

**A SOCIAL WORK PROGRAMME  
FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF  
THE SPIRITUAL STRENGTHS OF  
MIDLIFE WOMEN**

ANNETTE WEYERS

# **A SOCIAL WORK PROGRAMME FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SPIRITUAL STRENGTHS OF MIDLIFE WOMEN**

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University of the Free State

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Our birth is but a sleep and a deep forgetting:  
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,  
Hath had elsewhere its setting,  
And cometh from afar:  
Not in entire forgetfulness,  
And not in utter nakedness,  
But trailing clouds of glory do we come  
From God, who is our home.

- William Wordsworth

*Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*

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*Although exhilarating and exciting, doing this research has also been very hard. It was not merely a research project; it was also a personal journey of discovery and growth, riddled with many reservations, queries and doubts. Yet, it was an extremely rewarding undertaking particularly when it became clear that midlife women increasingly embrace the freedom to chart a midlife passage that is personally meaningful. It was edifying to realise that social work is willing to extend the boundaries of service delivery to include the development of the spiritual strengths to support the current cohort of midlife women in their endeavours to flourish in this phase of life.*

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*To all the midlife women out there who is still wondering – just do it!*

Annette

***Omnia ad maiorem Dei gloriam.***

*In midlife, the soul wants a larger  
journey*

– Hollis

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# **CHAPTER 1: METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATION**

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Modern society is distinguished by on-going social change that restructures the ways in which individuals live, continually forcing them to reappraise their coping strategies. The midlife transition of women has not escaped the changes brought about by modern society. The prescriptive midlife developmental designs of previous generations are outdated, as expectations about this phase of life have changed in significant ways (Degges-White, 2001, p. 6). The current cohort of midlife women is shaping unorthodox models of development. These women now recruit spiritual strengths to invigorate growth and support adaption in this phase of life. This chapter explores how this turn of events inspired the inquiry into the role of spiritual strengths in supporting the midlife development of women as research topic. It examines how the choice of the research topic influenced the proposed aim of the study to delineate guidelines for a social work programme to develop the spiritual strengths of midlife women. The chapter specifies the research problem and questions that direct the inquiry and the discussion of the research methods explains the courses of action recruited to achieve the research goals. Discerning the scope of the investigation by demarcating the literary sources consulted the geographic boundaries of the study and the identification of the research population serves as further orientation to this study.

## **1.1 CHOICE OF TOPIC**

The current cohort of midlife women, as children, faced what Apter (1995, p. 17) calls “a divided social history”. As girls they were raised to function in a traditional female world; yet they entered adulthood with very different ideas of what “a woman should be, what she could be, and what she wanted to be” (Apter, 1995, p. 18). The discrepancy between a traditional upbringing and that required of women to function successfully in society is primarily the result of the social changes brought about by modernity. For instance, women are more readily welcomed into male-dominated professions, where they are expected to be smart, successful and powerful. However, at the same time they are expected to embody the female ideals of youth,

beauty and maternity of their traditional upbringing (Apter, 1995:19). Modernity resulted in a social revolution, as far as women are concerned, yielding benefits such as the empowerment of women, legal changes that benefit women, and greater equality in the workplace. Nonetheless, this generation of women are still grappling with the contradictions between in many instances, their traditional upbringing and the demands of modern society, their personal aims and expectations, and those of society and culture. These ambivalences also affect the midlife trajectory of women as they face the challenges of reconciling or transcending contradictory expectations without the benefit of a developmental design of previous generations of women. Negotiating the uncharted territory of the midlife landscape prompts many women to include spiritual strengths in their arsenal of coping strategies (King, Hunter, & Harris, 2005, p. 73; Arnold, 2005, p. 643). The researchers' own work attests to this, with midlife women in the corporate world who, in the course of personal development programmes, expressed their interest in spirituality as a resource.

Modernity afforded women the long overdue social liberation from constricting social roles and expectations. However, although it generated many benefits, many of the ills of our present-day society are ascribed to the impact of modernist doctrines (Garrard, 2006, p. 665; Coates, 2007, p. 6). Modernists' unrestrained reverence of science, reason and objectivity has led to a dismissal of a subjective epistemology and ontology. This reductionist enterprise endorses a biomedical approach when working with people (Healy, 2005, p. 50; Prins, & Van Niekerk, 2009, p. 46). A modernist approach to wellbeing would therefore pay scant attention to what women subjectively experience as enhancing wellbeing, such as spiritual strengths, as these are difficult to measure objectively. An example of this narrow approach is seen in the modernist's belief that the social liberation was the missing piece of the puzzle concerning women's wellbeing, and with that in place women can do no other than flourish. Unmasking this myth, Gloria Steinem, American activist for women's rights, acknowledges that in midlife she has realised that even after all the "external liberation", she did not experience a sense of wellbeing; what she lacked was "a core belief in herself and a sense of internal reality" (Rountree, 1993, p. 138). In midlife, she was forced to look inward and undertake the midlife task of individuation in her quest to discover her authentic self (a task that for many women include the integration of a spiritual identity). The challenge for midlife women is to embrace the

opportunities that social liberation bestows, but at the same time to recognise that negotiating the midlife passage successfully requires development, growth and adaptation in all areas of their lives, including the spiritual domain. Furthermore, that which a woman subjectively experiences as an aid, such as spiritual strengths, should be included in her repertoire of resources.

Although many of the challenges women face in midlife are brought about by the changes introduced by modernity, the modernist epistemology and ontology render it ill equipped to promote wellbeing in midlife in modern society. Thus, a paradigmatically new way of thinking is called for, which supports a phenomenological stance on ontology and epistemology and allows for the exploration of spirituality as subjective experience. In essence, it means discarding the *biomedical model* for a *holistic model*. Therefore, this study employs the bio-psychosocial and spiritual model for the inquiry into the role of spiritual strengths to support midlife transition and enhance midlife women's sense of wellbeing.

The emergence of the postmodern worldview is a counter-response to the positivistic archetype of modernity. In contrast to modernity's abiding faith in the master narratives of scientific models, postmodernity endorses pluralism, diversity and the relativity of all knowledge (Hugman, 2003, p. 1026). Thus, it affirms spirituality as a bona fide area of study. Postmodernist thinking largely shapes the renewed inquiry into spirituality. At the root of the renewed interest in spirituality is the disillusionment with the fruits of modernity, and particularly the arid rationality of the positivistic paradigm. The epistemological and ontological stance of postmodernism not only supports the notion of spirituality as subjective experience, but also recognises the diversity of spiritual and religious narratives. Therefore, the phenomenological stance on epistemology and ontology gives credence to an inquiry into midlife women's subjective experience of spiritual strengths and the development of those strengths. Furthermore, equal credence is given to traditional religious practices and secular spirituality, a stance reflected in the inclusive approach adopted by social work, which assents to the diversity of religious and non-religious expressions of spirituality. This approach addresses the concerns of religious biases, exclusivism and discrimination (Canda, 2005, p. 98). A postmodernist approach is adopted when exploring spirituality as a possible strength to reinforce midlife women's adaptation.

Coinciding with the renewed interest in spirituality was the emergence of the strengths perspective in social work in the 1980s. As a postmodern approach in social work practice, it disputes the core notions of the positivistic scientific paradigm (Healy, 2005, p. 152). For example, the strengths perspective favours a phenomenological orientation, which recognises that clients' reality (such as spiritual strengths) is constructed from their lived experience (Rankin, 2007, p. 5). The central principle is that all individuals have untapped strengths and abilities; furthermore, it affirms the notion that clients' subjective experiences of what they perceive as strengths are valid points of departure in discerning all possible resources. Not only does the strengths perspective recognise spirituality as source of strength; it also locates the identification of spiritual strengths within social work theory, providing parameters for clinical intervention and practical application that are consistent with the directives of the profession. Therefore, the strengths perspective serves as theoretical model of this research project.

In an unceasingly changing world, social work, as a profession, is commissioned to reflect continually on the consistency between service delivery and its mission. Service delivery becomes irrelevant when it no longer serves the mission of social work. It is precisely because of deliberation on the relevance of service delivery (devoid of spiritual content) in a social context, characterised by a growing interest in spirituality, that social work has reconsidered its position on spirituality. The acceptance of spirituality as a salient component of clients' lives is recognition that the biomedical model is too limited to serve social work's mission to promote the wellbeing of clients. Conversely, the holistic approach implies that wellbeing is the product of positive adaptation and functioning in the physical, psychological, social and spiritual life domains. The implication for social work endeavours to promote the wellbeing of midlife women is that it compels the consideration of the spiritual dimension and the role of spiritual strengths to support the midlife transition. The research topic is inspired by social work's holistic approach to wellbeing and particularly the recognition of spiritual strengths' contribution towards enhancing a sense of wellbeing. It is also motivated by the notion that spirituality is a source of strength during adaptation to midlife, as voiced by the current cohort of midlife women. Furthermore, a social work programme to facilitate the mobilisation of midlife women's spiritual strengths is reconcilable with the profession's mandate.



The resurgence of spirituality in societies globally, with the consequent introduction of spirituality as an academic field of study, invites a new discourse between science and religion (spirituality). For the most part, social work has responded positively to the invitation to engage in the dialogue on spirituality, not only within the profession, but also as part of the global post-secular debate between science and religion (spirituality). However, the reaction of the South African social work community is rather muted in this regard (Bhagwan, 2010a, p. 188). Therefore, this study is in part motivated by the call to accord a higher priority to the incorporation of spirituality in theory and practice in the local social work community.

## **1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The mission of social work includes the advancement of the individual's sense of wellbeing. To realise this goal, the social worker would need an understanding of the obstacles that might inhibit the experience of wellbeing, as well as knowledge about the best strategic coping strategies and resources to address the challenges.

Every stage of life, including midlife, not only offers opportunities for growth and development, but also challenges, which might frustrate the sense of wellbeing. For this reason, social work theorists Crawford and Walker (2007, p. 2) insist that it is central to the role and task of the social worker to understand how people develop and grow across their lifespan. This study endorses this view; however, it also proposes that social workers should be informed about possible strengths and resources that might have a beneficial outcome to adaptation in a particular phase of life, in order to promote the sense of wellbeing. It is a key assumption of this study that spiritual strengths not only enhance the ability to cope with the demands of daily life, but also have a felicitous and significant bearing on adaptation in midlife; therefore, significantly contribute to an overall sense of wellbeing. However, there is a dearth of research, not only on the midlife passage of the current cohort of women, but also of possible spiritual strengths available to them.

Thus, the research problem that directed this study was the development of guidelines for a social work programme to facilitate the identification and mobilisation of spiritual strengths to support women in their midlife transition in order to contribute to a sense of wellbeing in this phase of life.

Given the research problem, the following research questions gave direction to the investigation:

- What is the nature of the midlife transition of women?
- How do women experience spirituality and the role of spirituality in their lives?
- What are the characteristics of midlife women's spiritual strengths?
- What is the relevance of the strengths perspective in the identification and mobilisation of the spiritual strengths of midlife women?

This study was primarily directed by the strengths perspective's stance that all individuals have strengths, capacities and resources that can be mobilised to enhance their resilience and quality of life. Furthermore, the premise was that spirituality has the capacity to be a source of strength; therefore, the point of departure in this investigation was that midlife women have unengaged spiritual strengths which, once identified, explored and utilised, can reinforce their development and therefore enhance a sense of wellbeing in this phase of life.

## **1.3 AIM OF THE STUDY**

The overall aim, goals and objectives that guide this study are thus:

### **1.3.1 Aim**

The aim of this study was to delineate guidelines for a social work programme that would facilitate the identification and mobilisation of spiritual strengths to support women's midlife transition, in order to enhance a sense of wellbeing in this phase of life.

### **1.3.2 Goals**

In an effort to achieve the above-mentioned aim, the following primary and secondary goals of this study were identified:

The study primarily endeavoured to:

- gain an understanding of the nature of the midlife transition of women in order to identify those spiritual strengths that are of particular relevance to the challenges distinctive to this phase of life;
- explore midlife women's experiences of their spirituality to understand the role and the relevance of spirituality as it pertains to the adaptation and enhancement of a sense of wellbeing in this phase of life;
- attain an understanding of the characteristics of midlife women's spiritual strengths to assist in the identification and mobilisation of spiritual strengths that could support women's adaptation to midlife; and
- elucidate the eligibility of the strengths perspective in providing the rationale and directions for the introduction of such a programme.

Secondly, this study endeavoured to:

- contribute to the knowledge framework in social work (and associated professions) of the spiritual strengths of midlife women with reference to the identification and development of spiritual strengths; and
- provide information on spirituality and spiritual strengths that will inspire a greater engagement of the South African social work community in the discourse on spirituality;
- through the findings of this study, motivate practitioners to consider the use of a social work programme that identifies, embellishes and mobilises the spiritual strengths of midlife women.

## **1.4 RESEARCH METHODS AND PROCEDURES OF THE QUALITATIVE INQUIRY**

The following courses of action were applied to achieve the research goal:

### **1.4.1 Literature review**

The literature review presented a "sustained argument" (Padgett, 2008, p. 206) explaining the rationale for the study; it framed the theoretical and empirical context of the research; elucidated the research problem, research questions and research

methodology; and clarified the reasoning for the philosophical framework which guides the study.

The phenomenological philosophy on ontology and epistemology informed this study's stance as it pertained to spirituality and spiritual strengths. By affirming phenomenology as orienting framework, the study accepted the importance "of the subjective meaning individuals bring to the research process" (Hesse-Biber, & Leavy, 2011, p. 35). This set the parameters for the inquiry into spirituality and spiritual strengths as subjective experiences. Furthermore, it sustained the argument of this study that a positivistic framework is not suitable for an enquiry into the role of spiritual strengths to promote wellbeing.

The literature study reviewed the evolution of spirituality not only to locate this study in the greater debate between science and religion, but also to provide the context for the on-going discourse on spirituality in social work, as it pertains to the social work mandate, theoretical development, and practical application and research methods. It also illuminated how the meaning of spirituality had changed over time; therefore, explained the research question as to the nature and role of spirituality and spiritual strengths as experienced by the current cohort of midlife women. To support the argument of this study that spirituality is a resource, the literature study analysed the contemporary meaning of spirituality, which is a prerequisite for an in-depth understanding of the fundamental nature of spiritual strengths. The guidelines for the programme to develop the spiritual strengths of midlife women were informed by the demarcation of those aspects of spirituality deemed spiritual strengths.

By examining the historical relationship between social work and spirituality, the literature study presented compelling arguments why social work is commissioned to attend to spirituality. The discussion of the strengths perspective established that its stance on epistemology and ontology was sympathetic to an investigation of spiritual strengths. As an accepted practice approach in social work it not only provides rationales for the development of strengths, but also offers guidelines for developing practice responses that adhere to the principles for spiritually sensitive practice. For this reason, the strengths perspective was employed as the theoretical model to assist the inquiry into the formulation of guidelines for a programme to develop spiritual strengths.

The objective of the exploration of the midlife transition of women in the literature review was to understand the experiences of women and to explain why and how spiritual resources might be beneficial in this stage of life. This review contributed to the achievement of the research goal, as it provided information that would not only address the research question as to the nature of women's midlife experiences, but also for the delineation of guidelines for a programme to develop the spiritual strengths of midlife women.

The conceptual framework (Fig. 1) elucidated the theoretical and empirical context of this inquiry. In view of the aim of this study, the qualitative research paradigm was employed to direct the research process. As the primary focus of the constructivist/interpretive approach is to understand the lived experience from the point of view of those who have lived it, this approach was deemed the most suitable theoretical perspective to reconcile the philosophical stance of the study and its research methods (Racher, & Robinson, 2002, p. 469). In contrast to a purely phenomenological study that focuses on the description of phenomena as they are lived (Finlay, 2009, p. 6), this study aimed to bridge the gap between theory and practice by formulating guidelines for a programme for the development of spiritual strengths to be used in practice. Therefore, action research with its focus on the practical purpose of research was selected as research design (Heron, & Reason, 2009, p. 367). The choice of this research design was further inspired by this study's commitment to engage participants as co-researchers during the research process. This is in accordance with the plea for a more collaborative approach in social work research (Chapter 5).

### **1.4.2 Empirical investigation**

The empirical investigation was based on the literature study and aimed at the development of guidelines for a social work programme to facilitate the mobilisation of spiritual strengths to support women's midlife transition. For the purposes of the empirical investigation, two workshops were presented. In accordance with the directives of action research as research design and the strengths perspective as theoretical model, the workshop offered the opportunity for the active involvement of participants as co-researchers (Healy, 2005, p. 161; Wicks, & Reason, 2009, p. 244).

Moreover, a workshop meets the requirements to generate the experiential knowledge and capture the data in creative ways, in accordance with this study's stance on ontology and epistemology. Therefore, the format of a workshop is well qualified to facilitate the inquiry into guidelines for a programme to identify and mobilise the spiritual strengths of midlife women.

The target population of the study was midlife women between the ages of 40 and 60 years. A public relations agency was commissioned to send out invitations to women on their database who lived in the Bloemfontein area. The sampling procedure can be described as purposive sampling (Padgett, 2008, p. 53), as twelve to sixteen participants from those who responded were contacted to participate in the workshops. One of the first tasks in data collection is to establish democratic participatory relationships and establishing communicative spaces to create an arena for participants to explore and articulate their experiences of midlife, spirituality and spiritual strengths. Although the study remained open to the emerging process, it was guided by the inquiry cycle (Heron, & Reason, 2008, p. 145) and the 4-D model (Ludema, & Fry, 2009, p. 283) to produce learning about spiritual strengths that could be transformed into data. Participants' experiential knowledge of midlife, spirituality and spiritual strengths could be presented in a variety of forms, for example through poetry, art, drawings, diagrams and songs (Heron, & Reason, 2009, p. 372; Zandee, & Cooperrider, 2009, p. 194). In addition to these presentational forms of capturing data, the researcher kept a journal, used field notes, photographs and audio recordings to collect data.

The method of analysing the qualitative data was driven by the research question and the study's stance on ontology and epistemology. Therefore, this study used thematic analysis to interpret data, as it could be applied across a wide scope of theoretical and epistemological approaches (Braun, & Clarke, 2006, p. 81). The themes identified provide information for the delineation of guidelines for the programme to develop the spiritual strengths of midlife women. From the data, conclusions were formulated to establish whether the aim of the study had been achieved, and recommendations are made regarding guidelines for the programme, social work theory, practice, training and research. To maintain methodological rigour and ensure trustworthiness, the study applied the criteria (credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability) proposed by Lincoln and Guba

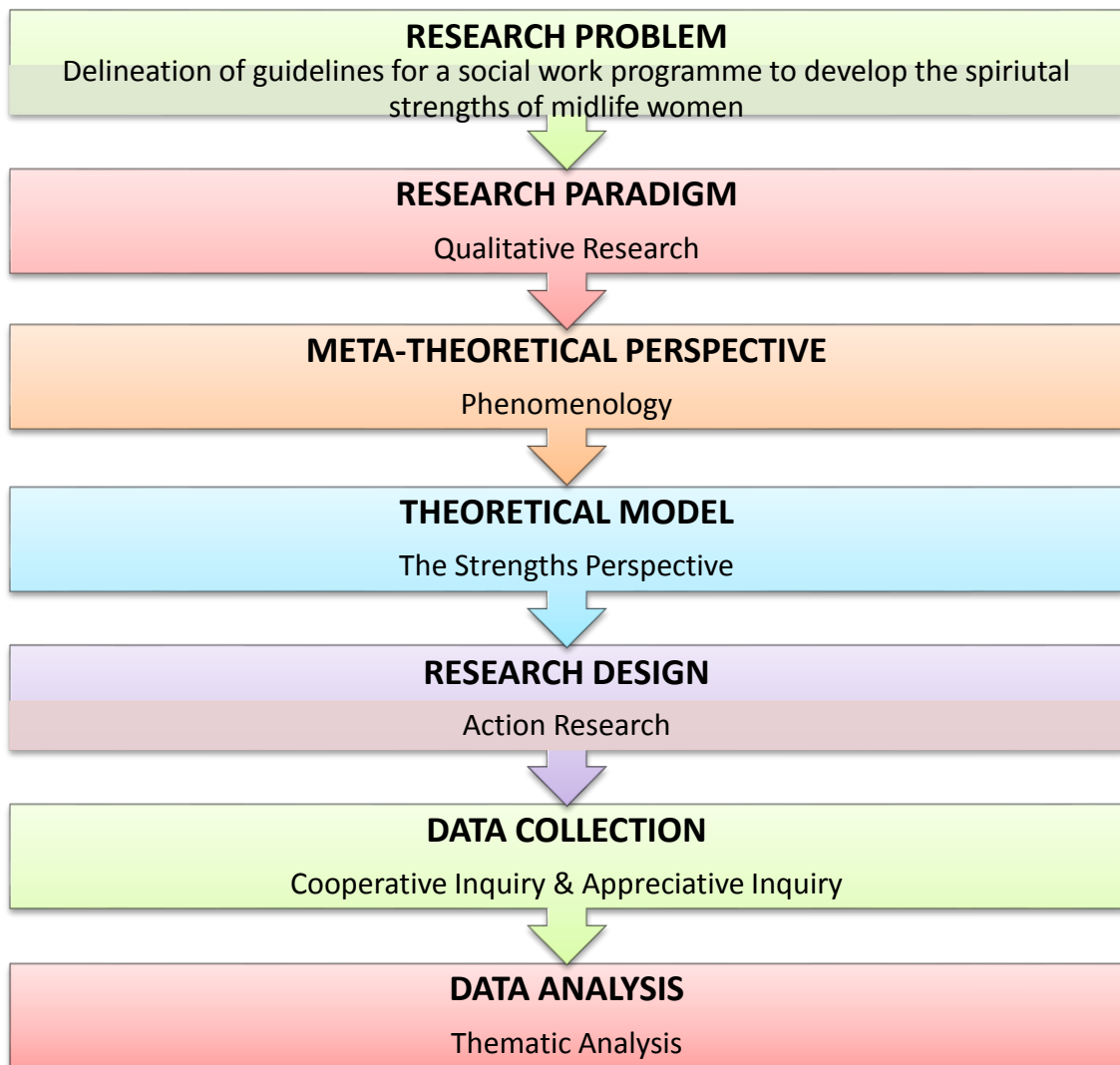
(1985, p. 289). Ethical concerns in the study were addressed by ensuring that participants were well informed about the research project, that steps were taken to maintain confidentiality, as well as attending to basic safety concerns during the workshop. In addition, the researcher's conduct was governed by the code of ethics as delineated by the South African Council of Social Service Professions (SACSSP).

## **1.5 DEMARCATION OF THE INVESTIGATION**

The literature overview drew on local and international sources. These sources included policy documents, textbooks, scientific journal articles and dissertations in the disciplines theology, sociology, psychology, nursing, philosophy and social work. The theoretical investigation of spiritual strengths was informed by a phenomenological orientation, which allowed for an inquiry that attends to individuals' subjective experiences of their spirituality and spiritual strengths.

Consulting and interpreting sources from literature, the conceptual framework (Fig. 1) is outlined and explained below:

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



**Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the study**

The research questions demarcated the study as a qualitative inquiry. Although not prescriptive regarding research methods, the fundamental principles of qualitative research delineated the required criteria for a qualitative study. Within the boundaries set by the qualitative paradigm, the parameters of the empirical investigation were further delineated by the phenomenological stance on epistemology and ontology. The constructivist/interpretive approach, as theoretical perspective, integrated the philosophical stance and the research methods. As this is a social work research project, the inquiry was also guided by the strengths perspective (theoretical model), as it provided directives for an investigation of spiritual strengths that adhered to principles for spiritually sensitive practice.



Accordingly, the theoretical perspective, research design and methods of data collection and analysis collaborated to answer the research question, heeding the boundaries set by the qualitative paradigm, the stance on ontology and epistemology and the guidelines provided by the strengths perspective.

The study was geographically restricted to midlife women living and working in the district of Bloemfontein, Free State. Women between the ages of 40 and 60 years were selected, as this is the most accepted chronological age norm for this stage of life (Hunter, Sundel, & Sundel, 2002, p. 2). The focus of the study was on midlife women, as various studies (Howell, 2001, p. 52; Wink, & Dillon, 2002, p. 91/92; King et al., 2005, p. 69; Dalby, 2006, p. 4) report that there is an increased interest in spirituality in midlife. This is particularly true for women (Chapter 4). Therefore, they are more likely to explore and use spiritual strengths. Participants included white and black South African women. Spirituality can be practised without being religious or within an organised religious context. For example, some individuals described themselves as *spiritual but not religious*, while others describe themselves as *spiritual and religious* (Hill, Pargament, Hood, McCullough, Swyers, Larson, & Zinnbauer, 2000, p. 61). Participants in this study included women of all religious orientations, or with no particular religious orientation.

## **1.6 DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS**

To verify the uniform interpretations of concepts used in the research report, the following concepts are clarified:

### **1.6.1 Midlife and midlife women**

There is ambivalence as to the demarcation of the age period in adult life referred to as midlife, as different benchmarks for defining midlife are employed, including age identity, life-events and chronological age (Chapter 4). Using age identity as benchmark, midlife is defined according to the subjective feeling of being middle aged, rather than belonging to a particular age group (Menon, 2001, p. 66). When demarcated in accordance with life-events, midlife is defined as that period of life when children leave home, the commencement of menopause, or becoming a

grandparent (Staudinger, & Bluck, 2001, p. 5). Chronological age norms define midlife according to exit and entry ages. For example, midlife is defined as the life phase between the ages of 40 and 60 years (Lachman, 2004, p. 311). As most scholars regard the entry and exit ages for midlife as approximations, researchers attempting to define midlife do not have definite criteria to guide them (Staudinger, & Bluck, 2001, p. 4; Hunter et al., 2002, p. 3; Lachman, 2004, p. 311).

Although this study used chronological age as norm to define midlife, it conceded that the linear age-stage demarcation was limited; therefore, it acknowledged the variation in the needs, functioning and contexts of midlife women. For the purposes of this study, midlife was defined as that period of life between the ages of 40 to 60 years (Hunter et al., 2002, p. 2), and midlife women were defined as women between the ages of 40 and 60 years of age.

### **1.6.2 Programme**

The Compact Oxford Thesaurus Dictionary (Waite, 2008, p. 654) describes a programme as “an agenda, calendar, timetable or order of events”.

From a business perspective, a programme is defined as “a plan of action aimed at accomplishing a clear business objective, with details on what work is to be done, by whom, when, and what means or resources will be used” (Business Dictionary.com online, 2013).

Smith and O’Loughlin (n.d., p. 834) characterise a programme as “a statement of what is to be done, the course of one’s intended actions, especially when directed toward a particular end”. Wyld and Partridge in the Webster Dictionary (1963, p. 1053) define a programme as “an outline, schedule of a course of study, of proceedings, list of engagements or of things intended to be done”.

The above definitions intimate the nature of a programme to be prescriptive and specific as to the order of events. However, in this study the term *programme* did not denote a fixed or predetermined list of actions to be taken. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, *programme* referred to guidelines and recommendations as to the potential material to be included, and modes of actions to be undertaken to achieve the aim of developing the spiritual strengths of midlife women. The

programme encompassed suggestions as to possible format, the preparation and role of the social worker, and the engagement of participants in accordance with the strengths perspective as theoretical model, as well as the protocol for spiritually sensitive social work practice.

### **1.6.3 Religion**

The evolvment of various forms of spirituality, including irreligious spirituality, impelled the differentiation between religion and spirituality. Although most scholars agree that these are not mutually exclusive concepts they find it instructive to identify the distinctive features of each construct (Kourie, 2006, p. 24; Wink, & Dillon, 2008, p. 103; Brennan, 2002, p. 34; Hill, & Pargament, 2003, p. 64; Compton, 2005, p. 196).

In broad terms, religion is defined as institutional, organised religious activities and faith communities, for example, religion is defined by Carroll (1998, p. 2) as “a set of organized, institutionalized beliefs and social functions as a means of spiritual expression and experience”. Coates (2007, p. 8) describes religion as “a framework for beliefs, values, traditions, doctrine, conduct, and rituals”. The definition submitted by Compton (2005, p. 196) is that “religion refers to a spiritual search that is connected to formal religious institutions, while spirituality does not depend on institutional context”. The segregation of religion as institutional practices and spirituality as an autonomous quest for spiritual growth is criticised as too simplistic, as spiritual growth and development may or may not be embedded in religion (Chapter 2).

The inclusive approach adopted by social work, which accepts the diversity of religious and non-religious expressions of spirituality, was endorsed by this study (Canda, & Furman, 2010, p. 69). Furthermore, this study acknowledged that for some people there is no distinction between spirituality and religion and that individual spirituality can be experienced within an organised religious context as well. Thus the definition by Hodge (2001, p. 203), namely that “religion flows from spirituality and expresses an internal subjective reality, corporately, in particular institutionalised forms, rituals, beliefs and practices” was accepted for the purposes of this study.

### **1.6.4 Social work**

A widely accepted definition of social work is that of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) (2013), which states that

the social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance wellbeing. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.

Discussing the mission of social work that stems from this definition, the IFSW states that the mission of social work not only includes addressing issues of social justice, but also encompasses individual wellbeing; hence, the profession should strive “to enable all people to develop their full potential, enrich their lives, and prevent dysfunction”. Therefore, since its beginning, the mission of social work was to meet human needs and develop human potential.

The Canadian Association of Social Work (CASW) (2013) defines social work as

a profession concerned with helping individuals, families, groups and communities to enhance their individual and collective wellbeing. It aims to help people develop their skills and their ability to use their own resources and those of the community to resolve problems. Social work is concerned with individual and personal problems but also with broader social issues such as poverty, unemployment and domestic violence.

As in the definition of the International Federation of Social work, this definition indicates that the mission of social work includes the enhancement of the wellbeing of not only individuals, groups and families, but also communities. Added in this definition is the qualification that wellbeing might be enhanced when people develop and use their own resources as well as those in the community. In contrast to the definition of the IFSW, this definition, although it does refer to social problems such as poverty and domestic violence, particularly emphasises social justice and human rights.

The Terminology Committee for Social Work (1995, p. 60) in South Africa proposes the following definition: Social work is the “professional services by a social worker aimed at the promotion of the social functioning of people.”

The two main themes in the above definitions of social work are the advancement of human rights and social justice, and the promotion of social functioning or wellbeing. The mission of social work is also described in terms of these themes. The advancement of social justice and the promotion of the wellbeing of individuals, groups, families and communities are not mutually exclusive goals, as the advancement of social justice and liberation contributes to a sense of wellbeing. At the same time, developing people’s full potential not only prevents dysfunction, but also empowers them in the struggle for social justice. In practice, whether the focus is primarily on advancing social justice or promoting wellbeing, the social worker acts in accordance with the professional commission. In accordance with the social work mandate, this study focused on the advancement of the wellbeing of the population of midlife women. The study supported the advancement of social justice. However, in the context of this study, social work was defined as the professional application of social work theory and methods, in accordance with social work values and professional codes of conduct, with the aim of advancing the quality of life and sense of wellbeing of individuals, families and groups in all domains of life (bio-psychosocial-spiritual).

### **1.6.5 Spirituality**

Spirituality is considered a nebulous concept that evades precise definition (Hodge, 2002, p. 110; Taylor, 2004, p. 6; Gibson, 2006, p. 64). This accounts for the diversity of definitions presented by theorists, for example, spirituality is defined by Wagler-Martin (2007, p. 136) as

what grounds us. It frames our view of the world and our deepest beliefs. It includes our sense of order and chaos, our understanding of good and evil, and our belief in a form of Higher Power.

The definition for spirituality proposed by Hill and Pargament (2003, p. 66) is “the search for the sacred and the attendant thoughts, feelings and behaviours that fuel and arise from the search for the sacred”.

Wink and Dillon (2002, p. 79) define spirituality as “the self’s existential search for ultimate meaning through an individualised understanding of the sacred”.

Social work scholars Canda and Furman (2010, p. 59) define spirituality as referring “to a universal and fundamental human quality involving the search for a sense of meaning, purpose, morality, wellbeing, and profundity in relationships with ourselves, others and ultimate reality, however understood”.

Informed by the definitions of Wink and Dillon (2002, p. 79), Hill and Pargament (2003, p. 66), Pargament (2007, p. 32) and Canda and Furman (2010, p. 59), this study conceptualised spirituality in such a way as to capture the subjective nature of spirituality by including concepts such as the “personal search” and “individualised understanding”. Introducing the “sacred” in the definition of spirituality was an attempt not only to portray the contemporary meaning of spirituality, but also to delineate it along particular lines in order to avoid an overly broad conception of spirituality.

In the context of this study, spirituality was defined as “the personal search for the sacred, and for ultimate meaning through an individualised understanding of the sacred”.

### **1.6.6 Spiritual strengths**

The strengths perspective is the theoretical model that guides inquiry into the formulation of guidelines for a programme to develop the spiritual strengths of midlife women. The delineation of spiritual strengths is informed by the strengths perspective’s conceptualisation of strengths (Chapter 3).

The strengths perspective does not provide a list of all possible strengths and resources, as Saleebey (2006b, p. 82) points out, “virtually anything given the circumstances and context, that assists an individual to deal with challenges, can be deemed a strength”. This is reiterated by Rankin (2007, p. 6) who confirms, “just

about anything assisting you in dealing with challenges in your life can be regarded as strengths, and this will vary from person to person” (Rankin, 2007, p. 6). These strengths are classified as internal strengths (beliefs, learned skills, traits), and external strengths (relationships, family, and community) (Saleebey 2006d, p. 301; Eichler, Deegen, Canda, & Wells, 2006, p. 70; Cowger, Anderson, & Sniveley, 2006, p. 104). In accordance with the strengths perspective’s delineation, internal spiritual strengths may include personal beliefs regarding the sacred, the experience of a personal relationship with the sacred, beliefs about the authentic self and authentic self-expression (Pargament, & Sweeney, 2011, p. 60). External spiritual strengths might include spiritual friends, faith communities, spiritual mentors, prayer groups, spiritual support groups, spiritual practices and rituals (Geertsema, & Cummings, 2001, p. 28; Walsh, 2003, p. 104; Kilmer, 2006, p. 263; Canda, & Furman, 2010, p. 294).

For the purposes of this study, spiritual strengths were defined as those internal and external spiritual strengths that are subjectively experienced by midlife women as having a salutary effect on their overall sense of wellbeing.

### **1.6.7 Wellbeing**

The earliest definitions typically described wellness in terms of physical health. However, researchers, realising that wellbeing is only possible if people are healthy in a number of areas in their lives, thus expanded the definition of wellbeing to include physical, mental and emotional health; hence, the recognition that wellness not only encompasses physical fitness, but includes aspects such as emotional self-regulation, social support and personal growth (Compton, 2005, p. 109). This expanded vision of wellbeing is reflected in definitions such as that of the Merriam-Webster online dictionary (2013), which defines wellbeing as “the state of being happy, healthy, or prosperous”, and Fontana (2008, p. 214), who notes that wellbeing is a broad term, which includes aspects “such as happiness, life satisfaction, positive affect, optimism and hope”.

Contemporary studies, which investigate the causes, predictors and consequences of happiness and life satisfaction, are described as studies of subjective wellbeing. In these studies, subjective wellbeing refers to “an individual’s personal perception of

their overall happiness and life satisfaction” (Weiten, 2002, p. 317). An examination of the factors contributing to high levels of subjective wellbeing includes optimal psychological functioning, positive social relationships (Compton, 2005, p. 65) and spiritual wellbeing (Van Dierendonck, & Mohan 2006, p. 232; Sperry, Hoffman, Cox, & Cox, 2007, p. 435; Cloninger, Singh, & Singh, 2008, p. 7). The implication is that a sense of subjective wellbeing is influenced by factors from various life domains. This is demonstrated in studies on the link between spirituality and subjective wellbeing. For example, findings in the study of Van Dierendonck and Mohan (2006, p. 232) indicate that spiritual wellbeing, as component of eudemonic wellbeing (to live according to one’s true self), is a significant predictor of satisfaction with life as a whole. These findings are supported by Sperry et al. (2007, p. 435), who report that spirituality and spiritual practices improves physical and psychological health and wellbeing. Similarly, Cloninger et al. (2008, p. 7) emphasise “that human wellbeing requires a coherent spiritual perspective”. It was a key assumption of this study that spiritual development engenders spiritual strengths that can be deployed not only to enhance a sense of spiritual wellbeing, but also an overall sense of wellbeing in midlife.

It seems that when considering wellbeing, a holistic approach is called for, one which recognises that human beings are “integrated systems of mind, body, emotions, and spirit” therefore, [a]ny definition of wellbeing must include healthy functioning in all subsystems as well as healthy integration between subsystems” (Compton, 2005, p. 246). In a similar stance, Prins and Van Niekerk (2009, p. 55) affirm that wellbeing refers to optimal life functioning in all life domains according to the bio-psychosocial and spiritual model. In this study, wellbeing was defined as the subjective experience of contentment and satisfaction as an outcome of positive functioning in the physical, psychological, social and spiritual life domains.

Terms used only within a particular chapter are defined in that chapter.

