

**Women in Transition: Discourses of Menopause**

by

**Sue McPherson**

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An MA Thesis Submitted to the  
Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research through the  
Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
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the degree of Master of Arts at the University of Windsor.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Discourses of menopause are varied and complex, just as the lives of women themselves are diverse and multifaceted. Traditionally, menopause has signalled the end of the child-bearing years and the “change of life,” a time when women might experience a great deal of change, in many ways. But menopause can also be understood as a natural physical change, or a time of hormonal change, or as a passage from one way of life to a different one, often accompanied by emotional flux and changes in ways women think about themselves.

For this study of menopause and women’s lives, using life story methodology I have gathered information, anecdotes, poems, and personal revelations through interviews conducted with ten women. Drawing on the stories of their lives, I have explored the ways women think about their experience of menopause and related aspects of their lives.

The feminist poststructuralist framework I have used consists of two elements, poststructuralism and feminism. The poststructuralist framework uses theories of language and concepts of discourse, dualisms, subjectivity and consciousness, power, diversity, and context. Taking a feminist approach to poststructuralism enables women’s voices to be recognized as meaningful within this framework, while acknowledging the possible restrictions of society’s structures as well as women’s agency in their personal lives and within society.

From a poststructuralist perspective, the aim is to increase understanding through a multiplicity of methods, from exploring the historical background and existing research on menopause, and presenting the data in a variety of ways. In this research, the data is displayed in a form that enables readers to read and reflect on what the women say and on their creative writing, with minimum input from the researcher. Separately, the data is examined from the perspective of feminist sociology. The research process, for myself, was one of learning through talking with other women, delving into different forms of knowledge, and coming to think in new ways.

## DEDICATION

*To the memory of my grandmother, Gertrude McPherson,  
and my mother, Katherine Fulham.*

And to my daughter and son, Christine and Steven.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to acknowledge the assistance and guidance I have received, while doing this research, from Alan Sears, research advisor; Lynne Phillips and Jeff Noonan, members of my committee; Andria Turner, the department graduate secretary; and many, many others, my family among them, who have made it possible for me to do the research and prepare the thesis, giving practical assistance, offering direction, providing feedback on my work, and sharing ideas and insights from their own knowledge and experience. A special thanks goes to the women who participated in this study, sharing their personal reflections on menopause and their lives.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Menopause is a phenomenon that has been explored and talked about by researchers, by the medical system, and by women themselves in a multitude of ways. It has been studied in terms of a physiological deficiency (Drife, 1993: 632; Delva, 1993: 2149), a symbolic social transition (Skultans, 1970: 639) and a normal life transition (Cobb, 1994: 19). I have heard women refer to it as the closing down of the baby factory, a change to a new stage of life, and as being just physical changes to their bodies. Most, if not all, of women's experiences of menopause are encompassed by the term from the title of this thesis—transition—defined as a “change or passage from one state or stage to another,” and “the period of time during which something changes from one state or stage to another” (Collins English Dictionary, 1998).

The subject of this thesis is the many forms of discourses of menopause, and the women who have given voice to them in this study. The purpose of the research has been to gain insight into the ways women understand menopause, themselves, and their place in society, and to provide the means for women to talk about menopause and their lives. For this study I conducted in-depth interviews with women, sorted the interview data according to theme, and incorporated the themes into this thesis. In accordance with a feminist poststructuralist perspective it was also a way of enabling reflection on this subject—for myself and the participants—through our interactions during the interviews. I discovered at these times that I shared similar experiences and views on menopause with

each of the participants, although our lives were also very different in many ways.

The approach I have taken to this research—a feminist poststructuralist approach—involves taking a feminist approach to poststructuralist theories of language and the concepts of discourse, dualisms, subjectivity and consciousness, power, diversity, and context. Poststructuralism emphasizes the ways that the individual’s subjectivity is formed through language, concluding that there is no knowing, rational subject, only the subject that is constructed through systems of discourse. The feminist approach expands on this notion of subjectivity and consciousness, to include the notion of agency and acknowledge the embodiedness of the individual within society. In Chris Weedon’s work on feminist poststructuralism (1987), where I encountered this dual approach, her argument is that even though individuals’ subjectivities are formed through discourses, as capable individuals they are often able to act on the discursive knowledge they have acquired, in ways that might resist or serve to maintain the status quo. Thus, in this research, the life story methodology I have used, and women’s voices telling about their experiences and perceptions of menopause, are compatible with *feminist* poststructuralism as explained by Chris Weedon’s work.

