

Uncharted paths: A qualitative exploration of the life experiences of middle-aged, never-married women in 21st Century America

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Abstract

The life experiences of middle-aged never-married women in the United States are an often-overlooked demographic in psychological research. Utilizing an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis [IPA] approach, this research aimed to uncover the unique narratives of these women, focusing on the cultural, social, and personal factors that shape their identities and experiences. Drawing upon developmental and lifespan psychology theories, particularly Erikson's theory of generativity versus station, this study critiques existing frameworks that fail to account for the diverse narratives of never-married middle-aged women. Participants aged 35 to 50, shared their experiences through semi-structured interviews, revealing three major themes, including the interplay between perceptual awareness construction, liberation from societal myths and redefining identity, and a journey of self-acceptance and growth. The findings highlight how societal norms can create pressures that influence self-esteem and identity in never-married middle-aged women. Participants describe a complex relationship with their social circles, where feelings of inclusion or exclusion shaped their perceptions. The study emphasizes the importance of empowerment and personal agency, as participants articulated a desire to define their identities beyond societal expectations, embracing their identities and life choices. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the psychological experiences of never-married middle-aged women in the United States and illustrates a resilience and capacity for self-discovery in the face of societal stigma. By amplifying these voices, this study advocates for a more inclusive discourse that recognizes the diverse paths women may choose, ultimately informing support systems and policies that address the unique needs of this demographic. Future research should continue to investigate the intersectionality of experiences among never-married women across different cultural and societal contexts, striving for a comprehensive understanding of their journeys.

Keywords: Midlife; Middle Age; Qualitative; Women's Experiences

1. Introduction

Developmental and lifespan psychologists examine how individuals learn, grow, develop, mature, and adapt to different life stages [1]. This is key for understanding and conceptualizing the dynamics of human development and how individuals physically, cognitively, socially, and emotionally grow and decline over time [2]. Current psychological research that investigates the stage of midlife suggests being middle-aged is complex and negatively skewed.

Midlife chronologically spans the age between 40 and 50, but this age is subjective as perceptions of age can shift as much as plus or minus 10 years [3,4] depending upon perceptions of age [5]. These perceptions can be linked to social psychological and biomedical theories or perspectives [6], which impact conceptions of life satisfaction, well-being, cognitive functioning, and successful aging [7].

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1.1. Theoretical frameworks

1.1.1. Generativity and Stagnation

Erikson theorized that middle adulthood was marked by an impactful shift and conflict began between the ages of 30 and 47 years and continued until the age of 65 [8]. According to this theory an individual either focuses on generativity with the primary task of caring for others or contributing to the next generation, or stagnation and feeling emotional despair as a result of failing to meet this generative developmental stage [9]. Subsequently, an individual moves into older adulthood and either focuses on feelings of accomplishment and acceptance of death or feelings of bitterness over missed opportunities and dread of death.

A gap in Erikson's theory is that it fails to account for how individuals experience differing narratives and norms, social factors, and biological factors that can influence psychological stages. Nor does Erikson's theory advance how an individual can resolve conflicts in generativity versus stagnation, account for biological differences between individuals related to chronological age or examine how an individual can move successfully from one developmental stage to the next. If individuals in midlife were to adopt the perspective put forth in this theory, it would suggest that an individual in middle adulthood who is caring for children or others would find emotional balance, but a childless individual or an individual who is not caring for others would find emotional despair. This means there is a gap in understanding the outlying individuals who find emotional balance, even though they are failing to meet Erikson's developmental stage markers.

1.1.2. Midlife Crisis

Jaques [10], who popularized the 'midlife crisis' theory, did little to challenge or change understandings of midlife different than Erikson's. In the Jaques study, 310 creative artists' case histories were examined. Around the age of 37 Jaques suggested that many experienced a creative crisis and a multitude of stressful experiences. These experiences included emotional struggles, experiences with mortality, depression, breakdowns, religious awakenings, decline in productivity around the age of 35, and even death. According to Jaques, those who had not established themselves in middle age through marriage or occupation were badly prepared to meet the demands of middle age [10]. This suggests a psychological burden will fall on those who fall outside of cultural norms [11]. This research is limited, as it examined a population that was mostly men who were economically advantaged and was conducted over 60 years ago. This limits an individual from understanding how lifestyle choices, personality traits, or differing life experiences could impact the likelihood of a midlife crisis occurring today.

Levinson [12] examined the social roles, personalities, and experiences of 40 men between the ages of 35 and 45 years and found that for 80% of the men, this time of life was filled with crisis. However, they also found that midlife was a time of reevaluation, self-discovery, change, and soul searching. While these findings highlight the challenges of the midlife stage of life, they do not contextualize the experiences of women or cultural norms. To this day, the idea of a midlife crisis remains a constructed cultural norm. Wethington [13], who assessed 724 Americans' ability to define a midlife crisis, found that 90% were able to define the midlife crisis, but what is lesser known is that only 10% of American men and women are likely to experience a crisis. This suggests that there is a gap between theoretical constructions and perceptions around middle-age identity and lived experiences.