## **1.7 COMPOSITION OF THE RESEARCH REPORT**

An orientation regarding the research methodology is provided in Chapter 1. The choice of the research topic is clarified as well as the point of departure that directs the inquiry. The research problem, research questions, aim of the study,



demarcation of the study, and some of the terms used consistently in the report are outlined. A discussion of the research methods (literature review and empirical investigation) explains how the research is to be undertaken and how it will contribute to achieving the aim of the study.

The discussion of phenomenology as orientating framework in Chapter 2 elucidates the ontological and epistemological stance, which guides the inquiry into spiritual strengths as subjective experience. The review of the evolution of spirituality confirms that this study formed part of the greater debate between science and religion in general and of the discourse on spirituality in social work in particular. The concept analysis of spirituality assists in defining spirituality in such a way that it expresses the current meaning of spirituality and demarcates guidelines for the identification of those elements of spirituality considered strength. In Chapter 3 the link between social work and spirituality is investigated against the background of the historical development of social work as profession. The historical overview corroborates that the development of spiritual strengths is part of the social work mandate. The strengths perspective, as theoretical model of this study, addresses the concern of how to integrate spirituality in practice, particularly as it pertains to spiritual strengths.

The analysis of midlife as developmental phase in adult life, in Chapter 4, serves to elucidate the role of spiritual strengths in advancing psychosocial functioning in this phase of women's lives. The discussion of the research methodology in Chapter 5, explains the guiding influences that direct endeavours to achieve the research goals. Strategies to ensure methodological rigour are explained and guidelines for ethical research practices are provided. An account of how the data were processed and categorised is offered in Chapter 6. The process of assigning meaning to the data yielded by the workshops was guided by the theoretical perspective and the strengths perspective as theoretical model. The conclusions and recommendations, informed by the literature study and the empirical investigation, are reported in Chapter 7. The research report consists of four parts, namely the orientation (Chapter 1), the literature study (Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5), an empirical investigation (Chapter 6) and a conclusion (Chapter 7).

## **1.8 SUMMARY**

This chapter serves as a methodological orientation to the inquiry into guidelines for a social-work programme for the development of the spiritual strengths of midlife women. Citing research, which supports claims that spirituality is considered a resource, emphasising midlife women's expressed interest in spiritual strengths and focusing attention on the demand that social work pursues a holistic practice reveal the rationale for doing this particular study and explain the choice of the research topic. The statement of the research problem and the research questions illuminate the point of departure in the investigation.

A deliberation on the aim, the primary and secondary goals and the objectives of the study gives a perspective on what the study endeavoured to achieve. Apart from its aims to discern guidelines for a social work programme to develop spiritual strengths, it also endeavoured to contribute to the knowledge framework of social work. Further aims were to inspire social workers to consider the use of the programme to mobilise the spiritual strengths of midlife women and to encourage an engagement of the local social work community in the debate on spirituality. Objectives regarding the literature study and empirical investigation are specified. The literature study appraises the debate on spirituality in social work, analyses the concept of spirituality, illuminates the nature of spiritual strengths, explores the role of the strengths perspective, reviews the midlife transition of women and explains the conceptual framework. The strategies employed in the empirical investigation and the identification of the target population and their selection are described. To achieve the research goal, the literature study and the empirical investigation are integrated.

The demarcation of the investigation discloses the scope of the investigation by indicating the nature of the sources consulted for the literature review, the geographic boundaries of the study, and the identification of the research population. The conceptual framework dictates the principles and criteria for answering the research question in a way that honours the study's stance on ontology and epistemology, adheres to the directives of the strengths perspective, and abides by the benchmarks for qualitative research.

To avoid confusion, the concepts *midlife*, *midlife women*, *religion*, *social work*, *spirituality*, *spiritual strengths* and *wellbeing* are defined, as these terms are used consistently throughout the research report. A synopsis of the research report is presented, providing an overview of the content and aim of each chapter.

## CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUALISING SPIRITUALITY IN SOCIAL WORK

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### *Validation of Spirituality as Source of Strength*

Spirituality is one of the oldest traditions in human history; yet present-day social scientists grapple to capture the complexity and essence of spirituality. The predicament is that continuous changes in the socio-cultural environment have an impact on the perspective on spirituality. To perceive the meaning of present-day notions of spirituality, the evolution of spirituality was examined within the context of the pre-modern, modern and post-modern eras of human history. The conception of spirituality in this study not only portrayed the contemporary meaning of spirituality; it endorsed spirituality as a source of strength and served as the departure point for the identification of spiritual strengths.

Inquiry into the nature of spirituality revealed its capacity to be a resource (strength). This was supported by compelling evidence from a growing body of research (Jacobs, 1997, p. 173; Canda, 2006, p. 61; Saleebey, 2006b, p. 84; Canda, & Furman, 2010, p. 22). The strengths perspective, as theoretical framework of this study, and the definition of spirituality were used as benchmarks to identify those elements of spirituality associated with strength and resilience. Spiritual strengths were categorised as internal and external spiritual strengths in accordance with the directives of the strengths perspective.

### **2.1 SPIRITUALITY AND SPIRITUAL STRENGTHS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

One of the dilemmas of defining spirituality is that it is subjective by nature; hence, any definition of spirituality might fall short of representing what an individual might experience as spiritual (Miller, & Thoreson, 2003, p. 27). Considering the subjective nature of spirituality, and by implication of spiritual strengths, this study designated phenomenology as meta-theoretical perspective to inform thinking on spirituality, in

particular as it pertains to epistemology (the nature of knowledge) and ontology (nature of being).

### **2.1.1 Epistemology and ontology**

The German philosopher, Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), considered the founder of phenomenology, focused mostly on questions concerning epistemology (Giorgi, 2008, p. 33; McLeod, 2011, p. 22). He argued that the positivistic models employed in human sciences failed to represent the “distinctive characteristics of human behaviour and first-person experience” (Wertz, 2005, p. 167). Disputing the positivistic stance that rationality and reason are the only ways to arrive at scientific truths and to uncover knowledge Husserl argued “knowledge about life and the world can come from a reflection on what appears in consciousness” (Todres, 2007, p. 1). Thus, phenomenology can be considered the study of “the phenomenon or objects of human experience” (McLeod, 2011, p. 88), and as “the study of the essence of conscious experience” (Finlay, 2011, p. 44). The phenomenological stance repudiates the positivistic dualism, which results in the reductionist enterprise of viewing humanity in a mechanistic fashion, to be studied only according to the bio-medical model, with its emphasis on linear thinking and quantifiable empirical evidence. The phenomenological perspective supports this study’s argument that the positivistic paradigm is too limited to explore spirituality as subjective human experience in full. Instead, it maintains that knowledge about spirituality and spiritual strengths can be attained by exploring individuals’ subjective experiences of their spirituality.

Expanding on the work of Husserl, the German philosopher Heidegger (1889–1976) focused more on ontological concerns, the nature of being, and “the context within which beings arise” or the human life world (Kvale, 1996, p. 53; Todres, 2007, p. 1). The underlying assumption of Heidegger’s work is that there is a dialogue between the person and his/her world (Groenewald, 2004, p. 4), the implication being that there are elements in the social context that shape individuals’ being in the world. The notion of being-in-the-world is “in keeping with the social work concept of person-in-context and systems theories more broadly” (Pascal, 2010, p. 4). The holistic approach of the being-in-the-world (person-in-context) resonates with this

study's assumption that sociocultural factors within the social context (for example, religious institutions) can shape a personal experience of spirituality. Furthermore, external spiritual strengths (such as spiritual relationships, spiritual groups), which can be utilised to promote wellbeing, are located in the social context. Thus, a virtuous portrayal of spirituality and spiritual strengths necessitates a phenomenological philosophy that defines the principles for a holistic understanding of the subjective experience of spirituality and spiritual strengths within the context of the life world.

By broadening the scope of inquiry into the human experience, phenomenology has forged a distinct meta-theoretical perspective devoted to the integrity of human experiences through its emphasis on the subjective experience of the individual in everyday living.

### **2.1.2 Spirituality as lived experience**

Spirituality is increasingly equated with an ***internal awareness***, focusing more on individuals' ***subjective experience*** of spirituality (Wink, Ciciolla, Dillon, & Tacy, 2007, p. 1055). The custom of accentuating internal aspects of spirituality is reflected in the portrayal of spirituality as the "individual experience, [which] is identified with such things as personal transcendence" (Hill et al., 2000, p. 60); "an inner attitude of living life related to the sacred" (Van Dierendonck, & Mohan, 2006, p. 228); and the inward, subjective, emotional expression of the individual (Hill, & Pargament, 2003, p. 64). Consequently, spiritual strengths, and in particular internal spiritual strengths, are also associated with subjective experiences. For example, Van Dierendonck and Mohan (2006, p. 324) characterise internal resources as "inner aspects that produce the individualised awareness of oneself, of one's inner self and a sense of being part of a deeper spiritual dimension". The definition of spirituality appointed for this study reflects this contemporary emphasis on the subjective nature of spirituality (e.g. "*personal search*", "*individualised understanding of the sacred*"). In view of the research question of this study, the aspect of spirituality studied (spiritual strengths), and the subjective nature of spirituality, a phenomenological orientation directs the research agenda of this study.

### 2.1.3 A phenomenological orientation

Endorsing phenomenology as meta-theoretical perspective quintessentially is acquiescence that there is a fundamentally different way of looking at the nature of the lived world, than that of positivism. By appointing phenomenology as meta-theoretical perspective, this study sanctioned the phenomenological stance on ontology and epistemology to direct the inquiry into spirituality and spiritual strengths. Furthermore, it compelled this investigation to embrace a set of guiding phenomenological assumptions such as a non-dualistic vision of existence (Todres, 2007, p. 165); developing knowledge about phenomenon as they are experienced and lived (Merriam, 2002, p. 7); and focusing on the subjective experiences of individuals (McLeod, 2011, p. 88); or, as aptly described by Wilber (2006, p. 47), as “interior empiricism”. The supposition of this study was that allegiance to these phenomenological assumptions would not only facilitate a more reliable and valid exploration of spirituality, but also enhance the possibility of a more faithful representation of the subjective experience of individuals. Moreover, by providing the parameters for the scientific investigation into the essence of spirituality as lived experience the phenomenological stance secured the integrity of this study’s inquiry into a social work programme for the development of the spiritual strengths of midlife women.

Although this study availed itself of the phenomenological philosophy, it was not a phenomenological empirical inquiry *per se*. Contrary to phenomenological research, which is restricted to descriptions of phenomenon as they are lived (Finlay, 2009, p. 6), this study moved beyond the description and understanding of spiritual strengths to formulate guidelines for a programme for the development of spiritual strengths to be used in practice. However, this study adopted what Finlay (2009, p. 9) calls “an open phenomenological attitude” (as is evidenced in many qualitative approaches that borrow techniques from this approach) when investigating the spiritual strengths of midlife women.

## 2.2 THE EVOLUTION OF SPIRITUALITY

The conundrum facing researchers in this field is that conceptualisations of spirituality have changed over the course of time, and a consensus of meaning has yet to emerge. For example, in previous epochs, religion and spirituality were considered indistinguishable; however, there is now a growing tendency to divorce spirituality from religion, implying that the meaning of both religion and spirituality is being revised (Pellebon, & Anderson, 1999, p. 230; Miller, & Thoreson, 2003, p. 24; Schneiders, 2003, p. 164; Crisp, 2008, p. 363). It appears that the meaning of spirituality is evolving concurrently with transformations in culture. Consequently, contemporary attempts at conceptualising spirituality would require deliberations on *why* and *how* the changing cultural historical landscape is transforming the meaning of spirituality.

By doing a concept analysis of spirituality and formulating a definition of spirituality, this chapter aimed not only to endorse claims of spirituality as a resource, but also to bolster arguments for the inclusion of spirituality as a source of strength in social work practice. Without an in-depth understanding of the fundamental nature of spirituality it would be difficult to conceptualise the nature of spiritual strength, or to make a compelling case for the recognition of spirituality as strength. Hence, to appraise spirituality as strength requires a clear perception of the contemporary meaning of the phenomenon. The reasoning behind the contemporary conceptualisation of spirituality can only be appreciated by examining its evolvment within the historical sociocultural context. This stance is supported by social work scholar Swartzentruber (2007, p. 339), who insists that spirituality is “historically situated and socially constructed within a historical cultural context and, as such, is best understood from the vantage point of the broader socio-cultural context”. Spirituality is culturally embedded; thus, an understanding of spirituality would benefit from mapping its transformational passage throughout history to the current epoch.

The advent of spirituality can be traced to prehistory. Throughout the succeeding eras of human history the meaning of spirituality has constantly been shaped and reshaped – this is an on-going process.



### **2.2.1 The pre-modern era**

About a hundred thousand years ago, *homo sapiens* emerged from a four-million-year process of human evolution to become a being that could speak, make tools and think symbolically. Early humans' capacity to think symbolically is evidenced by findings that around 30 000 BCE, primitive cultures performed ceremonial burials which expressed an afterlife belief. One such sacred site, the caves at Grosse Chauvet (dating from this period), depicts engravings of religious ceremonies (Armstrong 2009, p. 14). According to Esposito, Fasching and Lewis (2009, p. 43), the artefacts of prehistoric religions reflect early humans' efforts to understand ultimate reality, to explain the unseen powers of life, the inner world of personhood and the mystery of death. The evidence of prehistoric humans' attempts to grasp the mystery of the ultimate reality in the view of Armstrong (2009, p. 5, 20), demonstrates that ancient cultures had an awareness of ultimate reality, or a transcendent mystery. Supporting this notion, King and Koenig (2009, p. 4) affirm that, "humans have always sensed a transcendent spiritual world". Thus, as soon as they became recognisably human, men and women had a subjective experience of a transcendent reality; moreover, they accepted it as a fact.

#### **2.2.1.1 World religions**

Around 3 000 BCE, the better-known religions of the East and the West evolved from the shamanistic and polytheistic forms of religion. For the first time in human history people from different social groups congregated in cities. Urbanisation brought about a transformation in human experience, as people attempted to negotiate life in a more complex society. The loss of indigenous collective life confronted the new city dwellers with different questions about mortality, morality and the meaning of life. The quest to answer these questions inspired the emergence of world religions. However, the birth of the well-known world religions does not denote the beginning of religion in human history. According to Esposito et al. (2009, p. 42), the record of all societies over the last 100 000 years refers to "the unmistakeable presence of religion". Remarkably, religion was always present throughout human history in one form or another.

### ***2.2.1.2 The role of religion in pre-modernity***

Inquiry into the function of religion in earlier cultures reports that religion was a resource abetting survival and employed to deal with life's challenges. By way of illustration, Esposito et al. (2009, p. 72) refer to the evidence that those more religious were better organised, adapted more successfully to the environment, bonded more tightly, hunted more effectively and were more able to reconcile with death through the practice of religious rituals. Thus, religion, and by implication spirituality, probably was a resource utilised to enhance psychosocial functioning from the beginning of the human experience. Not only was religion utilised as a resource, but religious practices such as ritual dancing reinforced the collective sense of common identity (in stark contrast to the modern emphasis on individuality). In pre-modernity, life was ordered through the myths and rituals passed down orally through generations.

Characteristic of pre-modernity was the unquestioned acceptance of a single grand narrative, which was typically based on religious myths. This religious worldview was experienced by the majority of people as valuable, meaningful and unfailingly true. Hence, in the pre-modern era, religion was considered the most certain form of knowledge. As a result, religious authority played a central role in the social, political and economic spheres in public life (Esposito et al. 2009, p. 26). Indeed, spirituality was considered so crucial to human existence that, according to Armstrong (1999, p. 12), pre-historic people believed that only by being part of the divine or spiritual life they could become truly human. For this reason the religions of pre-modernity not only influenced all spheres of life, but also provided a unified, coherent meta-narrative through which life was interpreted.

### ***2.2.1.3 Spirituality is fundamental to being human***

Considering the prevailing presence of spirituality since the dawn of human history, modern-day scholars argue that spirituality is an integral human phenomenon and central to human existence (Purdy, & Duprey, 2005, p. 95; Cashwell, Bently, & Bigby, 2007, p. 66; King, 2008, p. 5; Prins, & Van Niekerk, 2009, p. 70; Esposito et al., 2009, p. 42; Canda, & Furman, 2010, p. 59). This prompts Armstrong (1999, p. 3) to conclude that humans are "spiritual animals", *homo sapiens* is also *homo religious*. An analogous deduction is that of King (2008, p. 41), who observes that

spirituality is an essential part of human existence; moreover, “spiritual needs are basic to humans”. This stance is substantiated by Payne’s (2010, p. 189) observation that since pre-modernity, amidst all eminently material activities such as finding food and shelter, people also “acknowledged that their lives and their deaths had an overarching meaning and purpose, beyond mere material satisfaction”. Thus, the spiritual quest for meaning, pursued since pre-modernity to this day, reaffirms the notion that spirituality is a cardinal aspect of being human.

Apart from spirituality as being fundamental to being human, Peterson and Seligman (2004, p. 601) emphasise that a universal characteristic of spirituality in all cultures throughout the ages is the “concept of an ultimate, transcendent, sacred and divine force”. Thus, a core characteristic of human spirituality is the subjective experience of an ultimate reality or a Higher Power. Humans have endeavoured persistently and purposefully to explore the connection to the ultimate reality (Cascio, 1998, p. 593; Walsh, 1999, p. 3; Peterson, & Seligman, 2004, p. 601). This aspect of spirituality – the desire to connect with the sacred – is described by Pargament (2007, p. 25) as the search for the sacred and as a *distinctly human pursuit*. In a similar stance, Armstrong (2009, p. 19) views the desire to cultivate a sense of the transcendent as the *defining human characteristic*.

Considering the prevailing presence of spirituality since pre-modernity, Armstrong (1999, p. 4) sardonically remarks that the current secularism “is an entirely new experiment unprecedented in human history”. Concurring, Payne (2010, p. 89) observes that most of the seven billion people on Earth today consider spirituality as an inalienable aspect of being human, postulating that the “secular post-Christian materialist worldview of Western Europe is unique not only in time but also in place”. The materialistic worldview and the denial of the central role of spirituality in people’s lives in some Western countries are antithetical to the evidence from pre-history, which attests to religion and spirituality as a constituent part of being human. Thus, the unrelenting manifestation of spirituality throughout human history substantiates claims of the ubiquitous and fundamental nature of spirituality. This propounds the theory that individuals are more than physical, psychological and social beings; they are also spiritual beings. Moreover, their spirituality makes them uniquely human. It is a core assumption of this study that all humans are innately spiritual beings and the spiritual as a life force underlies the impetus for sustenance, growth and healing.

### **2.2.2 Modernity**

The origins of modernity can be traced to the late seventeenth century, when the doctrines of the Enlightenment and the emerging science of that period initiated changes that created a radically different world from that of pre-modernity. The spiritual and religious beliefs entrenched in Western culture since pre-modernity succumbed to reductionism, rationality and dualism. It is most notably the emphasis on reason, as reflected in the writings of the philosophers of the Enlightenment, which contributed to the discontent with the religious traditions of pre-modernity (Armstrong, 2007, p. 183). The resulting impact on culture and the transformations of social conditions engendered the unique features associated with modernity (Ferguson, & Wright, 1988, p. 223; King, 2009, p. 12; Lorimer, 2010, p. 10). Although modernity originated in Western Europe, the impact of rational thought and the scientific and technological revolution not only shaped Western society; it also had an impact on the rest of the world to varying degrees (Giddens, 2002, p. 1; Garrard, 2006, p. 664; Lorimer, 2010, p. 9). Thus, the radical changes brought about by modernity reverberated globally.

The magnitude and the extent of the transformation engendered by modernity are not only evidenced in the values and practices, but as Foucault (1984, p. 32) astutely observes, in “what we are, what we think, and what we do today”. The changes brought about by modernity left a legacy that has become embedded in society, prompting King (2009, p. 23) to observe that the contemporary world “remains stubbornly modern”, despite the many claims that we now live in a postmodern era. Thus, the philosophies informing modernity still predominate our current epoch.

#### ***2.2.2.1 The era of enlightenment***

The dictum of Enlightenment is to doubt everything, to think for oneself, and to believe only the truths unveiled by science (Armstrong, 2009, p. 205; Robinson, 2010, p. 94). The strong belief in rationality and science induced the critical questioning of traditional institutions and customs. Moreover, such was the confidence in the doctrines of the Enlightenment that a commitment to science and reason was deemed the only way to move forward (Armstrong, 1999, p. 45). Thus, progressive thought, with its emphasis on empirical observation and reason, rejected

spiritual explanations of phenomena (Clark, 2006, p. 2). According to Robinson (2010, p. 96), as modernity spawned technological and industrial revolutions,

[s]cience became the figurehead of the modern mind set, embodying the virtues of questioning, rationality and a search for new truths. Modernity became a dominant movement that directed society from the centre.

Thus, instead of religion, reason was advocated as the primary source of authority and legitimacy, initiating changes in society, which fashioned a modernist culture distinctly different from that of the pre-modern era.

The internal history of social work is embedded in the external world history; therefore, social work did not escape the influences of modernity. Religious and spiritual issues became peripheral in social work discourses, as it was regarded unscientific and difficult to categorise and use in practice (Zapf, 2005, p. 634). Consequently, under the influence of Enlightenment thinking, with its emphasis on rationality and empirical evidence, social work regarded religion and spirituality as outside its sphere of interest (Chapter 3).

#### ***2.2.2.2 The expansion of secularism***

The advances in science and technology witnessed a gradual decline in the influence of religion, weakening the governing role religion played in politics, education and economics. The most dramatic expression of modern reality, according to Esposito et al. (2009, p. 25), was the separation of church and state. In many Western countries politics now started to govern public life and religion was regarded a private matter. This observation is shared by D'Amico (2007, p. 25), who maintains that the primary domain of spirituality in most Western countries is the individual realm.

The novel scientific worldview replaced the religious worldview of the pre-modern era. Hence, the meta-narrative of pre-modernity informed by religious beliefs was replaced by a meta-narrative informed by the modern myth of “progress driven by science and technology” (Esposito et al., 2009, p. 26). The beliefs and traditions of the pre-modern past were regarded as superstitious and irrational, and the aim was to emancipate secular thought from religion and metaphysics (Du Toit, 2006,

p. 1255; Esposito et al., 2009, p. 25). Scientific rationalists opposed the influence of religion in all spheres of life, aiming to replace it with a more reasoned approach. Not only did this alter the status of religion in societies, but it also influenced the way in which individuals viewed and conceptualised religion.

The early introduction of secularisation models is found in the classical literature in sociology. For example, Comte (1798–1857) insisted that religion as part of a “more primitive human developmental stage gives way to the evolutionary emergence of a positive scientific stage” (Hill et al., 2000, p. 58). Similarly, Durkheim (1858–1917) advanced the hypothesis that secularisation is a normal modern phenomenon, postulating that religion will degenerate as science develops. Thus, as a sign of social progress, religion would become less relevant and recede as science advanced (Hill et al., 2000, p. 58). The progress of secularism in the West gained momentum during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As late as the 1970s, many scholars predicted the end of religion and the evolvment of a secular stage in world history (Esposito et al., 2009, p. 26). As people began to question the acceptance of prescribed beliefs, narrow-minded dogmas, the exclusivity of religious traditions and the obligatory rituals and practices characteristic of some religious traditions, the expansion of secularism became more evident. Moreover, the demands of rigid religious traditions came to be seen as a hindrance to spiritual experiences and as restricting human potential. Consequently, people began to distinguish between organised religion and personal spirituality. Direct spiritual experiences were emphasised rather than organised forms of worship (Hill et al., 2000, p. 58; Schneiders, 2003, p. 163, 164). The alienation from religion in Western society brought about a gradual distinction between religion and spirituality.

Under the impact of these historical and cultural changes, spirituality began to acquire a more distinct meaning during the 1960s and 1970s. Spirituality came to be associated with an individual and subjective experience, and religion with a formal, institutional expression of spirituality (Hill et al., 2000, p. 58). Although the divergence between religion and spirituality was more prevalent in Western society, particularly in Western Europe, it influenced not only the popular use of the term *spirituality* worldwide, but also the conceptualisation of spirituality in academia, even theology. When interest in spirituality in social work was revived in the 1980s, the conceptualisation of spirituality reflected the changes forged by modernity, for

example, the bifurcation of religion and spirituality (Henery, 2003, p. 1109; Nelson-Becker, & Canda, 2008, p. 179).

### ***2.2.2.3 Dark side of modernity***

The proponents of the Enlightenment had such confidence in the authority of reason that they firmly believed that the ability to understand the world and our own thoughts rationally would enable us to “shape history for our own purposes” (Giddens, 2002, p. 2). Moreover, Enlightenment idealists had an unfaltering faith in a utopian future brought about by modern science and material progress (Kourie, 2006, p. 29; Garrard, 2006, p. 664; Parkinson, 2010, p. 72). They optimistically believed that progress and reason would create a better world, a global utopia, in which people would be free (without the need for religion or spirituality), promising wealth and happiness for all (Tacey, 2003, p. 18; Kourie, 2006, p. 29). There is no doubt that the scientific revolution and Enlightenment yielded many benefits. Some of these benefits are listed by Garrard (2006, p. 664) as the unprecedented expansion of scientific discovery and its application, political reform, social liberation and individual empowerment. In a similar vein, Eagleton (2009, p. 69) pays tribute to the advantages brought about by the Enlightenment such as freedom of thought, feminism, civil liberties, socialism and democracy.

Although modernity initiated many positive changes, the 20<sup>th</sup> century has revealed the dark side of modernity. In the opinion of Garrard (2006, p. 665), the benefits generated by the Enlightenment are far outnumbered by the costs of this epoch. The two world wars, World War I (1914–1918) and World War II (1940–1945), and the wars of modern technology, exemplify the grievous toll paid for modernity. The unprecedented destruction that progress in science and technology brought about could not be more clearly demonstrated than the newly invented atomic bombs dropped on Japan in 1945 (Kourie, 2006, p. 29; Esposito et al., 2009, p. 30). Contemplating the failures of modernity Esposito et al. (2009, p. 30) remark “[t]he makers of the modern myth of progress had failed to foresee that a technology that increases efficiency can be applied not only to the production of less expensive consumer goods, but also to the invention and manufacture of weapons of mass destruction”. The irony, according to Eagleton (2009, p. 69), is that Europe – home to the Enlightenment – was also home to the Holocaust, prompting the author to

conclude that “enlightened liberal humanism served as the legitimating ideology of a capitalist culture more steeped in blood than any other episode in human history”. It seems disenchantment with modernity is increasing as the injurious consequences of modernity are exposed.

According to Garrard (2006, p. 665), as the myths of modernity crumble, few retain their faith in science, progress and reason, tenets so highly valued by advocates of Enlightenment. Lambasting those who still believe that the ideals of Enlightenment are steadily improving the lot of humanity, Eagleton (2009, p. 70) states,

If ever there was a pious myth and piece of credulous superstition, it is the liberal-nationalist belief that, a few hiccups apart, we are all steadily en route to a finer world.

Captured in Eagleton’s (2009, p. 70) remark is what Laszlo (2010, p. 17) describes as the recognition that there is something seriously wrong with the world, prompting theorists such as Robinson, Clark and Lorimer (2010, p. 229) to suggest that the questionable assumptions underlying modernity should be re-evaluated. The crippling failures of modernity, particularly since the economic-financial crisis of 2008, confirm that the modernist paradigm has become unsupportable, lending more weight to pleas for a move beyond modernity (Laszlo, 2010, p. 17). As the reality of the failures of modernity is confronted, there is growing recognition that the values of the scientific era is outdated; moreover, the arid rationality of the positivistic paradigm gives rise to a spiritual hunger, calling for a reassessment of the role of spirituality in the modern epoch.

#### ***2.2.2.4 The effect of secularism on modern society***

Of the many ills engendered by modernity, secularism is often singled out as the source of many of the maladies of our current era (Beumer, 1997, p. 39; Canda, 1999, p. 2; Coates, 2007, p. 7). One of the most palpable and unwholesome effects of secularism, according to Harris (1991, p. 45), is that humans have become diminished through dismissing the spiritual. Reviewing the contemporary secular society, Tacey (2003, p. 3) boldly claims that the afflictions associated with secularism can be attributed to the modernist arrogance, which led us to believe “that we have outgrown the sacred, and that notions of soul and spirit are archaisms



of a former era". Concurring, Walsh (2003, p. 7) also asserts that the primary source of the ailments of the current society is a neglect of the soul, which appears "symptomatically in obsessions, addictions, violence and loss of meaning". Adding to the argument, Kourie (2006, p. 29) and Pargament (2007, p. 4) assert that feelings of nihilism, alienation, meaninglessness, abandonment and emptiness are kindled by the loss of spirituality. In similar vein, Coates (2007, p. 6) postulates that the spiritual emptiness and search for meaning arise from modern-day lifestyles, which are characterised by materialism, consumerism and individualism. Endorsing these views, King (2008, p. 19) remarks that modernity is marked by a great spiritual poverty, described by many as feelings of alienation and a lost sense of soul. For social work, the relevance of a discussion about the impact of secularism is the recognition that the secular context in which our clients live engenders distress and affliction of such a nature that it can only be alleviated by deploying spiritual strengths.

#### ***2.2.2.5 The turn to spirituality***

The paradox of modernity is that the comprehensive secularisation in influential Western societies has created the very context for the renewed worldwide interest in spirituality. The progress and technological advances brought forth by modernity did not grace humanity with the freedom and fulfilment it promised. On the contrary, the spiritual deprivation engendered despair, anguish, alienation, nihilism and a search for meaning on a scale unknown in human history. Thus, the turn to spirituality is an attempt to temper the mischievous consequences of modernity (Henery, 2003, p. 1105; Kourie, 2006, p. 20; Coates, 2007, p. 9; Canda, & Furman, 2010, p. 3). This worldwide turn to spirituality is described by Tacey (2003, p. 1) as a spiritual revolution, depicting it as "a spontaneous movement in society, a new interest in the reality of spirit and its healing effects on life, health, community and wellbeing". Similarly, the turn to spirituality is described by Barbato and Kratochwil (2008, p. 2) as the masses of the global village's resistance against secularism. This is reiterated by Torpey (2010, p. 269), who affirms that the global village is "taking up arms against the secular establishment". The return to the spiritual might also be considered an intimation of humans' inherent recognition that spirituality is a

resource. This study endorses the assumption that the regeneration of spirituality includes civil societies' recognition of spirituality as strength.

#### ***2.2.2.6 A renaissance in academia***

The acknowledgment that modernity did not yield the benefits it promised and, in particular, the malaise brought about by secularisation, impelled a critical reassessment of the fundamental paradigm buttressing modernity. For example, Nagler (2005, p. 5) postulates that modernity endorses “a worldview that is too narrow” and is bounded by its restricted view of material reality. What is needed, according to Tarnas (2010, p. 49), is a “critical reappraisal of the epistemological limits of the conventional scientific approach to knowledge”. This would require a new understanding of reality with a deeper appreciation of “both the complexity of reality and the plurality of perspectives” (p. 49). It is this narrow view of material reality that refutes a holistic approach to wellbeing, particularly an approach that attempts to include the spiritual.

The dissatisfaction with this reductionist and mechanistic approach and the recognition that “[n]either the secular nor the spiritual side of our lives can be ignored: both needs to be explained, structured and interpreted” (Du Toit, 2006, p. 1258), implored social scientists (including social work) to look for a radically different way to understand individuals' life world. A new historical trend – postmodernism – emerged to challenge the reductionist worldview of positivism and, of interest to this study, the discredited spiritual visions of reality.

### **2.2.3 Postmodernity**

In view of the dramatic loss of faith, particularly in Western Europe, neo-liberalists pronounced the triumph of secularism in the 1960s. However, the 1960s is also the decade that some scholars describe as the beginning of “the end of the Enlightenment project and the beginning of Postmodernity” (Armstrong 2009, p. 278). It is during this decade that French intellectuals such as Lyotard and Baudrillard began to question the modernist epistemology (Lechte, 1994, p. 260; Tacey, 2003, p. 16). Although the postmodern stage was ushered in during the 1960s, this new worldview is not fully embraced. This is illustrated in Saleeby's

(2006d, p. 293) observation that, notwithstanding the shift in Western culture, there is yet no clear notion of what will replace the modern archetype. Concurring, Esposito et al. (2009, p. 5) remark that our current epoch is in transition between *modernity* and the new, emerging *postmodern* era. The sentiments expressed by Saleebby and Esposito et al., is endorsed by Tarnas (2010, p. 49), who states that the current era is caught between two worldviews – a “transitional era where the old cultural vision no longer holds and the new has not yet constellated”. Thus, although post-modern thinking has a significant impact on society, it has not succeeded in superseding modernity.

### **2.2.3.1 Epistemological shift**

Clarifying postmodernism, Kourie (2006, p. 29) describes it as an epistemological transformation (or Gestalt shift), which manifests itself in the political, social, philosophical, economic and religious spheres. Theorists regard the demise of meta-narratives as one of the defining characteristics of postmodernist thinking (Lechte, 1994, p. 260; Hugman, 2003, p. 1026; Esposito et al., 2009, p. 26). In contrast to the meta-narratives of pre-modernity and modernity, postmodernism advocates pluralism, diversity, flexibility and the relativity of all knowledge (Hugman, 2003, p. 1026). Hence, the meta-narratives of pre-modernity in which religion provided the universal, over-arching explanation of the world are not accepted, but neither is the modernist meta-narrative of science as the only form of objective knowledge about the world (Esposito et al., 2009, p. 27). Postmodernist inquiry exposes the limitations of the scientific worldview, bringing to an end the unquestioning faith in science. Furthermore, it considers religious knowledge on equal footing with scientific knowledge (Esposito et al., 2009, p. 31). The collapse of the scientific meta-narrative contributed to the upsurge of interest in spirituality (Du Toit 2006, p. 1259; Kourie, 2006, p. 31; Esposito et al., 2009, p. 31). True to the philosophy of postmodernism, the renewed interest in spirituality reflects a plurality of narratives in which there is an awareness of the diversity of religious stories. For example, the emphasis on the interconnectedness of all life, as expressed in contemporary spirituality, is due to the influence of postmodern thinking, which rejects dualism (Kourie, 2006, p. 31). The postmodern stance also rejects the modernist strategies of privatising religion, insisting that spirituality and religion not only influence private, but also public life,

“recognising the public benefits of pluralism in contemporary society” (Esposito et al., 2009, p. 26). Postmodernist thinking refutes many of the misconceptions (such as dualism of body and soul) about religion and spirituality brought about by modernism.

### ***2.2.3.2 Emergence of secular spirituality***

It is the postmodern consciousness and culture, which, according to King (2008, p. 20), provide the new context for innovative inquiry into both traditional religions and new spiritualities. A hallmark of postmodernism is the emergence of *secular spiritualities*, not necessarily in opposition to traditional religions, but unmistakably distinct. According to Du Toit (2006, p. 1259), the new spirituality is not necessarily a rejection of religion or religious rights, but rather a framework in which every person can “exercise his or her chosen mode of spiritual fulfilment, whether traditional or modern, theistic, pantheistic or atheistic”. Expanding on Du Toit’s (2006, p. 1259) view King (2008, p. 21) postulates that secular spirituality replaces the traditional religious explanations of the world with narratives that represent “new conceptions of the self and the cosmos not directly indebted to religion”. The discomfort with traditional religions, according to Tacey (2003, p. 2), reflects a postmodern conundrum, namely that “[w]e are caught in a difficult moment in history, stuck between a secular system we have outgrown and a religious system we cannot fully embrace”. Adding to the conversation on the abandonment of religion in favour of spirituality, Schneiders (2003, p. 173) argues that it can be attributed to ideological criticisms of institutionalised religion, encouraged by a postmodern context that “fosters the pursuit of idiosyncratic and non-religious spirituality”. The emergence of secular spirituality entrenches the bifurcation of religion and spirituality. Consequently, the meaning of the concepts of spirituality and religion has changed for many people. This is illustrated in the often-expressed disclosure, “I am spiritual but not religious” (Schneiders, 2003, p. 163; Praglin, 2004, p. 71; Thomas, 2006, p. 397). Thus, the division between religion and spirituality brought about by modernists’ antagonism towards religion is extended by postmodernist pluralism. Postmodernism’s emphasis on diversity encourages the evolvment of various forms of spirituality, including irreligious spirituality. The emergence of new forms of

spirituality, and the diverse meanings ascribed to the term, calls for a continual investigation into the understanding of the nature of religion and spirituality.

The impact of secular spirituality on the conceptualisation of spirituality is twofold. Firstly, differentiating spirituality from religion resulted in a perception of spirituality as “good” and religion as “bad”; hence, the novel tendency to opt for spiritual orientations and practices independent of religious institutions (King, 2008, p. 15). The other influence of secular spirituality on the conceptualisation of spirituality is the confusion it creates regarding the meaning of spirituality. Postmodernism has witnessed the inclusion of what Kourie (2006, p. 22) calls “a myriad of activities ranging from the deeply creative to the distinctly bizarre” under the umbrella term of spirituality. The burgeoning interest in spirituality in popular culture seems to include an ever-expanding array of beliefs, values and practices, resulting in the very meaning of spirituality to become “fluid” (Kourie, 2006, p. 22). The uncertainty and dissent about the meaning of spirituality is mirrored in academic literature by the diverse definitions assigned to the concept.