Since first beginning this research, my own ways of understanding menopause and women’s lives and my ways of thinking about these have changed to some extent. I became interested in menopause as a research topic when I was at middle-age. I had had a partial hysterectomy in my thirties, and thus experienced no external cues, no cessation of menstruation, as many women do at this time of life. The realization that I was going through “the change” came gradually, as I became aware of changes in my body and from reading about menopause and the aging process. A laboratory test of my hormone level

confirmed that I was going through menopause.

But besides the physical changes, I was also going through many other changes in my life. I had been married for twenty years, and after my marriage ended I moved away with my children and returned to university. I had never had the opportunity of “finding myself,” and this became a time for exploring my identity—a moratorium in my life. Within a few years, I had to move again, away from my family and all that was familiar to me, in order to continue my education.

I felt as though I were carrying a lump inside of me, a lump that needed to be taken apart, deconstructed, and examined piece by piece, in relation to the whole. As I researched the topic, I began to see how my experience fit into studies on women at menopause. When I first started this research, I saw feminism as liberating for women, providing insights into society that could benefit all women. I think now that some of the ideas that have come out of feminist theory can be emancipatory but that some have the potential to cause harm to women and their relations with family and friends, and with significant others in their lives.

In this research, where appropriate, I have let the women speak for themselves, leaving it for the reader to reflect on their words. Some of the participants’ experiences and ways of thinking might not seem compatible with feminist thought, but if the lives that women lead is a feminist concern, and if feminists are interested in what women themselves think and what they find rewarding or troublesome, then this research might still be considered feminist.

One of the difficulties of doing this research was that the experiences of the women differed greatly, as did their understandings of menopause and ways of talking

about it. This was not a *group* of women, in any real sense of the word. Each of them lived separate lives, and they have come together only on paper, through language, in this thesis.

Often, in qualitative research, the researcher attempts to interpret the experiences of the group under study by attempting to understand it from the group's own point of view, although the categories and theories used are those of the researcher. In the current study, what we have are multiple perspectives, some of which may even seem to contradict another's way of understanding menopause. Rather than conduct an in-depth sociological and/or feminist analysis of the data, thus imposing my own views on them, in this study the participants' different perspectives on any one issue are grouped together, thus illustrating that there is more than one form of knowledge on a given issue. The data has been displayed so that it is not a question of seeing menopause from one perspective only. What we have are multiple perspectives—a diverse sample of experiences and views—on menopause.

Discourses are systems of communication - of language - understood as “competing ways of giving meaning to the world” (Weedon, 1987: 24). These are not fixed, but can change and be redefined according to context—social and historical. Several years ago Dorothy Smith (1987) argued that women had been excluded from the historical making of an “intellectual, cultural, and political world” (p.1). She explained that “sociology has objectified a consciousness of society and social relations that ‘knows’ them from the standpoint of their ruling and from the standpoint of men who do that ruling” (Smith, 1987: 2). In her view, this is how women have come to know themselves.

The meaning of menopause has changed throughout history, depending on

knowledge about this subject as well as the economy, politics and culture of the particular era. Up until the last few decades, medical discourses of menopause, often depicting menopause as deterioration, seem to have predominated. Recent research discusses menopause in terms of social and personal change, suggesting that midlife is a time when women may be starting a career after rearing children—often as single parents, or returning to school, or peaking in their careers (Gilbert, 1993: 110). Women whose lives revolve around the domestic sphere may also be seeking new ways of self-expression (Turner and Troll, 1995: 235). Discussion of normal endocrine and physiological changes associated with menopause, and of hormone replacement therapy, from a professional woman's perspective, is another view offered on this topic (Callahan, 1999). In post-structuralism, according to Chris Weedon (1987), “language is not the expression of unique individuality; it constructs the individual's subjectivity in ways which are socially specific” (p.21). But she adds that it is the feminist adaptation of poststructuralist theory that acknowledges women as agents. It is through the actions of individuals, such as the writers I have mentioned, who become the bearers of language by taking up the forms of subjectivity and its meanings and values and acting on them, that language has social and political effects (Weedon, 1987: 34).

