce after a Long-Term Marriage.

The purpose of this study is to understand how women who believe they have grown through their divorce describe their growth and to learn what they believe has helped and challenged them along the way.

I am interested in your specific experiences of personal growth — for instance, how you think you, your relationships, or other things in your life have changed for the better. To determine if you are eligible for the study, I need to gather some general information about you. Confidentiality is very important to me; therefore, I want to assure you that only my advisor and I will see this information. Your responses and any identifying information will not be shared with anyone. If you do not wish to provide specific information or if you have questions about anything on this form, please feel free to email me. Please fill out the form to the best of your ability. I can be reached at the following email address: McHALEL2@mail.montclair.edu

Initial Screening Questions

Are you a woman between the ages of 55 and 75?

Yes

No

Were you divorced after being married 20 or more years*?

Yes

No

How many years have you been divorced from your long-term marriage (a marriage of 20 or more years)? [Choose one]

Less than 1 year

1 - 2 years

2 – 3

3 - 4 years

4 -5 years

More than 5 years

Do you believe you experienced personal growth through your divorce (from separation to the

present time)? [Choose one]

Yes, very much so

Maybe, a little

No, not at all

I'm not sure

Other

Background - Enter the following:

First/Last Name

Birthdate

Email address

Alternate email address

Phone number where you can be reached

Divorce/Marriage/Family - This section asks specific questions about your divorce, marriage,

and family

How long were you separated before your divorce was finalized? [Choose one]

Less than 1 year

1 - 2 years

2 – 3 years

3 – 4 years

4 – 5 years

More than 5 years

Who initiated the divorce? [Choose one]

I did

He did

It was mutual

Was this your first Marriage?

Yes

No

How many times have you been married? [Choose one]

One

Two

Three or more

If you are currently married, how long have you been married? [Choose one]

Less than 1 year

1 - 3 years

3 – 5 years

More than 5 years

N/A (not applicable)

Do you have children?

Yes

No

How many children do you have?

One

Two

Three

Four

Five or more

N/A (Not Applicable)

Enter your children's ages (If Applicable)

If you have children, did you have them with your ex-husband? [Choose one]

Yes

No

N/A (Not Applicable)

How would you describe your race or origin? [Check all that apply]

White

Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin

Black or African American

Asian

American Indian or Alaska Native

Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander

Biracial/Multiracial

Other

What is your employment status? [Check one or more]

       Employed Full-time

       Employed Part-time

       Unemployed

       Retired

       Volunteer

       Other

What is your highest level of education? [Choose one]

       Highschool

       Undergraduate

       Master's

       Doctorate

       Other

What's Next?

I will contact you as soon as possible to let you know whether you are eligible for the study. If you are eligible, I will email you a Consent form for you to sign, scan, and send back to me. In the email, I will ask you to choose a day and time for a brief phone call so I can ask you a few follow-up questions and so we can schedule our first interview. If you have sent the Consent form back, we will schedule our first interview during our phone call, otherwise, I will email you after I receive it and we will schedule the interview at that time. I truly appreciate you taking the time to complete this survey!

Are you interested in participating in the study, if eligible? [Choose one]

       Yes

No

I'm not sure

I will keep the data I collect confidential, and I will not share your personal information with anyone outside the research team. Here is how to contact Lisa Silva McHale, LPC, the principal researcher: Phone #: 201-602-1458 or Email: MCHALEL2@mail.montclair.edu

Montclair State University Institutional Review Board, Study #＿＿＿, approved this study.

Appendix C: Recruitment Email

Doctoral student seeking female participants for following research study: *Women Baby Boomers' Experiences of Personal Growth through Later-Life Divorce after a Long-Term Marriage.*

Dear _____

    I would like to let you know about an opportunity to participate in a research study about women's personal growth through a divorce in later life, after a long-term marriage. The purpose of this study is to understand how women who believe they have grown after a divorce, describe their growth and to learn what they believe has helped and challenged them along the way. I am interested in learning about your experiences of personal growth after your divorce— how you think you, your relationships, or other things in your life have changed for the better. I am also interested in learning about things (experiences, people, etc.) that contributed to your growth. Participant Requirements: I am seeking to interview a diverse sample of women:

- Born between 1946 - 1964 (ages 55 – 74 in 2020)

- Divorced at age 50 or over, from a first marriage of 20 years or more

- Divorced two to seven years

- Identify as having experienced personal growth* through the divorce transition (during or after the actual separation and/or legal divorce (when the divorce papers were signed).

    *Personal growth includes positive changes in thoughts and feelings about yourself, your relationships and the way you relate to others, your actions or ways of behaving or doing things, or any other changes you identify as growth.

I hope that information obtained from this study will inform the practices of people (like counselors) who are in the position to help folks who are separated, divorced, or considering divorce so that they may experience personal growth early in the divorce process. I will keep the data I collect confidential, and I will not share your personal information with anyone outside the research team. If you are interested in participating in my study or want to learn more about it, please contact me, Lisa Silva McHale, at 201-602-1458 or by email at

MCHALEL2@mail.montclair.edu

Thank you for considering participating in this study!