### ***2.2.3.3 Post-secularism***

It is acknowledged that the philosophy of the postmodernist movement opened the door for the discourse on religion and spirituality, as it casted doubt “on the grand narratives of modernity” (King, 2009, p. 216). However, it is also argued that the extreme relativism that often governs postmodern thinking contributes to the sense of meaninglessness and fragmentation experienced by modern people (Hugman, 2003, p. 1026). It is King’s (2009, p. 216) contention that the multiple narratives of postmodernism represent a strain of thought “which is so open it is barely useful”. Another criticism raised by Kourie (2006, p. 30) is the postmodern tendency to overcome the modern worldview via an anti-world-view, employing a process of deconstruction. Deconstructing or eliminating concepts such as God, self, purpose and meaning can result in extreme relativism and nihilism. In a similar stance, King (2009, p. 202), maintains that postmodernism “pursues a sceptical deconstruction of all systems of thought”, postulating that postmodernism to a large extent represents a hermeneutics of suspicion “a stance that promises a critical approach to a subject such as spirituality, but one that could also scoff at the position of trust at the heart of the spiritual life”. Scholars such as King (2009, p. 202) and Robinson (2010, p. 92)

argue that in view of these shortcomings, postmodernism is not potent enough to bring about a post-secular (trans-modern) shift. In support of this stance, Robinson (2010, pp. 92) insists that postmodern ideology is but “a critique of modernism’s deification of rationality, a parody of modernism, not a movement beyond it”. Neither the rational scientific model of modernity nor the relativism of postmodernity provides a model that could facilitate the discourse between secularity and religion. Thus, a paradigmatically new approach is called for to mediate in the conversation between scientific reason and religion.

#### ***2.2.3.4 The events of 9/11***

The need for a new ideology to address questions of spirituality and religion in a modern secular society has been gathering momentum over the last two decades. Transformations in world societies and events such as the 9/11 attacks in America, the global resurgence of spirituality, the rise of religious fundamentalism, disenchantment with modernity and the tentative overtures to establish a new discourse between science and religion impelled “the secular elites” (Barbato, & Kratochwil, 2008, p. 25), particularly from Western Europe, to acknowledge the relevance of religion in modern society. The notion of post-secularism is considered a move in the right direction, as it attempts to “explain how religion interacts with modern societies on the basis of structural independence from the state, but also in reaction to requests of civil society” (Zieberts, & Riegel, 2009, p. 299). An overview of the evolvement of post-secularism provides an appreciation of the nature of this paradigmatically new approach, as well as how the emerging post-secular sensibility distinguishes itself from old religious (pre-modern) discourses and secular rationalism.

This need to move beyond the narrow Eurocentric worldview and occidental rationalism of the West gained new vitality after the attacks of 11 September 2001 in New York and elsewhere in the United States. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, Jürgen Habermas, in an acceptance speech at the annual *Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels* in Frankfurt on 14 October 2001, addressed the tension between secular society and religion (Harrington 2007, p. 544). In the wake of the attacks, Habermas argued, “we have entered into a ‘post-secular’ age in which the claims of religion have to be addressed by liberal democracies in a more serious

manner than had been the case theretofore” (Torpey, 2010, p. 269). It is the view of McLennan (2007, p. 867) that the implication of Habermas’s statement is that the previous idea of “modernity as a ‘zero sum’ game between faith and reason” needs to be discarded. In a similar stance, King (2009, p. 9) concludes that, “religion no longer flies below the cultural radar of the West”. The reverse is true, namely, that religion, in a turnabout, now dramatically disturbs “the religious-secular détente”. The rise of religious fundamentalism, which came to a head in the attacks of 9/11, forced social scientists to reappraise their muted response to previous appeals to engage with questions of religion and spirituality. The increased interest in post-secular sensibilities confirms a commitment to establish a dialogue between two seemingly incompatible worldviews.

### ***2.2.3.5 The post-secular discourse in Western cultures***

The events of 11 September 2001 vociferously announced the unmistakable presence of religion in the modern world. The omnipresence of religion is confirmed by Prothero (2011, p. 9), who asserts that with the exception of Western Europe, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, the rest of the world is as “furiously religious” as it ever was. Consequently, the premise of a positive linear correlation between modernity and secularism is called into question, aptly portrayed in Torpey’s (2010, p. 269) remark that “the notion that secularization is a necessary concomitant of modernization is in disarray”. Thus, the presence of religion in most other modern or modernising societies of the world dispels the modernist assumption that modernisation as a matter of course results in secularisation. This is clearly demonstrated in the United States of America, a country thoroughly modern, yet with varied and vibrant religious communities, with ninety per cent of the population professing to a belief in God (Pargament, 2007, p. 9; Torpey, 2010, p. 270). The United States, once considered the exception, from the standpoint of European secularity as paradigmatic of modernity, now seemed to be the norm. This forced in particular European sociologists to reassess one of the prevailing assumptions, namely that modernisation brings about an inevitable decline in religion (Harrington, 2007, p. 543; McLennan, 2007, p. 857; Torpey, 2010, p. 269). It is reiterated by Habermas (2006, p. 16), who professes that Western Europe’s image of modernity is undergoing a change, as there is a growing realisation that “occidental rationalism

now seems to be the actual deviation". Thus, Habermas (2008, p. 6) concludes that a post-secular consciousness is needed in secular societies to adjust to the continued existence of religious communities. The acceptance by social scientists that religion is part of modern societies underlines the need for post-secular design to direct the difficult debate between secularism (science) and religion.

### ***2.2.3.6 Criteria for a post-secular debate***

At the heart of post-secularity is the assumption that there is compatibility between secularity and religion that can overcome the antagonisms (Ziebertz, & Riegel, 2009, p. 293). Therefore, one of the key features of post-secularism is openness to questions of religion and spirituality (Harrington, 2007, p. 547; McLennan, 2007, p. 860; King, 2009, p. 11). The receptiveness to religion, in Habermas's (2006, p. 16) view, requires a rejection of a scientifically "limited conception of reason" and the rationalist presumption that itself can decide which parts of religious doctrines are rational and which are not. To be able to sustain an openness to religion and spirituality, Harrington (2007, p. 547) advises a reappraisal of the "previously over-confident secular outlook" and the discarding of the "modern self-understanding that has become hardened in its secularism". According to King (2009, p. 203), a "hermeneutics of trust" and openness to learn from each other is vital for the new discourse between science and religion. At the core of this new openness is the rejection that "reason must rule out religion" (King, 2009, p. 203). Instead, post-secular sensibility displays "a renewed openness to questions of spirit, but one that retains the habit of critical thought which partially define secularism" (p. 11). A more sympathetic disposition towards religion, however, does not imply an uncritical acceptance of religious worldviews. Hence, although the secular position is prepared to learn from religion, it remains agnostic in the process.

In the post-secular debate, religion is introduced in a manner that complements rational inquiry. Hence, religion's public voice is expressed by communicating convictions through explanations and reasoning (Ziebertz, & Riegel, 2009, p. 300). The post-secular religion is distinguished from pre-Enlightenment religion, in that it embraces the diversity of spiritual perspectives that characterise modern societies. It can be assumed that, as in previous epochs post-secularism will have an impact on the conceptualisation of spirituality. The openness to spirituality ensures



receptiveness and flexibility when inquiring into the varied expressions of spirituality, while at the same time maintaining a critical stance to unsupported claims about the concept. Greater consensus regarding the meaning of spirituality might ensue as the post-secular conversation unfolds.

### ***2.2.3.7 Social work and the post-secular debate***

With the passing of modernity into history, spirituality is clearly on the agenda as the new global order is taking shape. This is compellingly captured in Tarnas's (2010, p. 55) comment that, "various movements now press for the creation of a more meaningful and spiritually resonant world to replace the atomistic void". In the transition to a postmodern era, the new *détente* is essentially a debate between the secular culture (science and reason) and post-secular culture (spirituality and religion).

Social work scholar Barbara Swartzentruber (2007, p. 342) pronounces the conversation between social work and spirituality as set at the edge of the new era of tentative reconciliation "in the great debate between science and religion". This emerging post-secular context represents a paradigm shift in the social sciences and, according to Swartzentruber (2007, p. 347), opens "the door to multiple paths of knowledge creation and 'post-secular' approaches to intervention". It also provides the context that enables social work to pursue inquiry into spirituality. The resurgence of spirituality in social work displays a commitment to engage in this difficult dialogue, one that no longer evades the previously dismissed questions of the importance of religion and spirituality to clients and communities. In many ways this dialogue emancipates social work from the prevailing modernist dialogue, as contemporary research on spirituality and religion exposes the myths and constraints of the modernist doctrines. However, Swartzentruber (2007, p. 343) cautions that emancipating social work from its modernist position will not be easy, noting that the profession "will be forced to struggle with the limitations and consequences of having been conceived in a modern paradigm that is inadequate to address emergent issues". In negotiating ways to integrate spirituality in practice, social work will be obliged to explore what Robinson et al. (2010, p. 299) describe as "the frontiers of conventional orthodoxies". This would require a fundamental re-conceptualisation of outdated shibboleths and a research agenda that allows for "the significant

contributions of positivistic/rational inquiry, but also the limitations of its application to questions of ultimate meaning and conceptualisations of the sacred” (Swartzentruber, 2007, p. 346). Consequently, the current post-secular debate on spirituality is of relevance to social work, as it might provide guidelines to balance the demand for scientific study, with a hermeneutics of trust required to do justice to the complexity of human spirituality. Furthermore, as the post-secular debate progresses, the meaning of spirituality is expected to continue to evolve. In contrast to the postmodernist relativism, which resulted in overly broad and non-specific definitions of spirituality, a post-secular stance that is flexible, but retains critical thought, might contribute to a definition that is more explicit and consistent, and reconcilable with the current meaning of spirituality. This study participates in the post-secular discourse on spirituality in social work and is therefore, in a modest way, part of the global counter-hegemonic response to the scientific rationalism of modernity.

## **2.3 A CONCEPT ANALYSIS OF SPIRITUALITY**

One of the research questions that directed this inquiry is about the nature of the spiritual strengths of midlife women. By doing a concept analysis of spirituality, this chapter aimed to contribute to a better understanding of spirituality and spiritual strengths. An understanding of the nature of spirituality is a prerequisite for an understanding of spiritual strengths, and therefore essential for the delineation of guidelines for a programme to develop the spiritual strengths of midlife women.

There is consensus as to the definition of religion; however, the “diverse and fuzzy history” (Wink, & Dillon, 2002, p. 79) of spirituality compromises a clear understanding of the concept. One of the factors contributing to the uncertainty surrounding the meaning of spirituality is that, once liberated from the containment of religion, new spiritual seekers embraced a miscellaneous gallimaufry of spiritual experiences, practices and rituals. Hence, in popular parlance, the term *spirituality* is used inconsistently, as it is permissively invoked to refer to a boundless array of experiences and practices. Consequently, there is confusion as to the content and the boundaries of the concept. This poses a challenge for scholars who require a more “discipline oriented definition” (Wink, & Dillon, 2002, p. 80). A definition of

spirituality that is whimsical, ambiguous and inclusive to the extent of being nonspecific would render it irrelevant and unfit for use in research. Thus, one of the challenges when endeavouring to define spirituality is to portray the contemporary meaning of spirituality, without succumbing to an overly broad conception of spirituality, which would yield results of limited value.

### 2.3.1 The challenges in defining spirituality

The substantial transformations in the understanding of the nature of spirituality forced social scientists to rethink their conceptualisation of spirituality (Hill et al. 2000, p. 52). Thus, as Hodge and McGrew (2006, p. 638) laconically remark, “[i]n tandem with the emergence of spirituality and religion as a field of inquiry a diverse array of definitions has appeared in literature.” Their observation is affirmed by Crisp (2008, p. 634), who reiterates that the uncertainty about the meaning of spirituality is reflected in the diverse ways in which spirituality is defined. The manifold definitions of spirituality in the social sciences (see Table 1) are an indication of the challenges scholars grapple with when attempting to define spirituality.

**Table 1: Definitions of spirituality**

Definitions of spirituality		
Author	Field	Definition
Peterson, & Park, 2004, p. 438	Psychology	having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where you fit within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort
Compton, 2005, p. 196	Psychology	The term “spirituality” refers to the human tendency to search for meaning in life through self-transcendence or the need to relate to something greater than the individual self
Moreira-Almeida, & Koenig, 2006, p. 844	Medicine	Spirituality is the personal quest for understanding answers to ultimate questions about life, about meaning, and about a relationship with the sacred or transcendent, which may (or may not) lead to or arise from the development of religious rituals and the formation of community
Wagler-Martin, 2007, p. 136	Social work	Essentially spirituality is about meaning making. Spirituality is what grounds us. It frames our view of the world and our deepest beliefs. It includes our sense of order and chaos, our understanding of good and evil, and our belief in a form of Higher Power
Hodge, 2002, p. 112	Social work	Spirituality represents transcendent beliefs and values

Tolliver, 1997, p. 479	Social work	The nature of spirituality is that it is not bound by time or physicality; it is integral to the human being; it is the renewable life force; the energy that enlivens the physical, and the space where human communion is possible
Gibson, 2006, p. 66	Social work	Spirituality is the human experience of discovering meaning, purpose and values which involve some kind of relationship with a higher force, being, power or God
Hickson, & Phelps, 1997, p. 46	Social work	Spirituality refers to a way of being in the world that acknowledges the existence of a transcendent dimension. It includes an awareness of the connectedness of all that is, and accepts that all life has meaning and purpose and is thus sacred
Reese, 2001, p. 138	Social work	Spirituality is the underlying dimension of consciousness, which strives for meaning, union with the universe, and with all things, it extends to the experience of the transcendent or a power beyond us

The authors in Table 1 represent different fields of study in the helping professions namely *psychology* (Peterson & Park; Compton), *medicine* (Moreira-Almeida & Koenig) and *social work* (Wagler-Martin; Hodge; Tolliver; Gibson; Hickson & Phelps; Reese). The dissimilarity of the definitions proposed by these authors demonstrates that a lack of consensus as to the meaning of spirituality compromises the formulation of a more universally accepted definition of spirituality.

Different authors emphasise different aspects of spirituality, for example, spirituality is about *beliefs* regarding meaning, purpose and a Higher Power (Peterson, & Park, 2004, p. 438; Wagler-Martin, 2007, p. 136; Hodge, 2002, p. 112), while for Compton (2005, p. 196) spirituality involves a *process* that is: the *search* for meaning. Other scholars focus on aspects such as the *experience* of the transcendent power (Reese, 2001, p. 138); the *relationship* with a Higher Power (Gibson, 2006, p. 66); and *acknowledgement* of a transcendent dimension (Hickson, & Phelps, 1997, p. 46); while Tolliver (1997, p. 7) refers to spirituality as a *renewable life force*. Also included in some definitions are the benefits of spirituality, for example, it shapes conduct and provides comfort (Peterson, & Park, 2004, p. 438); it grounds us and provides an understanding of good and evil (Wagler-Martin, 2007, p. 136); and it enlivens the physical (Tolliver, 1997, p. 479).

Careful analysis of these definitions; however, does expose recurring themes such as a *transcendent aspect*. This is exemplified in theorists' reference to a Higher Power (Wagler-Martin, 2007, p. 136); transcendent beliefs (Hodge, 2002, p. 112); something greater than the individual self (Compton 2005, p. 196); higher force or God (Gibson 2006, p. 66); and transcendent dimension (Hickson, & Phelps, 1997, p. 46). Another recurring theme is *meaning* and *ultimate meaning* (Peterson, & Parks, 2004, p. 438; Wagler-Martin, 2007, p. 136; Compton, 2005, p. 16; Gibson, 2006, p. 66; Hickson, & Phelps, 1997, p. 46; Moreira-Almeida, & Koenig, 2006, p. 844; Reese, 2001, p. 138). Definitions of spirituality are not only diverse, but are often confounded by including related issues such as the benefits of spirituality (for example, it provides comfort; it grounds us). Although there are commonly recurring themes, which suggest there might be a degree of harmony in scholars' opinion as to which aspects constitute the essence of spirituality, there is no general agreement as to which of the aspects, themes, or combination of aspects and themes embody the nature of spirituality.

### ***2.3.1.1 Spirituality in the popular parlance***

The bounteous application of the term *spirituality* in the popular parlance includes an impressive array of experiences labelled as spiritual, for example, winning a sports event, seeing a sunset, eating good food and feelings of happiness and altruism (Moberg, 2002, p. 47). In similar vein, Du Toit (2006, p. 1251) claims that spirituality is summoned to describe any experience that touches the individual as spiritual; a spiritual experience can come from travel, reading a novel, or watching a movie. Therefore, spirituality "can mean anything from a profound spiritual experience to an aesthetic experience". The broad scope of the popular use of the term *spirituality* contributes to the perplexity and creates confusion and dissension about what is meant by the concept (Kourie, 2006, p. 22). Thus, the popular conceptualisation of spirituality has almost no limits.

The eclectic blend of experiences labelled as spiritual denies the depth and complexity of authentic spirituality and, in the words of the theologian Spohn (2001, p. 277), "turns the life of faith into a shopping excursion in the Great Mall of the Spirit, where everyone gets to pick up whatever gives them some religious feelings and the assurance that they are *spiritual*". Commenting on the kaleidoscope of individual

spiritualities, Moss (2005, p. 43) notes that this self-defined spirituality relegates it to the “realms of individual hobbies, which are neither here nor there when it comes to the big issues of human existence”. In another example of how the prevailing application of the term *spirituality* distorts its meaning, Tacey (2003, p. 85/141) points out that, as spirituality becomes more fashionable, essential elements and components are left out of the popular conception. To support his argument Tacey recounts the misleading tendency of popular spirituality to emphasise only the positive, reducing spirituality to what he calls a “kind of teddy-bears’ picnic” that aims to produce a utopian or a ‘feel-good’ experience. This parody of spirituality is depriving it of its profound essence and the deeper understanding of the sacred reality.

One of the challenges when defining spirituality is to avoid succumbing to popular notions of spirituality, which considers almost any experience as “spiritual”. Cautioning against such broad definitions, Doherty (2003, p. 180) insists, “a term that means too much soon means nothing and risks becoming everything”. In similar vein, social work scholars Canda and Furman (2010, p. 62) caution against definitions that attempt to include all possible versions of spirituality, arguing that such definitions are vague and “fail to make important distinctions”.

### ***2.3.1.2 The subjective nature of spirituality***

The efforts to conceptualise spirituality are further complicated by some theorists’ contention that the very nature of spirituality defies any attempt to reduce it to a construct. According to Tolliver (1997, p. 478), the subjective nature of spirituality cannot be expressed in a definition. In similar vein, Seaward (2000, p. 243) states that our limited vocabulary fails to capture the essence of spirituality; hence the argument that human spirituality is ineffable and beyond description. Concurring, Miller and Thoreson (2003, p. 27) confirm that scientific operational definitions of spirituality are likely to differ from that which the client considers spiritual thus, falling “far short of representing ... the essence of what is experienced as spiritual”. This line of argument is extended by Barker (2008, p. 78), who concludes that a simple definition cannot convey the depth, richness and fullness of spirituality, as well as by Canda and Furman (2010, p. 63), who assent that the mystical or sacred aspect of spirituality is ineffable; thus “its deepest meaning cannot be expressed”. The

predicament is twofold; firstly, there is *an inherently mysterious, elusive and incomprehensible quality to spirituality*; and, secondly, this indescribable and intangible quality is *uniquely and subjectively experienced and interpreted by every individual, as it is experienced first-hand*.

As spirituality encompasses the unknown, Taylor (2004, p. 6) advises social workers to heed clients' own description of their spirituality. This view is endorsed by Barker (2008, p. 42), who reasons that, since the mystical aspect of spirituality becomes real through the lived experience of each person clients should be offered the opportunity to clarify their insight and perception of spirituality. As it seems impossible to construct a definition that is wholly inclusive, Aten and Worthington (2009, p. 225) suggest that the definition of spirituality "should leave room for the subjective experience of the client". In this regard, Canda and Furman (2010, p. 64) advise social workers to be flexible when using definitions of spirituality, for example, in clinical practice the clients' beliefs, symbols and practices "should be paramount rather than any preconceptions on the part of the practitioner". It seems the mysterious essence of spirituality evades definition; however, even if some of its features are beyond description, these features should not be considered as invalid. Thus, theorists and researchers should recognise that even the most comprehensive definition of spirituality could not quite capture this ineffable aspect of spirituality, or clients' personal and subjective experience of spirituality. To address this problem, this study employs the constructivist/interpretive approach, which will offer participants the opportunity to articulate and express their subjective experiences of spirituality and spiritual strengths.

### ***2.3.1.3 The polarisation between religion and spirituality***

Contributing to the confusion regarding spirituality is the progressive polarisation between spirituality and religion. As Furman, Besthorn, Canda and Grimwood (2005, p. 816) point out, previously, spirituality has been considered the almost exclusive domain of religion; however, the meaning of religion and spirituality has evolved in different directions over time. In a similar stance, Pargament (2007, p. 30) states that "[h]istorically the term *religiousness* encompassed what many people today would define as spirituality", reiterating that the meaning of these constructs have changed significantly over the past 40 years. The social work scholars Cascio (1998, p. 534)

and Krieglstein (2006, p. 26) point out that the hazy boundaries between spirituality and religion hamper the integration of spirituality in social work. Concurring, Rice and McAuliffe (2009, p. 405) identify the uncertainty about the distinction between spirituality and religion as one of the prevailing difficulties in the discourse on spirituality in social work. In a similar stance, Holloway (2007, p. 273) pinpoints the confusion about the meaning of spirituality as one of the reasons why the integration of spirituality is restrained in social work in the United Kingdom. Thus, the quest to incorporate spirituality in social work will be best served when the current meaning of these terms are clarified and explained.

#### ***2.3.1.4 The conundrum of a single definition***

The absence of a universally accepted definition impedes the integration of spirituality in social work practice (Taylor, 2004, p. 6). It is also recognised that a more universally accepted definition of spirituality is vital in social work research settings (Hodge, & McGrew, 2006, p. 637). In this regard, Hyman and Handal (2006, p. 266) remark that, in the absence of a common definition, it is difficult to conclude what researchers attribute to the term, and it “makes it hard to draw general conclusions from various studies”. Social work scholars Canda and Furman (2010, p. 60) also stipulate that scientific investigations are dependent upon an explicit definition of spirituality to ensure mutual understanding in clinical communications. Furthermore, a more global definition of spirituality is needed not only to explain the impact of spirituality on human behaviour, but also for the assessment of spirituality and spiritual strengths. Thus, there are compelling reasons for establishing a more universally accepted definition of spirituality in social work.

The quandary to find a single definition for spirituality is not restricted to social work. Other helping professions such as psychology also wrestle to find a greater consensus regarding the meaning of spirituality. However, in spite of the urgent calls for a more universally accepted conceptualisation of spirituality, Hill et al. (2000, p. 52) caution that, given the multidimensional nature of both religion and spirituality, and the limited understanding of contemporary religion and spirituality, it is “premature to insist on a single comprehensive definition of either term”. This notion is supported by Canda and Furman (2010, p. 64) who concur, “[e]xactitude and consensus remain elusive”, arguing that defining spirituality is “a continuous process



not a final act". Therefore, social workers are encouraged to adopt an open definition that "invites continued dialogue and debate". This study aspired to construct an open definition that encapsulates the fundamental and distinctive characteristics of spirituality. It held the view that both religious and non-religious spirituality should be embedded in the definition. Hence, in constructing the definition, the conceptual overlap and the subtle but definite differences between spirituality and religion was noted. In addition, every care was taken to reflect the contemporary meaning of spirituality brought about by the historical cultural shift.

### **2.3.2 Clarifying the distinctions and overlaps between spirituality and religion**

The rise in secular spirituality necessitates the differentiation between spirituality and religion. Disuniting spirituality and religion is a contentious issue with some theorists regarding spirituality and religion as mutually exclusive constructs, while others argue that although they differ, the constructs are complementary (Kourie, 2006, p. 24; Wink, & Dillon, 2008, p. 103; Brennan, 2002, p. 34; Hill, & Pargament, 2003, p. 64; Compton, 2005, p. 196). To appreciate the difference between spirituality and religion scholars have identified the distinctive features of each construct:

**Table 2: The differences between spirituality and religion**

RELIGION	SPIRITUALITY
Stipulates patterns of behaviour	Emphasise self-growth, emotional fulfilment
Institutional, formal and authoritarian	Relates more to an emotional experience
Delineated by particular beliefs and doctrines that inhibit human potential	Living by one's own inner truth
Requirements for membership of a faith community (community of adherents)	Autonomous quest
Participation in organised religious activities	Focus on the essence of life, creativeness mystical experiences
Institutionalised and community focus	Individual and experiential focus
Static, conservative, traditional	Dynamic, personal, creative
Exclusive system	Inclusive systems
Established beliefs rooted in the past	A process of transformation

(Seaward, 2000, p. 244; Harrington, Preziosi, & Gooden, 2001, p. 156; Wink, & Dillon, 2002, p. 79; Miller, & Thoreson, 2003, p. 28; Hill, & Pargament, 2003, p. 64; Compton, 2005, p. 196; Van Dierendonck, & Mohan, 2006, p. 228; Canda, & Furman, 2010, p. 76)

An analysis of the way in which religion and spirituality are distinguished (Table 2) reveals a tendency, in the words of Pargament (1997, p. 6), to reserve the term *spirituality* “for the loftier/functional side of life” (dynamic, creative, transformative and growth oriented), and regards religion as rigid, fixed systems of beliefs (static, conservative, rooted in the past). Ironically, even the most secular spiritualities avail themselves of the regalia and practices (e.g. fasting, meditation, incense and candles) of the religions they renounce (Schneiders, 2003, p. 164). According to Kourie (2006, p. 24), some proponents of spirituality regard religion as antagonistic towards spirituality, and Van Dierendonck and Mohan (2006, p. 228) point out that spirituality is often associated with an aversion to clergy. This trend to regard spirituality as good and religion as bad is vehemently criticised by King and Koenig (2009, p. 2), who insist that this campaign has come to set spirituality against religion; thus “has become a way of putting distance between oneself and religion, while holding on to something regarded as good”. Consequently, spirituality is “defined against what it is not” (ibid.). Thus, although there are distinctions between religion and spirituality, theorists caution against a good/bad division, as this is not only a simplification of complex constructs, but disregards the fact that both religion

and spirituality might harbour the risk of distortion and abuse (McKernan, 2007, p. 100; Hill et al., 2000, p. 72; Pargament, 2007, p. 31; King, & Koenig, 2009, p. 2).

The segregation of religion and spirituality into an institutional (organised religious activities, faith community) and an individual domain (autonomous quest, individual and experiential experience, self-growth) is criticised by Hill and Pargament (2003, p. 64), who argue, “all forms of spiritual expression unfold in a social context”. Furthermore, it is a misconception to assume that individual spiritual growth and development can only be achieved outside the realm of formal religious organisations (Hill, & Pargament, 2003, p. 64). Almost all faith communities are interested in the personal spiritual growth of members, as is demonstrated by the fact that there are both private and public forms of religiousness (Miller, & Thoreson, 2003, p. 28). Consequently, spiritual growth and development may or may not be embedded in religion.

Although there are individuals who describe themselves as *spiritual but not religious*, there are also those who identify themselves as *spiritual and religious* (Hill et al. 2000, p. 61). The *spiritual and religious* group is religiously involved and spiritually engaged, denouncing the tendency to regard spirituality and religion as mutually exclusive constructs. Hill and Pargament (2003, p. 68) contend that spirituality and religion are united in the search for the sacred. In this debate, Van Dierendonck and Mohan (2006, p. 228) argue that there is a similarity between the “current distinction between spirituality and religion, and the *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* orientation on religiousness”. An extrinsic orientation is associated with outward motives such as the pursuit of status, using religion as a crutch and bowing to the demand for conformity. In contrast, an intrinsic orientation is described as “an internal attitude focused on the unification with the sacred”, suggesting that the intrinsically oriented individual lives his/her religion. Thus, an intrinsically oriented search for the sacred is very similar in character to spirituality, again refuting claims of the mutual exclusivity of religion and spirituality. When referring to religion, the (intrinsic) search for the sacred is conducted within the context of a religious setting and institution, with adherence to institutionalised practices and rituals. Spirituality denotes that the search for the sacred can be pursued outside the context of formal religious institutions. Both spirituality and religion is a way of living and behaving; thus, two dimensions of the same quest, namely to connect with the sacred.

Social work scholars recognise that spirituality and religion are distinct, but interrelated concepts that diverge and converge (Gotterer, 2001, p. 188; Healy, 2005, p. 83; Swartzentruber, 2007, p. 345; Barker, 2008, p. 143; Bhagwan, 2010b, p. 165; Canda, & Furman, 2010, p. 59). The inclusive approach adopted by social work theorists accepts the diversity of religious and non-religious expressions of spirituality. Thus, it is acknowledged that spirituality can be practised without being religious, but that spirituality is not an exclusively secular phenomenon. Individual spirituality can also be experienced within an organised religious context. It recognises that for many people there is no distinction between religion and spirituality, and for others their spirituality has no association with religion. In this study, spirituality is defined in such a way to include both religious (intrinsic) and non-religious forms of spirituality.

## **2.4 FORMULATING A DEFINITION OF SPIRITUALITY FOR SOCIAL WORK**

To construct a definition of spirituality for this study, an overview of the conceptualisation of spirituality and the salient themes considered important in social work is provided; hereafter arguments for the inclusion of components of spirituality deemed important by other disciplines are presented.

### **2.4.1 Reviewing existing definitions of spirituality in social work**

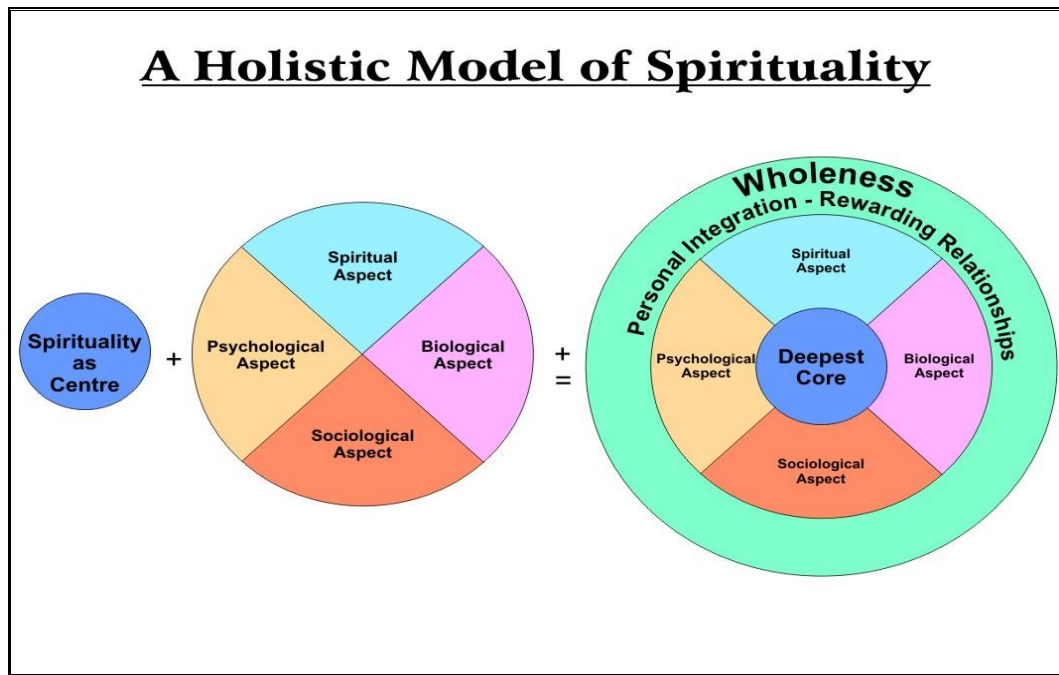
Reviewing the existing definitions of spirituality in social work, Barker (2008, p. 25) concludes that current definitions are primarily based on theory, “with little empirical support for one conceptualisation over another”. Another criticism is that of Rice and McAuliffe (2009, p. 405), who point out that there is no consistency in the use of the term in social work. This view is reiterated by Canda and Furman (2010, p. 68), who note that social workers vary in their definitions of both religion and spirituality. Although there is no uniformity in the use of spirituality in social work, there are recurring themes in the definitions. For example, spirituality refers to the *relationship with the transcendent reality* (Bullis, 1996, p. 2; Anderson, 2003, p. 157; Walsh, 2003, p. 6; Gotterer, 2001, p. 187; Carroll, 2001, p. 10; Hodge, 2005a, p. 40). There is also the reference to spirituality as the *ground of our being* (Joseph, 1988, p. 444;

Freeman, 2001, p. 97). Many social work scholars avoid reference to the transcendent and use the broad definition of spirituality as the *search for meaning and purpose* (Healy, 2005, p. 183; Payne, 2005, p. 181; Gray, 2008, p. 176; Mathews, 2009, p. 5; Walsh, 2010, p. 28). Reviewing definitions of spirituality in social work, Canda and Furman (2010, p. 66) observe that some definitions relate spirituality to an inner experience, while others emphasise that spirituality include both individual and collective dimensions.

According to Zapf (2005, p. 635), one of the most influential definitions of spirituality in social work is that of Canda and Furman (1999, p. 44; 2010, p. 59). The definition is the product of one of the first undertakings in social work to create a holistic understanding of spirituality. Although this definition is not universally accepted, it is often used and referred to in academic papers in social work (Cascio, 1999, p. 130; Henery, 2003, p. 1109; Saleeby, 2006b, p. 84; Eun-Kyong, & Barret, 2007, p. 3; Coholic, Nichols, & Cadell, 2008, p. 41; Sheffield, & Openshaw, 2009, p. 2).

Spirituality refers to a universal and fundamental human quality involving the search for a sense of meaning, purpose, morality, wellbeing, and profundity in relationships with ourselves, others and ultimate reality, however understood (Canda, & Furman, 1999, p. 44; 2010, p. 59).

A comprehensive national survey in the United States, the United Kingdom, Norway and Aotearoa New Zealand (AZN) has explored how social workers understand spirituality. The findings of the survey reveal that spirituality is most often associated with “meaning, personal, purpose, values, belief and ethics” (Canda, & Furman, 2010, p. 67). Further to the survey amongst social workers, Canda, and Furman, (2010, p. 69) have reviewed the definitions of spirituality in related fields such as medicine, psychology, theology and nursing. Related themes were identified from these definitions such as spirituality as essential quality; an innate drive to search for meaning; the search for wholeness and connectedness; profound experiences of a sacred or transpersonal nature; and spirituality as holistic quality. Drawing on the insights from both social workers’ definitions of spirituality as well as those from related fields, Canda and Furman (2010, p. 74) have developed two interrelated conceptual models of spirituality, namely the **holistic model** and the **operational model**.



Adapted from Canda and Furman (2010, p. 87)

**Figure 2: A holistic model of spirituality**

#### ***2.4.1.1 A holistic model of spirituality***

The holistic model uses three metaphors: spirituality as the *wholeness*, as *centre*, and as *aspect* of the person:

- Spirituality as the **centre** is also described as soul or seat of consciousness of the person. It serves as orientation point between all aspects of the person. Many spiritual traditions use the expression, 'becoming centred' or 'going inward' to refer to finding a place of quiet within one. Being centred provides "a sense of connection, integration, and clear awareness of self and world" (Canda, & Furman, 2010, p. 89). Although spirituality as centre is included in the holistic model, Canda and Furman (2010, p. 89) concede that the notion of spirituality as centre is not widely used in academic writing in the social sciences.
- Spirituality is an **aspect** of the person. The addition of the spiritual aspect to that of the biological, psychological and social aspects presents a bio-psychosocial/spiritual profile of the individual. This holistic conceptualisation provides a more complete understanding of the person (Cornett, 1992, p. 101; Carroll, 1998, p. 4; Rice, 2002, p. 309; Bhagwan, 2010a, p. 189). The spiritual

aspect is described by Canda and Furman (2010, p. 87) as “fundamental to human nature”. It also “infuses the other bio-psycho-social aspects” and helps to “weave them together in a sense of integrity”. Spirituality as an aspect assumes that there is an aspect of the person that strives to find meaning and purpose in life (Mathews, 2009, p. 5; Walsh 2010, p. 28; Canda, & Furman, 2010, p. 87).

- Spirituality is often referred to as that quality of an individual that is irreducible and therefore described “as the **wholeness** of what it is to be human” (Canda, & Furman, 2010, p. 88). Wholeness signifies that, which is sacred, and denotes the mysterious quality or divine nature in humanity. This feature of spirituality is described in various ways, for example, as the “ground of our being” (Joseph, 1988, p. 444); “integral to the human being” (Tolliver, 1997, p. 479); and “core nature” or “essence” (Carroll, 2001, p. 7). According Miller and Thoreson (2003, p. 28), spirituality is not a linear dimension that one has more or less of. In a similar stance, Canda and Furman (2010, p. 75, 88) assert that spirituality is a universal feature; thus, everyone has spirituality, although people vary in the amount they focus on spirituality.

