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"Midlife Crises": Understanding the Changing Nature of Relationships in Middle Age Canadian Families

Karen M. Kobayashi

SEDAP Research Paper No. 212

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"Midlife Crises:" Understanding the Changing Nature of Relationships in Middle Age Canadian Families [1]

Karen M. Kobayashi

Abstract: This paper focuses on the transitions that mark middle age (e.g., the 'empty nest', caregiving) and are triggered by the occurrence of life events in families (e.g., adult children leaving home, care for aging parents). It is noted that home-leaving by adult children has been taking longer in recent years, and in many instances adult children return to their natal home after having left. Support for older parents is becoming a significant issue in Canada as a result of population aging. Of course, the experience of such life events as taking care of older parents varies according to individuals' situations, and these can be quite varied. The paper therefore examines some of the diversity of mid-life families by describing patterns of separation and divorce, remarriage, same-sex relationships, and childlessness. It concludes with a discussion of the relationship between mid-life families and social policy.

Keywords: midlife, families, and intergenerational relationships

JEL Classifications: J12, J13, Z00

Résumé: Cette étude se concentre sur les transitions des personnes d'âge moyen (i.e. le don de soins, « le syndrome du nid vide ») survenus à l'occasion de certains événements familiaux (i.e. les enfants qui quittent la maison, la prise en charge de parents âgés). Ces dernières années, on a observé que les enfants adultes quittent de plus en plus tard le foyer familial et, dans plusieurs cas, y retournent après l'avoir quitté. Par suite du vieillissement de la population, le soutien aux parents âgés est devenu une question importante au Canada. Bien sûr, l'expérience d'événements tels que le soutien aux parents âgés dépendants varient énormément en fonctions des situations individuelles de chacun. Cette étude se concentre en conséquence sur la diversité des familles d'âge moyen en décrivant les tendances de séparation et de divorce, de remariage, de relations homosexuelles et d'absence d'enfants. Elle se conclut par une discussion sur la relation entre les familles d'âge moyen et les politiques sociales.

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[1] Previously published as Chapter 7 in D. Cheal and M. Owen (eds.), Canadian Families Today (pp. 101-116). Don Mills: Oxford University Press.

The application of a life course perspective to the study of families has resulted in a partitioning of family time into stages, allowing researchers to isolate and examine the changing nature of relationships at different periods of the family life course. Given its focus on the interplay between "aging, social change, and family dynamics" (Moen, 1991:135), researchers have applied this theoretical framework to examinations of family change over time at both the micro and macro levels.

This chapter focuses on the midlife stage in families, often referred to in the literature as the "sandwich stage" because of its chronological placement between young adulthood and later life along the family life course trajectory. Recently, however, with the increasing demographic complexity of North American families, it has become even more difficult to assign distinct structural markers, such as age, to entrance and exit from life course stages. The age range of 45-64 years, previously used to define middle age, is no longer seen as valid or appropriate. As Allen et al. (2000:913) point out in their review of the literature on families in the middle and later years, "there is no agreed upon chronological or processual definition of middle-age." Indeed, it is the transitions to various stages (e.g., the return to work, the "empty nest," caregiving) triggered by the occurrence of life events in the domains of work and the family (e.g., re-entry into the paid labour force, adult children leaving home, care for aging parents), and not age markers per se, that seem to define the parameters of midlife in the family literature.

In the family domain, "demographic changes highlight the evolving nature of midlife" (Antonucci and Akiyama, 1997:147). For example, with the increasing age at first marriage for both men and women in Canada over the past few decades, the transition to

parenthood has inevitably been delayed into the 30s for many couples.[1] With the mean age at first birth for women at just under 30 years of age (29.5 years) in 2002 (Statistics Canada, 2004) and average life expectancy at almost 80 years (79.7 years) (Statistics Canada, 2005), Canadians are more likely to experience being "sandwiched" between the needs of growing children and aging parents, at one time the definition of a middle age family (Allen et al., 2000), well into their 40s and 50s. This trend is likely to continue well into the future as the pursuit of career trajectories (i.e., post-secondary education and full-time employment) in intersection with family interests and responsibilities becomes increasingly "normative" for Canadian women.