In this research the theory, methodology, and data from the interviews are inter-related and have been drawn together using a feminist poststructuralist approach. In this introduction, besides briefly explaining the research I have also introduced the poststructuralist concepts of discourse, diversity and subjectivity, from a feminist perspective. In Chapter 2, I explain the life story methodology used in this research, for which in-depth interviews are the key feature. Chapter 3 consists of a review of the literature on the

historical development of menopause and of feminist research on menopause. In order to understand the experiences of menopause in women at the present time, it is necessary to view menopause in its historical and cultural context. In Chapter 4, using Chris Weedon's framework, I discuss feminist poststructuralism and the concepts of poststructuralism: subjectivity and consciousness, language, diversity, discourse, power and context. Chapter 5 consists of brief summaries of the lives of each of the participants. In Chapters 6, 7, and 8 are women's own thoughts on themes associated with menopause and related issues: Women's Knowledge about Menopause, Women's Health, and Women Changing Their Lives.

The significance of women's experiences and perceptions, and how these relate to poststructuralist theory, is the focus of Chapter 9. In the first section, 9.1, I explore the data from the perspective of three key themes, using mainly sociological and feminist theory. In the second part of this chapter, 9.2, I reflect on the ways poststructuralist theory has guided this study, and examine the relationship between feminist poststructuralist theory and women's own voices—the key feature of this research—telling about menopause and their lives.

In the conclusion, Chapter 10, I explain the significance of the research to myself, women in general, the medical system, and to academia. In particular, the stories and information provided by women who volunteered for this study are integral to understanding menopause and women's lives.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **METHODOLOGY**

Traditional epistemologies have excluded “the possibility that women could be ‘knowers’ or agents of knowledge” (Harding, 1987: 3). From a feminist poststructuralist perspective, however, the subjective meaning that social experience holds for women is a valuable source of knowledge. In Mary Brown Parlee’s (1990) view of research on menopause, “multidisciplinary enterprises tend to be limited by a virtual absence of the interpretive social sciences” (p.386). She argues that scientific discourse shapes our perception of menopause, middle-aged women and the aging process, relying on objectivity and causal models. Anthropologists, psychoanalysts and sociologists, however, may be better able to “bring research and clinical practice more in line with middle-aged women’s interests as they themselves define them” (Parlee, 1990: 387).

For this study, I have used a qualitative methodology, conducting in-depth interviews with women. I have collected stories from ten women about their lives. Although it carries a connotation of falsehood, the word story is becoming accepted among qualitative researchers working with life histories. As Goodson (1995) suggests, stories may be used to “generate new ways of producing, collaborating, representing, and knowing” (p. 89).

Qualitative research is similar to quantitative research in that, in the final run, what is required is interpretation, or human input. Personal biases have a way of interceding in ways that we may not always recognize. My own experience of menopause

seemed to me to be a mixture of physiological, socio-cultural and psychological phenomena. Although in this type of research there are ideally no bounds to the issues that may be raised, it is always up to the researcher to place boundaries according to the purpose of the study. If particular themes are raised that serve no useful purpose, in the view of the researcher, or themes arise that would complicate the study unnecessarily, then it is the researcher's decision whether or not to include such themes in the collection.

## **Sample**

The sample consisted of ten women, all but one of whom perceived that they were experiencing or had experienced menopause at the time of the interview. At the time of the interview they were residing in cities and villages of south-western Ontario. This sample is limited to women who had not had a hysterectomy prior to mid-life. According to Cobb (1996), "Even though hysterectomized woman have physical and emotional changes typical of natural menopause, these changes have little meaning outside the context of life as it is at age 50" (p.2).

In this study, four of the women were in their forties, three were in their fifties, two were in their sixties, and one was in her seventies. Interviewing woman who are just now going through menopause can show us the challenges that women have to deal with at that time in their lives. It is valuable to this research to include the struggles as they are in process. John Shotter (1993) explains, people are "taking part in a contested (or at least contestable) process, a tradition of argumentation, in which they are still struggling over the constitution of their own mental makeup" (p.31). On the other hand, stories of women

who are farther along in their lives might provide another perspective.

The sampling method I used was the purposive or “snowball” technique, which, as described by Taylor and Bogdan (1984: 83), entails starting with someone known to the researcher and asking this person to suggest another woman who would likely hold views different from her own. As Taylor and Bogdan (1984) state, in life history research “informants are seldom ‘found’; rather, they emerge in the course of one’s everyday activities. You just happen to stumble across someone who has an important story to tell and wants to tell it” (p.85). This method enabled me to connect with women who were experiencing or who had experienced menopause and who were able to articulate their experiences.