#### ***2.4.1.2 Operational model of spirituality***

The **operational model of spirituality** refers to the religious and non-religious manifestations of spirituality. Five interrelated categories of spiritual manifestations are identified, namely spiritual drives, spiritual experiences, functions of spirituality, spiritual development and contents of a spiritual perspective. According to Canda and Furman (2010, p. 81), this model supports a “more precise and practical use of concepts in social work practice and research”.

The holistic and operational models serve as reference, grounding and source of knowledge and are, according to Canda and Furman (2010, p. 64), primarily for the “purpose of professional discourse”. Thus, the models are aids to understand spirituality and are not meant to be used rigidly. The authors stress that theirs is an open, working definition of spirituality that invites further dialogue.

According to Praglin (2004, p. 73), social workers tend to accept only other social work scholars’ definitions of spirituality uncritically; the consequence of such a

practice is a “narrow intellectual inbreeding”. Instead, social workers should be more amenable “to extend their boundaries” to incorporate a broader-reaching, interdisciplinary conceptualisation of spirituality (p. 73). To broaden the scope on the topic of spirituality, this study incorporated insights from psychology.

#### **2.4.2 Constructing a definition of spirituality**

Contained within the definition of Canda and Furman (2010, p. 59) as well as definitions by other social work scholars such as Reese (2001, p. 138), Aponte (2003, p. 77), Walsh (2003, p. 6), Healy (2005, p. 183), Payne (2005, p. 181) and Gray (2008, p. 176) is some aspect of the individual’s **search** for something. Thus, spirituality as **a search** emerges as a strong theme in conceptualising spirituality.

Spirituality as a *search* is endorsed by the psychologist and eminent scholar of spirituality, Kenneth Pargament (1997, p. 33, 2007, p. 32), who succinctly defines spirituality as “the search for the sacred”. Expanding on this conception, Wink and Dillon (2002, p. 79) describe spirituality as the “existential search for ultimate meaning through an individualised understanding of the sacred”. Hill and Pargament (2003, p. 66) define spirituality as “the search for the sacred and the attendant thoughts, feelings, and behaviours that fuel and arise from the search for the sacred”. Thus, spirituality as a search is emphasised by these definitions. However, different from Canda and Furman (2010, p. 59), the aspect of the *sacred* is introduced, thus delineating an important defining characteristic that helps to distinguish spirituality from other phenomena, curbing the modern tendency to regard almost any experience as spiritual.

Constructing the definition of spirituality for the purposes of this study is not an attempt to formulate a global definition that is wholly inclusive, but rather an endeavour to devise a definition that is succinct, clinically useful, reflects the contemporary meaning of spirituality and acknowledges clients’ subjective experiences of spirituality. For the purposes of this study, spirituality was defined as

the personal search for the sacred and for ultimate meaning through an individualised understanding of the sacred.



The conceptualisation of spirituality is informed by the definitions of Wink and Dillon (2002, p. 79), Hill and Pargament (2003, p. 66), Pargament (2007, p. 32) and Canda and Furman (2010, p. 59). The rationale for the formulation of the definition is elucidated by exploring the content categories and evaluating the synergy between these scholars' conceptualisations of spirituality (Table 3). The definition of Canda and Furman (2010, p. 59) represents social work theory on spirituality, and the definitions of Hill and Pargament (2003, p. 66), Pargament (1997, p. 32, 2007, p. 32), and Wink and Dillon (2002, p. 79) offer insights from psychology.

**Table 3: Content categories of definitions**

<b>CONTENT CATEGORIES OF DEFINITIONS</b>			
<b>Author:</b>	<b>1. Canda and Furman</b>	<b>2. Hill and Pargament</b>	<b>3. Wink and Dillon</b>
<b>Definition:</b>	Spirituality refers to a universal and fundamental human quality involving the search for a sense of meaning, purpose, morality, wellbeing, and profundity in relationships with ourselves, others and ultimate reality, however understood	The search for the sacred and the attendant thoughts feeling, and behaviours that fuel and arise from the search for the sacred  The search for the sacred	The self's existential search for ultimate meaning through an individualised understanding of the sacred
<b>Concepts:</b>	Search	Search	Existential search
	Sense of meaning	Sacred	Sacred
	Fundamental human quality		
	Morally fulfilling relationships: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self</li> <li>• Other people</li> <li>• Encompassing universe</li> <li>• Ground of existence (theistic, non-theistic, atheistic)</li> </ul>	Thoughts Feelings behaviour	Ultimate meaning

### 2.4.3 An analysis of the components of spirituality

A profile analysis of the different elements (*fundamental human quality, the search, sacred and ultimate meaning*) of the definition is offered:

#### 2.4.3.1 *Fundamental human quality – spiritual core*

The acknowledgement that individuals are spiritual beings signifies that spirituality is recognised as fundamental to human nature. According to Moberg (2002, p. 49), an appraisal of research on spirituality confirms that most scholars acknowledge, “all people are spiritual beings”, prompting the author to conclude that “this normative value of universalism has dominated most research on spirituality”. This fundamental spiritual quality is often referred to as the essential or deepest core of the individual (Miller, & Thoreson, 2003, p. 28; Hyman, & Handal, 2006, p. 264; Pargament, 2007, p. 69; Canda, & Furman, 2010, p. 59). Accounts of spirituality as fundamental human quality are found in social science literature, for example, Sweeney, Hannah and Snider (2007, p. 26) profess the “human spirit is thoroughly manifested in who we are”. In the words of Pargament (2007, p. 69), it represents an “intrinsic propensity” people are born with and which motivates the search for the sacred. Gibson (2010, p. 26) portrays it as the “inner and experiential and intuitive aspect” of the person. This spiritual core is described by King (2008, p. 79) as part of our “innermost being”, which explains our capacity for spirituality. It is these traces of the sacred “imprinted on the soul” (Tacey, 2011, p. 62) that seek connection and motivate the search for the sacred.

The spiritual core or deepest part of the self generates a significant motivating force, “that perpetuates the drive for transcendence” (Purdy, & Duprey, 2005, p. 98). This motivating force is often described as an “internal drive, something that impels us” and as an “activating force” (Mayers, & Johnston, 2008, p. 269). The spiritual essence then, is an ***animating force*** that launches a lifelong journey, in the course of which people seek to connect with the sacred and realise higher-order goals. Furthermore, it assures every individual’s potential for spiritual growth (Hayes, & Cowie, 2005, p. 31). Furthermore, when spirituality is developed, spiritual resources are unleashed.

Acknowledgement that the spiritual core is an indelible part of the individual impels scholars such as Pargament (2007, p. 21) and Canda and Furman (2010, p. 87) to insist that individuals are more than merely physical, social and psychological beings; they are also spiritual beings. This interpretation informs the bio-psychosocial and spiritual model (Fig. 3), which was adopted by this study as a holistic framework for the inquiry into midlife women's experiences of midlife, spirituality and spiritual strengths.



Source: Adapted from Winiarski (1997, p. 7)

**Figure 3: Bio-psychosocial and spiritual model**

The revival of interest in spirituality is often described as “the return of the repressed” (Tacey 2003, p. 24). The turn to spirituality suggests that the spiritual core as indissoluble dimension defies attempts at being suppressed and disregarded. The implication for service delivery is that the promotion of wellbeing requires attention to spirituality, and of interest to this study, the identification and development of spiritual strengths to support midlife development to advance an overall sense of wellbeing.

#### ***2.4.3.2 The concept of “search” as a component of spirituality***

The definitions of Wink and Dillon (2002, p. 79), Hill and Pargament (2003, p. 66), Pargament (2007, p. 3), and Canda and Furman (2010, p. 59) refer to spirituality as a **search**, implying that spirituality is not a static set of beliefs; rather, a continuous process unfolding across the lifespan. This view is corroborated by Schneiders (2003, p. 167), who affirms that spirituality is a dynamic quest, and “on-going enterprise” throughout life. The process of searching constitutes the various means (practices and rituals) that people engage in with the intention of enhancing their search. This quest is often referred to as a spiritual journey or spiritual pathway (Pargament, & Sweeney, 2011, p. 59).

The object of the search is articulated in various ways. For example, Canda and Furman (2010, p. 59) regard it as the search for meaning, a relationship with the self, others and the grounds of existence. It is Wink and Dillon’s view (2002, p. 79) that the aim of the search is to find “ultimate meaning”, which they connect to an understanding of the sacred. According to Hill and Pargament (2003, p. 66), and Pargament (2007, p. 3) the spiritual quest is primarily concerned with the search for the sacred, and because of the search process, the thoughts, feelings and behaviour of the individual are affected.

Describing spirituality as involving a search process implies that *what* the individual search for (sacred, relationships or existential meaning) is not automatically known, implying it will require active participation from the individual for the process to be beneficial and functional. This suggests the individual has to assume responsibility for the search. Endorsing this view, Wink and Dillon (2002, p. 80) assert that the search, if devoid of obligations and commitments, results in a spirituality that is shallow and transient. Therefore, they argue for a “practice-oriented spirituality” based on the “performance of intentional activities aimed at relating to the sacred”, one in which there is “an increase in the depth of a person’s awareness of and search for spiritual meaning over time”. This requires a “deeper commitment to engagement in actual spiritual practices”. Concurring with Wink and Dillon (2002, p. 80), Hill et al. (2000, p. 67) also emphasise the responsibility of the individual, postulating that the process of the search for the sacred requires action, even struggle, on the part of the individual. Both traditional and non-traditional spiritual

groups emphasise the importance of dedication to a spiritual pathway. A search process that is characterised by commitment and diligence will result in a spiritual pathway that has depth and breadth. Embedded in such a pathway is a diverse set of spiritual resources that can be accessed throughout life (Pargament, 2007, p. 259). For the purposes of this study, the use of the word *search* in the definition denoted the active participation of the client and commitment to engage in activities that will enhance spiritual development.

The spiritual pathways that people embark on take many forms, and is further individualised by the way in which the search for the sacred is experientially expressed. For some people the search is primarily one of *emotions* or feelings; for others it is more a way of *reflecting* on the nature of reality or the meaning of life, and there are those for whom *behaviour* (a way of living) is the defining characteristic in the search for the sacred (Hill et al., 2000, p. 68). The distinct and novel expression of spirituality is confirmed by Schneiders (2003, p. 166), who asserts that, “each individual develops his or her spirituality in a unique and personal way”. Depending on the individual’s spiritual orientation, the spiritual quest might include both traditional and non-traditional ways, for example, the pious individual’s spirituality finds expression within the context of a traditional religious institution. By contrast, the New Age and non-religious seekers create their own space by “borrowing elements from various religious and mystical traditions” (Wink, & Dillon, 2008, p. 103). The diverse ways in which the search for the sacred unfolds are evidenced in the many forms these pathways may take, such as nature, art, music, religion, philosophy, loving relationships, study and scientific exploration (Pargament, 2007, p. 32; Pargament, & Sweeney, 2011, p. 59). An individual’s subjective experience of the search for the sacred shapes a spiritual journey that is unequalled and personally meaningful.

According to Pargament (1997, p. 11), because the search for the sacred is subjectively experienced, the conceptualisation of spirituality cannot be restricted to the perspective of “people stand[ing] outside looking in”. It has to allow for “the phenomenological perspective of those who stand inside”. In a similar stance, Miller and Thoreson (2003, p. 27) argue that spirituality is individualised through the personal encounter of every individual; consequently, they insist that, “[h]uman experience is central in understanding spirituality”. As no definition can entirely

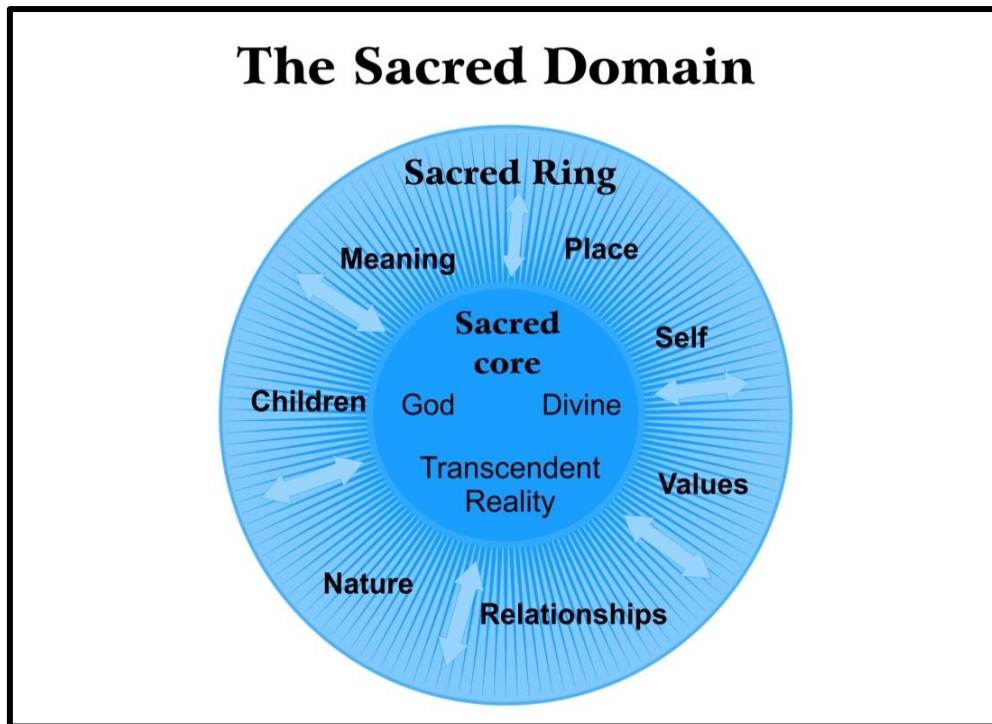
capture the essence of individuals' experience of spirituality, social workers have to provide the opportunity for clients to explain their own experience of their search for the sacred.

#### ***2.4.3.3 The concept of the sacred as a component of spirituality***

Contrary to the definitions of Hill et al. (2000, p. 66), Wink and Dillon (2002, p. 79), and Pargament (2007, p. 3), the definition of Canda and Furman (2010, p. 59) does not refer to the sacred. However, when discussing the definition of spirituality, Canda and Furman (2010, p. 75) explain that spirituality engages a sense of transcendence, which can be experienced as “deeply profound, sacred or transpersonal”. According to Pargament (2007, p. 30), the sacred lies at the core of spirituality, stating, “the sacred is the heart and soul of spirituality” and “spirituality starts and stops with the sacred” (p. 49). The notion of a transcendent dimension in spirituality is not exceptional in academic inquiries but, according to Hodge (2002, p. 110), “finds broad recognition among some major theorists”. This study supports the notion of the sacred or transcendent dimension as an aspect of spirituality.

It is the view of Gotterer (2001, p. 187) that the transcendence of temporality, through a connection to a higher power, is “the common thread” in all spiritualities. In similar vein, Miller and Thoresen (2003, p. 24) consider the transcendence of time, space, matter and the transcendent relationship with that which is sacred in life as the most distinguishing feature of spirituality. This view is supported by Moreira-Almeida and Koenig (2006, p. 844), who affirm that there is general agreement that religion and spirituality are related to a search for the transcendent or sacred. Concurring, Kourie (2006, p. 24) emphasises that the concept of self-transcendence is vitally important in all forms of spirituality. Transcendence as definitive feature of spirituality is keenly epitomised in Benner's (2012, p. 155) observation that “[s]pirituality is the way we live our life in relation to that which is transcendent to our self”.

To elucidate the sacred domain, Pargament (2007, p. 33) has developed the following model (Fig. 4):



**Figure 4: The sacred domain**

The sacred domain consists of a **sacred core** encompassing ideas of God, transcendent reality, divinity and higher powers. Diverse images of the divine can include the divine as creative power, cosmic energy, Earth Mother, or unifying presence (Pargament, 2007, p. 32). Perceptions of the sacred, in the words of Hill et al. (2000, p. 64), “invoke feelings of respect, reverence and devotion”. One component of the definition of spirituality used in this study is described as *an individualised understanding of the sacred*, indicating that individual images, beliefs and views about the sacred are varied. Based on their assumptions about the sacred, individuals formulate an *individualised understanding* of the sacred such as, cosmic energy or creative power.

The **sacred ring** includes aspects of life that take on a sacred character by virtue of their association or representation of the sacred. When people view secular objects as holding a divine significance or character, those objects are sanctified. The process of sanctifying objects has particular consequences, for example, a marriage considered sacred might inspire a different approach to the institution of marriage. Similarly, the search for meaning and the authentic self might be transformed when it is imbued with a sacred character (Hill et al., 2000, p. 67). The influence of the divine extends to the larger circle of people’s lives, implying that the sacred is not only

concerned with transcendental matters, but also with mundane and earthly matters. When objects are imbued with the divine, they elicit strong emotional responses, actions and motivations.

Commenting on the sacred domain, Pargament (2007, p. 49) concludes that the sacred domain is not rigidly partitioned, but includes a mixture of sacred objects. "Thus, one person perceives the sacred largely in terms of nature, music and an inner soul. Another sees the sacred most clearly in loving relationships and efforts to make the world a better place. Still another perceives the sacred in terms of church, special religious celebrations and a very personal God". Spirituality is distinct for every person, as each individual's configuration of sacred objects varies". In similar vein, Cashwell et al. (2007, p. 67) affirm that every individual "develops a highly personal spiritual life that changes over time". To conceive spirituality in generic terms would do an injustice to the abundant ways in which spirituality is experienced and expressed. A programme that aims to enhance spiritual strengths should avoid the economical "one-size-fits-all" approach, but rather encourage participants to identify and develop spiritual strengths that are personally meaningful.

It is Hill and Pargament's (2003, p. 65) contention that it is the sacred that distinguishes spirituality from other phenomena. By including a consideration for the sacred, this definition contests the new tendency to use spirituality as substitute for words such as "fulfilling", "moving" or "important". It also questions the new practice of using the term *spirituality* to describe ideologies, activities or lifestyles that are regarded worthwhile or fulfilling. To illustrate this point, Hill et al. (2000, p. 64) cite statements such as "I find my spirituality in gardening", or "Music is my spirituality", as examples of behaviours or lifestyles that provide satisfaction and subjective wellbeing, but which is not spiritual, because they are not a response to the sacred. Affirming the stance of Hill et al., King and Koenig (2009, p. 2) argue that if almost any experience can be called spiritual, in other words, when "spirituality is everything then it is also nothing", it renders the definition pointless. Hence, by introducing the sacred in the definition of spirituality for this study, it delineates spirituality along particular lines, in an attempt to respond to the "fuzziness" surrounding the popular use of spirituality in the post-modern society.



#### ***2.4.3.4 The quest for ultimate meaning***

In social work, spirituality is often defined in terms of a search for meaning (Healy, 2005:183; Wagler-Martin, 2007, p. 136; Gray, 2008, p. 176; Mathews, 2009, p. 5; Walsh, 2010, p. 28). Social work scholar, Coates (2007, p. 10) considers the revival in spirituality in society a consequence of clients' search for meaning in their lives. Thus, this aspect of spirituality is considered important in social work. However, the broad definition of spirituality as a search for meaning is usually devoid of any reference to the sacred. When not linked to the sacred, meaning is arbitrarily accredited to that which is deemed important, or to that to which the person attaches the greatest value, for example, ideologies, activities, material possessions or work (Bourne, 2001, p. 164; Hill, & Pargament, 2003, p. 67; Lichner Ingram, 2006, p. 270). This conceptualisation is criticised. For example, King and Koenig (2009, p. 2) point out that people with no spiritual belief or spiritual experience often profess that they find meaning and purpose in life; therefore, to define spirituality in this way fails to indicate that "spirituality contains anything that is distinctive". Furthermore, when any belief or experience can give meaning to life, there is no need to define spirituality as the search for meaning.

The search for meaning is transformed when it is associated with the sacred. The sacred informs the way attributions are made. Thus, the "ultimate meaning of life is gained by virtue of attachment to something that transcends the self" (Seligman, 2004, p. 156). This is reiterated by Sherburne (2008, p. 104), who considers the search for meaning as related to that which each individual considers sacred. Hence, when the search for meaning is associated with the sacred it engenders a sense that the meaning of life transcends the narrow interests of the self and of everyday life, thus that life has meaning beyond the present moment. For the purposes of this study, the search for meaning was linked to the sacred (as individually understood by participants) (Wink, & Dillon, 2002, p. 79). By connecting the search for meaning to an understanding of the sacred, the parameters of the search for meaning was demarcated as a spiritual quest.

The ultimate meaning individuals assign their existence to is based on their own personal experience; therefore, a sense of ultimate meaning is unique and special to each individual (Ryckman, 1985, p. 446; Frankl, 2004, p. 104; Purdey, & Dupey,

2005, p. 102). One person cannot adopt another person's perception of meaning; furthermore, a sense of meaning is dynamic and changes over one's lifetime (Compton, 2005, p. 20). The subjective nature of the meaning people ascribe to their lives emphasises the importance of a phenomenological attitude when endeavouring to support clients in their spiritual quest for meaning.

## **2.5 SPIRITUALITY A SOURCE OF STRENGTH**

The discussion of the content categories of the above definition revealed its potential to be a source of strength for those engaged in the spiritual quest. Hence, not only did the conceptualisation of spirituality set the parameters for this study; it also furnished it with guidelines for the identification of those elements of spirituality that are associated with strength and fortitude. However, a comprehensive and equitable evaluation of spirituality as a resource also requires consideration of the possibility that, under certain circumstances, spirituality might be an impediment.

### **2.5.1 Spirituality as impediment**

For the most part, there is a positive association between spirituality and physical and mental wellbeing (Hill, & Pargament, 2003, p. 6; Hodge, 2006, p. 638; Van Dierendonck, & Mohan, 2006, p. 229; Eun-Kyong, & Barrett, 2007, p. 4; Wills, 2009, p. 49). However, to regard spirituality as entirely good would be simplistic, as there are expressions of spirituality that can be considered negative or even pathological. Thus, while some clients might consider spirituality a source of strength, it creates confusion and conflict for others.

Spirituality, as defined in this study, includes individuals who choose to express their spirituality within the context of religious institutions. Religious communities and formal religious practices are often criticised as being detrimental and even harmful to its followers. For example, a demand for strict adherence to religious doctrines and rigid teachings might inhibit personal change, stunt intellectual exploration, and take a passive stance when circumstances call for change (Gotterer, 2001, p. 189). In a similar stance, Larimore, Parker and Crowther (2002, p. 71) indicate that religion can affect the sense of wellbeing adversely, as people might experience it as

restraining rather than liberating; it might be used to justify prejudice, self-righteousness and hypocrisy. Discussing the potentially negative effects of religion, Miller and Thoresen (2003, p. 32) postulate that religion might be associated with feelings of guilt, anxiety, excessive dependency, depression and intolerance. In similar vein, Canda and Furman (2010, p. 77) report that in contrast to healthy religiousness that promotes a sense of wellbeing, unhealthy religiousness manifests in religiously based delusions, low self-esteem, abuse and oppression.

The new spiritual movement and popular forms of spirituality that find expression outside the bounds of formal religion have not escaped censure. For example, Spohn (2001, p. 279) condemns the popular tendency to treat spiritual practices as mere mechanisms to get what you want without commitment from the participant to “live a more authentic life”. This approach of the spiritual seeker, who is obsessed with self-fulfilment, reduces spirituality “to a series of self-help gimmicks” (p. 282). Related to this theme is the frequent condemnation of the New-Age spirituality as promoting self-involvement to the point of narcissism, which encourages followers to live in “a bubble of self-regard” (Prothero, 2010, p. 109). Thus, spirituality, which is reduced to self-involved people becoming more self-involved, yields a spiritual pathway that is without depth and lacks the profundity to be a source of strength. Practitioners should be attentive to the possible downside of spirituality; also that some clients, due to a negative association with spirituality, might not consider spirituality a strength.

### **2.5.2 Spirituality as a strength**

The recent re-emergence of spirituality in those societies that negated the role of spirituality has prompted social scientists to concede that for many people spirituality is of paramount importance. Therefore, new research projects were initiated to find empirical evidence that spirituality is a resource. Subsequently, a multitude of investigations has corroborated the “important links between spiritually based resources health and wellbeing” (Pargament, & Sweeney, 2011, p. 60). In social work too, evidence is building that spirituality is a source of strength for many clients (Jacobs, 1997, p. 173; Cascio, 1998, p. 525; Gotterer, 2001, p. 188; Hodge, 2005a, p. 77; Saleebey, 2006b, p. 84; Eun-Kyong, & Barret, 2007, p. 4; Canda, & Furman,

2010, p. 4). Declarations of spirituality as strength are substantiated by scholars such as Hodge (2002, p. 85), who states that spirituality is “a significant personal strength for many clients”, and Saleeby (2006b, p. 84) who declares that spirituality is “a grand bulwark” against the pressures of life. Bhagwan (2010a, p. 189) argues that the relevance of spirituality in social work “is rooted in the central strength it brings to clients in despair”. Social work scholars Canda and Furman (2010, p. 75) list the benefits of healthy spirituality as promoting the development of a sense of meaningfulness, purposefulness, personal integrity, wholeness, joy, peace, contentment and overall wellbeing”. Confirmation that spirituality is a potential resource endorses the assumption of this study, namely that women have distinctive spiritual strengths that can support them when negotiating the challenges of midlife.

### **2.5.3 Empirical evidence validating spirituality as a source of strength**

There are encouraging developments in research on the positive connection between spirituality and physical and psychological health (Pargament, & Sweeney, 2011, p. 60), with an accumulating body of evidence verifying spirituality as an important resource for many people.

#### ***2.5.3.1 Spirituality and psychological wellbeing***

Within the confines of the present study, it was not feasible to report on all research findings concerning the effects of spirituality on psychological wellbeing. Hence, it restricted its focus to some of the more recent inquiries. For example, Frame, Uphold, Shehan and Reid (2005, p. 5) have found that male patients with HIV whose Spiritual Growth Scores were high, have more positive mental health, emotional wellbeing, role and social functioning and more energy over time. Supporting these findings, Szflarski, Ritchey, Leonard, Mrus, Peterman, Ellison, McCullagh and Tsevat (2006, p. 528) report that a study with patients living with HIV testifies to the positive correlation of spirituality/religion and wellbeing for these patients. The study of Van Dierendonck and Mohan (2006, p. 227) exploring the role of spirituality and eudemonic wellbeing reports on the beneficial effect of spirituality on wellbeing. Another study by Lumadue and Wooten (2007, p. 58) documents the positive correlation between spiritual wellbeing and psychological wellbeing in Mexican-American Catholics. Two studies, one on older adults approaching the end of life and

another on older adults with life-limiting illnesses, indicate that spirituality and an intrinsic religious orientation is an inner resource that has a positive impact on wellbeing (Ardelt, & Koenig, 2007, p. 64; Reed, & Rousseau, 2007, p. 81). More recently, Greenfield, Valliant and Marks (2009, p. 196) has provided clinical evidence that suggests that higher levels of spiritual perceptions are independently associated with better psychological wellbeing across eight dimensions: negative affect, positive affect, purpose in life, positive relations with others, personal growth, self-acceptance, environmental mastery and autonomy.

A social work study with adults with cystic fibrosis serves as an example of how spirituality can be a source of strength in adverse circumstances. According to Canda (2006, p. 61), spirituality offers participants a way to live with and transcend the discomforts of cystic fibrosis. Participants' ability to deal with their illness in all life domains was attributed to the importance of their faith and spirituality. In general, most participants indicated that spirituality was salient in their resiliency, prompting Canda (2006, p. 66) to remark that spirituality is a strength that integrates and edifies the whole person. Locally, inquiry into spirituality as resiliency quality in Xhosa-speaking families reports that spirituality "is a core aspect that contributed to the resilience of the families" (Greeff, & Loubser, 2008, p. 292). Families taking part in the study deemed spirituality a resource that not only imparted protection, but also facilitated recovery (by means of unique spiritual coping mechanisms).

### ***2.5.3.2 Spirituality and physical health***

In an early literature review of various research projects on the relationship between religion and health, George, Larson, Koenig and McCullough (2000, p. 102) report on the positive link between religion and the reduced onset of illness, reduced likelihood of disease, and the association between religion and longevity. Acknowledging that this review excludes people who describe themselves as spiritual and not religious, George et al. (2000, p. 107) encourage future researchers to follow a more inclusive approach that includes spirituality. Later studies have disbanded the practice of an exclusive focus on the relationship between religion and physical health by including spirituality in their research. One such study is that of Lawier and Young (2002, p. 347) that documents that spirituality and religion is related to greater resiliency and resistance to stress-related illness. Similarly, the

study by Larson and Larson (2003, p. 35) reports that spirituality protects against depression, reduces the risk of substance abuse, enhances surgical outcomes and improves pain management. The more recent inquiry by Haber, Jacob and Spangler (2007, p. 265) reports that one of the dominant spiritual factors, the perception of closeness to God (whichever way “God” is defined), influences health positively, for example, psychobiological benefits through higher immune and endocrine functioning, and increased energy.

The substantial literature that links spirituality with physical and psychological wellbeing upholds the hypothesis that a reservoir of strengths, embedded in spirituality, enhances health and wellbeing.

#### **2.5.4 A classification of spiritual strengths**

A classification of spiritual strengths would aid the social worker to identify those aspects of spirituality associated with fortitude, positive coping and support.

##### ***2.5.4.1 Internal and external spiritual strengths***

Spiritual strengths include diverse spiritual beliefs, practices, rituals and relationships, prompting Pargament (2007, p. 99) to observe that spiritual resources come in a “variety of shapes and sizes”. Relevant service delivery would require social workers to understand the scope of clients’ spiritual strengths; therefore, this study will avail itself of the strengths perspective’s classification of strengths, which catalogues strengths as either *internal* or *external* strengths (Saleeby, 2006d, p. 301; Cowger, Anderson, & Sniveley, 2006, p. 104). Consequently, spiritual strengths will be categorised as **internal spiritual strengths** and **external spiritual strengths**. In addition, the classification of strengths will be further delineated by the criteria for spirituality as illuminated by the definition of spirituality for this study. Directed by the phenomenological principals that guided this study, the notion that spiritual strengths “develops from critical reflection on one’s lived experience” (Crisp, 2009, p. 10) were heeded. Thus, in accordance with the practice directives of the strengths perspective, the evaluation of spiritual strengths was a collaborative effort (Kisthardt, 2006, p. 175) with the focus on exploring participants’ self-defined spiritual strengths.

Contextualising spiritual strengths, Pargament (2007, p. 167) insists that spiritual strengths must be understood within the setting of all other strengths, warning against tendencies to focus exclusively on either secular or spiritual resources, as this means being “disconnected from the realities of life”. Although this study focused on the development of spiritual strengths, it acknowledged that spiritual strengths are one component of a range of strengths available to midlife women.

#### ***2.5.4.2 Internal spiritual strengths***

The internal dimension of spirituality refers to those aspects of spiritual engagement, which is of a private and intimate nature, for example, a relationship with God/Higher Power. This solitary engagement in the spiritual journey engenders inner spiritual strengths that are highly individualised and personal. Understanding the unique nature of clients’ inner spiritual resources would require social workers to offer clients the opportunity to articulate their experiences of these strengths.

Engagement in the spiritual quest might engender internal spiritual resources such as:

#### ***2.5.4.3 An experience of perceived closeness to the Divine/God***

Elaborating on the advantages of a relationship with the Divine, Pargament (1997, p. 289) indicates that such a relationship dispenses emotional reassurance, love and guidance in problem solving, and assist in reframing perplexing events. According to Hodge (2001, p. 207), a relationship with the Divine is a key strength as it facilitates coping, promotes a sense of purpose, instils a sense of personal worth and provides hope. In a similar stance, Bourne (2001, p. 395) and King et al. (2005, p. 80) affirm that for many the experience of a personal relationship with the Divine is a source of inspiration, hope, joy, security, courage, moral support, guidance and peace of mind. The relevance of a relationship with the Divine is illustrated by Geertsema and Cummings (2001, p. 27) in their study on the midlife transition of women. Participants reported that their experience of a connection to God serves as a guiding principle in their lives, inspiring them to become the people they were created to be.

A social work programme that seeks to encourage the development of a relationship with the Divine as a spiritual resource is not based on a particular stance or position on the ontological truth or validity of non-religious or religious frameworks of belief. Neither is the social worker in a privileged position to answer ontological questions about God or a Higher Power's existence, or the truth of religious claims. The social worker merely facilitates the clients' own endeavours at establishing a deep and meaningful relationship with the Divine in whatever way they might define it.

#### ***2.5.4.4 Integrating the spiritual core***

The spiritual essence or core is described in various ways, for example, "the divine nature within humanity", "made in the image of God" and "the Buddha Nature of the person, or the true self (Atman)" (Canda, & Furman, 2010, p. 88). A typically human campaign is the endeavour to integrate all aspects of the self, including the spiritual core into a meaningful whole. This is particularly true in midlife when the attention shifts from an outer focus to a focus on the inner spiritual reality (Brewi, & Brennan, 2004:13). This need for wholeness or integrity is articulated as the search for the authentic self, higher self, soul, transpersonal self and ground of our being (Brewi & Brennan, 1999:13; Marston, 2002:196; Pargament, 2007:69). When the true self (image of God within the self) is recognised, individuals gain a new understanding of themselves, which enables them to extend their identity. According to Canda and Furman (2010:84), integration of the transcendent self-advances a sense of wholeness or being attuned to ourselves; moreover, it is a movement to unite "with the divine or ultimate reality that enfolds us all". Studies with midlife women report that women who extend their identity to include the spiritual core, confess that it helped them to accept themselves more readily, it inspired them to reconsider their values, and enabled them to reorient their lives to adjust more positively to midlife changes (Howell, 2001, p. 53; Geertsema, & Cummings, 2001, p. 32; Arnold, 2005, p. 634)

#### ***2.5.4.5 A clear understanding of the core beliefs***

According to Hodge (2001, p. 207) cognitive schemata associated with a spiritual belief system (for example, believing that life has a deeper spiritual purpose) animates a person's existence and "can facilitate peacefulness". According to Gall,



Charbonneau, Clark and Grant (2005, p. 92), spiritual beliefs are contextual frameworks that orient people in their “interpretation, comprehension and reaction to life experiences”. This corresponds with Hodge’s (2005a, p. 83) view that spiritual beliefs provide people with a general framework for interpreting the world and help them to re-envision their circumstances “through a spiritual lens”. Concurring, Matthews (2009, p. 6) maintains that core spiritual beliefs enable individuals to make sense of the world and the events that shape their lives. In summation, spiritual beliefs appear to have an adaptive function; mediating important decisions, providing frameworks for understanding and explaining events and reframing circumstances more positively.

An important aspect of a person’s core beliefs includes well-defined beliefs about the ultimate meaning of life. Finding ultimate meaning often helps people to find a purpose in life; it enhances the sense of control and efficacy and encourages the development of a consistent life scheme (Compton, 2005, p. 201). A sense of ultimate meaning ameliorate psychosocial functioning, as it locates the individual in the larger cosmos, inspires the belief that life is truly worth living, and assists individuals to find purpose and direction in life (Hill, & Pargament, 2003, p. 8; Compton, 2005, p. 202; Purdey, & Duprey, 2005, p. 102). When the need for ultimate meaning is not met, the individual might experience life as shallow or empty and this threat of meaninglessness engenders existential anxiety. Most forms of spirituality move beyond the existential predicament, as most spiritual perspectives hold the view that each person has a higher reason for being and that life “should be lived in accordance to this meaning” (Fontana, 2008, p. 12).

To find ultimate meaning and purpose is of particular relevance for midlife women, as this is a time when they “focus their attention on the need to discover the deeper meaning in their lives” (Marston, 2002, p. 2). Concurring, Clark and Schwiebert (2001, p. 168) confirm that a woman’s central task during midlife is to construct personal meanings for life-events, re-examine her life goals and set new goals. Consequently, a programme that aims to develop the spiritual strengths of midlife should attend to this need to find meaning, offering guidance and encouragement in the search for ultimate meaning.

#### ***2.5.4.6 A process of inner change and development***

The inner change brought about by spiritual development:

- results in the investment in a set of ultimate and intrinsic values (Hodge, 2002, p. 112);
- fosters qualities such as forgiveness, hope and gratitude (Watts, Dutton, & Gulliford, 2006, p. 278);
- brings about a change of attitudes, beliefs and modifications to the worldview (Sperry et al., 2007, p. 439);
- engenders feelings of inner peace, being complete and intensely alive (Wills, 2009, p. 52); and
- generates resilience, joy, peace, contentment and a clear life purpose (Canda, & Furman, 2010, p. 74).

According to Fontana (2008, p. 12), people are incomplete without this inner change or spiritual transformation. It seems that embarking on a spiritual journey kindles an inner change, resulting in the development of spiritual strengths that fortify the individual in times of crisis.

#### ***2.5.4.7 External spiritual strengths***

External spiritual resources refer to those resources located in the *social context* of the client, including the family, community and society. For the purposes of this study, the spiritual practices and rituals that mobilise and uphold spiritual strengths will be included in this section.