1.1.3. Identity

Social identity theory posits individuals derive their self-concept from their inclusion in social groups, such as nationality or gender [14]. If there is a gap in the ability to determine whether an individual is part of an in-group or out-group, it can impact an individual's sense of value or positive social identity [15]. A positive social identity is associated with positive self-esteem, whereas a negative social identity is associated with lower self-esteem, feelings of competition, and a search for and seeking a more positive image within the in-group [16]. For individuals in midlife, this concept can impact psychological perceptions and outcomes.

The National Survey of Midlife Development in the United States [MIDUS] research suggests that perceptions of middle-aged identity are markedly different depending on gender. Barrett [17] examined the gendered perceptions of age of 2,681 individuals as part of MIDUS research. Findings suggest aging is a more negative experience for women in midlife as a result of cultural preferences for youth and attractiveness and that women are more significantly tied to youth identities than men, family and work role influence, and perceived control over their lives. This is inherently problematic, as it suggests that women will struggle to navigate middle age more than men, as a result of identity perceptions related to age, youthfulness, and preferences towards attractiveness. While it appears, that there is more of a complex interplay between identity, gender, and age and that there is a shifting identity at this age, this is not examined in the MIDUS research. This suggests there is a gap in examining how complex experiences, cultural norms,

individual differences, social factors, and differing cultural narratives can influence psychological outcomes. Yet, solutions as to how to navigate midlife successfully are not advanced, nor assessed, even though many studies make a suggestion that this is inherently important. Most psychological quantitative research findings only continue to contribute to these constructs and perceptions of midlife.

1.2. Quantitative Research Findings

1.2.1. *Well-Being and Life Satisfaction*

Quantitative research findings suggest that midlife individuals experience the lowest levels of well-being and life satisfaction. English and Carstensen [18] contributed to the perceptions of middle age when they examined 33 quantitative longitudinal studies on well-being and satisfaction. Findings suggest that there is a U-shaped curve surrounding well-being and life satisfaction, which falls to the lowest scores between the ages of 44 and 54 as a result of social networks becoming smaller in midlife. Noticeably missing in this study is a paralleling examination into an individual's understanding of socioemotional selectivity [19] and how it impacts their perceptions of well-being and middle-age. This theory posits that as individuals age they make more active choices about the number of close relationships they invest in, preferring more meaningful contacts. This suggests there is a gap in accounting for how other theories, like socioemotional selectivity, may impact well-being and life-satisfaction scores, which may in turn impact an individual's sense of identity.

Blanchflower [20] contributes to findings that suggest there are lower levels of well-being and life satisfaction perceptions in midlife. Findings suggest that life satisfaction across 145 countries is at its lowest between the ages of 44 and 49, and that of all the countries examined the United States held the lowest midlife well-being scores, no matter family or financial situations. Noticeably missing from this study was a counterbalanced examination of how cultural beliefs around aging and values relating to age can impact an individual's sense of well-being and life satisfaction. This suggests that there is a gap in understanding that there is not a consensus regarding aging [21] across cultures and that perceptions can shift dramatically depending on a population structure. Additionally, little research examines how an individual can navigate midlife without experiencing low life satisfaction and well-being, even though some research suggests that only 15% of single women in midlife struggle with low life satisfaction [22]. These findings are confusing, and it is essential that research further examines these shifts and provides potential solutions.

1.2.2. *Health and Mortality*

Quantitative research findings also suggest that midlife individuals experience increased negative health and psychological-related outcomes, which is only negatively compounded for never-married middle-aged women living in the United States. The Dowd et al. [23] study examined the midlife mortality rates of individuals in midlife. Findings suggest that well-being can impact mortality rates and there is a correlation between having a lower well-being score and a higher likelihood of suicide-related mortality outcomes for middle-aged individuals. Especially, as it relates to American middle-aged women, who are more likely to experience midlife mortality by suicide than American men, and are 1.7 times more likely to commit suicide than middle-aged women in Western Europe, Australia, Canada, and Japan, where suicide-related mortality rates are on the decline [24]. This suggests there is a gap for American middle-aged women to understand how to successfully navigate middle adulthood.

The Gallo et al. [25] quantitative study, which examined the correlation between cardiovascular risk profiles with life satisfaction in 493 women found that unmarried women were at a higher cardiovascular risk and showed lower life satisfaction than their married counterparts, continues to highlight the potential epidemic level of negative psychological impacts of midlife aging. This suggests there is a gap in understanding the extent to which these perceptions can impact individuals, especially middle-aged never-married American women, and that there is a lack of resources for helping individuals navigate heightened risk factors or navigate successfully through middle-age. If they did exist, it is suggested that these health and mortality-related outcomes would decline [26].