What are the implications of these changing demographic trends for middle age families? This chapter explores the impact of such changes in the broad contexts of living arrangements and intergenerational relationships, two of the main areas of sociological research on midlife families in Canada and the United States.

a. Coresidence and Home Leaving

Recent statistics from the 2001 Census indicate that over one-half (58%) of young adults aged 20-24 years and almost one-quarter (24%) aged 25-29 years still co-reside with their parents, supporting the contention that "… midlife parenthood often comprises prolonged periods of co-residence with grown adults" (Mitchell, 1998a:2). The provinces with the highest proportion of intergenerational coresidence (young adults 20-29 years with their parents) are Newfoundland and Labrador and Ontario at 50.9% and 47.1% respectively,

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[1] It should also be noted here that a growing number of Canadian adults are opting not to have children, thereby increasing the number of childless couples in midlife.

but all provinces have seen substantial increases in coresidence over the past 20 years. This new family arrangement coupled with an increase in the average age at first birth means that midlife parents may be well into their 50s before experiencing an "empty nest," if at all. Such a delay in the transition to a one-generation household has implications for parent-child relationships in the latter years of middle age as it is likely to coincide with the timing of parents' retirement planning or, in cases of prolonged coresidence, the passage into retirement. This intersection of key transition points along family and work trajectories in midlife reflects the multiple linkages of roles in these two domains over the adult life course. (See Figure 1 and Table 1.)

Why is it taking longer for recent cohorts of young adult children to leave the parental home to establish residential independence? There are a number of reasons for the postponement of this life course transition. Research indicates that children's economic/financial needs are a key factor influencing the home leaving behaviour of young adult children (Carr, 2005; Cohen and Kaspar, 2002; Mitchell and Gee, 1996; Shehan and Dwyer, 1989; White 1994). Midlife parents, who, it is assumed are in their peak earning years, provide a significant amount of financial and instrumental support to coresident children at this stage in the family life course. Assistance that takes multiple forms, including the payment of tuition and other fees for postsecondary education and/or vocational training, and, most importantly, the continued provision of housing, utilities, meals, and transportation. Given increases in unemployment and underemployment rates, declines in affordable housing, and the trend toward extensions in schooling for young adults over the past few decades, parents may continue to be, as noted earlier, the primary resource for adult children well into later life (Mitchell, 1998b; Settersten, 1999).

The shift in the timing of home leaving among young adults can also be attributed to the continuation of a long-term trend toward postponement of marriage. 2001 Census data indicate that the average age at first marriage is currently 28.2 years for women and 30.2 years for men, up from 22.0 and 24.4 years respectively in 1975 (Statistics Canada, 2003a and The Vanier Institute of the Family, 2004). The increasing age at first marriage coupled with the propensity of young adults to leave home just prior to marriage, for a number of different reasons from economic to cultural, has resulted in prolonged periods of intergenerational coresidence in midlife Canadian families (Mitchell and Gee, 1996). The timing of parents' transition to an "empty nest" then can be seen as directly linked to the inter-relationship between economic and marital status characteristics of adult children.

In addition to the economic and marital characteristics of adult children, family structure plays an important role in determining home leaving behaviour. Young adults living in blended or step- families are more likely to leave home early than those who reside in either single- or two-parent biological families (Eshleman and Wilson, 2001; Mitchell, 1994). Premature home leaving by adult stepchildren is related to a weakened sense of mutual obligation as family members in stepparent-stepchild relationships and related conflict over power relations within these families (Aquilino, 2005; Eshleman and Wilson, 2001). Divorce and widowhood also influence coresidence patterns in midlife Canadian families: there is a decreased likelihood that adult children will live at home if parents are divorced or a parent is widowed (Boyd and Norris, 1995). This may be due to the custodial or widowed parent's decreased ability to provide financial support to adult

children in coresident families, an impetus for the child to seek residential independence (Aquilino, 2005).

Although intergenerational coresidence is regarded in the literature primarily as a reflection of adult children's needs, Ward and Spitze (1996) note that children do not always express satisfaction with this living arrangement. In fact, they maintain that "coresidence [actually] violates the child's norms and expectations about adulthood and independence, and [that] children may experience greater strain over exchanges in shared households" (p. 537). The recognition of a tension between coresident parents and adult children and its relationship to living arrangements has been a focus of research on the quality of intergenerational relationships in midlife families (Mitchell and Gee, 203; Shehan and Dwyer, 1989; Ward and Spitze, 1996). In many cases, incongruence between parents and young adult children over expectations for support may lead to intergenerational disputes within the family (see Box 1). Within more traditional immigrant cultures, parent-child incongruence on adherence to core family and religious values (e.g., filial obligation, family shame) can be the source of extreme conflict leading to the eventual break-down of the nuclear family unit.