The social environment abounds with spiritual strengths that provide comfort and succour, for example, spiritual support from family, friends, faith communities, spiritual mentors, prayer groups, spiritual support groups, spiritual practices and rituals.

External spiritual strengths include:

#### ***2.5.4.8 Faith communities and spiritual groups***

Participation in faith-based communities is a significant source of strength, as it promotes empowerment, coping abilities, self-confidence and a sense of belonging

(Hodge 2001, p. 208). According to Hill and Pargament (2003, p. 69), support from members of a faith community can be “a valuable source of self-esteem, information, companionship and instrumental aid that buffers the effects of life stressors”. Adding to this debate, Compton (2005, p. 52) maintains that “being with other people who are supportive and helpful in a religious context can be an important factor in physical health”. It seems the connectedness to others yields positive effects and is a strong predictor of subjective wellbeing.

A study by Geertsema and Cummings (2001, p. 28) on the role of spiritual groups in the midlife transition of women endorses it as a valuable resource. Participants testified that the spiritual group offered the opportunity to share experiences and stories with others, to pray together, and to participate in rituals that help them cope with midlife transitions. Summarising the findings of their study, Geertsema and Cummings (2001, p. 28) conclude that spiritual groups are therapeutic, as they offer a safe place for midlife women to acquire an understanding of their lives, rebalance their sense of self, safely express their way of being, and gain strength to negotiate the midlife passage. Considering the beneficial outcomes of belonging to a spiritual group, the researchers recommend using a group format for spiritual discussions and personal growth in midlife.

#### ***2.5.4.9 Spiritual relationships***

Assessing the role of spiritual relationships, Walsh (2003, p. 104) maintains that the support offered in relationships in the family and faith communities advance spiritual development. In a similar stance, Pargament (2007, p. 84) points out that not only does spirituality unfold in the context of relationships in families, between friends and in spiritual groups, but these relationships also offer the opportunity to share wisdom and “enact their truths through shared rituals and practices”. Within a spiritual community, people can choose from a variety of spiritual relationships, for example, shared worship, prayer groups, meditation groups, study groups, spiritual support groups and spiritual leaders (Pargament, 2007, p. 84).

#### ***2.5.4.10 Spiritual directors, clergy, and spiritual mentors***

Pastors, clergy and spiritual mentors can identify individual and community spiritual practices that can advance spiritual growth. Those who seek intensive spiritual

growth might prefer to work with a spiritual director. Kilmer (2006, p. 63) describes the spiritual director as a “spiritually mature and sensitive individual specifically trained to guide the spiritual path of other individuals”. The director guides the participant in integrating spirituality in their daily living. Accordingly, Pargament (2007, p. 265) concludes that spiritual leaders and “clergy can do some things that the therapist cannot”. It is the view of Canda and Furman (2010, p. 311) that social workers should recognise spiritual and religious leaders as potentially valuable partners. Collaboration between social workers and spiritual leaders would allow for more breadth and scope in service delivery. When called for, social workers should connect clients with spiritual leaders. Religious and spiritual leaders have distinct skills, for example, they are best equipped to answer theological questions, impart religious wisdom and have the authority to perform rituals (e.g. baptism, Holy Eucharist).

Aiming to expand clients’ spiritual strengths, the social worker will discern, in collaboration with the client, external spiritual strengths that might offer support and assistance. In accordance with the principles of spiritually sensitive social work, the referrals to external spiritual resources will be in congruence with clients’ beliefs and interests (Canda, & Furman, 2010:294). Consequently, the guidelines for the programme to develop the spiritual strengths of women should include recommendations regarding the identification and referral to individuals (e.g. spiritual mentors), groups (e.g. prayer groups) and faith communities (e.g. congregations at churches, synagogue or other spiritual communities) that can affirm and build midlife women’s spiritual strengths.

#### ***2.5.4.11 Spiritual practices and rituals***

According to Hodge (2001, p. 207), the rituals inherent in spiritual traditions are associated with positive outcomes such as the alleviation of isolation, mitigating anxiety, promoting a sense of security and of a sense of being loved. Spiritual practices and rituals are activities that vivify, augment and mobilise both internal and external spiritual strengths. For example, participating in rituals such as the Holy Eucharist might enhance the experience of closeness to God (Pargament, 2007, p. 257), and singing spiritual songs in a faith community or spiritual group might enhance a sense of connectedness to the group. In the view of Kilmer (2006, p. 57),

the function of spiritual practices and rituals as individual or community activities is to nurture and promote spiritual growth. In addition, it yields qualities such as inner peace, hope, courage and meaning. In a similar stance, Pargament (2007, p. 257) regards spiritual practices and rituals as ways in which people seek to experience the sacred. The perceived (subjective) emotional experience of the sacred is that it assists people in sustaining their spirituality. However, spiritual or religious rituals and practices not only mobilise and enhance external and internal resources, but spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation or spiritual reading intrinsically are also sources of strength (Van Dierendonck, & Mohan, 2006, p. 257). Considering the potential of spiritual practices and rituals to marshal and amplify spiritual strengths, and its capacity to *be* a resource, Gibson (2006, p. 90) encourages social workers to investigate the use of rituals or practices such as meditation, contemplation and spiritual reading. However, integrating spiritually oriented activities in practice such as prayer, meditation and sacred rituals requires careful reflection. It must be aligned with professional values and adhere to basic standards of ethics at all times. Social workers should not confuse their work with that of the officials of religious and spiritual traditions; they cannot perform rituals usually performed by the minister, rabbi, imam or priest (e.g. offer sacraments or give blessings). The social worker's actions are governed by basic professional standards of ethics and codes of conduct stipulated by the governing body (SACSSP) at all times.

It seems commitment to a spiritual quest (the search for and the subjective experience of the sacred) engenders qualities such as joy, inner peace, courage and hope. It provides guidance and encourages integration of all aspects of the self. Spiritual beliefs inspire the adoption of a framework to interpret the world in a more meaningful way. Thus, the positive attributes stemming from spiritual engagement foster resilience, encourage optimal human development, equipping individuals with unique coping strategies and have a beneficial effect on mental and physical health. This affirms spirituality as a source of strength.

## **2.6 CONCLUSION**

Phenomenology is the meta-perspective informing this study's stance on spirituality; therefore, it directs the investigation into spirituality and the spiritual strengths of

midlife women. The phenomenological stance on ontology and epistemology sets the parameters for a research design that adheres to the principles of scientific study, and safeguards the integrity of the inquiry into the subjective experience of spirituality.

This chapter campaigned for the construction of a definition of spirituality that represents the contemporary understanding of spirituality, and which will uphold arguments that spirituality is a source of strength. Defining spirituality is perplexing, as the term has become increasingly fluid due to its transformation over the course of succeeding eras in human history. To perceive the present-day meaning of spirituality this chapter charted its transition through the eras: pre-modernity, modernity and post-modernity to the present time.

The presence of spirituality since pre-history attests to spirituality as fundamental to being human, awarding credence to social work's conceptualisation of clients as bio-psychosocial and spiritual beings. Modernity witnessed the untrammelled expansion of a scientific worldview at the expense of religion. As science's devaluation of spirituality expanded, spirituality was increasingly marginalised in Western societies. The alienation from formal religious institutions spearheaded the bifurcation of religion and spirituality, with spirituality acquiring a more distinct meaning. Progressive disenchantment with the ideologies of modernity prompted post-modern intellectuals to question the modernist epistemology. The themes of spirituality were re-introduced into the mainstream agenda. However, arguments that the relativism and hermeneutics of suspicion of a post-modern approach are inadequate to negotiate a successful move beyond modernity have inspired the initiation of the post-secular movement. The post-secular worldview represents a new openness to the debate between science and spirituality, and provides the hermeneutics of trust, a prerequisite for this discussion. The evolving meaning of spirituality finds application against the background of the post-secular discourse.

The definitions of spirituality in social work reveal the multidimensional nature of spirituality, as represented in the holistic and operational model of Canda and Furman (2010, p. 5). To conceptualise a more encompassing definition of spirituality, insights from psychology were included in the construction of the definition. An analysis of the different elements of spirituality, namely the essential core, the search

process, the sacred and ultimate meaning confirmed the shift in meaning brought about by the social historical changes. The change in meaning was manifested in the new emphasis on the internal awareness or subjective experience of spirituality.

The discussion of the content categories of the definition also revealed its potential to be a resource, and it elucidated the nature of spiritual strengths. Heeding the directives of the strengths perspective as theoretical framework, spiritual strengths were categorised as internal and external strengths.

## **CHAPTER 3:**

# **SPIRITUALITY AND SOCIAL WORK: THE NEXUS**

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### ***Introducing the Strengths Perspective as Theoretical Model***

Spirituality as an emerging trend in social work reflects the worldwide, renewed interest in spirituality in both popular and academic discourse. It finds amplification within contemporary social work discourse. Heeding the call to engage in the new conversation between social work and spirituality, many social work scholars and practitioners are campaigning for a greater degree of inclusivity with respect to social work's worldview. The growing awareness of the importance of spirituality as a source of comfort and strength summons the profession to challenge old paradigms of religion and spirituality and to pursue inquiry into spirituality as a salient component in service delivery.

The strengths perspective, a postmodern approach in social work practice, represents a break with the core notions of the positivistic scientific paradigm (Healy 2005:195), and for this reason is empathetic to an inquiry into spirituality as lived experience. Thus, the strengths perspective served as theoretical model for this study.

### **3.1 THE DISCOURSE ON SPIRITUALITY IN SOCIAL WORK**

In countries such as the United States and Canada, educators and practitioners are actively engaged in the conversation on spirituality. They revisit old paradigms and explore strategies to incorporate spirituality in ways that are aligned with social work's values and mission. Although countries such as the United Kingdom (Moss, 2005, p. 41; Holloway, 2007, p. 266) and Australia (Rice, 2002, p. 304; Crisp, 2008, p. 363) are not as far advanced as the United States and Canada with the integration of spirituality in practice, the last decade witnessed an increased interest to incorporate spirituality. However, in South Africa (Bhagwan, 2010a, p. 188), the discourse on spirituality is in its infancy, with a noticeable paucity regarding the inclusion of spirituality in curricula, research and practice application.



This study argued that social work as a dynamic profession is at that juncture of its evolution where the inclusion of spirituality was self-evident. To understand the social work community in South Africa's resistance to accommodate spirituality, an overview of social work's evolution as a profession and the consequent changes in the relationship between spirituality and social work are presented. Over time, the relationship between social work and spirituality alternated between an exclusively religious approach and an almost total disregard for religion and spirituality. Thus, many of the concerns in the current debate, such as the fear of proselytization (Krieglstein, 2006, p. 22), is best understood against the background of the tempestuous relationship between social work and spirituality. Furthermore, by examining the evolution of the profession, the chapter endeavours to corroborate arguments that the modernist stance on ontology and epistemology (which disregards spirituality as field of study) no longer serves social work's mission to promote the wellbeing of clients.

To explain the changing relationship between spirituality and social work, Canda (2005, p. 100) distinguishes four sequential developmental phases in social work's transformation as a profession in the United States. Although it is a helpful heuristic framework, Canda (2005, p. 100) acknowledges that it is "a general distillation of a complex and flowing process". The developmental phases are charted on a continuum (Nelson-Becker, & Canda, 2008, p. 180):

### **Historical Continuum - Spirituality and Social Work**



**Figure 5: Historical continuum – spirituality and social work**

Although the phases described by Canda (2005, p. 100) refer to developments in the United States, these phases broadly mirror the historical relationship between social work and spirituality in most Western societies. According to Healy (2005, p. 84), in most post-industrial societies such as Australia, New Zealand, the Nordic countries and the United Kingdom, social work (as in the United States) was founded in religious organisations. In South Africa too, social services in the early twentieth century were mainly provided by religious organisations such as the Dutch Reformed church and Afrikaner women's organisations (Patel, 2009, p. 68). Hence, the developmental phases identified by Canda (2005, p. 100) have broader application than in the United States and will be used in this study to set the context for the discourse of whether spirituality can or should be accommodated within social work theory and praxis.

### **3.1.1 Phase one: sectarian origins**

The forerunners of modern social work were religious volunteers from religious charity organisations who provided social services during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Bullis, 1996, p. 7; Larimore et al., 2010, p. 111). These volunteers were inspired by their religious beliefs and philanthropic concerns to act on behalf of the poor and vulnerable members of the community. Thus, religious organisations were the matrix from which social work as a profession emerged.

Its sectarian origins philosophically connected social work to spirituality; consequently, "early social work leaders were influenced by spirituality" (Bullis, 1996, p. 7). Not only did its sectarian origins shape the earliest service delivery, but contemporary social work too is profoundly influenced by its religious heritage (Healy 2005, p. 84; Payne, 2005, p. 184). In this regard, Healy (2005, p. 84) states that "professional social work shares a common value base", particularly with the Christian and Jewish faiths. Concurring, Payne (2005, p. 184) remarks that social work's values are "humanist and spiritual". Both Baskin (2002, p. 2) and Gibson (2006, p. 29) argue that its religious origins have played a vital role in shaping the character and mission of social work, with Baskin (2002, p. 2) asserting that social work evolved from the spiritual values of "love, justice, community and mutual responsibility". Commenting on the abiding bond between spirituality and social

work, Govenlock (2007, p. 81) notes, “it will always strike me as more than somewhat strange that we have to remind social workers of all people, of the essential spiritual component of their profession”. It seems that the philosophical underpinnings informed by religious sources had a lasting influence on the profession as manifested in the nature and mission of social work.

Although the religious volunteers performed a valuable service, some helpers attempted to convert the people they helped to their faith. Moreover, human behaviour and social problems were explained according to theological doctrines (Canda, & Furman, 2010, p. 111). Another concern was that the “friendly visitor” was often “very moralistic” and ethnocentric in their judgement of the behaviour of those they called on, and helping was based on “categories of ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’”. Consequently, the religious epistemology came to be recognised as being too rigid and dogmatic, and that religiously informed service delivery might be harmful to clients. This initiated a growing opposition to the integration of religion in social work practice.

### **3.1.2 Phase two: professionalization and secularisation**

In the early part of the twentieth century, pioneers of social work education, in their quest to establish a scientific base for social work practice and gain recognition as a profession, sought to distance social work from its religious roots (Healy, 2005, p. 136; Graham, Coholic, & Coates, 2007, p. 25). Thus, during phase two (1920-1970) social work gradually severed its religious connections.

The pursuit of professional status was one of the most compelling reasons for disconnecting social work from its spiritual and religious origins. In order to establish a scientifically based practice, social work scholars turned to biomedical models (psychiatry), socialism, psychology (behaviourism, Freudianism), sociology and economics, which eventually became “the core knowledge foundation for the profession” (Healy, 2005, p. 50). Thus, as social work succumbed to increasing empiricism, linear thinking and reductionism of the positivist philosophy, the role of spirituality and religion in clients’ lives was mostly shunned by the intellectual pioneers. Furthermore, it has a particular significance to discourses on spirituality in social work, as modernists insist that science, by way of data that can be empirically

verified, is the only contributor of reliable knowledge. This is an unfortunate stance, since spirituality does not easily lend itself to be studied within the positivistic framework so favoured by modernists.

The adoption of the positivistic philosophy and empirical-analytical sciences to expand its knowledge base had an impact on social work's conceptualisation of clients. One of the early proponents of the Enlightenment, Rene Descartes (1596-1650), argued that physical and spiritual dimensions belong to separate realms (*res cognita* versus *res extensa*); ergo, the mind belongs to the spiritual realm and the body to the physical realm (Du Toit, 2006, p. 1255; Prins, & Van Niekerk, 2009, p. 47). Dualism, and in particular mind-body dualism, became firmly entrenched in the Western culture. In time, this mind-body dualism led to a mechanistic and reductionist view of human beings from which evolved the biomedical model. The biomedical model was adopted by social work scholars (Healy, 2005, p. 50). Consequently, a truly holistic approach to wellbeing was unattainable, as spirituality was shunned.

According to Canda (1999, p. 8), a lamentable outcome of the adoption of psychodynamic and psychosocial theories is that "we have unwittingly allowed ourselves to throw out the baby of spirituality with the bath water of sectarian rivalry", to the extent that social work developed a "professional allergy to spirituality". Expanding on Canda's (1999, p. 8) statement, Besthorn (2002, p. 24) maintains that in limiting the integration of knowledge "to the narrow confines of traditional sociological and behavioural scientific theory", social work has failed to utilise "the full range of epistemological innovation" that occurred in other disciplines, and in doing so failed its clients. The drive to be accepted as a legitimate academic discipline was so urgent that the profession succumbed to scientific rationality in the clamour "to be part of the triumphant march of secular, technical progress and human rationality" (Graham et al., 2007, p. 25). Hence, professionalization, which included the acceptance of secular humanism, resulted in religion and spirituality being devaluated as "oppressive, irrelevant [and] fraught with ethical concerns" (Rice, & McAuliffe, 2009, p. 405). It seems scholars lament the extreme measures taken to eradicate spirituality, which has resulted in modern social work's inability to come to grips with human spirituality.

So firmly entrenched is the positivistic paradigm that, for many modern-day scholars, the inclusion of spirituality is inconceivable, arguing that by including spirituality the profession will not be able to maintain the technological and political gains it has made since the founders embraced the values of democratic pluralism and chose a more professional knowledge base. For example, Clark (1994, p. 11) insists that inclusion of spirituality and religion would compromise social work's professional status. In a similar stance, Healy (2005, p. 87), commenting on the spiritual discourse, points out that the unease for many are "that religious and spiritual ideas are incompatible with the image of a modern profession as founded on rational and objective knowledge". As a result, many of the criticisms levelled today at renewed attempts to include spirituality in social work are informed by a reductionist, materialistic stance, negating religion and spirituality as legitimate domains of study.

Although religion and spirituality had virtually disappeared from the social work landscape, Canda (2005, p. 98) points out that not only did religious-based organisations continue to provide social work services, but some scholars also called attention to religion and spirituality, although it did not "gain wide acceptance". An interesting development during this phase was the Eastern religions and philosophies that began to enter social work literature. Apart from humanistic perspectives, other non-sectarian perspectives such as humanistic psychology, existentialism and 12-step programmes became more noted within social work during this period (Canda, & Furman, 2010, p. 112). The result was that, although spirituality was stifled in mainstream social work literature and practice, a new spiritual undercurrent has subtly gained entrance into social work.

### PROFESSIONALIZATION OF SOCIAL WORK IN SOUTH AFRICA

Following the recommendations of the Carnegie Commission (1929), the first welfare department was instituted in South Africa in 1937, which “marked the beginning of organised state intervention in social welfare and the professionalization of social work” (Patel, 2009, p. 69). This led to concerted efforts to train social workers at South African universities according to programmes that mostly adhered to the psychoanalytic models propagated in Europe and North America during the 1940s. This approach not only succeeded in eliminating spiritual content from curricula, but also “resulted in the adoption of approaches inappropriate to the conditions in poor countries” (Patel, 2009, p. 69). The extent of the exclusion of spirituality in social work is reflected in the findings of Bhagwan (2010a, p. 188) who report that a survey of 21 South African universities reveals that none of the schools of social work includes spirituality in their curricula. Thus, the way in which social work sought to gain professional status in South Africa mirrored the developments in the rest of the Western world.

### 3.1.3 Phase three: the re-emergence of spirituality

Various articles on spirituality in social work (Canda, 1983, p. 22; Laird, 1984, p. 123; Siporen, 1985, p. 211; Krassner, 1986, p. 157; Holland, 1989, p. 28; Joseph, 1989, p. 12) published during the 1980s in the United States heralded the return of spirituality in social work discourse. This is evidenced in an article written by Siporin in the *Clinical Social Work Journal* in 1985, in which the author observes that the religious revival in the United States and elsewhere in the world “is beginning to make its appearance felt in professional social work thinking and education for practice” (Siporin, 1985, p. 211). Initial cautious and hesitant responses to spirituality soon changed into growing recognition of spirituality as an important aspect of clients’ lives, which demanded the attention of researchers, educators and practitioners (Siporin, 1985, p. 11). This observation is endorsed by Sherr, Singletary and Rogers (2009, p. 158), who state that spirituality has gained the attention of an increasing number of social work researchers as they became cognisant of the profound impact of spirituality on human functioning. Moreover, they have identified a discrepancy between clients’ spiritual beliefs and practices and the neglect of the spiritual dimension in social work practice.

During the 1990s, an increasing number of scholars called for a re-examination of social work’s relationship to spirituality and for the integration of spirituality into the curriculum and practice (Sermabaiken, 1994, p. 178; Bullis, 1996, p. 33; Pellebon, & Anderson, 1999, p. 229; Krieglstein, 2006, p. 23). Another significant occurrence

during this phase was the “the establishment of professional networks and organisations” (Canda, 2005, p. 99). For example, the *Society for Spirituality and Social Work* was founded with the aim to establish international networks, sponsoring conferences and publications, and systemising scholarly and practitioner approaches in the United States (Canda, 2002, p. 1). The rapidly expanding interest in spirituality during this period secured the interest of an increasing number of social workers, lending greater prominence to spiritual discourses in social work. However, discourse on spirituality by the social work community in South Africa is virtually non-existent, which in Bhagwan’s (2010a, p. 195) view might be ascribed to the “historical ambivalence towards religion within the profession, the need to uphold the scientific model and the fear of engaging in potentially complex issues” best left to spiritual leaders. Thus, in contrast to its Northern American and European counterparts, the South African social work community fails to initiate a paradigmatic shift towards spirituality.

A central theme in the new debate on spirituality was the insistence that spirituality as salient component of clients’ lives has to be addressed in social work. This inspired the conceptualisation of clients as bio-psychosocial and spiritual beings (Cornett, 1992, p. 101; Rice, 2002, p. 309; Canda, & Furman, 2010, p. 5). According to Canda (2005, p. 98), one of the most important innovations of the third phase was the “conceptualisation of spirituality for social work purposes that addressed the holistic mind-body-spirit relational qualities of human beings”. Accordingly, the bio-psychosocial and spiritual model informs the conceptualisation of women in midlife in this study.

Significant of Phase three was the diversity of religious and spiritual perspectives included in social work literature, such as Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Judaism, Shamanism and Taoism and non-sectarian spiritual perspectives, for example, Ghandian Social Activism, existentialism and transpersonal theory (Bullis, 1996, p. 125; Canda, 2005, p. 98; Eun-Kyong, & Barret, 2007, p. 4). This shift in focus is described by Besthorn (2002, p. 1) as “broadening the definition of the religion/spiritual construct” sanctioning the inclusion of diverse religious and non-religious spiritual traditions. This approach addresses concerns such as religious biases, exclusivism, discrimination and oppression “when dealing with spirituality in practice, policy and education” (Canda, 2005, p. 98). While the

renewed interest in spirituality can be construed as consistent with the professions historical origins, the social work stance towards spirituality now reflects the post-modernist emphasis on diversity, favouring an inclusive approach to religion and spirituality. This move towards an inclusive approach reflects the shift in the broader sociocultural context towards an emphasis on the plurality of narratives, as opposed to the meta-narratives of both religion and science (Chapter 2 – 2.1.3).

The incorporation of spirituality in practice has compelled practitioners and theorists to consider how spirituality can be integrated in clinical settings in a competent and sensitive manner (Cascio, 1999, p. 133; Williams, & Smolak, 2007, p. 26; Canda, & Furman, 2010, p. 213). The term *spiritually sensitive practice* was introduced by Canda and Furman (1999, p. 83) to characterise the unique approach social workers follow when they integrate spirituality in practice. It is widely used in texts and scholarly papers (Rice, 2002, p. 313; Bhagwan, 2007, p. 29; Coholic et al., 2008, p. 41; Sheridan, 2009, p. 122). The prerequisites for spiritually sensitive practice include the following:

- an awareness, knowledge and respect for the diverse range of religious and non-religious spiritual perspectives; thus supporting an inclusive approach (Cascio, 1999, p. 131; Canda, & Furman, 2010, pp. . 15);
- a client-centred approach where clients' spiritual beliefs are valued and honoured (Sermabaiken, 1994, p. 179; Bhagwan, 2007, p. 29);
- ethical considerations such as self-determination, informed consent, non-judgmental attitude and positive regard (Canda, Nakashima, & Furman, 2004, p. 28; Hodge, 2005a, p. 38; Bhagwan, 2007, p. 29; Sherr et al., 2009, p. 159);
- self-reflection from social workers to gain a spiritual awareness regarding their spiritual belief system, biases, unresolved spiritual issues; their own comfort levels to address spirituality (Cascio, 1998, p. 531; Wagenfeld-Heinz, 2009, p. 183; Mutter, & Neves, 2010, p. 169); and
- professional competency, which dictates that practitioners recognise the parameters of their expertise and “only provide the services or techniques for



which they are qualified by education, training, or experience” (Northcut, 2000, p. 160).

In this study, the delineation of guidelines for the programme to embellish spiritual strengths, will comply with the principles for spiritually competent practice and the ethical codes of conduct stipulated by the South African Council of Social Service Professions (SACSSP).

The re-introduction of spirituality in social work in the 1980s as part of an alternative conceptual approach in social work is the culmination of “a growing body of post-modern social critique”, which challenges “the reductionist, materialistic, and hierarchical assumptions of the positivist/empirical worldview” (Besthorn, 2002, p. 24). In a similar stance, Healy (2005, p. 69), reiterates that the discourse on spirituality “contests the notions of individualism, rationality, objectivity and linear notions of progress” that underpin the dominant discourses in social work. It is Healy’s (2005, p. 69) view that alternative discourses cannot be disregarded, as their influence in determining client needs and service provision is steadily growing. It seems developments in this phase raised the awareness that continued dialogue on spirituality would require social work to reconsider the positivistic stance on ontology and epistemology, as it is not amenable to a holistic approach to wellbeing, which includes spirituality. Moreover, the positivistic paradigm lacks the flexibility and latitude to attend to spirituality as subjective, lived experience.

#### **3.1.4 Phase four: transcending boundaries**

The mid-1990s witnessed the interest in spirituality gaining momentum, to the extent that in 1994 the Council on Social Work Education in the United States stipulated that all social work programmes should include material on spirituality and religion in the curricula (Furman et al., 2005, p. 818). This, according to Canda (2005, p. 99), marked the transition to the fourth phase. In the field of education, Hodge and Derezotes (2008, p. 103) confirm that the number of programmes offering courses in spirituality increased from 17 programmes in 1997 to 75 programmes in 2005. As far as research is concerned, trends that began in the previous phase continued to expand in “scope and breadth” evidenced in the proliferation of publications, textbooks, courses and symposia on spirituality in social work (Northcut, 2000,

p. 155; Nelson-Becker, & Canda, 2008, p. 182). Examples of new areas of interest to researchers in spirituality include group work (Gilbert, 2000, p. 67), eco-spirituality (Besthorn, 2002, p. 15), death and bereavement (Holloway, 2007, p. 833), children and adolescents (Kvarfordt, & Sheridan, 2007, p. 3; Cheon, 2010, p. 2), the elderly (Langer, 2004, p. 611; Richards, 2005, p. 173), stress and work (Csiernik, & Adams, 2007, p. 243), and HIV/AIDS (Cadell, Janzen, & Haubrich, 2007, p. 175). Research on the integration of spirituality addressed aspects such as *spiritual assessment* (Hodge, 2004, p. 183), *ethical guidelines for spiritually sensitive social work* (Canda et al., 2004, p. 27), *social work theory and practice* (Tangenberg, 2005, p. 197; Furness, & Gilligan, 2010, p. 617; Gray, 2008, p. 175), and *social work education* (Miller, 2001, p. 12; Moss, 2005, p. 40; Hodge, & Derezotes, 2008, p. 103; Bhagwan, 2010a, p. 188). Results from this wide-ranging research provided the information necessary to formulate (for the first time in social work) coherent frameworks of values, knowledge and practice skills. These frameworks serve as guiding constructs when incorporating spirituality in practice with diverse groups. The vast expansion in research projects, publications and symposia, combined with the establishment of frameworks for the integration of spirituality in practice not only verified the legitimate status of spirituality, but also entrenched it in social work discourse.

The resurgence of spirituality in the United States soon evoked the interest of social work scholars around the globe in countries such as Canada (Coates, 2007, p. 1) the United Kingdom and Australia (Rice, 2002, p. 304; Holloway, 2007, p. 265; Crisp 2008, p. 364). By contrast, the South African social work community seems to demonstrate little enthusiasm for incorporating spirituality in social work, as reported by Bhagwan (2010a, p. 188). According to Bhagwan (2010a, p. 88), the absence of spiritual content in the educational programmes at South African universities “mirrors the profound disconnection from global academic discourse and the empirical trail in this field” (2010a, p. 88). However, there is promising evidence of an emerging awareness of the importance of spirituality. For example, the South African scholar Rankin (2007, p. 16), discussing the strengths perspective, emphasises the importance of recognising spirituality as a source of strength. More recently, Ross (2010, p. 44) recommends that South African social work “decolonise the profession” and suspend its over-reliance on “Euro-American and British theories” to include African religion and spirituality in educational curricula and practice. Notwithstanding

these developments, it seems that the local social work community has not yet come to terms with the “spiritual” as a salient component at theoretical and praxis level. Disregarding their clients’ spirituality calls on the South African social work community to reflect on the integrity of its service delivery, in particular as it pertains to a holistic approach to wellbeing.

The new century saw the connection between spirituality and social work as “transcending boundaries”; that is, boundaries between spiritual perspectives, academic disciplines and governmental and religious institutions (Canda, 2005, p. 99). For example, the corresponding increase in interest in spirituality in other fields encouraged interdisciplinary collaborations and most of the current scholarly writings in social work to draw on research and conceptual work in other disciplines (Canda, 2005, p. 99; Canda, & Furman, 2010, p. 114). Another distinguishing feature of the fourth phase is what Canda (2005, p. 101) calls “the internationalisation of work on spirituality in social work”, referring to the first international conference on spirituality in social work, which was presented in 2002, and the establishment of the Spirituality and Social Work Resource Centre in 2004. Although there is greater international contact and collaboration, each national profession of social work is developing unique and inclusive approaches to spirituality (Canda, 2002, p. 3). This poses a challenge to the social work community in South Africa to develop an approach to spirituality that is uniquely South African and honours the spiritual diversity of its citizens.

It seems the debate on spirituality has settled the question regarding the incorporation of spirituality over the last two decades, as most theorists consider the integration of spirituality in practice reconcilable with the social work mandate. It is clear that spirituality will remain on the agenda for now, and that the on-going spiritual agenda leaves room for exploring new territory, transcends historic boundaries, engages globally across disciplines and for the possibility to shape social work services in profound ways.

## **3.2 DEVELOPING THE SPIRITUAL STRENGTHS OF MIDLIFE WOMEN: A SOCIAL WORK MANDATE**

The following arguments provide an explanation as to why the mission of social work, to enhance clients' wellbeing, necessitates the inclusion of spirituality, and why a social work programme for the development of the spiritual strengths of midlife women is relevant to service delivery:

### **3.2.1 Spirituality is an important aspect of clients' lives**

Many social work clients testify to the importance of spirituality in their lives, often evidenced in the spiritual problems they struggle with, or the spiritual goals they wish to achieve (Russel, 1998, p. 18). Thus, a well-supported argument for the integration of spirituality is the acknowledgement that, for many social work clients, "spirituality is fundamental to their existence" (Hodge, 2002, p. 85). This is reiterated in the words of Rice and McAuliffe (2009, p. 404), who confirm that spirituality is central to the "personage of clients' lives". Intrinsic to this argument is the recognition by scholars and practitioners that spirituality is "*a human need*" (Sermabaiken, 1994, p. 181), "*basic to one's nature*" (Carroll, 1998, p. 2), a "*fundamental human quality*" (Canda, & Furman, 2010, p. 59), and a "*significant dimension of a person's identity construct*" (Mutter, & Neves, 2010, p. 165). As spirituality is an important aspect of clients' lives, it is often intimately linked to their growth and development as well as "their capacity to accomplish personal and collective goals" (Jacobs, 1997, p. 171). The significance of spirituality in the individual's life is captured in Gotterer's (2001, p. 187) remark, "many clients' innermost thoughts and feelings are rooted in spiritual beliefs which, rather than being a separate issue, serve as the foundation for the seemingly mundane activities of everyday life". Spirituality also often offers the most efficacious solutions to their problems (Williams & Smolak 2007, p. 33). For many clients then, spirituality is essential to the context of their lives and the problems they present.

What most of the advocates for the integration of spirituality in social work tacitly express, is the belief that when spirituality is ignored or slighted it affects the profession's ability to provide effective service. In midlife, many women express a

profound interest in spirituality and profess to a desire to explore their inner spiritual reality (Howell 2001, p. 51; Dalby 2006, p. 4). It is a time when they rediscover the importance of spirituality and spiritual strengths (Marston 2002, p. 196). Thus, social workers aiming to promote the wellbeing of midlife women should consider the role of spiritual strengths in enhancing a sense of wellbeing.

### **3.2.2 A holistic approach**

According to Russel (1998, p. 18), if social workers strive to assist clients in developing their full potential, they need to incorporate a spiritual perspective in practice. When social workers fail to honour clients as bio-psychosocial and spiritual beings, they fail to respond fully to clients, reducing them to less than they are (Leight 2001, p. 64; Baskin 2002, p. 3). In this regard, Williams and Smolak (2007, p. 31) remind social workers that clients are “presenting their whole selves”. When disregarding their spirituality, the social worker, in the words of Graham et al. (2007, p. 29), no longer deals “with the human person who has sought your service, but a truncated creature of your own fashioning”. A further consequence of omitting spirituality from social work practice is to deny clients the opportunity to explore and develop their spirituality, which for many clients is their primary source of strength (Sermabaiken, 1994, p. 178; Hodge, 2002, p. 85; Baskin 2002, p. 3; Taylor 2004, p. 1). A fundamental assumption of this study is that to enhance a sense of wellbeing in midlife compels a holistic approach, which attends to spirituality as salient component of midlife women’s lives.

The holistic approach in social work also recognises that people are shaped and influenced by factors in the systems of which they are part (e.g. family, community, society) (Leight, 2001, p. 64; Ambrosino, Ambrosino, Hefferman, & Shuttleworth, 2008, p. 53). The holistic approach seeks to understand the person within their social context, and to appreciate the significance of, amongst others, the spiritual factors, such as spiritual groups and faith communities’ impact on individual experience (Cascio, 1998, p. 534; Healy, 2005, p. 25). This view is affirmed by Bhagwan (2007, p. 27), who emphasises that spiritual and religious factors are “intrinsically interwoven with the other facets of human functioning”, cautioning that, to disregard the spiritual is “antithetical to the holistic framework to which the profession

ascribes". This study holds the view that ontological concerns pertaining to the nature of midlife women's spiritual strengths can only be understood by adhering to a holistic approach, which not only defines midlife women as holistic beings, but also recognises the impact of context (life world) on their experience of spiritual strengths.

### **3.2.3 Cultural diversity**

Social work, in an attempt to respond to the needs of diverse cultures and ethnic minorities, increasingly recognises that culturally competent practice needs to include issues of religion and spirituality (Praglin, 2004, p. 68; Furman et al., 2005, p. 813). The importance of culturally diverse practice is corroborated by Furness and Gilligan (2010, p. 37), who refer to a growing body of literature on the subject, acknowledging the spiritual aspect as important in cultural competent practice. Reminding South African social workers that they are "ethically mandated to exhibit cultural competence in their work with clients", Ross (2010, p. 44) cautions social workers to be sensitive to traditional African religions and spiritual practices and rituals. Thus, when called for, local indigenous spiritual traditions should be considered when delineating guidelines for a programme to develop the spiritual strengths of midlife women.