1.2.3. *Personality*

Quantitative research findings suggest that midlife individual's life experiences are linked and shaped by traits [27] that cause an individual to behave in a certain way, known as their personality [28]. While earlier research suggested that personality typically stops developing in adulthood [29] more recent research suggests personality traits are not set and can continue to shift with age due to the development of emotional stability in midlife [30]. This suggests midlife individuals should be able to exhibit an expanded emotional ability to remain calm, collected, and consistent when faced with challenges. Another study by Graham et al. [31], which examined 60,000 self-reported personality assessments, suggested a slight personality change begins to take place in middle age with agreeableness increasing and openness and neuroticism decreasing. This suggests that in midlife an individual should be more empathetic, open to new ideas,

and be less likely to experience the strong negative emotions of anxiety, depression, and anger. A longitudinal study by Allemand et al. [32], which examined the personality traits of 420 middle-aged individuals for four years, contradicted the 2020 study when it found that personality traits showed continuity across the lifespan. This suggests that personality traits remain consistent, and it might be important to look at other factors that may be impacting middle-aged individuals. However, this research also does not account for how external forces impact personality in middle age, explore how shifts impact women at this age, or account for individual differences across a population.

1.2.4. Challenges of Quantitative Research

Only in recent years have researchers begun to examine how other factors like resilience, negative life events, and shifting perceptions of midlife can influence experiences and outcomes. McGinnis [33], who developed the Managing Life Survey that measures resilience outcomes, found that of 358 participants from 35 to 40 years of age managing uncertainty, continual growth and purpose, and education were key to navigating the psychological impacts of midlife successfully. More studies like this need to expound on what can be learned from qualitative research. Part of the challenge is that quantitative research places an emphasis on standardized measures [34], which may not be encapsulated by complex variables like experiences, behaviors, and physiological factors that can vary depending on the individual [35]. Many experiences in midlife, such as life satisfaction and well-being, are subjective, and quantitative research struggles to quantify these experiences [36]. This may result in misleading conclusions [37]. Plus, quantitative studies may only encapsulate a moment in time, not account for social or cultural influences, and may struggle to construct reliable and valid measurement constructs. All of which complicate the ability for research findings to be compared across cultural contexts [38]. To alleviate some of the challenges that arise from quantitative research, researchers need to employ qualitative research methods that give validity to the measurement tools that are being developed and determine more adeptly what is being or should be measured. Yet, qualitative examinations are not well represented by researchers. Most especially for examinations of a growing population of never-married middle-aged women.

1.3. Qualitative Exploration of Middle-Age Women

1.3.1. Current Discourses of Midlife Womanhood

Quantitative findings amplify the importance of exploring the cultural, social, and historical factors that influence the lives of those in middle age because qualitative studies provide researchers with deeper insights into complex issues and uncover trends in human behavior that quantitative data may miss. For example, Moore and Radtke [39] conducted a qualitative discourse analysis of 12 women in Western Canada who identified as being never married and non-mothers, between the ages of 35 and 44 and found that participants had to continually navigate normative discourses of womanhood, singlehood, transformation in midlife, and being considered as part of a deficit identity. Counter to most quantitative studies, the study found these participants were comfortable within their middle-aged never-married womanhood, even though there was a continual struggle to maintain this mental space. This suggests that the dominant Canadian cultural narrative, which is centered around the ideology of marriage and family, is impactful. Yet, it also suggests it is possible to navigate midlife successfully without aligning with cultural norms and this gap needs to be closed. Dare [40] examined the life experiences of 40 middle-aged women in Australia and found participants had to navigate role changes in parenthood and caretaking, the impact of stress on well-being related to divorce, and shifts in social support constructs. However, this study did not account for women who fell outside a normative view of middle-aged women, including those who were never married or never had children. The study highlights there is a gap in accounting for the multidirectional life course trajectories that can impact those in midlife [41].

Thus, qualitative research examining the lives of never-married middle-aged women is surprisingly unrepresented in psychological research, with most research focusing on notions of becoming a mother, midlife crisis, life's finitude, guiding the next generation, and marriage [42,43] and research of never-married middle-aged American women is missing, almost completely.

1.3.2. Closing the Gap

What becomes clear when examining research into midlife, whether it be proposed theories or findings from both quantitative and qualitative studies, individuals experience middle age in different ways; and it is essential to examine the factors that contribute to these different experiences. This time of life can account for one of the longest developmental chronological stages $25 \pm$ years in an individual's life. Yet, little research examines the individual differences and psychological outcomes between those in midlife. While it is understood that midlife is a challenging time in life, the question needs to be answered as to how an individual can navigate this time successfully and with less negatively associated outcomes.