Box 1: Intergenerational Conflict in a Cluttered Nest: The Voice of a Young Male, Indo-Canadian Adult Child

I personally feel my father is not living up to that obligation of taking care, of being supportive, and fulfilling his roles, for example, tuition fees. Every time I have asked for money, he's refused. (This son does not contribute to the household finances) Me and my father don't speak to each other, so that is kind of rough. I've laid down the foundation of the dynamic in my family. Now, there's problems. There's that implicit assumption that the younger, the kids will take care of the parents, right? Now my grandparents are also feeling like my parents are not living up to their obligations.

Source: Barbara A. Mitchell and Ellen M. Gee. 2003. One Roof: Exploring Multi-generational Households in Canada. In Marion Lynn (Ed.), *Voices: Essays on Canadian Families* (pp. 291-311). Reprinted with express permission of author.

The intersection of ethnicity and immigrant status has implications for continuing coresidence in midlife families. North American research indicates that there is a stronger sense of obligation to support young adult children in Asian immigrant families (Kamo, 2000; Mitchell and Gee, 2003). Mitchell and Gee (2003), in a study of multigenerational households, include an exploration of the coresidential experiences of Chinese and South Asian immigrant families, currently the two largest visible minority populations in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2003b). Their findings, although limited by a small sample size, highlight the salience of cultural preferences (for e.g., midlife parents' complete assumption of all financial responsibilities for their young adult children as an expression of their parental obligation to "care" for their children) and not economic needs as the key determinants of living arrangements over the family life course. Results from Pacey's (2002) comparative study between Canadian and Chinese Canadian immigrants support these findings in a sample of older adults.

The importance of cultural exigencies can be seen even in the context of post-immigrant visible minority families. In a study on parent-child relationships in Japanese Canadian families, third generation midlife children recalled that both cultural and socioeconomic factors shaped their preferences to coreside with parents as young adults (Kobayashi, 1999). Despite the Canadian-born status of the midlife parents, there was an enduring expectation that the nuclear family would stay intact until children, particularly daughters, made the transition to marriage. This cultural "pull factor" combined with the economic necessity, in many cases, on the part of adult children to remain at home, formed the basis for intergenerational coresidence in midlife families.

b. Returning Home

The return of adult children to the parental home in young adulthood is becoming an increasingly common experience in contemporary middle age families. These young adults, referred to in the literature as "boomerang kids" (Mitchell and Gee, 1996; Mitchell, 1998b) due to their pattern of leaving the family "nest" and returning again at some point(s) over the family life course, have been the focus of a number of recent studies on parent-adult child coresidence (Mitchell, 1998b; Mitchell et al., 2002; Ward and Spitze, 1996; White, 1994). This literature has examined the antecedents and consequences of a "cluttered nest" for both home returning children and their parents.

The experience of home returning is shaped mainly by adult children's needs and social situations, particularly economic necessity and/or marital status transitions. The antecedents of return coresidence are, in fact, remarkably similar as those for continuing

coresidence. Ward and Spitze (1996), in a comparative study on living arrangements in the United States, find that coresidence by parents and adult children, whether continuing or return, is largely a "response to the circumstances of children" (p. 537). Indeed, the return of adult children to the parental home is often precipitated by marital disruption (i.e., separation, divorce, or the break-up of a common law relationship) and/or economic difficulties (i.e., transition from full-time employment to unemployment or underemployment, single parenthood). This finding is supported by the results of studies undertaken by Mitchell and Gee (1996) and Mitchell (1998b) in the Canadian context.

How does the return to the "empty nest" affect midlife family relationships? Although much has been written on the consequences of the "cluttered nest" in midlife, research findings in this area have often been contradictory. The effects of "boomerang children" on family relationships have ranged from positive to negative. On the positive side, the overall marital satisfaction of midlife parents has been found to be quite high among those who are living with returning children as parents may receive additional support (emotional, instrumental, financial) from pooled resources (Mitchell and Gee, 1996; Ward and Spitze, 1998). Thus, returning children may actually act as the antidote to "empty nest syndrome" for parents. Of negative consequence, however, is the decrease in self-reported relationship satisfaction between parents and adult children in the post-return home period due to conflicts over power relations in the home (Kobayashi, 1999). Returning adult children may not adapt well to the reassertion of authority by parents within the household, particularly if the "ground rules" are not open for negotiation. The negative effects of home returning are multiplied even further in families of children who

are “serial home leavers,” those who leave and return multiple times (i.e., three or more) over the family life course (Mitchell and Gee, 1996).

c. Support for Older Parents

Cutbacks to health care and social services over the past decade in Canada have precipitated an increased reliance on the family by governments at all levels for the care of older adults. This issue is particularly salient for midlife families as Michelson and Tepperman (2003:56) point out that almost one-half of caregivers are between the ages of 35 and 54 years, with an average age of 51. What will be the consequences of changes to public policy and programs for midlife families? This is an important and timely question as Canada faces the challenges of an aging population early this century.