### **3.2.4 Social workers routinely address spirituality in practice**

Social workers routinely deal with problems containing a spiritual dimension. For example, in palliative care, individuals suffering from chronic illness, clients who grapple with the meaning of life and many alcohol and drug recovery programmes contain a spiritual dimension (e.g. the twelve-step programme). In the United States, regional and national surveys report that the majority of social work respondents believe that spirituality is important for their clients and indicate that they incorporate various spiritually oriented activities (Canda et al., 2004, p. 27). These observations are mirrored in the findings of a South African study in which Bhagwan (2010a, p. 196) reports that over half of the final-year social work students who took part in the study indicated that they applied spiritual activities such as helping clients to consider how spiritual practices/belief could be helpful and referring clients to spiritual counsellors. These students engaged in spiritual activities, despite the fact

that their curricula did not include any spiritual content. If social workers routinely engage in spiritual activities in particular fields of practice, and both educators and practitioners acknowledge the importance of spirituality in clients' lives, it would seem that adopting a spiritual perspective is unavoidable if social work is to meet the practice challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **3.2.5 Spirituality as resource**

The case for the integration of spirituality is also petitioned by those who regard spirituality a resource (Walsh, 2003, p. 38; Heyman, Buchanan, Marlowe, & Sealy, 2006, p. 4; Rankin, 2007, p. 16; Canda, & Furman, 2010, p. 4). For example, Sermabaiken (1994, p. 178) maintains that clients' spirituality can be considered "a weapon in their coping arsenal" and social workers should explore spirituality as a coping strategy, not only to "meet basic needs", but to "maintain mental health". It is also Rice's (2002, p. 309) belief that when harnessing clients' resources, spirituality needs to be acknowledged as a possible source of strength. This viewpoint is validated by Heyman et al. (2005, p. 4), who state that many social workers recognise that developing spiritual strengths might empower clients to improve coping skills and "serve as a source of strength". According to Williams and Smolak (2007, p. 39), spirituality can be a source of personal strength, providing essential tools that can aid coping abilities, "perseverance and problem solving". In her motivation for the integration of spirituality in social work, Bhagwan (2010a, p. 190) strongly supports this view, stating that spirituality is a "critical strength" in social work practice. A further incentive for the inclusion of spirituality is the growing evidence from several hundred studies that report a generally positive association between spirituality, and mental and physical health (Hodge, 2002, p. 85; Larimore et al., 2002, p. 72; Van Dierendonck, & Mohan, 2006, p. 229; Greenfield, Valliant, & Marks, 2009, p. 196). Considering the role of spirituality in practice, scholars such as Aguilar (1997, p. 84), Gotterer (2001, p. 187) and Heyman et al. (2006, p. 12) postulate that since spirituality serves as a bastion of strength for many clients, social workers, as part of the helping process, need to discover and embellish those spiritual strengths that are empowering the client. Concurring, Canda and Furman (2010, p. 3) remind social workers that "many of the people we serve draw upon spirituality by whatever names they call it, to help them thrive, to succeed at

challenges ...". It is the view of this study that promoting the wellbeing of midlife women necessitates attention to the spiritual domain and the concomitant exploration of spirituality as a source of strength.

### **3.3 THE STRENGTHS PERSPECTIVE AS THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

According to Praglin (2004, p. 78), for most practitioners the question is not *if* they should incorporate spirituality in practice, but rather *how* they should do that. Consequently, over the past decade, and particularly the last few years, academics and practitioners have moved the discourse on spirituality from defining spiritually sensitive practice and arguments for the incorporation of spirituality to "more specific intervention techniques, models and possibilities for practice" (Coholic et al., 2008, p. 41). The strengths perspective addresses the concern of *how* to integrate spirituality in practice, particularly as it pertains to spiritual strengths. It provides rationales for the development of strengths, offers guidelines for developing practice responses that adhere to the principles for spiritually sensitive practice and sets parameters for clinical intervention and practical application that is consistent with the profession's mandate. The central ethos of the strengths perspective, namely that all individuals have untapped strengths and abilities, resonates with the assumption of this study that midlife women have innate spiritual strengths and, once mobilised, might support midlife transition.

#### **3.3.1 The emergence of the strengths perspective – a paradigm shift**

The strength perspective emerged as a product of the broader intellectual questioning of the positivistic science tradition in social work during the 1980s, (coincidental with the introduction of the discourse on spirituality) (Koenig, & Spano, 1998, p. 48). According to Blundo (2006, p. 33), the conventional deficit paradigm pre-eminent in social work represents constructs that prevent social workers from conceptualising their work in any other way. In contrast, the strengths perspective proposed a focus towards previously unrecognised human strengths and abilities. Thus, in a dramatic departure from a focus on pathology, the strengths perspective focuses on identifying, developing and utilising clients' skills, abilities and strengths



(Saleeby, 2006a, p. 1; Blundo, 2006, p. 33). This new development in social work dovetailed with requests from social workers to identify and mobilise the spiritual strengths of clients.

At its philosophical core, the strengths approach affirms that clients have strengths, capacities, talents and resources that can be mobilised to realise their goals and improve their quality of life (Weick, Kreider, & Chamberlain, 2006, p. 118). The focus on strengths and assets has gained considerable prominence over the last couple of decades; however, Rankin (2007, p. 2) warns that the metaphors and narratives that guide social workers' thinking "... are still peppered with negative constructions". They are not oblivious to strengths, but a focus on problems is still prevalent in social work practice. In a similar stance, Blundo (2006, p. 27) stresses that the strengths perspective requires a fundamental shift in how social workers think and view the world. It poses a considerable challenge to those educated from a knowledge base and practice methods steeped in a deficit orientation. According to Saleeby (2006a, p. 1; 2006d, 301), practising from the strengths perspective demands a commitment to its principles and underlying philosophy "... everything you do as a social worker will be predicted, in some way, on helping to discover and embellish, explore and exploit client's strengths and resources in the service of assisting clients to achieve their goals, realize their dreams, and shed the irons of their own inhibitions ...". The innovative approach of the strengths perspective broadens the perspective of social workers to include an alternative way of viewing clients. Thus, with the strengths perspective as guiding construct, social workers are able to consider the potential of clients' strengths (including spiritual strengths) in confronting life's challenges, such as adaption to midlife changes.

### **3.3.2 The essence of the strengths perspective**

Quintessentially, the strengths perspective as an intellectual framework promotes a viewpoint that advocates emphasis on abilities and capacities over failure and defeat (Saleeby, 2006a, p. 1). The social worker is committed to draw attention to clients' talents, strengths and abilities consistently, a process that contributes to positive change. The social worker and client's efforts are directed at discovering, building and utilising internal and external strengths to promote growth and transformation

(Nelson-Becker, Chapin, & Fast, 2006, p. 150). Thus, adopting a strengths-based approach would require social workers, in the words of Rapp (2006, p. 131), to adopt a “strengths attitude”. Hence, one of the fundamental principles of the strengths perspective is a focus on clients’ strengths.

The strengths perspective does not deny the reality of impediments and problems, but cautions against the tendency to make them the focus of attention. The strengths perspective attempts to balance the pre-occupation with pathology by emphasising assets and strengths (Kisthardt, 2006, p. 175). The positive approach of the strengths perspective is not merely a counterbalance for the deficit model, nor is it “the mindless recitation of uplifting mantras or the idea that relief and surcease from pain and trauma is just a meditation or glib reframing away” (Saleeby, 2006d, p. 283). Thus, a strengths perspective approach to midlife would recognise that midlife is a time of both gains and losses, but would emphasise the opportunities for growth, identifying those strengths, such as spiritual strengths that might promote optimal functioning.

### **3.3.3 Defining characteristics of the strengths perspective**

The defining characteristics shape the distinctive practice approach of the strengths perspective. Drawing mainly on the work of Saleeby (2006a, p. 16), the following characteristics are discussed:

- ***Collaboration***

The strengths perspective supports a spirit of mutual understanding and collaborative partnerships (Healy, 2005, p. 161). Therefore, the strength perspective is characterised by the establishment of a *collaborative relationship* between social workers and clients. Human service professionals often adopt a stance of superior knowledge and, in the words of Saleeby (2006a, p. 18), “subjugate clients’ wisdom and knowledge to official views”. Social workers relinquish the role of the expert and rather work together with clients as consultants and stakeholders in relationships that respect their authentic views and aspirations (Saleeby, 2006a, p. 14; Kisthardt, 2006, p. 176). The collaborative alliance is aptly described by Kisthardt (2006, p. 177) as a reciprocal relationship in which “client and worker share co-responsibility for the work

process". Accordingly, the traditional social worker/client hierarchy is replaced by one of collaboration, where social worker and clients work together to mobilise clients' strengths (Healy, 2005, p. 153). In the view of Blundo (2006, p. 41), the collaborative nature of the relationship represents a shift in orientation from a worker-directed effort to a client-directed effort. Hence, the client is considered the expert of his/her own life. Reviewing this shift in focus, Blundo (2006, p. 37) concludes, "it is what the client brings in terms of strengths, resilience, and social support that are responsible for most of what is going to change and how it is going to change". This client-centred approach is consistent with the principles of the spiritually sensitive approach, which also emphasises the importance of starting where the client is (Bhagwan, 2007, p. 29). It seems one of the biggest challenges for social workers are to relinquish their position as experts and instead form a partnership with clients.

Guided by the directives of the strengths perspective, this study aims, in collaboration with participants, to discern guidelines for a social work programme to develop the spiritual strengths of midlife women.

- ***Suspension of disbelief***

The strengths perspective views clients as experts of their own lives. Clients construct their reality according to how they perceive and experience their world (Payne, 2005, p. 172). Thus, their representation of reality cannot be disregarded as invalid and inaccurate and calls for the suspension of scepticism about client's description of their reality (Blundo, 2006, p. 38). Social workers do not know the limits of clients' capacities, nor can they estimate the scope of what their capacities are. Therefore, social workers working from a strengths perspective are required to suspend their disbelief about clients' words and stories and to be open to explore their life world (Saleeby, 2006a, p. 15). Consequently, the strengths perspective is constructivist by nature, as it recognises that clients construct reality from the lived experience (Koenig, & Spano, 1998, p. 48; Rankin, 2007, p. 5). Constructivism supports the possibility of personal, subjective knowledge and questions the belief in a concrete and objective reality (Rankin, 2007, p. 5). Thus, the strengths perspective favours a phenomenological orientation, which recognises that clients' reality is constructed from their lived experience. Therefore, the strengths perspective's stance on epistemology and ontology is sympathetic to an investigation of spiritual

strengths as a lived experience. Moreover, the strengths perspective's stance on epistemology is sympathetic to the study's argument that knowledge about spiritual strengths can be gained from midlife women's subjective experience.

- ***Focus on strengths***

A key assumption of the strengths perspective is that every individual, family or community has assets, resources and knowledge, which might be operational or immanent (Saleeby, 2006a, p. 16). As the strengths perspective recognises that clients' resources can be marshalled to achieve goals and to improve quality of life, the social worker's efforts should be directed at discovering the potential strengths, resources (Weick et al., 2006, p. 121). Thus, in a collaborative undertaking, social workers and clients engage in a process of identifying and enumerating both internal and external strengths (Rapp, 2006, p. 129). A core assumption of this study is that midlife women have strengths, including spiritual strengths, which can be mobilised to promote adaption to midlife transition. This stance directs the inquiry into the delineation of guidelines for a programme to develop midlife women's spiritual strengths. However, this study does not suggest that spirituality is the only resource that will aid women in their midlife transition, but rather that it is part of their repertoire of strengths.

- ***Shape a different life***

The goal of the strengths perspective is to marshal capacities and resources that can aid clients to achieve their goals and have a better quality of life on their terms – to shape a different life (Saleeby, 2006a, p. 1). In similar vein, Kisthardt (2006, p. 172) reiterates that clients are assisted to achieve the goals they *want* to achieve rather than goals someone else believes they should achieve. The strengths perspective aspires to offer an opportunity for learning and growing and creating a more rewarding life by cooperating with individuals, families and communities to identify and expand the resources and tools within and around them (Weick et al., 2006, p. 125; Saleeby, 2006a, p. 11). It is the premise of this study that the utilisation of spiritual strengths might assist midlife women to shape their midlife passage on their own terms and in this way contributes to an enhanced sense of wellbeing.

### **3.3.4 Conceptualising strengths**

To be able to uncover, assess and mobilise strengths, social workers need to know what is considered strengths within the framework of the strengths perspective (Cowger et al. 2006, p. 98). However, according to Cowger et al. (2006, p. 95), there is a lack of strengths-oriented classification systems in social work that can be used to identify strengths. Another concern raised by Healy (2005, p. 169) is that there is a failure to account for *why* certain behaviours and attitudes are considered strengths. Consequently, Healy (2005, p. 169) remarks that “[t]he lack of direction as to how a worker determines a strength is a weakness of this perspective”. It is evident that these weaknesses and concerns need to be addressed, as social workers require reliable guidelines and clearly defined strengths-oriented classifications to assist them in their endeavours to distinguish and assess clients’ strengths and capacities.

A review of strengths, as identified by the strengths perspective, is presented, as it elucidates spirituality’s position within the register of strengths and its affinity to other strengths. If, during the process of identifying spiritual strengths other sources of strengths are discerned, midlife women should be advised about these strengths.

According to Saleebey (2006b, p. 82), virtually anything, given the circumstances and context, that assists an individual to deal with challenges, can be deemed a strength and therefore it would be difficult to compile an exhaustive list of strengths. The following are examples of strengths identified by Saleebey (2006b, p. 82-84):

#### ***3.3.4.1 What people have learned***

The knowledge gained from success, failure and disappointment can be a valuable source of information and even inspiration. Emphasising the valuable lessons that people learn in the course of daily living, Rankin (2007, p. 6) explains that the experience of success might strengthen behaviour, and failure can be a motivating force that prompts a search for alternatives. In the context of this study, what women have learned about their spirituality in the course of their lives might direct further exploration of those aspects of spirituality considered a resource.

#### ***3.3.4.2 Personal qualities, traits, and virtues***

Every person possesses certain qualities and traits either, as a natural endowment or as the product of life experience. These can include “a sense of humour, caring, creativity, loyalty, insight, independence, spirituality, moral imagination and patience” (Saleeby, 2006b, p. 82).

#### ***3.3.4.3 What people know about the world around them***

People learn about the world around them in many ways. This includes formal education as well as informal learning through their life experiences. The more people learn, the better they are able to understand and make sense of the world around them (Saleeby, 2006b, p. 83). In their encounters in their milieu people often develop talents and abilities (for example, the ability to work with small children or teach others) that can be explored in the search for strengths.

#### ***3.3.4.4 The talents that people have***

People are often unaware of their talents. In probing to discover strengths, they are often surprised to learn about their hidden talents. These might include dancing, painting, playing a musical instrument, telling stories, or cooking. These talents might prove to be assets that can assist clients in reaching their goals (Saleeby, 2006b, p. 83).

#### ***3.3.4.5 Cultural and personal stories and lore***

“[P]rofound stories of strength, guidance, stability, comfort, or transformation” that are often overlooked as sources of strength are embedded in most cultures and even in modern society (Saleeby, 2006b, p. 83). These narratives and myths can be a source of meaning and inspiration. Family and personal stories of resilience and rebound can inspire and motivate to persist in times of struggle. Personal stories or stories of other women, which recount the role of spiritual rituals, practices and beliefs as sources of strength might serve as confirmation to midlife women to continue utilising these resources, or inspire the investigation of spiritual strengths described in the stories.

#### ***3.3.4.6 People have pride***

The pride people experience (“survivor’s pride”) that survived and persevered in times of hardship cannot be overlooked, but it is often “buried under an accumulation of blame, shame and labelling” Saleeby (2006b, p. 84). The social worker has to be alert to signs of survivor’s pride, and uncover and include it in the repertoire of strengths.

#### ***3.3.4.7 The community***

According to Saleeby (2006b, p. 84), the community refers to the natural or informal environment, which abounds with people and organisations that could provide their talents and knowledge in the service of others. Midlife women might be encouraged to expand their reservoir of spiritual strengths by considering spiritual strengths located in the community, for example, spiritual support groups, spiritual mentors or faith communities.

#### ***3.3.4.8 Spirituality***

There is growing recognition in social work that spirituality is an important source of strength for many people (Canda, 2006, p. 61). Pondering the value of spirituality as a resource, Saleeby (2006b, p. 84) concludes that, “for many individuals and groups, then, spirituality is a grand bulwark against the demands and stresses, both ordinary and inordinate, of life”. For the purposes of this study, spiritual strengths are defined as those internal and external spiritual resources, which are subjectively experienced by midlife women as having a salutary effect on their overall sense of wellbeing (Chapter 1).

#### ***3.3.4.9 Internal and external strengths***

All strengths are classified as either *internal strengths*, for example, learned skills, traits and beliefs, or *external strengths*, for example, relationships, family and resources in the community (Saleeby, 2006d, p. 301; Eichler et al., 2006, p. 70; Cowger et al., 2006, p. 104). Some strengths might be universal, but individuals are unique and therefore practitioner and client will have to explore all possible internal and external strengths in the quest to uncover clients’ unique set of strengths. For

the purposes of this study, spiritual strengths are classified as internal and external strengths (Chapter 2).

When locating strengths, the social worker works holistically, considering all life domains, social, psychological, physical, spiritual, work, leisure and environmental resources (Nelson-Becker et al., 2006, p. 150; Sullivan, & Rapp, 2006, p. 271). The holistic approach of the strengths perspective, appreciative of the life world of the client (person-in-context), resonates with this study's stance on ontology as it pertains to the subjective experience of spiritual strengths within the context of the life world of the midlife woman.

### **3.4 CONCLUSION**

Appraisal of the historical landscape uncovers the spiritual imprints of the Judeo-Christian values and ethics on social work as profession. In the quest for professional recognition, social work has sought to remove all traces of its religious roots. The ensuing relationship towards religion and spirituality was characterised by ambivalence at best, and animosity at worst. However, the evolving profession cannot entirely escape its spiritual origins, as many of the Judeo-Christian values are entrenched in the professional codes of ethics and mission statements. Moreover, social work's *raison d'être* is deeply rooted in its spiritual heritage.

As part a broader intellectual movement against the dominance of positivistic models, the first tentative inquiries into spirituality emerged during the 1980s. This new debate on spirituality in social work became part of the alternative service discourses, burgeoning to a notable area of research, focusing on aspects such as the conceptualisation of spirituality, spiritually sensitive practices and intervention techniques. In contrast with its religious beginnings and exclusive religious orientation, the current debate advocates an inclusive approach, which recognises a diversity of religious and non-religious spiritual perspectives. An important juncture in the new debate is that the conversation has moved beyond arguments of whether spirituality should be included in social work, to questions about how spirituality should be incorporated in theory and practice. However, the response from the social work community in South Africa can be described as mostly uninterested.



The strengths perspective, as accepted practice approach in social work, is identified as the theoretical framework to pilot the investigation into the spiritual strengths of midlife women. An overview of the emergence of the strengths perspective reveals its radical departure from deficit models based on the biomedical models to a focus on clients' strengths. The assumptions underpinning the strengths perspective, the lexicon and purpose of the strengths perspective disclose a rapport between its stance on epistemology and ontology, and the phenomenological perspective, which informs thinking on spiritual strengths in this study.

## **CHAPTER 4:**

# **THE MIDLIFE TRANSITION OF WOMEN**

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### **Clarifying the Relevance of Spiritual Resources for the Midlife Development of Women**

Increased longevity makes midlife a viable component of women's lives; furthermore, the cultural and social changes of modern society have changed expectations about this phase of life. In contrast to the narrow and prescriptive midlife developmental designs of previous generations, the current cohort of midlife women is shaping innovative models of development. Although there are typical and standard growth models in midlife, more than ever before women are customizing their midlife developmental patterns. The uniqueness of women's developmental paths in midlife can be attributed to developmental trajectories that are multidirectional and multifaceted by nature. Therefore, to represent the variability of women's midlife development faithfully, the lifespan perspective is employed as orienting framework to direct the inquiry into midlife transition. A holistic model is used to illuminate the multiple factors across the physical, psychological, social and spiritual domains further, as well as factors in the cultural context that have an impact on women's midlife transition.

By exploring the nature of their midlife transition this chapter aims to explain why spiritual strengths might have a felicitous and significant bearing on the wellbeing of the current cohort of midlife women.

### **4.1 THE RELEVANCE OF SPIRITUAL STRENGTHS IN THE MIDLIFE TRANSITION OF WOMEN**

To understand *why* and *how* spiritual strengths might support midlife transition requires an understanding of the midlife experiences of women. By identifying the distinctive factors (both positive and negative) that shape the midlife development of women, this chapter attempts to explain the reasoning behind the assumption that spirituality might be a source of strength for midlife women. This study does not

argue for the exclusive use of spiritual strengths when negotiating the midlife transition; rather, it is an argument for the inclusion of spiritual strengths in the repertoire of resources.

Spiritual strengths are well qualified to address issues particular to the midlife transition of women. For example, spirituality might aid the process of individuation, as for many midlife women a better-defined self is incomplete without integration with the spiritual self (authentic self). In addition, a clear conception of the authentic self might contribute to a greater acceptance of the self and improved self-esteem (Chapter 2). The contribution of spiritual strengths is of unique value when dealing with those factors (such as negative stereotypes) that specifically concern women in the midlife passage. For example, a sense of ultimate meaning (Chapter 2) might imbue a woman's life with significance beyond the narrow confines of negative cultural stereotypes, inspiring the belief that life is truly worth living. When negotiating challenges such as ageing, a change in time perspective or value clarification, the subjective experience of a connection to God/Higher Power is a significant strength as it dispenses emotional reassurance, guidance, courage and peace of mind. External spiritual strengths such as spiritual support groups, faith communities, spiritual practices and sacred rituals, offer emotional support and guidance, which not only fortify women to adapt to changes in all life domains, but might also enhance their overall sense of wellbeing. Knowledge about the nature of spiritual strengths, the nature of midlife transition and the synergistic relationship between the two constructs are used as reference in the formulation of the guidelines for the programme to develop the spiritual strengths of midlife women. This does not only answer the research question as to the guidelines of this programme, but also clarifies the relevance of such a programme as it relates to the social work mission to promote wellbeing.

#### **4.1.1 Midlife transition**

The study of the midlife transition of women is situated within in the field of human development. Inquiry into midlife as discrete developmental phase is a new area of exploration in the field of human development and so, by implication, is the study of women's midlife passage.

#### ***4.1.1.1 Adult development***

An escalating interest in middle adulthood was established because of factors such as increased life expectancy during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and demographic shifts, described by Lachman (2004, p. 307) as a “population explosion of middle-aged adults”. Although interest in midlife resulted in various research projects, this period of life is still uncharted territory in many ways. The words of Lachman (2004, p. 325) that “the picture of midlife is still unfolding” support the notion that there is no predetermined, uniformly consistent developmental prototype for midlife. Thus, there is not yet consensus as to how individuals negotiate the midlife passage. (Staudinger, & Bluck, 2001, p. 4; Degges-White, & Myers, 2006b, p. 67). For example, Aldwin and Leveson (2001, p. 188) declare that for some, midlife is a time of struggle as they grapple with obstacles such as failure to achieve critical goals, trouble with adolescents and health problems, while for others this is a time of achievement and contentment. Nevertheless, Lachman (2004, p. 306) insists that “it is possible to characterise midlife in broad strokes given that a key set of issues and challenges emerges during the middle years”; however, at the same time acknowledging that one of the most striking features of midlife “is the wide variability in the nature and course of the midlife period”. This is corroborated by Ogle and Damhorst (2005, p. 2), who state that each adult’s development is unique, with many factors influencing his/her passage through midlife. It seems that, although there are general trends in midlife development, there is not a conventional template for development of this period of life.

#### ***4.1.1.2 The adult development of women***

The distinct study of the midlife development of women is an emerging field, aiming to address the paucity in the understanding of women’s midlife experiences (Lippert, 1997, p. 16; Howell, 2001, p. 54). According to Howell and Beth (2002, p. 189), women’s midlife transition requires separate studies, as the experiences of women are unique and different from those of men. This stance is supported by Degges-White and Myers (2006b, p. 67), who insist that generic theories of adult development are inadequate to explain the unique experiences of midlife women. Moreover, women “are charting life paths that are in stark contrast from the predictions of existing adult development theories built on the experiences of past

generations” (Degges-White, 2001, p. 6). Supporting the stance that the current cohort of midlife women is “pioneers in a new passage of time”, Evans (2008, p. 79) calls for new research, as past generations of women cannot serve as role models for the midlife transition of contemporary women. Similarly, McFadden and Rawson Swan (2012, p. 314) postulate that, although research on the wellbeing of midlife women is gaining in importance, it is still too limited to address the unique challenges this generation of women face. Reviewing the situation, McFadden and Rawson Swan (2012, p. 315) state that social workers are “concerned with the dearth of research to guide their professional work”. This study supports the call for inquiries that focus on of the midlife experiences of women, as it endorses the thesis that the factors influencing the ecology of midlife women probably differ significantly from those of midlife men. Thus, the novel ways in which midlife women shape their midlife passage call for inquiries that elucidate the contemporary evolution of women’s midlife transition. Moreover, an understanding of the midlife trajectories of the current generation of midlife women might serve as further endorsement of the role of spiritual strengths in supporting women’s transition.

#### ***4.1.1.3 Age parameters for midlife***

A survey of the literature on midlife reveals that most scholars regard the entry and exit ages for midlife as approximations, for example:

- it is the period between 45 and 64 years (Geertsema, & Cummings, 2001, p. 29);
- midlife to begins at 30 and ends at 75 (Lachman, 2004, p. 311);
- between 35 and 50 years of age (Weaver, 2009, p. 69); or
- between 42 and 52 years of age (Fitchett, & Powell, 2009, p. 258).

Thus, the predicament for researchers is that there is no clear demarcation of this stage of life, because different benchmarks are used to define midlife, including age-identity, life-events and chronological age. Appraising this predicament, Lachman (2004, p. 310) sardonically remarks that although the word *midlife* was introduced in the English language as early as 1895, the boundaries for midlife remain blurry.

Individuals' own **subjective experience** of middle age (age-identity) is used as reference to demarcate midlife; thus the feeling of being middle aged rather than belonging to a particular age group defines midlife. Not only do people live longer than previous generations, but because of the astounding advances in medical science and technology they experience good mental and physical health for much longer. This accounts for people in their late sixties describing themselves as middle-aged (Menon, 2001, p. 66). For example, Lachman (2004, p. 311) cites two studies undertaken in the United States, in which people in their seventies who experienced good mental and physical health have described themselves as being middle aged. As a result, the upper end of middle age is stretched further. This prompts Hunter et al. (2002, p. 3) to remark, "the boundaries of midlife are often fluid in people's minds". A study by Degges-White and Myers (2006b, p. 67) has inquired into the impact of feeling middle aged (age-identity) on women's experience of wellness and life satisfaction. The study reports that midlife women with a subjective age less or equal to their chronological age experienced greater wellness. Based on these findings, Degges-White and Myers (2006b, p. 76) advise service providers not only to focus on chronological age, but also to assess women's subjective perception of their age. By affirming midlife women's self-perception, helping professionals might empower women to make choices and set goals based on self-defined parameters rather than out-dated prescriptions for midlife.

The advent of midlife is often associated with the occurrence of life-events such as children leaving home, becoming a grandparent or the commencement of menopause. However, in contrast to previous generations when life-events occurred more or less at the same age, the life courses of men and women have become more varied in recent times and, coupled with factors such as delays in childbearing and shifts in career patterns, resulted in a midlife-life course that is less predictable. Thus, there is "a shift in how middle age is perceived and when it's beginning and end are dated" (Wethington, 2000, p. 87). According to Staudinger and Bluck (2001, p. 5), the changes in the timing of life-events, typically associated with the onset of midlife are linked to changes in society and the historical moment. Concurring with this, Hunter et al. (2002, p. 8) postulate that the changes in the timing of life-events of midlife women are "due to the historical trend of greater fluidity of life-events". The variability in the timing of life-events is aptly portrayed by the current cohort of midlife

women, for example, some 40-year-old women might become mothers for the first time, while other women's children are grown (Lachman, 2004, p. 312). The variation in the timing of life events for women is ascribed to the changes in society, "largely due to the cultural and legal changes brought about by the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s" (Percheski, 2008, p. 498). As a result, women's social roles have changed significantly since the 1970s in terms of "normative societal expectations for marriage, family, and career" (Newton, & Stewart, 2010, p. 76). Hence, life-events, associated with a particular age, is not considered a viable marker for the onset of midlife, and women in particular no longer follow the script for life-events which demarcated midlife for earlier generations of women.

Scientific study requires a more specific definition for research on midlife; thus, most researchers use chronological age as marker for midlife. For the purposes of this study, 40 as the modal entry year and 60 as the modal exit year is adopted as age parameters. These markers for midlife are supported by most theorists, for example, Lippert (1997, p. 16), Howell (2001, p. 51), Staudinger and Bluck (2001, p. 3), Hunter et al. (2002, p. 7) and Lachman (2004, p. 311). However, although scholars propose the ages 40 to 60 as comprising midlife, they concede that the exact boundaries of middle age are contested (Staudinger, & Bluck, 2001, p. 5). Hunter et al. (2002, p. 3) affirm that the boundaries of this period "is ambiguous rather than definite", and Sigelman and Rider (2009, p. 4) describe middle adulthood as the period between the ages 40 and 60 years, but stress that this "is only a rough indicator", as people of the same age can differ vastly in personality and functioning. This study uses the chronological age as marker for midlife, but at the same time acknowledges that midlife women cannot only be defined in terms of a linear age-stage perspective. Therefore, although the linear definition of midlife is employed in this study, it recognises the limitations of the linear definition and is cognisant of the variation in the needs, developmental tasks and contexts of midlife women.

## **4.2 LIFESPAN PERSPECTIVE AS ORIENTING FRAMEWORK**

The midlife transition of women cannot be reduced to a few general experiences assumed to be true for most women, but is rather characterised as variable and multifaceted (Lippert, 1997, p. 20; Banister, 2000, p. 745). Thus, to represent and

explain midlife women's experiences accurately requires a framework that is flexible, can accommodate a diversity of experiences and considers social and cultural influences. The lifespan perspective provides such a framework, as it refutes the notion that life stages "are fixed or immutable and that chronological age determines development" (Hunter et al., 2002, p. 12). The argument for employing the lifespan perspective is reinforced with social work scholars, Hunter et al.'s (2002, p. 12) contention that the orientation of the life-span perspective "fits the reality of midlife women's lives and counters the overemphasis on the negative aspects of ageing". Consequently, the life-span perspective provides the guidelines for inquiry into the diverse developmental trajectories of midlife women in this study.

A distinguishing thesis of the lifespan perspective is that ontogenetic development as a process of adaptation and transformation extends across the entire life course (Baltes, Staudinger, & Lindenberger, 1999, p. 472). Therefore, the lifespan perspective asserts that transformation and personal growth manifest at all stages of life (Staudinger, & Bluck, 2001, p. 19). This represents a revised position on human development, which Kläden and Feeser-Lichterfeld (2006, p. 96) describe as "as a new paradigm that conceives development as a lifelong multidirectional process and particularly takes into account developmental processes in adulthood." According to social work theorists Crawford and Walker (2007, p. 2), the life-span perspective's emphasis on lifelong development resonates with the profession's supposition that every stage of a person's life offers opportunities for growth and change. Thus, "[u]nderstanding how people grow and develop is central to the role and tasks of a professional social worker" (Crawford, & Walker, 2007, p. 2). The verification of midlife as a time of growth and development seems to confirm that social work service delivery to midlife women should be tailored in such a way that it promotes personal growth and development. Of interest to this study, is how spiritual strengths can support this process.

The human lifespan is divided into discrete periods (Table 4). Each of these phases of life is unique and is valued for its overall contribution in human development:



**Table 4: Periods of the lifespan**

PERIODS OF THE LIFESPAN	
Period of life	Age Range
Prenatal period	Conception to birth
Infancy	First 2 years of life
Preschool period	2 to 5, or 6 years
Middle Childhood	6 years to about 12 years (onset of puberty)
Adolescence	Approximately 12 to 20 years
Early Adulthood	20 to 40 years
Middle Adulthood	40 to 65 years
Late Adulthood	65 years and older

Source: Sigelman and Rider (2009, p. 4)

The lifespan perspective recognises that chronological age delineates life periods; however, although it acknowledges that every period of life comprises universal developmental tasks, it emphasises that development is highly individual, influenced by factors such as gender, race and culture (Hunter et al., 2002, p. 12). This view is reiterated by Ogle and Damhorst (2005, p. 2), who point out, “the course of a human life is structured by a life-cycle or an underlying order”, but stress that development is also “qualitatively unique”. Thus, although midlife women are charting a customized midlife passage, they also have to negotiate normative midlife transitions associated with this period of life.

#### **4.2.1 Characteristics of the life-span perspective**

According to Lippert (1997, p. 17), a pluralistic approach, which considers the impact of psychological, physiological, cultural and environmental factors, is imperative when attempting to explain women’s midlife experiences. A characteristic of the life-span perspective is its **pluralistic approach**, which stresses the importance of *multiple influences* on the outcome of life-cycle development (Hunter et al., 2002, p. 13). Thus, the pluralistic approach, which emphasises the reciprocal interplay between factors of the various systems in shaping human development, would yield a holistic portrayal of the midlife experiences of women. It would appraise the impact

of various factors across all life domains as well as the social and cultural factors on women's experience of the midlife transition. A pluralistic approach refutes reductionist tendencies to minimise midlife experiences by focusing on changes in one life domain, for example, the physical changes related to menopause.

Developmental patterns are largely defined by the *historical context* in which people live. For example, events such as the rise of the internet, television, the AIDS epidemic and the women's movement have a profound impact on developmental trajectories (Weiten, 2002, p. 345). The women's movement serves as an example of the way in which a cultural event can shape the historical context, to the degree that it has an impact on the developmental patterns of women. This is aptly portrayed in the developmental trajectories of the current cohort of midlife women. Under the auspices of the women's movement, the norms and cultural models that previously defined the midlife transition of women are revoked (for example, midlife women are now entering the labour market and become first-time mothers). The result of the changes brought about by the women's movement is that the midlife transitions of women "differ markedly from traditional societal expectations" (Degges-White, & Myers, 2006a, p. 134). Hence, a holistic approach that evaluates the impact of socio-cultural factors is imperative for an understanding of the midlife experiences of women.

Assessing the role of *person-environment interaction* on adaptive capacity across the lifespan, Staudinger and Bluck (2001, p. 19) conclude that development "is not the passive unfolding of pre-wired maturational programs" or merely a mechanistic reaction to environmental stimuli. Rather, development is described as the product of a ceaseless "and active process of the individual's transaction with changing contextual influences, including age-graded changes of the genome and historical transformations of society". The conclusion that development over the lifespan is the outcome of the person-environment interaction resonates with the holistic approach of this study. As such, this study recognises that modern society (Chapter 2) espouses spiritual needs, which kindle a revival of interest in spirituality. In addition, midlife is often characterised, particularly by women, as a time of renewed interest in spirituality. Thus, midlife women, not only under influence of factors in the socio-cultural context, but also because of an innate need for a more spiritual life, might express a notable interest in spirituality.

In addition to a pluralistic approach, the lifespan perspective also emphasises that development is ***multifaceted and multidirectional***. Explaining the multifaceted and multidirectional nature of the developmental process, Staudinger, Marsiske and Baltes (1995, p. 803) emphasise that although developmental process in life dimensions might be correlated, changes in life dimensions can be quite independent from one another. For example, there might be a decline in physical ability, but an increase in language ability. The multifaceted and multidirectional development is succinctly described by Staudinger and Bluck (2001, p. 24) as development that “unfolds in many different domains of functioning”. Thus, the changes and continuities over the life-span development encompass gains (growth) and losses (decrements) across all life domains such as the physical, cognitive and psychosocial domain. The nature of women’s midlife transformation is characterised by a multifaceted and multidirectional development across various life domains, further nuanced by the social and cultural context.

#### **4.2.2 The life-span perspective and changes and continuities in midlife**

The outcome of theories on midlife development, which fails to consider the multifaceted and multidirectional nature of midlife transitions, is depicted by two contradictory understandings of midlife. Depending on the focus of theorists, midlife is either portrayed as a time of turmoil and decline, or as a time of peak functioning and growth (Lachman, 2004, p. 312). These contradictory views are the result, either of emphasising the positive aspects of midlife, or of a focus on negative aspects in this stage of life. For example, Freund and Ritter (2009, p. 583) point out that middle adulthood is either depicted as a time of emotional loss, boredom, decline in physical stamina, increased financial responsibility and a professional plateau, or as a time of personal freedom, peak performance, higher workplace status and good physical health. On the one hand, midlife is described in terms of themes of decline and loss, and on the other hand as a time of satisfaction and mastery. However, to consider midlife as either a period of decline and despair or as a time of stability and fulfilment might be too simplistic. These disparate views of midlife can be reconciled when viewed from a multiple perspective as provided by the life-span perspective.

Life-course development is neither merely a progression to higher levels of functioning nor persistent degeneration. Midlife is a period of both gains and losses (Staudinger, & Bluck, 2001, p. 24). This is also reflected in the midlife development of women and accounts for the wide variability in the midlife experiences of women. Thus, the midlife development of women is neither a time only of growth nor a time of inevitable loss and decline, but comprises a system of internal and external changes, continuities and stability across all life domains. To assist women effectively to negotiate the midlife passage would require a holistic approach, which considers the impact of the gains and losses in all life domains (biological, social, psychological and spiritual) (Degges-White, & Myers, 2006b, p. 77). Understanding the scope of the changes, continuities, gains and losses across the life domains provides the information to customise a holistic programme that can facilitate optimal development in midlife. Moreover, an analysis of the multifaceted nature of midlife development also contributes to an understanding of the role of spiritual strengths in promoting wellbeing in midlife.

#### **4.3 FACTORS HAVING AN IMPACT ON THE MIDLIFE TRANSITION OF WOMEN**

It is the stance of this study that an awareness and understanding of the challenges, unique experiences and opportunities for growth of women in midlife will not only validate spirituality as a source of strengths, but are also imperative for a well-signposted programme that aims to utilise spiritual strengths to promote adaptability and wellbeing during midlife.