1.3.3. The Current Study

The study aimed to understand the unique perspectives and narratives of women who have chosen not to marry or who have never married and explore the cultural, social, and personal factors that have shaped their perspectives. With insights into life experiences, challenges, and social perceptions faced by never-married women in middle age, the aim is to contribute to the broader discourse on gender, relationships, and societal norms, as well as inform support systems that address the needs of this demographic. The overarching research question of the study was, *"How do middle-aged, never-married women in the United States experience life in the 21st Century?"*

2. Material and methods

2.1. Methodological Approach

A qualitative Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis [IPA] [44] was used to analyze the data, as it is an assistive tool for understanding how individuals experience and interpret situations, which cannot be reached through quantitative methods. It offers insight into how the participants make sense of their experiences and provides more in-depth context, which is valuable in exploring complex psychological experiences [45]. It emphasizes the subjectivity of human experiences and how lives are perceived and interpreted, ensures that participant interpretations are authentic and relevant to the central research findings, provides a framework for how participants navigate through experiences and requires a constant exploration between the whole and their parts [46]. Additionally, it is grounded in hermeneutics and phenomenology which helps to create a robust and theoretical framework [47].

Yardley [48] provides a framework to ensure that qualitative research is both valid and quality by employing the four dimensions of sensitivity to context, commitment to rigor, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance. The sensitivity to context dimension emphasizes the factors that a researcher should gain insight into or be aware of which might influence a participant's experience including cultural, social, and environmental factors. The commitment and rigor dimension emphasizes the thoroughness that is needed during a study, and the need to be meticulous during the research design, participant selection, data gathering, and analytical process to ensure that findings are credible and trustworthy. The transparency and coherence dimension emphasizes that the researcher clearly provides an account of their methods, decision-making, and data collection process, and reaches their conclusions. The impact and importance dimension emphasizes that the researcher considers the potential implications of the research to theoretical constructs, contributes to existing research, addresses relevant issues, and informs future research. By applying this framework when conducting qualitative research, a researcher can provide credible, relevant, and impactful findings to the field of psychology.

2.2. Epistemological Positioning

A social constructivist epistemological approach was taken, as it places emphasis on critically examining the societal processes and cultural and historical contexts that influence psychological understanding and highlights the importance of interpersonal relationships and dialogue in the construction of meaning, rather than on individual or biological factors that shape individual experiences [49]. By using this approach, the researcher can examine how participants are influenced by societal norms, societal interactions, narratives, values, and expectations, and identify how the participant navigates their self-concept and personal narratives [50].

The benefits of using a social constructionist epistemological approach are extensive in comparison to a positivist epistemological approach. A social constructionist epistemological approach allows the researcher to construct possible new meanings, as it suggests there is no universal reality [51]. It examines subjective contextual understandings, rather than objective realities and generalizability [52]. It employs qualitative methods, such as interviews, to explore the meanings individuals attach to their experiences, rather than quantitative methods that can be statistically analyzed [45]. It examines the interplay of various factors that may shape an individual's behavior, thoughts, or psychological outcomes, rather than reducing complex phenomena into simple components [53]. Finally, it requires the researcher to reflect on their role in the research and how their perspective might influence their interpretation of data, rather than minimizing the influence that biases, beliefs, and values a researcher might have related to the population they are examining.

2.3. Sampling Methodology and Participants

Five participants were biological women between the ages of 35 and 50, never married, living on their own, not previously diagnosed with a mental illness, currently living in the United States for a minimum of two years, and were recruited through convenience sampling. The sample was selected to align with chronological age as a result of

examining previous literature related to age samplings for those in middle age. Additionally, participants were asked to be never married and living alone to examine the influence to this growing population without the influence of a romantic partner, not be diagnosed with a mental illness to avoid possibly inflicting trauma on a participant, and be living in the United States as this population appears to be at high risk for negative age-related psychological outcomes as suggested by other studies.

2.4. Materials and Procedures

Participants were asked to report their specific demographic information, including stating their age, gender, marital status, nationality, and country of residence, and inform the researcher of their consent to join the study and be recorded prior to an interview schedule being loosely applied. Also, in adherence with the IPA process [44] an interview schedule was specifically developed in an effort to consider or identify potential sensitive topics or potential difficulties that might be encountered in relationship to key terms during the interview process. Additional prompts were developed to ensure the topic could be elaborated on.

Before the semi-structured interviews began, the researcher-built rapport with the participants. Upon verbal consent, the interviews began. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was recorded to facilitate the transcription process. After the interviews were transcribed IPA [44] process began in order to analyze the data set. This included reading through the transcripts on multiple occasions to gain a better understanding of the data and make initial notes on interesting points, themes, and reflections. Then developing themes were identified, patterns started to arise from the data, and a thematic tree was developed, which captured the essence of participant experiences. This resulted in interpreting the data on a deeper level and considering how the themes related in context to the research study question.