Each participant chose the location of the interview. In most cases, her own home was the favoured choice, although two of the interviews were held in more convenient locations. While it is sometimes difficult to achieve privacy, the participants made every effort to ensure enough time for the interview.

Prior to the interview, I asked each participant to read and sign the consent form (see Appendix 1). Each interview lasted approximately one and one-half hours and was tape-recorded. I interviewed each participant once, and in some cases checked back for further information. Later, I contacted each of the participants to ensure that they were in agreement with the summaries I had written about their lives.

## **Research Question**

Holstein and Gubrium (1995) suggest that, from the researcher’s standpoint,

interviews represent efforts to collect “interpretations of experience that address particular research agendas” (p.50). For this research, the main question is: How do women’s narratives express their understanding of menopause and the ways they understand themselves and their place in society? Related questions I am exploring include:

1. What changes do they experience? In what ways have they created independence in their lives? Do they see these as part of menopause? Do they see menopause as part of the developmental process?
2. In what ways does the medical system influence their views and/or how do they use the medical system for their benefit.
3. How do they perceive male/femaleness, womanhood, motherhood, aging.
4. What are the cultural and historical effects on women’s views on menopause? What part do education and life experience play?

I began the interview by asking women whether they were experiencing menopause or had experienced menopause and what menopause meant to them. Using the list of questions (Appendix 2) as a guideline, we explored facets of their lives: menstruation and menopause; aging and womanhood; autonomy and relationships; milestones or significant circumstances.

According to Oakley (1981), in “interactive” type research, “the principle of a hierarchical relationship between interviewer and interviewee is not adhered to and ‘an attempt is made to generate a collaborative approach to the research which engages both the interviewer and respondent in a joint enterprise’,” and “relies very much on the formulation of a relationship between interviewer and interviewee as an important element in achieving the quality of the information” (p.44). It is likely that my age was an

asset in this particular study. The participants shared a great deal of their lives with me, and with each of them I shared similar understandings and/or experiences, although in other ways our lives were very different. Although I guided the interview in the direction of the focus of the study, the questions were open-ended, allowing for new insights to emerge. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) suggest that the interviewer guide and constrain the conversation so as to produce narratives that are “appropriate to their projects *without* dictating how the respondents’ lives might be portrayed within the operative interpretive framework and language” (p.50). The result was the construction of narratives that expressed their understanding of menopause and the ways they understand themselves and their place in society. Tesch (1990) suggests that

In addition to empathetic listening, poetry, music, literature and other art forms are sources for increased understanding of the phenomenon (p.70).

In this study, I have included poetry which I thought to be conducive to a greater understanding of the issues.

## **Data Analysis**

In my analysis of the interviews, I sought out themes and separated them into clusters, which form chapters in this thesis. Chapter 6, Women’s Knowledge About Menopause, focuses on women’s own interpretations of their experiences. Chapter 7, Women’s Health, includes themes related to physical and mental health issues. Chapter 8, Women Changing Their Lives, focuses on women’s self-development and changes around the time of menopause.

The analysis involved a reflective, interpretive process based on phenomenological analysis and hermeneutics, as described by Tesch (1990: 94). To interpret a text hermeneutically, researchers try to discern what it means. One main principle is to “consider each part of the text in relationship to the whole. The part receives its meaning from that whole” (Tesch, 1990: 94). In this study, menopause is viewed as one part of the reproductive cycle and of the natural life cycle of women. Another principle is to treat the data as “biographical,” meaning to take into account the respondent, her personal circumstances and the larger social and historical context (Tesch, 1990: 94). In this study I have taken these factors into consideration. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) suggest that the interviewer should also be considered part of the biographical work (p.51). As stated earlier, the research cannot be viewed apart from my own experiences and perceptions.

Mies (1993) suggests that “conscious partiality,” which is achieved through partial identification with the research “object,” creates a “critical and dialectical” distance between researcher and object, yet widens the consciousness of both (p.68). Making the effort to understand the participants’ viewpoints has increased my own understanding of the diversity of views on menopause.