In accordance with this study's conceptualisation of midlife women as bio-psychosocial and spiritual beings, and directed by the lifespan perspective's emphasis on *individual differences*, the *multifaceted* nature of development and its *pluralistic approach*, a holistic model (Fig. 6) was developed to explore the nature of women's midlife transition. By highlighting some of the more salient factors that have an impact on midlife development, this model depicts the interconnectedness between the physical, psychological, social and spiritual life domains and the reciprocal interplay between the life domains and the cultural and societal context:

# A MODEL OF WOMEN'S MIDLIFE TRANSITION

*Multiple Factors influencing Midlife Transition*

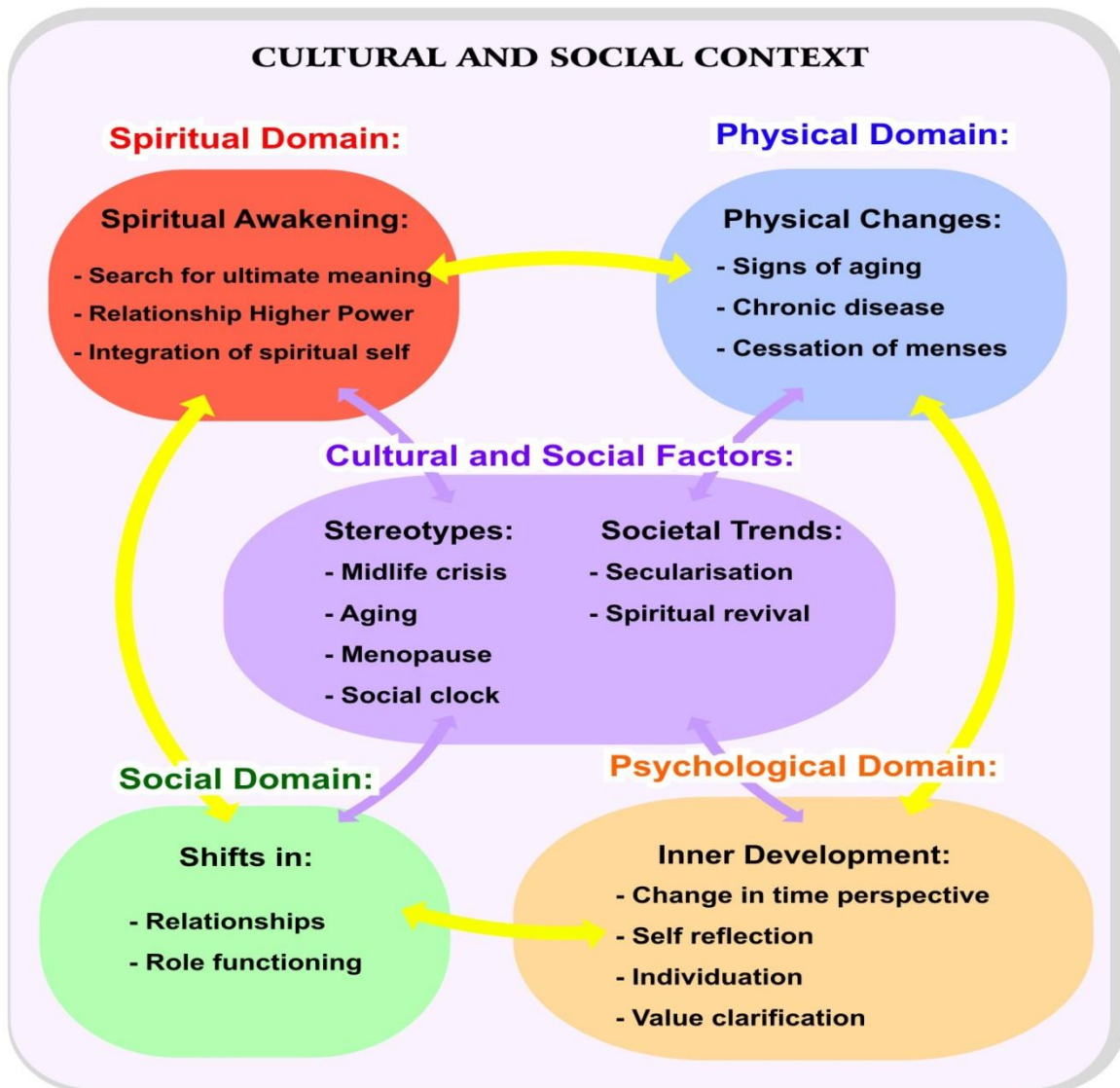


Figure 6: A model of women's midlife transition

## 4.3.1 The social and cultural context

The midlife transition of women does not unfold in a vacuum, but is affected by the social environment (Lippert 1997, p. 17). Similarly, Degges-White (2001, p. 6) maintains that women's perception of ageing, gender and social roles is informed by the social context. Therefore, factors in society, such as *negative stereotypes* and *cultural expectations*, colour the way in which women experience midlife. A more

complete understanding of women's midlife experiences would require deliberation on factors in society that might have an impact on development in midlife.

### **4.3.2 The physical, psychological, social and spiritual life domains**

It is beyond the scope of this study to provide an extensive list of all the possible factors, gains, losses, challenges and developmental tasks across the physical, psychological, social and spiritual life domains as it relates to the midlife development of women. For the purposes of this study, the major developmental trends, age-associated challenges, gains and losses, and some of the normative tasks as they pertain to the life domains of midlife women will be discussed. The possible influence of social and cultural factors will be examined as it relates to a particular life domain.

#### ***4.3.2.1 The physical domain***

To all, the physical and biological changes of midlife come unbidden. This is an inevitable characteristic of adult development. Every period of life, including midlife, has normative biological events associated with that phase (Hunter et al., 2002, p. 13). For midlife women, biology in the words of Degges-White (2001, p. 10) has created "a physiological blueprint" of their development. However, although there are naturally occurring biological changes, women's experiences of midlife are influenced by the interplay between various factors such as physical changes, life-events, social and cultural influences, and individual expectations and perceptions (Robinson, 1996, p. 453; Winterich, & Umberson, 1999, p. 71; Anderson, Yoshizawa, Gollschewski, Atogami, & Courtney, 2004, p. 179). Consequently, women's midlife experiences of biological changes are varied, as each woman traverses the midlife passage in her own unique way (King et al., 2005, p. 15). It is the assumption of this study that spiritual strengths might provide support that could aid women when adapting to the physical changes of midlife.

A notable change in midlife is the physical manifestation of the natural process of ageing, with the appearance of wrinkles, grey hair and weight gain (Banister, 2000, p. 746). Adjustment to the loss of youthful appearance is culturally mediated, implying that the meanings women attach to ageing are influenced by cultural values. For example, in Western societies, where being young (or appearing young)

has great cultural value, ageing is often negatively stereotyped, which might result in the denial of ageing, and women going to great lengths to appear young. According to Apter (1995, p. 50), cultural messages that declare ageing a flaw, persuade women to “grip youth between their teeth, and throttle signs of change”. Thus, Apter (1995, p. 22) concludes that, as long as culture attaches more value to being young, and none to being mature, it will be difficult for women to accept their maturity. In a similar vein, Degges-White (2001, p. 4) protests that because of ageism, “women are seen as victims of the ageing process”, Clark and Schwiebert (2001, p. 163) cynically remark that, “sooner or later every woman finds herself on the wrong side of these ideals. She is then expected to become invisible”. Reviewing the effect of cultural stereotypes that are suffused with messages which equate female beauty with youthfulness, Ogle and Damhorst (2005, p. 1) conclude that for women, “physical signs of ageing have become discrediting attributes, or stigmas that mark ageing women as ‘tainted’ or ‘discounted’ within mainstream society”. Commenting on the gendered double standard of ageing in Western society, Wray (2007, p. 33) caustically observes that, “midlife men often are represented as ‘at their peak’ and midlife women as ‘in decline’”. Attentiveness to socio-cultural messages that stigmatises the ageing process is imperative, as it might give an insight into midlife women’s experiences of the physical signs of ageing.

A striking example of the influence of stereotypes about ageing is noted in many midlife women’s ambivalent attitude towards their bodies. According to Banister (2000, p. 745), this might be attributed to the incongruence between their expectations of physical ageing, and their embodied experience of the process. This ambivalence is reflected in the wide-ranging findings on midlife women’s reactions to changes in their bodies, with some women expressing contentment and satisfaction, while others resent and dislike their ageing bodies. In a study conducted by Degges-White (2001, p. 9), some women expressed regret over the physical changes in midlife; however, an interesting finding is the response of other participants who, although they mourned the physical changes, revelled in the increased freedom and flexibility of mind. They were more focused on forming a new identity. A further illustration that women do not always escape the impact of these negative stereotypes is the study by Howell and Beth (2002, p. 202), who report that while women realised they were old enough to qualify for the label of midlife, “they did not

fit their own mental images of middle aged women". Thus, women could not reconcile the negative cultural stereotypes with their own experiences. By contrast, midlife women, in the study by Ogle and Damhorst (2005, p. 14), arrive at a "comfortable acceptance" of their middle-aged bodies. In the view of the researchers, the key to this acceptance was a perspective transformation in which participants were able to redefine the dominant *cultural meaning structures* for *personally relevant meaning structures*. These women succeeded in challenging and transforming mainstream ideologies about youth and beauty, which did not fit their experiences of their own bodies. By doing this, they recognised that popular cultural ideologies rather than their ageing bodies were problematic. A study that reflects similar findings is an inquiry by Ballard, Elston and Gabe (2005, p. 169) undertaken in the United Kingdom on midlife women's experiences of public and private ageing. Public ageing refers to the visible signs of ageing arising from physical changes in their bodies, while private ageing refers to less visible ageing that arises from physiological changes within the body, and which women accept as irreversible indicators of ageing. Physical changes in midlife prompt women to identify with their ageing bodies, implying that they have to reconsider their personal identity. Due to the negative narrative regarding female ageing, women might feel pressured to adopt a "culturally shaped identity" that is socially acceptable (Ballard et al. 2005, p. 172). However, participants in this study, although they wanted to present a socially acceptable identity, it was not one of youthfulness, but rather one that reflected their sense of ageing. Thus, these midlife women considered an unduly youthful appearance as a false image, which was not an appropriate expression of their inner identity; rather, it signalled inauthenticity. Deliberating on the findings of the study, Ballard et al. (2005, p. 184) conclude that the current cohort of midlife women is "carrying new values and images of ageing as they enter middle age". It seems "that there may be a time limit to the adoption of vigorous efforts to mask external ageing" and that this limit might be related to women's sense of the subjective experience of physiological changes of their bodies. It is also the view of Evans (2008, p. 97) that contemporary midlife women increasingly disregard stereotypes about ageing, stating that to them "age is only a number", which in no way defines or restricts them in their life choices. On the contrary, they feel better as they get older. They embrace midlife, regarding it as a doorway to an exciting part of



life. It seems the current cohort of midlife women is increasingly challenging the out-dated stereotypes about ageing.

For women, midlife transition is often *principally associated with menopause*, engendering the custom to equate the midlife passage of women with menopause. This stance is criticised by Apter (1995, p. 22), who protests that to put menopause at “the centre of midlife development is as unsatisfactory as placing the onset of menstruation at the centre of adolescent development”. A negative outcome of stereotyping of menopause as central to midlife is the negation of the equally important role of social and psychological factors in women’s midlife experiences (Lippert, 1997, p. 17). Thus, midlife cannot only be considered in terms of the biological changes associated with menopause, as it is but one aspect of the midlife transition of women.

Retracing the origin of negative stereotypes of menopause, Hunter et al. (2002, p. 177) observe that it dates to previous historical periods when loss of childbearing and child-rearing capacities were interpreted as a severe loss. Accompanying the gloomy picture of loss of fertility, menopausal women are further stereotyped as being beleaguered by an array of unpleasant physical symptoms. Rebuking those who persist to appraise menopause in a negative way, Hunter et al. (2002, p. 178) point out that these socially constructed stereotypes are “both ageist and sexist, largely resulting from patriarchal views and beliefs about women as defective and imperfect compared to men”. Hence, when a woman’s development is described in terms of her reproductive capacity, a decline in fertility during menopause implies a regressive course (Clark, & Schwiebert, 2001, p. 162). However, the notion that physical transitions define midlife for women, or that women view menopause as a negative event has been invalidated by recent research findings. For example, Degges-White (2001, p. 7,9) affirms that women’s beliefs, attitudes and feelings are not significantly related to menopause and, contrary to popular belief, most women do not “seem to feel that transitioning into menopause was remarkable in any way”. Concurring, Hunter et al. (2002, p. 176) remark that with the exception of a few, most women report neutral or positive attitudes towards menopause. For them menopause is a non-event, rather than a syndrome that causes physical and mental health difficulties. Moreover, findings of longitudinal studies, which documented that women who rejected negative stereotypes were less likely to show negative

symptoms of menopause, endorsed the view that it is the negative cultural beliefs that might contribute psychological vulnerability, rather than the physical changes at midlife (Hunter et al., 2002, p. 177). Thus, although menopause initiates the onset of various physical symptoms, how women experience these physical changes is significantly affected by the socio-cultural context (Robinson, 1996, p. 453; Lippert, 1997, p. 17; Degges-White, 2001, p. 6; Hunter et al., 2002, p. 177). Corroborating the notion that the variances in women's experiences are linked to the cultural interpretation of menopause, Hunter et al. (2002, p. 177) observe that in cultures that devalue older women (as in many Western cultures), women tend to have a more negative experience of menopause. This is in contrast to cultures (such as in Asia and India), where a woman's worth expands with age and she experiences less or no negative signs of menopause. Thus, women's experiences of menopause are the result of a complex interplay between biology and socio-cultural factors.

Not only does the current cohort of midlife women refute the popular notion that midlife for women is all about menopause, but a growing number of studies report that women do not as a matter of course, experience the negative physical and psychological symptoms associated with menopause. Endorsing this view, Lachman (2004, p. 325) stresses that there is no empirical evidence that women universally experience the distress associated with menopause. Thus, as inaccurate stereotypical views might colour women's menopausal experience, women should be provided with fact-based information about menopause and be encouraged to question the validity of the cultural stereotypes.

In midlife, women might become more aware of physical ailments, as this is often the time when chronic illness or disease such as high blood pressure, osteoporosis, high cholesterol, and arthritis take women by surprise. Although most of these ailments are largely treatable, Lachman (2004, p. 307) remarks that it might trigger distress, as these afflictions signal ageing and many cultures do not value ageing women. According to Staudinger and Buck (2001, p. 25), biological losses become more prominent after the age of 50, such as a decrease in muscular strength, decrease in sensory functioning and an increase in cardiovascular disease. The social worker should collaborate with midlife women to identify those spiritual strengths that would assist in ameliorating adaption to physical changes to the greatest effect.

#### **4.3.2.2 The psychological domain**

Popular culture portrays midlife as a time of crisis. The persistence of depicting midlife as a predictable time of crisis might provoke apprehension and anxiety about this period of life. The conceptualisation of midlife as a crisis is called into question by various scholars such as Wethington (2000, p. 87), who dismisses this notion as a contemporary *folk belief* that overestimates the risk of experiencing a crisis and exaggerates the degree of stressfulness, compared to other life cycles. According to Lachman (2004, p. 312), the conception of a midlife crisis is a widespread *cultural stereotype*, and not an accurate portrayal of this period of life. Freund and Ritter (2009, p. 582) observe that the midlife crisis is still one of the most popular ways in which middle adulthood is described. However, the inevitability of the midlife crisis is dispelled by the results of various studies, which find no support for the notion that most adults experience a predictable psychological crisis in midlife (Weiten, 2002, p. 346; Lachman, 2004, p. 315; Sigelman, & Rider, 2009, p. 335). According to Wethington (2000, p. 87), research findings that emphasise the positive aspects of midlife such as psychic equanimity, productive activity and good health, dispel notions of midlife as “a time of out-of the ordinary distress for either men or women”. The importance of the findings, according to Menon (2001, p. 66), is that they provide a “counter narrative” that dispels the myth of the “midlife crisis”. In a similar stance, Lachman (2004, p. 315) insists that the phase often described as a midlife crisis “is triggered by events such as job loss, financial problems or illness that can occur at any time in adulthood”. Furthermore, to reduce midlife merely to a period of crisis denies the complexity of his stage of life with its “juxtaposition of peaks and valleys across the social, psychological, and physical domains”. Concurring, Sigelman and Rider (2009, p. 9) stress that the stereotype of the midlife crisis is called into question by findings that report midlife to be a time of high satisfaction, successful adaptation and “peak levels of cognitive functioning”. Thus, it seems although some people might experience a difficult transition in midlife, it is not necessarily true for all individuals.

The midlife transition of women is also often depicted as a time of crisis (Banister, 2000, p. 747; Clark, & Schwiebert, 2001, p. 163). According to Ogle and Damhorst (2005, p. 2), the reason for assuming the midlife experience of women to be a crisis can be attributed to the tendency to use a “loss paradigm” to define midlife for

example, emphasising the “loss of reproductive capacity, the mothering role, sexuality, youth and appearance”. The focus on losses in midlife infers that middle-aged women experience more age-specific problems than other age groups. The modern myth of the midlife crisis might lie at the root of many women’s uneasiness about this period of life, and which might inhibit them to consider the possibilities for growth and development in midlife. Social workers should be aware of the way in which this stereotype might influence women’s perception of midlife. Informed by the research findings about midlife, social workers should caution women to avoid this negative conceptualisation of midlife, and rather encourage them to embrace it as a time for renewal and regeneration.

A key feature of midlife is aptly captured by Degges-White and Myers’ (2006b, p. 67) description of midlife as a “period of psychological awakening and significant inner development”. This inner development, in the words of Sheehy (1976, p. 21), is characterised by “shifts in the bedrock”, referring to an awareness of psychological discomfort that calls for change. Endorsing the vital role of inner development in midlife, Apter (1995, p. 201) emphasises that the changes that have been “noticed over the years of midlife women is a matter of psyche, not biology”. This observation by Apter (1995, p. 201) not only dismisses the cultural stereotypes that equate midlife women with menopause, but also supports the notion of women’s midlife development as multidimensional, redirecting the focus to the importance and impact of psychological changes in the midlife development of women.

The changes in midlife provoke *introspection*, initiating a process of self-reflection, during which the individual assesses his or her life (Morris, 1979, p. 123; Wagenseller, 1998, p. 267; Marston, 2002, p. 18; Ogle, & Damhorst, 2005, p. 2; Degges-White, & Myers, 2006b, p. 69; Wiggs, 2010, p. 222). According to Apter (1995, p. 14), the greater degree of reflection in midlife, often described as a turn inwards, might be the reason why women’s midlife development often appears muted. Also describing midlife as a time of introspection, Lewchanin and Zubrod (2001, p. 193) emphasise that individuals “move inside”, and that this process entails a life review, which is likely to result in “increased individuation and more internally directed choices in the second half of life”. This is reaffirmed by Sewell (2004, p. 2), who declares that midlife is a time that women often come to a deeper sense of self. The notion of midlife as a time of self-reflection for women is supported by findings

from studies by Arnold (2005, p. 639), who report “a psychological turning to reflection”, and Degges-White and Myers (2006a, p. 147), who attest that the majority of women in their study reported that they indeed “noticed a marked increase in introspection”. Hence, midlife development, amongst others, include a shift from an outer focus to an inner focus, fundamental to endeavours for *individuation*, a *change in time perception* and *the reassessment of personal values*.

Reflecting on their lives, many midlife women realise that their sense of identity no longer holds true, initiating the urge towards individuation (Wagenseller, 1998, p. 265). Expanding on Wagenseller’s (1998, p. 265) observation, Arnold (2005, p. 646) asserts that it is through serious reflection that women are able to expand their sense of self. In a similar stance, Ogle and Damhorst (2005, p. 2), and Degges-White and Myers (2006b, p. 69) stress that a precondition for midlife women’s growth is intensified self-evaluation and self-reflection. It is also a prerequisite for the move towards greater *individuation* (a better-defined sense of self). During the individuation process, women uncover beliefs about themselves and their lives that they can no longer subscribe to, as illustrated by Apter’s (1995, p. 27) observation that, by reflecting on their lives, many midlife women discover that they have been guided by false ideals, for example, the male ideal of a career person, or the ideal of super woman. In a similar stance, Lewchanin and Zubrod (2001, p. 195) claim that midlife is the time when individuals discover which parts of themselves have been neglected, repressed or not given a voice, citing the example of a woman who lamented that she had never pursued further education when she had the opportunity. Discoveries such as these motivate an inner-reorientation, which is needed to establish a new self-understanding and a meaningful personal identity.

The focus on individuation in midlife is often the time when many women “awaken” to the realisation that they do not really know themselves as well as they have thought, launching a process of intense re-evaluation (Marston, 2002, p. 147). The quest for individuation impels women to ask questions such as “Who am I really?”, “What do I believe in?”, “What do I want out of life?” and “What are my needs?” Pondering these questions, midlife women may discover that they are disconnected from their essential selves; that “there is a gap between their inner reality and the self they present to the world”, for example, that they are motivated by pleasing others or proving themselves to others (Marston, 2002, p. 2, 4). Analysing the role of

individuation, Marston (2002, p. 9) concludes that intense questioning and self-examination is essential if women are to navigate this passage of life successfully. This view is supported by Arnold (2005, p. 635), who affirms individuation as a central task for midlife women. The results of Arnold's (2005, p. 616) study of midlife women report that all participants sought "a clearer understanding and knowledge of themselves", a deliberate search for their "true path", and a "need to redefine in a personally meaningful way their place in the world they inhabit". To realise this goal required midlife women to "develop an inner wisdom about matters of importance to them" and to listen to their own needs. It seems that a vital component for growth in midlife is a woman's ability to uncover her authentic self and, through the process of individuation, to increasingly experience that her inner reality (thoughts, emotions) are aligned with her behaviour (how she presents herself to the world). Thus, social workers who endeavour to enhance the psychosocial functioning of midlife women should foster and affirm inner reflection, and with the client identify those spiritual strengths that might promote self-reflection.

The gains for women when they successfully renegotiate their identity and develop an authentic and well-defined sense of self include gaining self-confidence, being more self-assertive, experiencing an increase in perceived strength, interpersonal power and confidence. Women are often more energetic, free themselves from the pressure of external images and expectations, and have new skills for achieving and creating, the second half of life on their own terms (Apter, 1995, p. 77, 201, 316). Further gains for midlife women are the "development of their own voice", expressing their feelings more freely, becoming more independent, confidence, decisiveness, less self-critical, and increasing their sense of comfort and stability (Degges-White, 2001, p. 8). Identity development in midlife women also positively correlates with self-esteem and life-satisfaction (Stewart, Ostrove, & Helson, 2001, p. 24). Discussing the findings of her study, Arnold (2005, p. 630) notes that participants report being more authentic in midlife. This is the result of a "distinct psychological transformational paradigm shift" overturning previous definitions of the self, allowing participants to embrace an expanded sense of self. As a result, for these women, midlife is a time when they are able to experience the freedom to be who they really are, acknowledging their strengths as well as their shortcomings. This change in attitude towards themselves engenders a sense of empowerment and a sense of

peace. Another benefit of a stronger sense of self is what one participant describes as “stepping out of the mould”, referring to the move to a sense of self that is “unfettered by previous ‘*shoulds*’”. Midlife women no longer feel bound by roles and rules structured around the needs of others, describing themselves as their “own boundary keepers and rule makers”. A well-defined sense of self promotes the ability to “let go” of material possessions, previous beliefs and understandings, such as unrealistic expectations about the self, and to shed masks that are not consistent with the inner self-truths. Women in the study testified to an inner balance characterised by contentment, calmness, fulfilment and a sense of peacefulness. The women in Arnold’s study (2005, p. 641) describe one of the gains of individuation as a renewed zest for life and “an awareness of increased possibilities for creative self-expression.” Concurring with Arnold’s (2005, p. 641) findings, Moses (2006, p. 8) affirms that midlife women have a strong sense of who they are (both strengths and weaknesses), are internally driven, focused on what they really want, without yielding to pressure to play out scripts of what they *should* do, how they *should* behave, or what they *should* be happy with. The evidence of these studies confirms that the process of individuation in midlife promotes growth and development. It nullifies outdated conceptualisations of midlife as a time of inevitable loss and stagnation for women. Informed by the positive results of research on midlife growth, social workers should motivate women to remain committed to growth and to investigate and exploit all the possibilities, including the utilisation of spiritual strengths to promote individuation.

In the process of life assessment and individuation, women in midlife often re-evaluate their personal values. The insights that arise from this process of self-examination inspire women to retain the values that are aligned with the newly defined authentic self, and discard those that have no personal meaning for them. The newly discovered, personally meaningful values motivate midlife women to re-assess the goals they pursue, as these goals might no longer be relevant (Apter, 1995, p. 34). A study by Howell and Beth reports (2002, p. 190) that the wellness of midlife women is promoted when there is an alignment between their unique values, their activities, circumstances and behaviour. Thus, with their values as guiding construct, midlife women should be encouraged to fashion goals that have personal significance for them.

The realisation that midlife is the midpoint of life is often accompanied by a sense of limited time, confronting women with the decision of how they want to live the rest of their lives (Morris, 1979, p. 123; Apter, 1995, p. 14). In similar vein, Lewhanin and Zubrod (2001, p. 193) also postulate that midlife is often the time when individuals are confronted with choices regarding how they want to spend the time they have left to live. The study by Arnold (2005, p. 645), which has investigated the midlife experiences of women, notes that virtually all the participants have indicated that midlife kindled an awareness of the finiteness of life “and the need to live it wisely and meaningfully”. Midlife became a special time “to be carefully cultivated”; moreover, “it offered a context in which developmental growth needed to take place” (Arnold, 2005, p. 645). For the women in this study the *change in time perspective* served as inspiration to reflect on how they wanted to live their lives. Some women expressed the desire to live their lives more deeply, focus on inner development, to be more selective in their choices, focus on what they really wanted to do, and where they wanted to spend their energy. According to Freund and Ritter (2009, p. 584, 589), the change in time perspective, of perceiving life from ‘time since birth’ to ‘time left to live’, represents a future time perspective that might encourage women to redirect or correct their personal developmental path. Women who embrace the negative stereotype of midlife as a time of loss and inevitable degeneration might find it difficult to visualise the time left to live, as an opportunity to develop, grow or even flourish. Thus, depending on her interpretation of midlife, a woman might choose a developmental trajectory that will lead either to resignation and stagnation **or** to renewal and growth. In contrast to previous cohorts, the current cohort of midlife women increasingly transcends and overturns obsolete stereotypes; thus, the more accepted norm for midlife women is that of powerful renewal and personal growth. The effect of renewal and personal growth in midlife is underscored by descriptions of this period of life as a “prime time” of “unexpected pleasure” and for many women the “best time” of their lives (Hunter et al., 2002, p. 244). In a similar stance, Arnold, (2005, p. 649) contends that midlife women are beginning to rewrite the script for midlife as they engage with life in a personally meaningful way; as they become all they can be. Social workers should encourage women to recognise the change in time perspective as an opportunity to reorient their lives in a way that is significant to them, and to employ those spiritual strengths that can assist with this transformation.



#### **4.3.2.3 The social domain**

In the course of their lives, women occupy many social roles, including those of spouse, mother, friend and employee; thus, at the advent of midlife most women occupy multiple roles. There are contradictory views on the effect of multiple role involvement on the wellbeing of midlife women, with some theorists arguing that wellbeing is impaired by role overload (source of tension), while the opposite opinion suggests that women might benefit from multiple role involvement (source of fulfilment) (Lippert 1997, p. 18). Reviewing the impact of the multiple roles a woman holds on her psychological wellbeing, Lippert (1997, p. 18) maintains that it is not only quantity, but also the quality of the roles that has an impact a woman's wellbeing. Various factors such as biological (health), social (status level achieved at work) and psychological (self-esteem, effective functioning) influence a woman's experience of a particular role. Concurring, Reid and Hardy (1999, p. S329) state that it is women's perception of the *quality* of their various roles that influence their sense of psychological wellbeing. Thus, the effect on midlife women's wellbeing is not only determined by the multiple roles she holds, but also by the quality of those roles.

At midlife, women seek to *integrate* the multiple roles they hold in a meaningful way, and the extent to which they succeed in doing this will influence their experience of their role occupancy (Clark, & Schwiebert, 2001, p. 163). In a similar stance, Lachman (2004, p. 307) asserts that a woman's midlife experiences are affected by the extent to which she succeeds in *balancing* the multiple roles and resolve the conflict that arises because of this. The roles women hold in midlife are distinctive and, depending on their life circumstances, more roles might be added, such as that of caregiver of elderly members of the family. Consequently, midlife women are often referred to as the *sandwich generation* as they not only take responsibility for younger members of the family, but also for older members such as parents (McFadden, & Rawson Swan, 2012, p. 313). It seems midlife women's experience of the roles they undertake in midlife is influenced by multiple factors. To promote wellbeing in midlife, women might be encouraged to investigate if and how spiritual strengths might assist them in their efforts to integrate and balance the various roles they hold.

Understanding midlife women's experiences of role occupancy requires consideration of those factors in society that shape their experiences. One such factor, labelled "*social clock*", might influence the way in which women experience social roles. "*Social clock*" refers to norms about age-appropriate behaviour that reflect societies' beliefs about the right age for life changes, such as undertaking the role of wife or mother (Newton, & Stewart, 2010, p. 76). Not only does society endorse culturally legitimated benchmarks about the timing of life-events, but individuals too, have an inner "*social clock*" that allow them to assess whether a life course event occurs according to societies' prescriptive timeline. The "*social clock*" also influences individuals' decisions to begin (for example, childbirth) or end a particular enterprise (for example, to retire) (Degges-White, & Myers, 2006a, p. 135). When life-events are perceived as being "off time" (non-normative times), it might be experienced as stressful. There might even be societal sanctions (e.g. shunning, exclusion from groups, less support) against those who transgress these age norms (Apter, 1995, p. 303; Degges-White, & Myers, 2006a, p. 135). It is Degges-White and Myers' (2006a, p. 135) belief that women seem to be "more proscriptively constrained" than men regarding the appropriate age norms for life-events; moreover, they are at greater risk for societal sanctions when culturally 'off-time' choices and transitions occur. As a result of more stringent societal expectations regarding the timing and sequencing of women's life-events they might experience more distress when life-events and transitions are not aligned with cultural expectations.

Social clock projects are different during different historical periods (Newton, & Stewart, 2010, p. 76). The difference is illustrated by the current cohort of midlife women. As with other cultural stereotypes such as those regarding menopause, ageing and the midlife crisis, midlife women are now challenging the social clock stereotypes. The reason for questioning these stereotypes is that "the orderly and the rhythmic course of women's lives that was taken for granted in previous generations have fragmented" (Apter, 1999, p. 108). This view is supported by Degges-White and Myers (2006a, p. 135), who note that life-events now commonly experienced by women in midlife, such as first-time childbirth, or beginning a college education have traditionally been associated with younger women. The blueprint for the timing of life-events (social clock projects) of previous generations can no longer

serve as a guideline for midlife transitions. Consequently, women might experience psychological stress as they strive to develop an identity representative of their own experiences, and fight against these cultural stereotypes and the ambiguity as how to prepare best for the midlife passage (Degges-White, & Myers, 2006a, p. 135). When working with midlife women, social workers must be informed about the possible discrepancy between cultural expectations regarding social-clock projects and women's own expectations about their life course. When relevant, clients should be supported in their endeavours to move beyond the prescriptive social-clock projects set aside for midlife women.

The empty-nest syndrome is one of the most enduring myths about midlife women. It perpetuates the belief that when the last child leaves home, a woman because of the loss of the mothering role, inevitably experiences negative consequences such as depression (Lippert, 1997, p. 18; Hunter et al., 2002, p. 33). However, research does not support the empty-nest syndrome as a common occurrence for most midlife women (Lippert, 1997, p. 8; Hunter et al., 2002, p. 33; Boyd, & Bee, 2006, p. 439). The change in the cultural norms that delineate women's roles is cited as one of the main reasons why women do not experience the empty-nest syndrome. This change was brought about by the unprecedented number of women who joined the paid workforce in the twentieth century. This affected the way in which women experienced the post-parental period. Women who continue to work during child rearing invest in other roles and have higher expectations regarding their careers and professional advancement. This lessens the impact of the last child leaving home (Lippert, 1997, p. 18). Reviewing the impact of women joining the labour force, Clark and Schwiebert (2001, p. 162) conclude, proved "a powerful challenge to the traditionally circumscribed roles allotted to women". Concurring, Boyd and Bee (2006, p. 439) state that women in the labour force are more likely to experience the post-parental period as positive and that the few women who do experience distress when the last child is launched, are the ones whose "sense of self identity has been heavily focused on the role of mother". Thus, as working women has become the norm, rather than the exception, the current cohort of midlife women mostly succeed in finding a greater balance between maternal and other roles. When children are launched, they focus on other roles. Moreover, it seems the empty nest does not upset most women's lives; on the contrary, more often the gains of the period

outweigh the losses (Hunter et al., 2002, p. 34; McFadden, & Rawson Swan, 2012, p. 319). It seems the empty-nest syndrome is the exception rather than the rule for most midlife women.

Noticeable shifts occur in relationships at midlife. Explaining these shifts, Apter (1995, p. 14) postulates that it might be ascribed to a turn from a *role personality* (in which midlife women speak of themselves as mothers, daughters, partners and colleagues), to a *subjectively centred personality* (in which midlife women more clearly articulate how they feel, and how things seem to them). Thus, the balance of identity changes from an identity based on an objective description of roles to an identity defined by self-knowledge. In similar vein, Howell (2001, p. 61) observes that a well-defined sense of self influences the way in which midlife women view some of the relationships in their lives, for example, as they reorient their lives they choose to have fewer, but relationships that are more meaningful. For some midlife women there is also the realisation that friends, spouses and children will not bring fulfilment; thus, although relationships are of particular importance to women, they also simultaneously pursue the fullest development of themselves (Howell, 2001, p. 61, Marston, 2002, p. 136). Although the nature of relationships might change, such as a woman's relationships with her children as they become increasingly independent, Arnold (2005, p. 642) asserts that having strong relationships is still important to midlife women. This is particularly true of their friendships with female friends, which midlife women consider an invaluable source of support. A noticeable change in attitude towards relationships in their lives was reported by the participants in Arnold's (2005, p. 642) study, articulated as the need to reconnect with significant people "in a deeper, authentic and proactive way". According to these participants, it is their new sense of self (identity) that sets the parameters for the renegotiation of intimate relationships and the deepening of these relationships. Women in midlife are actively engaged in redefining the nature and the quality of their relationships, in ways that resonate with what they regard as their authentic self. Spiritual strengths, such as a positive relationship with a Higher Power or core spiritual beliefs might serve as guiding principle when renegotiating relationships.

#### ***4.3.2.4 The spiritual domain***

Appraising the literature on women's development, Howell (2001, p. 51), observes that there are substantial shifts in the psychosocial paradigms used to understand midlife women's development. One of the new psychosocial paradigms for understanding midlife women's development is a focus on spirituality. The focus on spirituality resonates with this study's argument that a more complete understanding of the development of midlife women requires attention to the spiritual domain.

There is a significant increase in interest in spirituality in midlife, and for some women the midlife process includes what Howell (2001, p. 52) calls "a powerful spiritual awakening". The turn to spirituality appears to be a general tendency for middle-aged and older people, but this overall trend is particularly true for women (Wink, & Dillon, 2002, p. 91/92; King et al., 2005, p. 69; Dalby, 2006, p. 4). The greater extent of women's interest in spirituality than those of men is a gender-related pattern that is not restricted to midlife, but is maintained across the developmental span (Peterson, & Seligman, 2004, p. 613). It seems that for many women spirituality plays an important role throughout their lives. As a result, women, according to King et al. (2005, p. 24), might also be more likely to utilise spiritual resources. This observation is endorsed by participants in Arnold's (2005, p. 643) study who testify that spirituality is an important resource in midlife. Thus, as spirituality seems to be an area of particular interest to many midlife women, the successful negotiation of the midlife transition might require a deeper exploration of their spirituality and spiritual strengths.