3. Results and discussion

Analysis revealed three major super-ordinate themes [Table 1]. The first highlighted a super-ordinate theme related to perceptual awareness construction. The second highlighted a super-ordinate theme related to the psychological impact of how I [the participant] think, they [others] think, and I am [the participants]. The third highlighted a theme related to walking in the participant's shoes to better understand the experiences of the demographic.

Table 1 Themes and Sub-themes

Super-ordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
Perceptual Awareness Construction	Impact of Social Circles and Gender Impact of Geographics, Cultural Narratives, and Discourses Impact of Physiological Factors
I Think, They Think, I Am	Liberation from Societal Myths and Redefining Identity Embracing My Inner Superwoman
Walk A Mile in My Shoes	The Chosen Path Accepting the Path Learning from the Journey

3.1. Super-ordinate Theme: Perceptual Awareness Construction

3.1.1. Sub-ordinate Theme 1: Impact of Social Circles and Gender

Participants reported the psychological impact that social circles and gender played in shaping their perceptions of being a never-married middle-aged woman in the United States. Many reflected that being surrounded by a social circle that they perceived as similar to their own or aligned with their beliefs, caused feelings of connection or being part of a group. This resulted in positive feelings and a sense of elation. This could be because having similarities is essential to both objective and subjective social connections [54], because without them, social exclusion can cause negative feelings [55].

A pattern found among the experiences of was the never-married participants' journey of navigating an array of social stigmas, feelings of exclusion and judgement, loneliness and attitudes that their married counterparts did not. An

example was being perceived as an outsider, with minimal responsibilities, when never-married women have similar responsibilities as married women [56]. The difference was that never-married women were actively scanning for signs of social inclusions or exclusion [53], which is a natural adaptative response to defending to potential threats of social exclusion [57]. Especially, when there is a real threat because middle-aged women are more likely to be publicly judged less attractive than their male counterparts and experience feelings of being socially rejected [58].

Experiences also indicated interactions with family, friends, work and larger social circles can induce feelings of pressure of needing to or not needing to assimilate towards normative gendered perceptions. The impact of this pressure varied. For some it was self-induced, for others it was directly as a result of parental perceptions or as a result of feeling a responsibility to give back to a parent, but for others, there was an active rejection of pressure from their social circle and gender normative roles. In all instances the construction of the pressure was complex.

The study findings also showed that interactions with family, friends, work and larger social circles can induce feelings of pressure, and of needing to or not needing to assimilate towards normative gendered perceptions. Some pressure was self-induced, for others it was directly as a result of parental perceptions or as a result of feeling a responsibility to give back to a parent, for others the pressure was induced by their social circle examining them through age, gender, child-rearing or marital status, but for others an active and ongoing rejection of pressure from their social circle and normative gender roles. In all instances the construction of the pressure was complex. This highlights that engrained gender perceptions exist within social circles, but these perceptions can have real consequences, but it also suggests that women can become more counter-gender stereotypic in middle age [59]. This can be both beneficial and limiting, as it can reduce emotional intergroup bias [60], but it can also cause poorer cognitive performance [61] and higher rates of negative mental health outcomes [62]. In all cases, participants were consistently having to navigate cognitive depleting experiences as a result of social stigmas associated with their gender and age. However, many were also experiencing positive outcomes associated with their independence. The balance for every woman is different, with some navigating feelings of loss and an inability to be grateful, while others feel satisfaction and an increased awareness as a result of their experiences within social circles.

The complexity of navigating social circles as a middle-aged never-married women suggests that these individuals have to navigate pressures to conform [63]. However, by examining how social circles can be a catalyst for negative feelings or a source of comfort participants navigated their experiences. Those participants who acknowledged the role their social circles had in informing their perceptions, including on gender and age norms, experienced more positive psychological outcomes [64].

3.1.2. Sub-ordinate Theme 2: Impact of Geographics, Cultural Narratives, and Discourses

Geographics, cultural narratives, and discourses also played a crucial role in shaping participant experiences. Participants located near urban areas reported a more progressive outlook on being a never-married middle-aged woman. This could be due to urban areas promoting individualism and personal choice, which allows women to explore their identities outside of traditional marital expectations [65] and has impacts well-being, the opportunity to socialize, and increase satisfaction with personal relationships. Conversely, participants from more rural areas often felt constrained by traditional views on marriage. For these participants, geographics created some feelings of ostracization and isolation, because there was a learned emphasis on marriage, having children, and conforming to cultural norms. The observation suggests geographical perceptual awareness can have varying impacts on how participants perceive themselves. This may due micro-environments having an array of political, social, and public health consequences, including impacts on feelings of well-being and satisfaction [66, 67]. This suggests that experiences should be examined through psychosocial approach to better understand the impact that geographical and psychological factors can have on individual experiences for this demographic, which some study suggest can even impact personality traits [68].