For the first time in our history, it is estimated that Canadian adults will spend a longer time caring for their aging parents than raising their children (McDaniel, 2005). Given the gendered nature of caregiving in our society, this means that the burden of care will continue to fall on women in midlife (Dentinger and Clarkberg, 2002; McDaniel, 2005). Although the compression of morbidity to the latter years of old age (80 +) has resulted in a greater number of disability-free years for older parents, the need for social support from middle-aged children (daughters, in particular) remains fairly constant over time. This is because social support is comprised of three main domains, financial, instrumental, and emotional, and need for assistance in each of these areas is influenced by the timing of a number of later life course transitions, namely widowhood, retirement, and the onset of chronic illness. As older parents experience these transitions in later life,

their reliance on middle-aged adult children increases either temporarily or long-term. The extent to which support is provided (the adult child's response) is dictated both by parents' assistance needs and the quality of the parent-child relationship. For some midlife adult children, being "sandwiched" between the competing demands of caregiving for young adult children and older parents can be extremely stressful, leading to negative financial and health outcomes (Gee and Mitchell, 2003).

An older parents' experience of widowhood, an oftentimes unexpected transition, has consequences for support ranging from temporary assistance with some activities of daily living like bill payments or grocery shopping (instrumental support) to permanent reliance on children for financial help and/or companionship to combat depression (emotional support). Of course, in the latter situation, the long-term need for assistance may require a complete restructuring of children's lives as they try to negotiate caregiving with full-time work and parenting roles and responsibilities. Although multigenerational coresidence may be the best solution, it may cause considerable strain on the relationship between parent and child.

It is less likely that retirement, a transition that older parents are expected to plan for over time, will have such an onerous effect on middle-age children's lives. In fact, if healthy, financially secure, and married, retired parents may end up providing financial or instrumental assistance to children in the form of childcare services, home and yard work. Nevertheless, there is great diversity in the older adult population, and a large proportion of later life Canadians have a difficult time adjusting financially and emotionally to retirement. It is older parents in this group that require the most support from children to help them adjust to the truncation of their work trajectory.

Perhaps the transition that gives rise to the most significant alteration in the family trajectory of middle-aged children is the onset of chronic disease or disability in an older parent(s). Support is transformed into caregiving when a parent becomes ill; this transformation is salient in that it requires a great deal of sacrifice (temporal, emotional, financial) on the part of middle-aged children, mainly daughters, who are oftentimes forced to make life-altering decisions regarding work and family in a very short period of time.

d. Intergenerational Ambivalence

Despite increases in continued and return coresidence in midlife families over the past few decades, these experiences are still considered non-normative in Canadian society. There is still an expectation that adult children will leave the parental home, an indicator of the success of parents' childraising skills or abilities. The launch of children from the nest is perceived as parents' "raison-d'etre," a key transition point along the family life course trajectory. Given the salience of this event, it is not surprising that incompatibility between parents' expectations and children's behaviour in this regard may often lead to ambivalence in intergenerational relationships (Fingerman et al., 2004).

A recent concept in the sociological literature on the family, intergenerational ambivalence has been used to describe midlife parent-child relationships. To date, it has been used to examine relationships between adult children and their aging parents and in-laws (Pillemer and Suitor, 2002; Willson et al., 2003), and the nature of social ties – both family and friends – in a diverse age sample of adolescents and adults (Fingerman et al.,

2004). Findings from Willson et al.'s study point to the significance of gender in ambivalent social relationships. Midlife women are more likely to experience ambivalence in their relationships with each other and in their roles as caregivers to older parents and in-laws, suggesting that "structural arrangements give rise to ambivalence and the relationship experience is shaped by gender within the context of socially defined demands and obligations" (Willson et al., 2003:1068). The exception it seems is in mid- to later life sibling relationships, where women (positively) report close ties and the most social contact with their sisters (Connidis, 2001; Connidis and Campbell, 1995).