Sincerely,

Lisa Silva McHale, LPC, NCC, Doctoral Candidate

Counseling and Education Leadership Department

Montclair State University.

1 Normal Avenue

Montclair, NJ

Montclair State University Institutional Review Board, Study #_____, approved this study.

Appendix D: Recruitment Email /Script for Colleagues

Title: *Women Baby Boomers' Experiences of Personal Growth through Later-Life Divorce after a Long-Term Marriage.*

A colleague of mine is conducting doctoral research on baby boomer women who believe they have experienced personal growth through a divorce at age 50 or over, after having been married for 20 years or more. The purpose of this study is to understand how woman who believe they have grown through a divorce in later life define and describe their personal growth, and to learn what they believe has helped and challenged them along the way - for instance, how did they grow and what supported, inspired, or in any way contributed to their growth?

To participate, you must be between ages 56-74 in 2020, have been divorced between two and five years from a first marriage of 20 years or more, and consider yourself having experienced personal growth through your divorce. The researcher is interested in learning about how you describe personal growth for yourself and about your specific experiences of personal growth — for instance, how you think you, your relationships, or other things in your life have changed for the better. She is also interested in learning what things (experiences, people, etc.) led to your growth. Examples of personal growth can include discovering new strengths in yourself; finding you have healthier relationships; positive changes in your behavior or actions; or any other way you believe you have grown.

The researcher hopes the information you and others share will help highlight how counselors and other helping professionals can encourage women who are in any stage of the divorce process (i.e., contemplating divorce, separated, currently going through a divorce, post- divorce) view the transition as a potential opportunity for positive change and personal

growth and to help facilitate the growth process.

Your information collected will be kept confidential. Your personal information will not be shared with anyone outside the research team. Contact Lisa Silva McHale, the principal researcher if you have any questions: Phone #: 201-602-1458 or Email: McHALEL2@mail.montclair.edu

Montclair State University Institutional Review Board, Study #_____, approved this study.

Appendix E: Social Media Post

Meet-up and Facebook post: Email to group organizers to post

Doctoral student is seeking female participants for following research study:

Women Baby Boomers' Experiences of Personal Growth through a Later-Life Divorce after a Long-Term Marriage.

Lisa Silva McHale, Licensed Professional Counselor and doctoral candidate in Counseling at Montclair State University in Montclair, New Jersey, is seeking to interview a diverse sample of women born between 1946 - 1964 (ages 56 – 74 in 2020) who were divorced at age 50 or over, after a first marriage of 20 years or more.

To participate in this study women must be divorced between two and five years and identify as having experienced personal growth after divorce. The purpose of this study is to understand how woman who believe they have grown through a later-life divorce transition define and describe their personal growth, and to learn what they believe has helped and challenged them along the way - for instance, how did they grow and what supported, inspired, or in any way contributed to their growth?

I am interested in learning about your experiences of personal growth, for example, ways you think you, or things in your life have changed for the better and what helped or contributed to any positive change(s). Examples of personal growth include positive changes in the following: your thoughts and feelings about yourself, for example, you have a stronger self- identity or have discovered new strengths in yourself; your relationships or the way you relate to others, for example, you find you have healthier relationships; and/or your actions and ways of behaving or doing things; or any other way you believe you have grown.

I hope the information you and others share will help to highlight how counselors and other helping professionals can encourage women, who are thinking about, are going through, or have gone through a divorce, to view the experience as an opportunity for positive change and personal growth. I will keep the data I collect confidential and will not share your personal information with anyone outside the research team. For more information about the study, please contact me by Phone at (201) 602 -1458 or Email at McHALEL2@mail.montclair.edu

Montclair State University Institutional Review Board, Study #_____, approved this study.

Appendix F: Consent Form

Please read below with care. You can ask questions at any time, now or later. You can talk to other people before you sign this form.

__Title:__ *Women baby boomers' experiences of personal growth through later-life divorce after a long-term marriage*

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this study is to understand how women who believe they have grown through a divorce in later-life define and describe their personal growth, and to learn what they believe has helped and challenged them along the way - for instance, how did they grow and what supported, inspired, or in any way contributed to their growth?

I am interested in learning about your experiences of personal growth after your divorce— how you think you, your relationships, or other things in your life have changed for the better. I also want to learn about what things (experiences, people, etc.) contributed to your growth.

What will happen while you are in the study?

- After you fill out the web-based demographic study, if you qualify you will be mailed this consent form. Or:
- After you let me know you are interested in the study, I will email you and will provide the title and purpose of the study along with a link to a brief web-based demographic questionnaire (e.g., age, how long you were married, when you divorced).
- If you qualify, I will email this consent form and I will invite you to ask any questions or express any concerns you have regarding my study so you can decide whether or not you want to participate.
- If you agree to participate, I will ask that you send me back this consent form (via a secure

account). And we will set up our first interview.