Cultural narratives and discourses came from the influence of social media. It is essential to examine this impact, as 70% of middle-aged adults use social media to share their experiences and seek out information [69], which can have a role in shaping perceptions and amplifying traditional narratives of family and marriage. Social media may be a risk for some never-married middle-aged women, as it can have negative impacts to perceptions [70]. Conversely, for some social media can have a positive impact on middle-aged individuals, as it can reduce feelings of social isolation and improve self-esteem, well-being, and depressive symptoms [71]. The presence of popular political narratives and discourse can also impact perceptions related to a sense of structural stigma [72], as negative psychological outcomes like chronic stress [73] can arise from the development of social stigmas, that are aligned with political and social discourse related to the never-married middle-age demographic. However, some participants chose to be empowered by challenging the negative social and structural stigmas. Instead.

Across narratives came the prevalent cultural underpinnings that were or were not influencing them. This included the pressure to conform or not conform to social norms, the impact of seeing women at this age become invisible in popular culture, and the influence that social media, social stigmatization, and television had. Those who avoided social media, understood the impact that their geography played on their outcomes, rejected pressure to conform, embraced their current identity, and understood that women in middle age should not be invisible, were experiencing more positive psychological outcomes and mental health.

3.1.3. Sub-ordinate Theme 3: Physiological Factors

Physiological factors that emerged as subordinate theme participants' narratives included those related to body health, beauty, and individual personality traits. Many participants reported the influence of realizing that their body was changing at that their body health was not to be taken for granted. The importance of focusing on the body suggests women focus on health-related outcomes. This may be due to gendered health disparities related to the systemic issue that healthcare systems are designed around men, as women have a higher likelihood of experiencing side effects from medication than men, and they are likely to have less access to knowledge of how health-related issues impact them than men [74]. Interestingly, the societal expectations regarding appearance and beauty, which are suggested to lead to a pressure to meet standards and impact on a woman's self-esteem, were rarely narrated by the participants. Instead, the influence of an individual's personality was cited as a larger influence in shaping their experiences. Some participants highlighted that having extroverted personality traits helped them cope with the potential stressor of loneliness and avoid negative psychological consequences, whereas others suggested having an introverted personality trait was helpful to their coping.

Meta-analytic studies on personality traits, suggest that there is a link between traits and values, and when an individual leans into their identity traits it can help them recognize their strengths and weaknesses, find new areas for growth, improve how they communicate, manage stress more effectively, acknowledge and change thinking patterns, and test alternative actions [28, 75]. This highlights the importance of understanding how physiological factors can influence how an individual perceives or understands their environment, which differ from individual to individual, and can have substantial impact.

In summary, an intersectional approach that accounts for social circles and gender narratives, geographical and cultural narratives and discourses, and physiological influence on perceptions is essential for supporting never-married middle-aged women. These themes reveal the complex interplay between societal perceptions and personal well-being. This helps to shed light on the challenges these women face while also illustrating their resilience and agency in navigating their identities in a society that often prioritizes marriage and having children.

3.2. Super-ordinate Theme: I Think, They Think, I Am

3.2.1. Sub-ordinate Theme 1: Liberation from Societal Myths and Redefining Identity

Participant narratives highlighted a focus on liberating themselves from societal myths and redefining identities beyond traditional narratives. Many of the participants highlighted their frustration at the portrayal of never-married middle-aged women as being abnormal, incomplete, lacking, or part of a deficit identity. Those participants who actively challenged stereotypes and sought to create a more authentic, rather than hyper-focusing on what they should be from a societal point of view, were finding self-acceptance, increased strength in accepting their identity, and were more resilient. This suggests that by breaking free from societal myths an individual can construct a more authentic identity, and that individuals are a complex collection of identities that are construction of an array of qualities, characteristics, affiliations, and beliefs [76]. By resisting being considered as a part of a deficit group individuals can have a more satisfying experience [39].

3.2.2. Sub-ordinate Theme 2: Embracing My Inner Superwoman

A powerful sub-ordinate theme that emerged from the narratives was a notion of empowerment or embracing an "inner superwoman." Participants often explored strategies that they employed to remain strong, realize their worth, and connect with their truest selves and identities. These were different between the participants. Some participant's inner superwomen came from feelings of knowing who they were from a young age, embracing their non-normative sexual identities, or knowing how they wanted to be perceived. Those who embraced their inner superwoman or were actively examining the nuances and shifts in their identities were fostering a sense of empowerment, resilience, and a reduced negative impact from expected societal pressures. Additionally, these participants were consistently examining, questioning, and developing a sense of self.