e. Diversity in Midlife Families

Studies on satisfaction in marital and parent-child relationships in midlife have tended to examine relationship quality as it is impacted by intergenerational living and/or social support arrangements with children (e.g., Carr, 2005; Marks, 1995; Mitchell and Gee, 1996), only occasionally highlighting the actual relationship between or well-being of members of the dyad. This myopic view of midlife families is problematic in that it fails to recognize the experiences of separated/divorced, remarried, childless, parentless, gay and lesbian, and long-term or permanent "empty nest" families, groups of emerging importance in the midlife Canadian population. We will focus on a few of these groups in this chapter.

i. Separated/Divorced

The topic of divorce has recently been the focus of research examining the impact of marital status transitions on spousal and children's well-being over the life course (Montenegro, 2004; Williams and Umberson, 2004). In a American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) – funded study based on 1,147 interviews with men and women who had been divorced at least once during their 40s, 50s, or 60s, the effects of divorce are profound; that is, the findings indicate that the divorce experience is "more emotionally devastating than losing a job, about equal to experiencing a major illness, and somewhat less devastating than a spouse's death" (Montenegro, 2004:7) (see Box 2).

Box 2: After 40, it's wives who divorce the husbands

Two-thirds of divorces after age 40 are initiated by wives, debunking the myth of an older man divorcing his wife for a younger woman, a new survey shows.

"That obviously happens, but mostly it's women who are asking for the divorce," said Steve Slon, editor of AARP the Magazine, on Tuesday. The magazine will publish the results Thursday in its July-August issue.

"The Divorce Experience: A Study of Divorce at Midlife and Beyond" surveyed 1,147 people ages 40 to 79 who had divorced in their 40s, 50s or 60s. The questionnaire survey, completed in December, had a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.

The survey found that women over age 40 seemed more aware of problems in their marriages, while men were more likely to be caught off-guard by their divorces. Twenty-six percent of men said they "never saw it coming," compared with 14 percent of women.

The increase in women initiating a divorce reflects the empowerment of women to leave bad marriages, said Linda Fisher, AARP's director of national member research.

"Thirty years ago, many of these women might not have been able to (divorce) because of lack of self-confidence and financial means," she said. "Women are more likely to have more self-confidence and the means to leave a marriage when the circumstances are untenable."

The AARP study found that most women said they filed for divorces because of physical or emotional abuse, infidelity or drug and alcohol abuse. Men said they sought divorces because they fell out love, they had different values or lifestyles or infidelity.

The report also found that most older divorced people move on to other serious relationships.

Seventy-five percent of women in their 50s reported enjoying serious, exclusive relationships after their divorces, often within two years. Eighty-one percent of men in their 50s did the same.

Source: Chaka Ferguson, Associated Press Writer; Yahoo! News May. 26, 2004 08:25 PM

Clearly, divorce is perceived as a disruptive and stressful event when it occurs in midlife, potentially leading to a number of negative life course consequences.

Perhaps the most significant consequences of divorce in midlife are its effects on parent-child relationships and the well-being of children. Indeed, the primary reason for partners remaining in an unhappy marital union and delaying separation is concern over the welfare of their children (McDaniel and Tepperman, 2004; Montenegro, 2004). With the experience of divorce increasingly becoming a midlife phenomenon [2], children who are most likely to be affected by parental divorce are in their late adolescent to young adult years. At this stage in the life course, children are the process of forming attitudes about marriage and family themselves and thus, may be more vulnerable to the negative impact of parental disagreement or conflict (Kozuch and Cooney, 1995). Despite concerns over the long-term effects of divorce on children's attitudes and behaviours however, there is little evidence to suggest that exposure to the marital disruption of midlife parents negatively affects the quality of parent-child relationships, children's ability to cope with challenging life events such as moving, nor their overall optimism about marriage (Dunlop and Burns, 1995; Landis-Kleine, Foley, Nall, Padgett, and Walters-Palmer, 1995; Taylor, Parker, and Roy, 1995).