The theoretical approach of this research suggests that concepts such as menopause, power, and gender have no clear meaning. In this study, I have relied on the research process to broaden understandings of the meanings of such concepts and the connections between them. According to O’Toole and O’Toole (1988), “menopause remains a topic of ambiguity and conflict...[and] is not a well-defined and regular passage” (p.85). Definitions of menopause include menopause as the “final menstrual period”, “a period of time in a woman’s life cycle in which hormonal changes in her body

signal the end of her reproductive years,” and a newer definition stating that a woman is “considered menopausal for one year following her last menstrual period” (Jones, 1994: 48). However, as Jones suggests, “medical science is uncertain about the subtleties of menopause” (p.48). Menopause has been defined in terms of biology, but “its psychological meaning to the individual and its sociological meanings have implications far beyond biological change” (O’Toole and O’Toole, 1988: 85).

One issue of concern to some individuals of this type of research may be that participants can mislead, whether on purpose or unintentionally. According to Hycner (1985), “*any* description of an experience is already different from the experience itself” (p.295). However, as Hycner describes, if the participant fills in gaps in memory according to her later viewpoint, the way the participant *thinks* about the phenomena can be important (p.296). In this study, exploring the ways women *think*—about menopause and their lives—is one of the purposes of the study.

How this research was conducted is a central issue in understanding the process of knowledge development. In sharing their stories with me, the participants open their lives up for analysis and for others to read about. Sometimes, as Barone (1995) suggests, “some stories deserve their own space, with inviolable boundaries surrounding the message” (p.72). As he says, sometimes we do not need to deconstruct them. Similarly, Lather (1994) states that, in postfoundational work, “the text is used to display, rather than analyze” (p.118). Strauss and Corbin (1990) state that some researchers believe that “the researcher’s task is to gather the data and present them in such a manner that the informants speak for themselves” (p.21). I believe that in some cases the participant’s own words are an effective way of presenting information that does not require further

analysis.

I have followed additional principles and procedures which are demanded of good qualitative research. Verifying my account of the participants' reality with them during the process of data analysis, as time permitted, ensured that my understandings were reliable. Discussing decisions and findings with my committee has acted as a check on my perception and ensured that I have not remained fixed in one position. I have also kept records of the decision-making process, including reports on my own expectations as they changed and why I made certain decisions and discarded other ideas. Throughout the research process I have written a record of insights and thoughts.

Guba and Lincoln (1989) state that

Like objectivity, confirmability is concerned with assuring that data, interpretations, and outcomes of inquiries are rooted in contexts and persons apart from the evaluator and are not simply figments of the evaluator's imagination (p.242-43).

Since one person has done the interviewing, coding and analyzing, this could possibly lead to biased results. According to Creswell (1994), the dependability issue may be addressed by including information about "the researcher's positions—the central assumptions, the selection of informants, the biases and values of the researcher" (p. 159). In this chapter and in the previous one I address these issues.

My own biases and assumptions can affect the type of questions that I ask, the interaction between the interviewee and myself, and my perceptions of their responses. I have attempted to become aware of them and examine how they may influence my interviewing and interpretations. On the one hand, my own experience has been beneficial to this study. I am familiar personally with the experience of menopause and

various ways of perceiving it. On the other hand, I have developed values and beliefs about the meaning of menopause that, unintentionally, may deny others' ways of knowing. In holding my own point of view of menopause as a combination of biological, psychological, and social phenomena, I might be more likely to discount the experiences and perceptions held by the women in this study. From a feminist perspective, the subjective understandings of women is important, and I have included women's own reflections and have attempted to understand their ways of thinking. As Dant (1991) explains, "Knowledge is both constructed and reproduced in the process of participants exchanging and transforming meanings in discourse" (p.208).

## **Ethics**

"Socially sensitive research" may be defined as "studies in which there are potential consequences or implications, either directly for the participants in the research or for the class of individuals represented by the research" (Sieber and Stanley, 1988:49). Menopause may be a taboo topic for some individuals and, as Lee and Renzetti (1993) suggest, sensitivity to the topic may be apparent at the beginning, or may become manifest once research is under way (p.5). I assured the participants that they were not required to answer any questions they preferred not to, and that they could withdraw from the interview at any time (see Appendix 1). I made efforts to maintain confidentiality and used sensitive interviewing techniques to ease the concerns of the participants in this study. According to Kelly, Burton and Reagan (1994), the potential for harm, that participation in such a project might not result in empowerment or change in material