Individuals who reject, accept, or challenge their personal identity are developing a sense of self [77], and in middle age, those with a well-developed identity and sense of self are able to function well psychologically [78]. For many individuals in midlife, it can serve as a resource for negotiating the stressors that are encountered at this time in life, and a path by which to understand their environments and context in order to make meaning [79]. Growing bodies of research continue to underscore the importance of challenging societal narratives, embracing diverse identities, and understanding that identity is constructed individually and influenced by a lot of different factors [80]. It also helps to build solidarity and support among women in this demographic, recognize the strength and resilience that never-married middle-aged women have, and can foster greater social acceptance and understanding, which ultimately promotes a more inclusive narrative.

3.3. Super-ordinate Theme 3: Walk A Mile in My Shoes

3.3.1. Sub-ordinate Theme 1: The Chosen Path

Narratives frequently alluded to the process of actively choosing their paths, in the face of pressure to conform to normative discourses, narratives, and trajectories. Those who perceived they had a choice had higher levels of life satisfaction and well-being. Whereas those participants who felt like they had not chosen their path had a lower sense of life satisfaction and well-being. This places an emphasis on personal agency, which suggests that those in midlife make deliberate choices that reflect their values and aspirations, rather than just conforming to societal expectations [81].

By having this sense of control, never-married middle-aged women appear to be better able to navigate their lives with intention and purpose, as well as with a sense of empowered decision-making. Also, this suggests that having a sense of control in midlife can influence an individual's behavior, emotional well-being, response to stressors, and performance that peaks in midlife [82], and that by learning to differentiate between what an individual can control and what they cannot control can help an individual reduce stress or increase stress and help consider different possible outcomes [83].

3.3.2. Sub-ordinate Theme 2: Accepting the Path

Acceptance emerged as a crucial sub-ordinate theme in the participant narratives. The ability to accept, came in different forms, including accepting that it was okay to get mental health counseling, challenge roles, choose to surround themselves with individuals that met their needs, or reject cultural influences. Those who chose to accept their circumstances were in a better mental state. For some acceptance was intertwined with the concept of control, as many recognized the importance of taking charge of their narratives and accepting what they could control or not control.

In all narratives the importance of coming to terms with their middle-aged never-married identity and life choices and submitting to the fact that some choices were beyond their control was underscored. This suggests that self-acceptance is vital for mental well-being [84] and having the willingness to accept feelings, thoughts, and other physiological sensations is a major determinant for improved mental health [85].

3.3.3. Sub-ordinate Theme 3: Learning from the Journey

The final subordinate theme was, "Learning from the Journey," which emphasized the importance of reflection and personal growth through introspection. Growth came in different forms for different participants. Examples included participants narrating a realization that they did not need to think about themselves inside rigid boxes, becoming more aware of the impact of life setbacks, and realizing they are not responsible for everyone else.

By recognizing that participants had control over how they interpreted and responded to their experiences, both inside and outside of their control, participants found appreciation for their journeys and examined this as a chance for growth and self-discovery. Additionally, narratives stressed the importance of building skills in middle-age that allow growth, which may differ from individual to individual. This emphasizes the importance of self-reflection in personal growth and highlights how individuals can gain control over their narratives through self-reflection [86].

Overall, the super-ordinate theme of "Walking in My Shoes" captured the multifaceted experiences of middle-aged never-married women in the United States, the importance of self-acceptance, and learning along the way. The participant narratives contribute to a deeper understanding of resilience and the ways that these women empower themselves. They also serve as a reminder of the need for societal recognition of diverse life paths and the fulfillment that can be derived from them, as negative psychological impacts can arise if they are not recognized. By amplifying

their voices and celebrating their journeys, society can begin to dismantle the myths that have long constrained these women and recognize their invaluable contributions as empowered individuals.

4. Discussion

The experiences of never-married middle-aged women are inherently complex and shaped by a myriad of factors including social circles, cultural narratives, gender perceptions, geographic contexts, and physiological factors. Women often have to navigate societal expectations and pressures that influence their self-perception and identity. The judgment and expectations imposed by friends, family, and peers can lead to internalized stigma, diminished self-worth, and potentially feelings of isolation. This appears to be particularly produced in the American culture where having children and marriage is a suggested societal obligation. Conversely, urban environments may offer a reprieve for these women, as they may offer progressive views and celebrate diverse relationships and identity types, which can impact a never-married middle-aged woman's experience.

Gender perceptions can also affect the lives of never-married middle-aged women as well, as societal narratives often portray single women as having a deficit identity, which can hinder perceptions of self-acceptance. Cislighi and Heise [87] posit that these negative societal discourses can create internal conflicts, where a woman can feel pressured to justify their identity. Additionally, physiological factors, including personality and body health, can complicate these experiences. Research shows that societal stigma can lead to increased stress, which may affect overall well-being and life satisfaction [88]. Combined the intersectional nature of these elements can creates a landscape where never-married middle-aged women continuously have to negotiate their identity and life choices and accept, reject, or challenge societal expectations and trajectories.