How do midlife parents themselves fare in the aftermath of divorce? The ability to cope varies greatly according to gender. In the financial domain, middle aged women, particularly those with sole or majority custody of adolescent or young adult children, are more likely than their male counterparts to fear (and to actually experience) economic instability (Finnie, 1993; Montenegro, 2004). Emotionally, although both men and

[2] According to Statistics Canada (2004), the age profile of separated and divorced Canadians is changing: from 1986 to 2002, the average age at divorce increased by just over four years to 43.1 for men and 40.5 for women.

women experience loneliness and depression following marital dissolution, women have greater rates of depression and distress than do men in the post-divorce period (Wu and Hart, 2002). This is not surprising given that women's distress is largely tied to their feelings of anxiety over their children's well-being as well as the uncertainty surrounding their financial status (Montenegro, 2004). Loss of spousal support, however, appears to have a significant impact on men's overall health; that is, separation/divorce results in both poorer physical and mental health for men (Wu and Hart, 2002), suggesting that the instrumental and emotional support wives provide in marital unions is an important determinant of health for husbands. This is not the case for women who tend to have stronger informal support networks (friends and family) outside of marriage and thus, do not suffer such notable declines in their physical well-being.

ii. Remarried

According to statistics on marriage in Canada, remarriage, like divorce, is a midlife transition with the average age of marriage for previously divorced brides being 41.4 years and the average age for grooms, 45.0 years (Statistics Canada, 2003a). Remarriage in midlife is also a gendered transition: men are more likely than women to remarry, a pattern that holds well into later life (Ambert, 2002). There may be a number of reasons for this including the idea that divorced or widowed women in middle to older age groups greatly value their newfound independence and thus prefer to remain single (Baker, 2001). For men, it may be the case that they find it difficult to make the transition to being "on their own," without the emotional and instrumental support of a partner and

subsequently seek out companionship in the period soon after a divorce to fill that void. Although research on remarriages in general indicates that these couples are at an increased risk of divorce compared to first marriages, it has been suggested that remarriages in mid- to later life may actually have a lower likelihood of marital disruption. This is especially the case when both partners have previously been married (Wu and Penning, 1997).

The remarriage of two previously married individuals in midlife oftentimes involves the "blending" of two families, referred to in the literature as a "complex stepfamily." This reconstitution, that is, the integration of adolescent and/or young adult stepchildren into a new family form, brings with it a number of challenges at this life course stage. In midlife families, the adaptation process for stepchildren is influenced by a number of factors including children's age at their parent's remarriage, their residential status (coresident or not), and the quality of the parent-child relationship prior to the remarriage. For example, the difficult period of adjustment that many coresident children undergo soon after a parent's remarriage may be attributed, in part, to their resentment at the introduction of another authority figure into the home. Depending on the child's age, this may coincide directly with the development of his/her desire to establish a sense of independence from the family, with the step-parent perceived as a yet another barrier to the achievement of this goal (Hetherington and Kelly, 2002). Of course, the degree of closeness between parents and their children prior to remarriage has a significant impact on the adaptation of children to their new family structure. Children who have close relationships with their custodial parent in the pre-remarriage period are likely to adjust

better to a stepfamily arrangement than those who have a history of conflicted or strained relations (Ahrons and Tanner, 2003).

iii. Gays and Lesbians

Gay and lesbian families in midlife are becoming increasingly diverse as more and more same-sex partners in middle age are making efforts to "blend" existing families or have children together either "biologically" or through adoption (Epstein, 1996; Miller, 1996). Such emergent family forms may be referred to as "new nuclear" or "new blended," with same-sex dyads forming the nucleus of the family unit. Often the result of the end of a heterosexual union(s), the "new blended" family is part of a midlife phenomenon in Canadian families. As once-married partners "come out" after years of marriage and child-rearing, they find themselves trying to negotiate both a divorced and new sexual identity in middle age. For custodial parents, in particular, this may be a difficult period of adjustment for both themselves and their adolescent and/or young adult children. Bringing together families who have not yet made their own transitions to a gay- or lesbian-headed single-parent unit may result in conflicted relations early on in the "new blended" family (Epstein, 1996).

Recently, the caregiving relationships of midlife gay and lesbians have been recognized as important topics in the literature on social support in families. One of the key exploratory studies to emerge in this area focuses on the experiences of midlife and older gay caring for chronically ill partners (Hash, 2001). The findings highlight a number of key similarities and differences between the experiences of gays and lesbians

and heterosexual caregivers. Not surprisingly, homophobic attitudes of informal (family and friends) and formal (health care and human service professionals) resources are a major barrier to providing care for chronically ill loved ones. Beyond that, on a structural level, unsupportive policies and practices serve to exacerbate the problem of discrimination and/or non-recognition of same-sex partnerships in the context of caregiving.

iv. Childlessness

Childlessness in midlife can be either by choice or due to "involuntary infertility." The latter meaning the inability to conceive despite the wish to have a child(ren) (Ambert, 2005). As the average age at marriage continues to increase in Canadian society, one of the principal reasons for involuntary childlessness has become delayed childbearing. A woman's decision to put off starting a family until her mid- to late 30s and 40s may have profound implications for her ability to conceive, given that significant fertility declines take place from the age of 35 years onward (Heaton, Jacobson, and Holland, 1999). For midlife women with fertility issues, one of the most-sought after options for childbearing is assisted reproductive technology (i.e., in vitro fertilization).