- We will meet two (2) times via Zoom (video conference software—you do not need an account) so that I can learn about your experiences of personal growth through your separation and divorce—positive ways that you think you or things in your life have changed and what helped you get to where you are now.

- The first interview will be about 90 minutes, and the second interview will be about 60-90 minutes long.

- At the beginning of our first meeting, we will talk about the information on this consent document, and I will let you know some information about my research interests and myself. I will ask you about what interested you in participating in the study and about your experiences that led to your positive changes in yourself, your relationships, or other things in your life. We will talk about those experiences in which you believe you have grown and what you think contributed or supported that growth. I will also ask you to share any challenges to your growth that you faced. I will again ask if you have any questions or concerns regarding this study.

- During our second meeting, I will review my summaries from our first discussion and will ask for your help in making sure I understood and captured your experiences correctly. As we speak, I will ask questions to help you describe the parts of your journey you want to share. At any point in time during the study, you can choose not to answer part or all of the questions. I will also review my summaries from other participants' interviews to see if you relate to what others have said.

Time: We will meet by Zoom (a video chat service) (2) times, with the first meeting lasting approximately 90 minutes and the second meeting lasting approximately 60-90 minutes. The entire study should be completed within four to five (4-5) months of our first meeting.

Risks: I do not anticipate any unusual risks to you in completing this study. Because I will be asking you to talk about ways you think you have grown through your divorce, our discussions will likely bring up memories, both ones that you think of as "good" memories and some that you may think of as "negative." You may feel sad or angry, depending on those memories. In addition to being a researcher, I am a licensed professional counselor and a counselor educator. If at any time during the interviews you become uncomfortable or would like to discuss feelings that come up for you please let me know and I will be happy to talk with you and to provide you with resources of support groups and counseling services, if needed. If you experience these feelings or other emotional distress in-between our meetings, please reach out to me or contact a local mental health center hotline on the list that I will provide to you during our first meeting.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits to you for being in this study. You may, however, benefit from this study because we will be focusing on positive changes that occurred through your divorce transition. You may find talking about those positive experiences meaningful and may recognize ways that you have grown and strengths that you have developed that you had not previously recognized. Others may benefit from this study because counselors and other helping professionals will hopefully gain insight about how to better help other women intentionally work on their personal growth (for example positive changes in their thoughts and feelings about themselves, clarifying their identities or who they are, how they relate to others, their actions or new or different ways of behaving or doing things etc.) as they work through the divorce process.

Compensation: There is no monetary compensation for participating in this study.

Who will know that you are in this study?

Although the results of this study may be used in publications or presentations, I will not use

your name or any identifying information. I will ask you to pick a fake name and I will use that

on all documents. I will digitally audio record the discussions that take place during the

interviews through Zoom. Recording interviews helps ensure that I accurately understand your

statements and views rather than relying on my memory. I plan to record through Zoom, which

will allow me to encrypt audio recordings (so I am the only one that can access them). After

interviews have been recorded, I will upload them to a Dropbox account (an account where I

keep information on the Internet Cloud), which is designed to protect your privacy. I will work

with a transcription service to change the recordings into words for, which will be saved as Word

documents. This service will upload recordings directly from Dropbox and send me the written

transcript via Dropbox. Outside of the transcription service, the only individuals who will have

access to these transcripts and information about our meetings are the members of my

dissertation committee and a colleague who is assisting me with my research. They will not

know your name and will not share your personal information with anyone.

You should know that New Jersey requires that any person having reasonable cause to

believe that a child has been subjected to child abuse or acts of child abuse shall report the same

immediately to the Division of Youth and Family Services.

Do you have to be in the study?

You do not have to be in this study. You are a volunteer! It is okay if you choose to stop or

withdraw and decide not to participate. It is okay if you want to stop at any time and not be

included in the study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

Do you have any questions about this study?

Please contact me, Lisa Silva McHale at the following email address:

mchalel2@mail.montclair.edu. I am conducting this study under the direction of my faculty

advisor, Harriet Glosoff, PhD at Montclair State University. If you wish to reach her please

contact her at 973-655-3482 or glosoffh@montclair.edu.

<u>Do you have any questions about your rights as a research participant?</u>

Phone or email the IRB Chair, Dr. Dana Levitt, at 973-655-2097 or reviewboard@montclair.edu.

<u>Future Studies:</u> It is okay to use my data in other studies:

Please initial: _____Yes   _____No

As part of this study, it is okay to audiotape me:

Please initial: _____Yes   _____No

One copy of this consent form is for you to keep. Statement of Consent

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general

purposes, the particulars of involvement, and possible risks and inconveniences have been

explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. My signature also

indicates that I am 18 years of age or older and have received a copy of this consent form.

Print your name here	Sign your name here	Date

Name of Principal Investigator	Signature	Date

Montclair State University Institutional Review Board, Study #_____, approved this study.