Amid these challenges, the journey towards liberation and self-discovery emerges as a central theme. Participants in this study expressed a strong desire to redefine their identities beyond traditional labels by embracing their "inner superwoman." This process of liberation involves rejecting societal myths and embracing a more empowered self-concept. As noted by Shahrak et al. [89] never-married women often take pride in their independence, as it is suggested to reflect their values and priorities. This empowerment can be a reaction to societal pressures, but a proactive engagement with their lived experiences allows them to shape their narratives and assert their identities. However, it must also be recognized that some never married middle-aged women will not be able to experience a proactive engagement with their environment, will struggle with their identity, face feelings of an uncertain future, feel overlooked by others, and be challenged by lack of emotional support from others. This suggests a heightened need for women in this demographic to come together in solidarity.

The experiences of middle-aged women vary and are characterized by a journey of choosing a path, accepting that path, and learning from their experiences. Each women's experience reflects a unique process of decision-making, whether the choice was made for reasons of career growth, personal growth, or lifestyle growth, they reflect a deeply intertwined sense of self. Eloise's journey illustrates the importance of agency in choosing one's life trajectory and embracing a sense of self early, but others felt they did not have the same control. However, by accepting their path, some participants hit a significant milestone, which allowed them to embrace their identity without feeling the need to conform to societal expectations. Those who did try to conform were met with questions of their identity that appeared to experience a more likely negative psychological impact. To avoid this impact, Luoma and Platt's [90] research suggests self-acceptance, particularly for individuals who face social stigma, is essential to maintaining positive mental health. This was reflected with study participants, as it appears those that were more accepting of self, were experiencing better mental health outcomes.

The importance of learning from their journeys further enriched participant experiences, as participants regularly narrated the valuable lessons they had gained along the way. The ability to reflect on their experiences allowed these women to develop a deeper sense of self-awareness and appreciation for their unique experiences. These reflective practices enhance personal growth and reinforce the importance of personal agency in controlling their lives, which can be both positive, negative, and challenging, but contribute to a robust sense of identity.

The implications of these findings can help provide a deeper understanding of how gender roles, societal norms, and individual experiences are influencing attitudes towards this population. In particular, this research provides an expanded understanding of how women perceive themselves in an American society that often values marriage, how women are shaped by relationship dynamics and navigating social networks, how women can increase life satisfaction and well-being through the employment of resilience strategies, how women develop coping mechanisms to handle pressure and challenges and create meaningful lives outside traditional structures through choice. Additionally, it encourages reflection on how life choices can influence insights about identity, self-worth, and a sense of fulfillment,

how societal stigmas and negative stereotypes can illicit feelings of anxiety and depression, provides strategies to never married middle-aged women to cope with societal expectations, supports women who are facing fears about aging, suggests ways to age more successfully, and extrapolates on how American culture is influencing decisions and experiences.

5. Conclusion

This study revealed eight sub-ordinate themes that were categorized into three super-ordinate themes. By recognizing the richness of never-married middle-aged women's experiences a more inclusive understanding of women and the diverse identities can be built. As society continues to evolve, it is essential to support and celebrate the journeys of never-married middle-aged women and acknowledge their contributions and resilience in light of the societal pressures they face. By amplifying these voices and validating their experiences, a more nuanced and compassionate discourse can evolve, which ultimately fosters a greater acceptance, understanding, and appreciation for the varied paths women choose or do not choose to take in life.

Future studies on similar and dissimilar populations can assist in uncovering the complex narratives, experiences, and outcomes of this population, and continue to explore the intersectionality of these experiences. Currently, there is a lack of research surrounding other never-married middle-aged female populations, including individuals from other cultural backgrounds and subgroups, geographical backgrounds, with varying personality traits, and non-normative constructs of gender and sexuality. By exploring and examining differences and similarities with the studied population, a more nuanced understanding of how they can influence psychological outcomes can be found and developed. These, along with findings from this study, could be used to build new psychometric tests, as previous psychometric tests have been developed to assist menopausal women in measuring quality of life changes in the domains of physical, psychosocial, sexual and quality of life questions.

A new psychometric test, that captures the complex intersectionality of perceptual awareness construction with the varying impacts of social circles, gender, geographics, cultural narratives and physiological factors, and considers the interplay of societal myths and redefining identity throughout midlife could be assistive to the population as a whole. Once items have been identified they can be used to develop test questions or statements using Likert-scale items, be test piloted with a sample selection, have feedback collected, analyzed, refined, be reliability tested, validity tested, be administered to a larger sample size, evaluated ongoingly, and be used to inform the treatment of individual's struggling with the potential negative outcomes related to being a never-married middle-aged woman.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Statement of ethical approval

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at Regent's University London.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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