Despite their higher propensity to divorce (controlling for number of years married), childless couples report greater marital satisfaction on a number of relationship dimensions than those who are parenting (Twenge, Campbell, and Foster, 2003). In another study comparing parents and childless couples, Koropeckyj-Cox (2002) tests a Connidis and McMullin's (1993) typology of parental status in her exploration of the

factors influencing subjective well-being among mid- to later life individuals in these two groups. The findings indicate that parental status in midlife is linked to psychosocial well-being; good-quality relationships between parents and adult children are associated with a sense of positive well-being among parents in mid- to later life. Further, the relationship between childlessness and well-being is gendered: women who are childless report higher levels of distress than their male counterparts and have, overall, lower subjective well-being than mothers in close parent-child relationships.

Conclusions

This chapter has provided an overview of the key research areas in the study of midlife families in North America. Wherever possible, connections to the Canadian literature have been made. It is important to note that Statistics Canada, through the collection of detailed family data in the Census and General Social Surveys (i.e., Cycles 5.0, 10.0, 15.0), is a valuable resource for information on changing patterns of family life over time. Coresidence, social support, caregiving, and marital transitions, are but a few of the broad topic areas relevant to midlife families that can be explored using national datasets. The door is also now wide open to pursuing new research projects on such emergent topics as intergenerational ambivalence in midlife parent-young adult relationships, the ethno-cultural dimensions of parent-child coresidence in midlife, and partnership satisfaction in midlife gay and lesbian unions.

As contemporary family researchers, we need to expand our definitions of family life course stages and recognize the linkages between lives at individual and structural levels.

And, in a field that has long been dominated by quantitative research, there needs to be a greater acknowledgment and appreciation of the contributions that qualitative and mixed method studies have made and have yet to make to the growing body of family life course literature. Although this has been an uphill battle for many years, recent published exploratory work by Mitchell and Gee (2003), Carr (2005), and Hash (2001) on midlife families have fuelled our optimism for change. Midlife family researchers can learn much from family gerontologists who have for some time now recognized the value and importance of narrative research (see the work of Bill Randall, Gary Kenyon, Phillip Clark, Brian DeVries, and Jay Gubrium for examples) in understanding the lived experiences of older adults and their family members.

Finally, this chapter would not be complete without a discussion of the relationship between midlife families and social policy. Three key issues need to be highlighted in this regard. They are: (1) midlife parent-young adult coresidence; (2) social support in midlife child-older parent relationships; and (3) diversity in midlife families.

With young adults finding it increasingly difficult to leave the parental nest (and increasingly necessary to return) for financial reasons, parents have become the social safety net for their children regardless of their own socioeconomic position (Mitchell and Gee, 1996). Since research in this area has, for the most part, focused on middle- to upper class parents (those with the financial means to assist adult children through coresident living arrangements), the experiences of low income families have all but been ignored. In Canada, the consequences for young adult children are most dire for those whose parents lack the financial means to provide assistance by allowing them to stay at (or return) home. Cuts to social welfare programs over time have weakened the "knots of the

net" in low income families, increasing the likelihood of earlier than expected launches and the posting of "no re-entry" signs for children wanting to return home. As a result, young adult children may be forced into a cycle of poverty, living out on the streets, suffering from chronic unemployment or underemployment, and subsequently engaging in high-risk behaviours like drug and alcohol abuse.

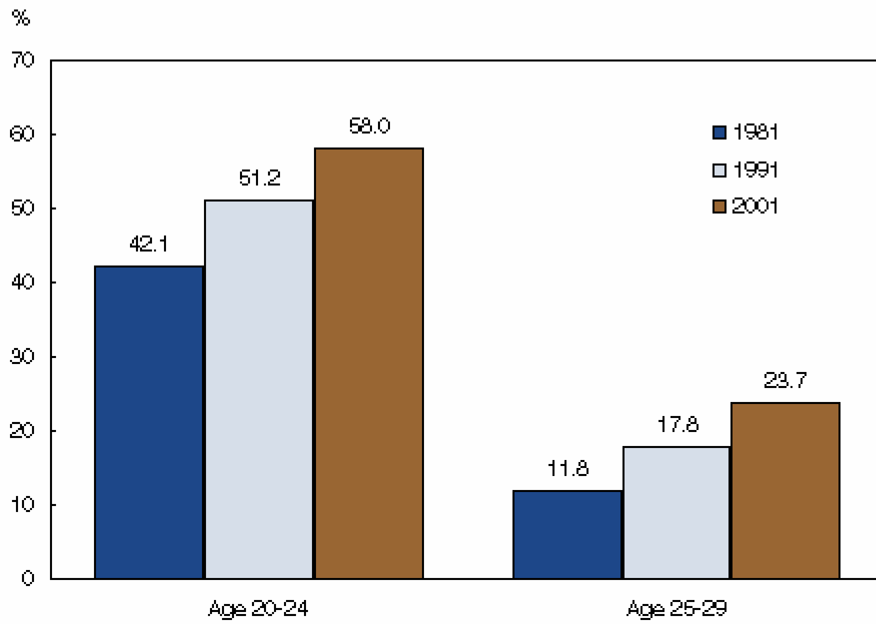
The issue of social support to older parents has been of primary interest to governments in light of reductions to health care spending in this country. At one time, a shared responsibility between government and family, the provision of social support and caregiving to older adults has been pushed further and further away from the public into the family domain. Responsibility for support has become more "informalized" as hospital and community support service budgets have been cut. Who bears the brunt of this excess burden for care? The onus falls squarely on the shoulders of midlife women – the sandwich generation – who are the primary caregivers to older parents and parents-in-law in addition to coresident adolescent and/or young adult children. As a result of this "caregiving squeeze," middle aged women have a higher likelihood of transitioning from full to part-time employment or of leaving the paid workforce altogether. To date, despite the findings from numerous research studies and reports (e.g., Fast, Keating, Oakes, and Williamson, 1997; Keating, Fast, Frederick, Cranswick, and Perrier, 1999), neither government nor employer-supported policy has adequately addressed the issue of paid eldercare leave for midlife women.

Recognition of the diversity in midlife Canadian families in the policy domain has been limited for the most part to issues of class, gender, and family structure. For example, governments have focused their efforts on the development of social welfare

policy and programs for young to middle age single mothers (female-headed lone parent families) living at or below the low income cutoff line (LICO), a group characterized by intersecting identity markers of diversity. With the continuing emergence of diverse family forms in midlife, like gay and lesbian-headed families and childless (by choice or not) couples, it is imperative that governments develop and institute policies that address and attempt to break down systemic barriers (e.g., definitions of "parent" in maternity/paternity leave policy, definitions of "family" for caregiving leave), that have, to date, served to marginalize these groups in Canadian society.

Research and policy must inform one another. Given the increasing diversity of the Canadian population in terms of age, class, ethnicity, immigrant status, sexual orientation, and family structure, it is clear that a broader mandate for family research in this country be developed. Such an initiative is needed to address some of the key policy issues for midlife families and the implications for their aging in the 21st century.

Figure 7.1: Percentage of Young Adults Living in the Parental Home, Canada



Source: Adapted from Statistics Canada website. 2002. 2001 Census of Canada: Profile of Canadian Families and Households: Diversification Continues, Catalogue Number 96F0030XIE2001003, www.statcan.ca, accessed on February 20, 2005.

Table 7.1: Proportion of young adults aged 20 to 29 living with their parent(s), Canada, provinces, and territories, 1981 and 2001

	1981	2001
	%	
Canada	27.5	41.1
Newfoundland and Labrador	35.9	50.9
Prince Edward Island	33.5	42.1
Nova Scotia	30.8	38
New Brunswick	31.3	38.5
Quebec	31.9	39.2
Ontario	29.8	47.1
Manitoba	24.4	36.1
Saskatchewan	18.9	29.8
Alberta	15.6	30.6
British Columbia	21.8	40.2
Yukon	12.9	30.9
Northwest Territories	22.1	30.8
Nunavut		32.2

Source: Adapted from Statistics Canada website. 2002. 2001 Census of Canada: Profile of Canadian Families and Households: Diversification Continues, Catalogue Number 96F0030XIE2001003, www.statcan.ca, accessed on February 20, 2005.

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