One of the reasons for the greater interest in spirituality in midlife is that profound re-evaluation and self-reflection in midlife navigate many adults from an outer focus on materialistic and extroverted goals to an increasingly inner focus on spiritual goals and pursuits (Van Niekerk, 1996, p. 95; Marston, 2002, p. 9; Wink & Dillon, 2002, p. 80; Dalby, 2006, p. 4). The inner focus on spirituality in midlife is articulated in various ways, such as "a call to the inner life" (Brewi, & Brennan, 1999, p. 13), an adaption to "the inner reality" (Grün, 2006, p. 52) and a call "to explore our inner world" Marston (2002, p. 196). Self-reflection that focuses on the inner spiritual reality is part of an inborn spiritual developmental pattern that naturally unfolds in midlife. According to Jungian therapists Brewi and Brennan (2004, p. 13,14), the Higher Self

(transpersonal psyche) is in existence since birth, but as the first half of life is governed by an outer focus, people might be ignorant of this aspect of themselves. In midlife when the focus turns inwards, the psyche moves to a new phase of development, namely to come to terms with the spiritual instinct and to uncover the true Self (the image of God within the self). The individual is described as an “embodied spirit with [a] built-in psychic pattern” and, dictated by this pattern, the person in midlife experiences the urge to explore his or her deeper nature (Brewi, & Brennan, 2004, p. 13, 14). This concurs with Jung’s view, that the focus on spirituality in midlife is a natural part of the process of maturation; therefore, an innate inner process vital to midlife development (Becker, 2006, p. 89; Dalby, 2006, p. 4). Thus, spirituality as an essential aspect of human nature represents the expression of a natural human instinct. Humans are born with this potential and a need to experience *numinosum* (presence of divinity or sacred). Failure to experience numinosum leads to failure to achieve individuation and the fullness of human life, as it is spirituality that makes us fully human (Brewi, & Brennan, 2004, p. 62, Fontana, 2008, p. 96). For this reason, Jung encouraged his patients to broaden their horizons beyond purely materialistic considerations in midlife (Van Niekerk, 1996, p. 95; Wink, & Dillon, 2002, p. 80; Fontana, 2008, p. 98). Theorists Wink and Dillon (2002, p. 80) propose that adults at midlife are more adept at shifting their perspective to a transcendent view of life, reasoning that adults, having experienced the ambiguity and relativity of life, can “go beyond the linear, strictly logical models, of apprehending reality”. This ability allows for logic and reason in making judgements, but it also embraces the paradoxes and includes “a greater acceptance of the mysterious dimension of life” (Sherburne, 2008, p. 105). The impact of a move from beyond a mere materialistic perspective to a transcendent perspective, one that embraces spirituality, is illustrated in the vignette below:

#### **Vignette**

Spirituality does not alter the reality of my 56 years. It does not change any of the challenges that lie before me. It does reveal grace present in each day to carry me through. Spirituality inspires a redefinition of my priorities, a distillation of what is really important. It inspires me to move away from society’s measures of self-worth: possessions, accomplishments, accolades and influence. It leads me toward new self-awareness, new goals, and new freedom to make choices based on personal criteria. Spirituality leads me to apply the brakes on this fast forward, me-first/you-last, hell-bent roadster and take a rest beside still waters.

The process of individuation, for many midlife women, is incomplete without the integration of the *spiritual self*. There are varied descriptions for the spiritual self, for example, the inner Self, Higher Self, the deeper nature, authentic self, deepest core, fundamental nature and the soul (Brewi, & Brennan, 1999, p. 13; Marston, 2002, p. 196; Miller, & Thoreson, 2003, p. 28; Pargament, 2007, p. 69; Canda, & Furman, 2010, p. 59). For some midlife women, the sense that there “must be something more” is the catalyst for the spiritual quest to reconnect to the deeper nature (soul) (Marston, 2002, p. 196). According to Arnold (2005, p. 634), “the quest for the soul”, allows a woman to integrate new and old understandings of herself into a synthesised whole. In a study by Geertsema and Cummings (2001:32) on midlife transition and women’s spirituality, participants indicated that the spiritual journey in midlife includes becoming the person one is created to be (authentic self). For the women in this study, a reconnection with the self entails a relationship with the inner self that results in a greater acceptance of the self, and discarding values that no longer serve them. The study of Howell (2001, p. 53) on spirituality and midlife women’s development reports that *all* participants indicated that the search for the personal essence was important to them. The self-awareness that resulted from a discovery of the essential self “enabled them to adjust their lives” and to respond more positively to midlife changes. For many midlife women, the discovery and relationship with the authentic self is concomitant with a relationship with a Higher Power (Mattis, 2000, p. 101). According to Marston (2002, p. 199), women in midlife experience a longing for greater depth in their lives, that is related to a desire to connect to something larger, something infinite, a “deeper guiding force in their lives”. The importance of a relationship to a Higher Power is confirmed by participants in the study of Geertsema and Cummings (2001, p. 34), who describe their relationship with God as a guiding principle in their lives, and that this relationship is a vital element for their spiritual wellbeing. Reviewing the findings of their study, Geertsema and Cummings (2001, p. 33) conclude that their study highlights the importance of spirituality in the midlife transition of women. This finding is supported by King et al. (2005, p. 73), who emphasise that spirituality is a valuable resource for midlife women as “[t]he strength that comes from personal religious and spiritual beliefs is unique”. The observation of King et al. (2005, p. 73) is mirrored in

the findings in the study of Arnold (2005, p. 643) where more than half of the participants indicated that they had a deeper and more meaningful relationship with God, and that this relationship represented an anchor that “gives direction and meaning to their lives”. It seems that, integrating the essential self in the identity construct and a relationship with a Higher Power (the sacred) engenders spiritual strengths that for many midlife women promote their sense of wellbeing.

A perspective transformation, such as the critical evaluation of the assumptions that underpin meaning structures is a central process in adult development (Ogle, & Damhorst, 2005, p. 2). Hence, a recurring theme in the spiritual quest of midlife women is the search for the deeper meaning of life (Sheehy, 1997, p. 156; Marston, 2002, p. 9; King, et al. 2005, p. 69). For many women, a greater awareness in midlife of their own mortality lends urgency to the search for ultimate meaning (Wink, & Dillon, 2002, p. 91). Women ask questions such as “Why am I here?”, “What is the meaning of my life?”, “What is my purpose?”, “Who am I really” and “Where do I stand in the greater scheme of things?” (King et al., 2005, p. 69; Marston, 2002, p. 198). For some women the search for meaning culminates in a reconnection and relationship with the Sacred (Marston, 2002, p. 202). It seems spirituality might offer an explanation to the fundamental meaning of life, which might help women to identify the purpose of the second half of their lives. It is the view of this study that, apart from the search for ultimate meaning as a normative developmental task in midlife, factors in the cultural context, for example, secularisation also contributes to the need to find ultimate meaning.

Spiritual growth in midlife yields many benefits, for example, Wink and Dillon (2002, p. 81) postulate that spirituality becomes less personal and moralistic in midlife, which promotes “an increased sense of unity and personal transcendence and a greater comfort with metaphor and subjectivity”. According to Sherburne (2008, p. 103), people in midlife are less self-occupied and therefore more inclined to reflect on the meaning of life and to accept the mysteries of life, which help them to face the challenges of midlife more successfully. In similar vein, Day (2010, p. 215) points out that higher-order spiritual development, such as the development of meaning making, moral judgement and complex problem-solving skills reinforces and enhances adult development. For Day (2010, p. 216), the overwhelming evidence is that spiritual engagement in midlife promotes psychological health. To corroborate



this statement, Day (2010, p. 216) cites studies across various cultures, which confirm that spiritual involvement is associated with self-esteem, personal efficacy, successful coping in adulthood and a sense physical and mental wellbeing. In midlife, spiritual development forms an inherent part of the life transition for women; moreover, successful negotiation of this process enhances adaptability and a sense of wellbeing in midlife. Exploring spirituality as a normative developmental pattern in midlife for many women results in spiritual growth, the recognition of spirituality as a source of strength and the development of spiritual strengths.

## **4.4 CONCLUSION**

The study of midlife as developmental phase is a recent expansion in the field of human development, and the distinct study of the midlife development of women is an even younger field of study. Women's midlife developmental trajectories are continually becoming more diverse, without consensus as to how the midlife transition unfolds and how to negotiate successful adaptation. Hence, the midlife development of women is still uncharted territory in many ways. The shortcomings in the information on women's midlife development lend urgency to the search for new theories that do justice to women's midlife experiences. This study supports the appeal for gender-specific inquiry into the midlife transition of women.

Although this study uses chronological age as marker for midlife, namely 40 as the modal entry year and 60 as the modal exit year, it recognises that the age parameters for midlife are ambiguous. Consequently, although the linear definition of midlife is petitioned for this study, it recognises the limitations of the linear definition, and is cognisant of the variation in the needs, developmental tasks and contexts of midlife women.

The life-span developmental perspective orients the inquiry into the midlife development of women, as this new paradigm conceives development as multifaceted and multidirectional, intimating that developmental trajectories unfold across various life domains. It also emphasises the importance of multiple cultural influences on developmental patterns. For the purposes of this study, a holistic model was designed to explore the multidirectional and multifaceted nature of women's midlife transition across the physical, psychological, social and spiritual

domains. This model not only depicts the interconnectedness between the various life domains, but also the reciprocal interplay between the life domains and the cultural and societal context. Guided by the holistic model, the impact of factors in society such as negative stereotypes (the midlife crisis, menopause, ageing women) and cultural expectations (social clock) on the experience of midlife is analysed. It also reviews the major developmental trends, age-associated challenges, gains and losses, and some of the normative developmental tasks across the four life domains. By reviewing the midlife transition of women, the many challenges and opportunities for growth in this phase of life are revealed, thus reinforcing the assumption of this study that spiritual strengths (in combination with other resources) can be utilised, to promote growth and development in midlife.

# CHAPTER 5:

## A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

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### *Employing action research as research design*

Social work research is vigorous and innovative, constantly challenging its own boundaries, breaking new ground in its endeavour to remain relevant in its service delivery. This is aptly portrayed in Padgett's (2008, p.22) observation that, regardless of methodology, social work research is change oriented and "unapologetically committed to improving peoples' lives by contributing to more effective and humane practices and policies". Within the broader landscape of social work research, this inquiry forms part of the profession's commitment to explore novel ways to enhance the wellbeing of those we serve. As such, this study seeks to emphasise human agency, particularly spiritual strengths, as a way to promote wellbeing. To gain an understanding of spiritual strengths requires an insider perspective designating this study as a qualitative inquiry.

The nature of the research question calls for a stance on ontology and epistemology that would do justice to spirituality as lived experience. Consequently, this study adopts a phenomenological orientation to guide the research process, as its assumptions on ontology and epistemology are empathetic to the research goal. Hence, a research framework is required that would fit within the parameters set by the ontological and epistemological dictates. This chapter argues that the constructivist/interpretive approach as theoretical perspective; action research as research design; and thematic analysis as method of data analysis provide such a framework, inasmuch as it not only embraces a phenomenological stance on ontology and epistemology, but also complies with the stipulations for sound social work research practices.

### **5.1 The practice of qualitative research in social work**

Social work, like other social sciences, values diversity in research approaches thus endorsing both quantitative and qualitative research paradigms (Lietz, & Zayas,

2010, p. 190; Thyer, 2012, p. 123). The myth that quantitative research methods are “epistemologically privileged” has prevailed for decades in social work. However, Thyer (2012, p. 123) insists that, “[m]any important areas of social work research [are] best addressed using qualitative methods”. For example, the social work researcher seeking an in-depth understanding of clients’ lives by exploring their subjective experiences would elect to do qualitative research, rather than quantitative research, which is more interested in the objective aspects of clients’ lives (Padgett, 2008, p. 2; Lietz, & Zayas, 2010, p. 190; Thyer, 2012, p. 123).

### **5.1.1 Qualitative research**

A fundamental assumption underpinning qualitative research is the premise that reality is socially constructed (Denzin, & Lincoln, 2005, p. 10). Social reality is the result of a constant process of subjective construction, the implication being that the life-world is made relevant through subjective meanings. As social reality is communicative by nature, it permits “the reconstruction of constructions of reality to become the starting point of research” (Flick, Von Kardoff, & Steinke, 2007, p. 7). Drawing on this assumption an internal design is fashioned which supports the principle of openness in research and takes account of the subjective and social constructions of participants’ lived experience. This allows for an in-depth description of people’s life-worlds from their point of view (Flick et al., 2007, p. 5). Summarising the goal of qualitative approaches as “understanding the subjective meanings that individuals give to their social worlds”, Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011, p. 32) affirm that it is the philosophical assumptions underpinning qualitative approaches that commissions a different set of goals compared to that of a quantitative approach. Consequently, the relevance of qualitative research is to be found in its contribution to an understanding and description of the meaning and experiential dimension of individuals’ lives and social worlds. Of interest to this study is midlife women’s subjective experience of midlife, spirituality and spiritual strengths.

### **5.1.2 The phenomenological underpinnings of qualitative research**

The assumptions undergirding qualitative research disclose a phenomenological stance regarding ontology and epistemology as it pertains to human existence. This

is attested to by scholars such as Merriam (2002, p. 7), who stresses that phenomenology is the meta-theoretical perspective underpins the conceptual roots of all qualitative research. Fouché and Delport (2003, p. 18) remark that the qualitative approach has its “epistemological roots in phenomenology”; and McLeod (2011, p. 26) proclaims all qualitative research to be informed “to a greater or lesser extent, by phenomenological principles”. It seems the phenomenological grounding of qualitative research ensures a unique position from which research is conducted, fostering a particular way of asking questions and favouring particular research practices to answer these questions. Thus, phenomenology presents a philosophical argument, which justifies this style of research and defends qualitative research methods and goals. There is congruence between the philosophical grounding of this research project and that of qualitative research. Hence, it is this study’s contention that qualitative research makes provision for a virtuous exploration of spiritual strengths as lived experience, as it allows for questions such as:

- “What are midlife women’s own perspective of their spiritual strengths?”;
- “What is the essence of the experience of their spiritual strengths?”; and
- “What meaning do midlife women ascribe to their experience of spiritual strengths?”

Accordingly, it is this study’s view that the qualitative research paradigm is best suited to attend to the aims of this research project.

## **5.2 THE THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE DIRECTING THIS STUDY**

The qualitative research paradigm encompasses a variety of theoretical perspectives, such as post-positivist, feminist, critical, constructivist and interpretive. These perspectives or methodological approaches represent different accounts of social reality; therefore, each approach sets “its own criteria for conducting and evaluating research” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 1). According to Ponterotto (2005, p. 1), it is imperative for researchers to clearly state the theoretical perspective adopted for the reported study, as it explains the context for the inquiry, informing both the conduct of the researcher and the benchmarks for the empirical programme (Fossey,

Harvey, Mcdermott, & Davidson, 2002, p. 718; De Vos, & Schulze, 2011, p. 5). Concurring, Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011, p. 6) also stress that understanding the theoretical perspective is critical, as it serves as a “bridge” that brings a study’s philosophical stance on ontology, epistemology and the research methods together. Ambiguity about the theoretical perspective would inhibit the integration of the philosophical standpoint and the research methods, compromising the integrity of the research process. Therefore, one of the aims of this chapter is to elucidate the synthesis between the theoretical perspective (constructivist/interpretive) of this study and the practice principles from action research and the research methods it employs.

### **5.2.1 The constructivist/interpretive approach**

As an ideological perspective, the constructivist/interpretive approach clarifies the research position of this study and serves as blueprint for “theoretically informed choices at every stage of the research process” (Hesse-Biber, & Leavy, 2011, p. 36). The primary focus of this approach can be summarised as understanding the “complex world of lived experience from the view of those who lived it” (Racher, & Robinson, 2002, p. 469). Consequently, Ponterotto (2005, p. 129) maintains that the constructivist-interpretive paradigm is “the primary foundation and anchor for qualitative research”.

The ontological stance underpinning the constructivist/interpretive approach is “that reality is complex, holistic and context dependent” (Racher, & Robinson, 2002, p. 470). Expanding on this view, Ponterotto (2005, p. 130) emphasises that the constructivist/interpretive approach recognises that there is not a single true reality but rather “multiple constructed realities”. Furthermore, reality is subjective “and influenced by the context of the situation, namely the individual’s experience and perceptions, and the social environment”. Ontologically, reality might be shared among individuals; however, the mental constructions of every individual are experientially based and therefore unique by nature (Racher, & Robinson, 2002, p. 469). Hence, the constructivism/interpretive paradigm adopts a *relativist ontology* (Racher, & Robinson, 2002, p. 469; Ponterotto, 2005, p. 130; Ponterotto, & Grieger, 2007, p. 410). This stance on ontology resonates with the meta-theoretical

perspective informing this study, which also emphasises that context is important when attempting to understand the nature of reality as experienced by the individual. Applied to this study it means not only recognition that factors in the social context might shape spiritual experiences, but also that the experience of spirituality as a strength is subjectively constructed in the minds of midlife women, and are therefore distinctive for every woman. Hence, in accordance with the constructivist/interpretive perspective's stance on ontology this study concedes that although midlife women's experiences of spiritual strengths are varied, these multiple realities regarding spiritual strengths are equally valid.

The constructivism/interpretive approach assumes a *subjective epistemology*, which acknowledges that individuals are continually engaged in the process of making sense of their life-worlds. They "interpret, create, give meaning, define, justify and rationalise daily actions" (De Vos, & Schulze, 2011, p. 8). Given the stance that reality is experientially based and socially constructed, this approach maintains that there is an interactive link between the researcher and the participant. Therefore, constructions are elicited "and knowledge is created through interaction between and among investigator and respondents" (Racher, & Robinson, 2002, p. 469). In a similar stance, Ponterotto (2005, p. 131) reiterates that proponents of the constructivist/interpretive approach support a transactional and subjective stance postulating that "reality is socially constructed and, therefore, the dynamic interaction between the researcher and participant is central to capturing and describing the 'lived experience' of the participant" (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 131). The subjective epistemology advocated by the constructivism/interpretive approach, in contrast to that of a positivistic paradigm, allows for the exploration of spiritual strengths as subjective experience. Moreover, it recognises that knowledge about spiritual strengths can be obtained through interaction and dialogue.

Action research as research design is sympathetic to the constructivist/interpretive stance on epistemology and ontology, because it "is grounded in the phenomenology of everyday experience" (Reason, 2006, p. 189). The underlying principles of action research such as a participatory worldview, the democratic relationship between researcher and participant and the creation of a communicative space are aligned with the directives of the theoretical perspective to elicit subjective data. A further example of the synergy between the constructivist/interpretive approach and action

research is the constructivist/interpretive approach's insistence that multiple ways of knowing is required "to uncover the knowledge embedded in human experience" (Racher, & Robinson, 2002, p. 497), and action research's use of an extended epistemology to explore the lived experience (Reason, 2006, p. 189). Hence, action research adheres to a research format and methodologies for gathering and analysing data that are congruent with the constructivist/interpretive stance on ontology and epistemology and is therefore the empirical research model of choice.

### **5.3 RESEARCH DESIGN: ACTION RESEARCH**

Action research as an approach to research emerged around the end of World War II, emanating from the work of scholars in different academic disciplines (Reason, & Bradbury, 2006a, p. 3). These early pioneers challenged the conventional wisdom that in "order to be credible, research must be objective and value-free". They argued that knowledge is socially constructed; therefore, reality is subjectively experienced (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003, p. 11). Since the traditions from which action research evolved did not support the positivistic epistemology, "the family of practices called action research has inhabited the margins of academia for many years" (Reason, 2006, p. 188). However, this situation is changing; in the last two decades action research has gained greater prominence as a movement that seeks "new epistemologies of practice" (Reason, & Bradbury, 2006a, p. 3). Action research has grown concurrently with the emergence of the constructionist view of knowledge, and "has become a major alternative to positivist conceptions and practices of research" (Gergen, & Gergen, 2009, p. 15). The impetus for the regeneration of action research is also the result of social scientists revisiting the question of the real purpose of social research and the consequent emphasis on research that addresses practical purposes (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003, p. 22; Reason, 2006, p. 188). The foundational principles that gave impetus to the establishment of action research endow it with distinctive characteristics:



### 5.3.1 Characteristics of action research

Recognising that the practice of action research is hugely varied, Reason and Bradbury (2009a, p. 4) nevertheless assert that the following five interrelated characteristics are broadly shared in all action research approaches:



Adapted from: Reason and Bradbury (2009a, p. 5)

**Figure 7: Characteristics of action research**

- **Human flourishing**

Faithful to the vision of the early pioneers, the focus in action research is the generation of practical knowledge that will improve life skills, the capacity for self-determination, personal growth and identification of personal strengths (Boog 2003, p. 426, 432). Thus, all action research endeavours are concerned with the creation of practical knowledge that will promote the flourishing of individuals, groups and the wider community.

This dimension of action research resonates with calls in social work to do “good” social work research. Elucidating what is meant with “good”, Peled (2010, p. 22) explains that it denotes “promotion of self-determination, promotion of social justice and working for the interests of others”. According to Peled (2010, p. 22), there is a

synergy between the goal in social work to do “good” social work research and the goal in action research to generate practical knowledge that will contribute to “positive social change and to the wellbeing of individuals, families and communities”. Thus, the aim of action research to promote human flourishing addresses the call in social work for research that will improve people’s lives. Similar to the aims of action research and social work research in general, it is the aim of this study to delineate guidelines for a programme to develop spiritual strengths, to support midlife women’s midlife transition and in this way contribute to an enhanced sense of wellbeing.

- **Practical purposes**

A noted change in the landscape of social scientific research is the move from mere understanding of social phenomenon to a praxis level. According to Reason (2006, p. 188), it “has long been pointed out that the findings of traditional social sciences are of little or no use to members of organizations or practitioners”. Action research, through its focus on the practical purpose of research, aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice. In a similar stance, Stringer (2007, p. 12) asserts that in contrast to traditional research projects that are “complete when a report has been written”, an action research project, on the other hand, which “does not make a difference, in a specific way, for practitioners and/or their clients has failed to achieve its objective”. It seems action research is not only concerned with gaining an understanding of a question or problem, but to generate “practical knowledge that is useful to people in their everyday lives” (Reason, & Bradbury, 2009a, p. 4).

In social work too, there is an appeal to move beyond the description of subjective experiences to greater relevance of qualitative research for social work practice. For example, social work scholar Powell (2002, p. 21) points out that there is now “a widely held view that the primary purpose of any research is to promote the development and improvement of social work practice”. In a similar vein, Fern (2010, p. 158) reiterates that the focus of social work research should be to solve problems that are relevant to a particular situation, and which would bring about “improvement for those most affected by research issues”. According to Thyer (2012, p. 119), a failing of qualitative research projects in social work is that it does not take the “second step of action, of developing social remedies, after developing a greater

understanding of lived experience". There is a rapport between the aims of this study (delineating guidelines for a programme); the appeal in social work for research that is relevant to practice; and the aim of pursuing worthwhile practical purposes stipulated by action research.

Although action research pursues worthwhile practical purposes, McKay and Marshall (2001, p. 47) caution against the notion to view action research as "just another approach to problem-solving". Action research has the dual imperative of the improvement of practical problems as well as expanding scientific knowledge. It is also the view of Bradbury and Reason (2003, p. 156) that action researchers not only aim to develop practical solutions, but also to make a "conceptual contribution". Availing itself of the action research design would allow this study the dual outcome of addressing the research problem regarding the nature of the spiritual strengths of midlife women (generating knowledge), as well as delineating guidelines for a programme to develop the spiritual strengths of midlife women (practical outcome).

- **Knowledge in action**

In its quest for practical solutions to practical problems, action research supports the notion of "epistemology through practice" (Bradbury, & Reason, 2003, p. 158). Therefore, action research endorses an extended epistemology that is open to the phenomenology of lived experience, drawing on the stories people tell and testing "knowledge against evidence derived from practice" (Reason, 2006, p. 189). Through an extended epistemology, the action researcher is enabled to explore the lived experience and gain knowledge, which has the capacity "to make a positive difference to the world in which we live" (McLeod, 2011, p. 219). It is the premise of this study that the lived experience of spiritual strengths might yield knowledge that will inform the formulation of guidelines for a programme.

Discussing the changing nature of social work research, Powell (2002, p. 17) notes that one of the areas of concern is "knowledge claims in the development of social work theory and practice". Expanding on this observation, Powell (2005, p. 17) remarks that social workers in the United Kingdom examine the "different conceptions of knowledge and their claims to truth" and, although contentious, question the "role of the researcher as expert or privileged in the process of knowledge creation". Thus, in contrast to the more traditional research

methodologies, a research process is advocated in which the researcher as facilitator and participants share expertise in the “joint process of knowledge construction”. Implicit in Powell’s (2002, p. 25) discussion on knowledge claims is the recognition in social work of clients’ lived experience as a source of knowledge. Apparently, there are social work scholars who acknowledge that the traditional approach to knowledge creation in research is limited. Moreover, they validate a subjective epistemology as a credible source of knowledge. This is of particular interest to this study, as the inquiry into spirituality and spiritual strengths as lived experience does not yield to a more traditional mode of inquiry. This stance is corroborated by Swartzentruber (2007, p. 347), who postulates that research on spirituality in social work requires “methodological approaches that allow for areas of inquiry that push beyond the traditional limits of the current social-scientific perspective”. In a similar stance, Canda and Furman (2010, p. 91) affirm that the experience of eminent qualities of spirituality does not yield to an approach of reductionist, empirical analysis. Clients’ subjective experience of spirituality “generates knowledge by direct experience” and social workers gain an understanding of these experiences by studying clients’ accounts “through examination of the symbols, narratives, poetry, music, paintings, ceremonies, and rituals” they use to communicate about it. Action research extends boundaries of knowledge creation beyond the traditional rational, empirical epistemology, to include a phenomenological epistemology or lived knowledge. Thus, action research is attuned to the research agenda of this study, as it supports an extended epistemology to explore the experiential knowledge of midlife, spirituality and spiritual strengths.

- **Participative and democratic**

The feature most often cited by scholars as characteristic of action research is the reference to the collaborative and participatory nature of the research process. According to Reason (2006, p. 193), for political, moral and epistemological reasons, action research is only possible when done *with*, *for* and *by* research participants. Therefore, central to the work of action research is “[b]uilding democratic, participative, pluralist communities of inquiry”. As a result, action research has a fundamentally different understanding of the nature of inquiry than the more traditional approaches, as participants are intentionally engaged as “equal and full

participants in the research process” (Stringer, 2007, p. 10). It seems a fundamental principle of action research is the deep involvement of participants in the research process.

The debate about the “changing nature and purpose of social work research” not only calls for research that is relevant to practice, but also petitions the inclusion of clients in the research process (Powell, 2002, p. 17, 21). The plea for a more collaborative approach in social work research is reiterated by Bradbury and Reason (2003, p. 156), who stress the importance of “doing research with, rather than on people”, and Fouché and Light (2010, p. 29), who state that there is an increase in discussions about “collaborative research approaches, including action research” in social work. The inquiry into the spiritual strengths of midlife women is guided by the principles of the strengths perspectives, which not only advocate a collaborative relationship between social worker and clients, but which also recognise clients as the experts of their lives (Chapter 3; 3.3.4.2). Consequently, there is compatibility between a participative and democratic nature of action research, the conceptual framework of this study and the appeal in social work to engage participants as collaborators in research.

- **An emergent process**

The observations of Boog (2003, p. 435) that “an action research design cannot be anything but rather sketchy” and McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead (2001, p. 3) that doing action research is not neat and tidy, suggest that action research is an emerging process. This view is endorsed by Reason (2006, p. 189) who describes action research as an emergent process, which does “not arrive fully fledged in a clear research design” but which evolves over time. The evolutionary nature of action research implies that action research “cannot be programmatic” or defined “in terms of hard-and-fast methods” (Reason, 2006, p. 197). Similarly, Stringer (2007, p. 8) notes that, “action research is not a neat, orderly activity that allows participants to proceed step by step to the end of the process”. This feature of action research is distinctive of qualitative research, as exemplified in Padgett’s (2008, p. 3) observation that, although qualitative research is focused it is not “prescriptive or predictable”. What makes qualitative research and, by implication, action research exciting and challenging is the “dynamic tension between flexibility and serendipity

on the one hand and methodological rigor on the other” (Padgett, 2008, p. 3). This study is guided by the research questions, but it remains amenable to emerging themes as the research process unfolds.

The discussion of the four characteristic dimensions of action research provides the rationale not only for the decision to appoint action research as research design, but also clarifies the motivation for its focus on particular dimensions of action research.

### **5.3.2 Defining action research**

For the purposes of this study, the term *action research* is understood to mean

a participatory process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more, generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities. (Reason, & Bradbury, 2009a, p. 4)

The nomination of this definition is motivated by the aptness with which it captures the essence of action research. Therefore, action research determines the parameters for this inquiry; however, to generate the experiential knowledge required to answer the research questions, a more narrowly refined approach is called for. Therefore, a multi-model design is appointed, fusing two practical inquiry models, namely cooperative inquiry and appreciative inquiry.

### **5.3.3 A hybrid design: cooperative inquiry and appreciative inquiry**

Both cooperative and appreciative inquiry endorses a subjective epistemology; approve of collaborative and participative methods; emphasises the usefulness of reflection of both past and current activities for learning; and recognise the “change potential of experiential knowing” (Fieldhouse, & Onyett, 2012, p. 4, 12). By combining these two approaches, this study broadens the scope of inquiry. The extended epistemology of cooperative inquiry and appreciative inquiry’s focus on uncovering untapped strengths are integrated to harness tacit and experiential knowledge about spirituality and spiritual strengths. The knowledge generated in this

way will be used to identify guidelines for the programme to develop spiritual strengths.

### **5.3.3.1 Cooperative inquiry**

It is an approach in which all participants fully engage in the research process by moving through cycles of action (practical application) and reflection (reflect critically on the experience of the action) (Heron, & Reason, 2009, p. 367). Thus, the basic action research routine involves cycles of action and reflection. The spiral steps of action research are described by \*<sup>1</sup>Beyleveld (2012) as composed of some type of planning, acting, observing and reflecting:



Adapted from: Berg (2004, p. 197) and \*Beyleveld (2012)<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 8: Inquiry cycles**

There are no firm rules as to how many times the cycles should be repeated. Six to ten cycles might be included in a short workshop or extended over months, depending on the research question (Heron, & Reason, 2008, p. 149). Although the discipline of the research cycle is fundamental, Reason (2006, p. 172) cautions that the process of cooperative inquiry is “not as straightforward as the model suggests”, pointing out that there are mini cycles in the major cycles. Some practitioners call for

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<sup>2</sup> \*Prof. A.A. Beyleveld, Associate Professor: Office of the Dean: Education, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein.

a less structured approach, “advocating a more emergent process of inquiry”. Neither the inquiry cycle, nor the 4-D model is “a forced marched agenda one must follow” (Ludema, & Fry, 2009, p. 284). Thus, the inquiry does not necessarily proceed in a linear fashion. In a similar stance, \*Beyleveld<sup>3</sup> (2012) advises that the inquiry cycles are not linear steps, nor are they intended to be followed at all costs, but are intended as “awareness milestones”. For the purposes of this study, the research cycle will be used to structure the inquiry, but will also remain flexible to the emerging research process.

As the cooperative inquiry moves through the cycles, it draws on the four-folded extended epistemology (Reason, 2006, p. 195; Heron & Reason, 2009, p. 367; Fieldhouse, & Onyett, 2012, p. 4). The extended epistemology includes four different ways of knowing:

**Experiential knowing** – Experiential knowing focuses attention on phenomena as they are experienced in real life; in other words, the everyday lived experience of the individual (Reason, 2006, p. 195). According to Heron and Reason (2009, p. 367), this kind of knowing is essentially pre-verbal and tacit, and might be difficult to articulate. Cooperative inquiry endeavours to explore and express this unarticulated knowledge. Harnessing tacit knowledge, in the view of Fieldhouse and Onyett (2012, p. 4), is emancipatory, as it might help individuals to identify and free themselves from the constraints of habitual ways of thinking and transform the way in which they act. As spiritual strengths are subjectively experienced, this study considers access to experiential knowledge as vital in order to gain an understanding of the nature of midlife women’s spiritual strengths.

**Presentational knowing** – Experiential knowing is made manifest through presentational knowing. Thus, tacit knowledge is expressed in communicable form through visual arts, music, dance, drama and storytelling (Reason, 2006, p. 195). This provides the means to convey the significance of an experience. In the view of Heron and Reason (2009, p. 371), presentational knowing is not only a “fundamental part of the process of inquiry”, but its expression is a “meaningful outcome in its own

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<sup>3</sup> \*Prof. A.A. Beyleveld, Associate Professor: Office of the Dean: Education, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein.



right". This study will avail itself of presentational knowing as a means through which the spiritual strengths of midlife women can be explored.

**Propositional knowing** – Propositional knowing is intellectual knowledge about something and captured in ideas and theories (Reason, 2006, p. 196; Fieldhouse & Onyett, 2012, p. 4). Although action research is critical of the traditional academic stance, which privileges propositional knowing, it concedes that propositional knowing embedded in theoretical perspectives "can be brought to bear on the practice of action research (Reason, 2006, p. 196). Explaining the role of propositional knowing in action research, Heron and Reason (2009, p. 374) postulate that it is "essential for naming, in a well-rounded and grounded way, the basic features of our being-in-a-world in order to empower effective action in it". In this study propositional knowing, in the form of the strengths perspective, is 'brought to bear' on the research process. The strengths perspective provides the lexicon to clarify and organise spiritual strengths in a meaningful way, for example, differentiating between internal and external spiritual strengths. It also provides the framework that locates spiritual strengths within the roster of all other sources of strength.

**Practical knowing** – Practical knowing is described as "know-how"; thus, embodied in skills and competencies. According to Heron and Reason (2009, p. 376), there is an "up-hierarchy of knowledge grounded in experiential knowledge", that unfolds in presentational, then propositional ways of knowing and is then fulfilled through practice. Furthermore, knowing will be more valid when there is congruence between the four ways of knowing; in other words, when knowing "is grounded in our experience, expressed through our images and stories, understood through theories which make sense to us, and expressed in worthwhile action in our lives" (Heron, & Reason, 2009, p. 367). The aim of this study is the formulation of guidelines for a programme to develop the spiritual strengths of midlife women. In cooperation with participants, this inquiry endeavours to solicit experiential, presentational and propositional knowing and translate that knowledge into practical knowing through the formulation of the guidelines for the programme.

### 5.3.3.2 Appreciative inquiry

In contrast to the often problem-oriented approaches applied by action researchers, appreciative inquiry favours a positive approach, which focuses on what is possible rather than what is wrong (Grant, & Humphries, 2006, p. 403). Appreciative inquiry is described by Zandee and Cooperrider (2009, p. 191) as a “strengths-based collaborative approach”, which aims to promote the flourishing of individuals, organisations and communities. According to Fouché and Light (2010, p. 30), this stance “resonates strongly with social work practitioners committed to a strengths based practice”, because appreciative inquiry also aims to identify strengths and to harness those strengths to promote flourishing. Consequently, there is rapport between appreciative inquiry as research strategy, and the strengths perspective as theoretical framework of this study.

A key task in appreciative inquiry is the identification and mobilisation of strengths (Ludema, & Fry, 2009, p. 283). To aid this process, it uses the 4-D cycle (Grant, & Humphries, 2006, p. 403; Ludema, & Fry, 2009, p. 283; Fieldhouse, & Onyett, 2012, p. 5):



Adapted from: Ludema and Fry (2009, p. 291)

**Figure 9: Appreciative inquiry: 4-D Model**

- The purpose of the first step, *discovery*, is to recognise the best of what there is (e.g. recognising existing spiritual strengths). According to social work scholars Fouché and Light (2010, p. 37), this step is similar to a strengths-based perspective’s endeavours to source clients’ experiences of how they

coped previously (drawing on their resourcefulness). By doing this possibility thinking is harnessed.

- The second step, *dream*, entails exploring and articulating hopes of what could be (e.g. envisioning the possibility of novel sources of spiritual strengths). Thus dreaming can be described as a “visionary exploration” constructed by clients. This process promotes “strategic intention” and therefore it can be transformative and aspirational (Fouché, & Light, 2010, p. 37).
- The *design* phase is about designing strategies to bring the dream to life by asking, “What should be?” (e.g., what is needed to discover and leverage spiritual strengths?). Designing strategies can be based on examples from previous successes. In the view of Fouché and Light (2010, p. 38), when strategies stem from existing resourcefulness and previous achievements, goals are more realistic and achievable.
- In the last phase, *destiny*, there is a commitment to action (What practical steps can be taken to sustain sources of spiritual strengths?). The possibilities for action can also be explored “through the lens of past successes” (Fouché, & Light, 2010, p. 38).

This model will be teamed with the inquiry cycles of the collaborative inquiry to explore participants’ experiences of midlife, spirituality and spiritual strengths and to identify spiritual strengths.

## **5.4 METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION**

The primary objective for data collection in cooperative and appreciative inquiry is to represent the subjective viewpoint of participants. To achieve this goal, one of the first steps in the inquiry is the “development of healthy human interaction in a face-to-face group” (Reason, 2006, p. 172). The importance of interaction in the research process is reiterated by Berg (2004, p. 431), who notes that, “interaction between researchers and researched subjects is explicitly used for the processes of data gathering”. Thus, it is self-evident that at a methodological level, the establishment of

positive interaction and cooperation is vital. The first step in initiating interaction and intercommunication is to establish a positive working relationship. According to Snoeren, Niessen & Abma (2011, p. 200), it is important to invest in relationships in order to promote participation from the earliest phase of the research project. Consequently, one of the first and primary tasks of the researcher is establishing and maintaining a collaborative relationship.

According to Bradbury and Reason (2003, p. 161), “action researchers are the instruments of their own research”. Researchers have to use their practice skills to establish relationships of genuine respect, trust, mutuality and equality. In the view of Stringer (2007, p. 27), such relationships are characterised by open communication, should promote feelings of equality, maintain harmony, resolve conflict as it arises, display sensitivity to participants’ feelings and demonstrate an acceptance of participants as they are. The generation and collection of data in action research is closely linked with the researcher’s ability to establish collaborative relationships, which in turn facilitate participative dialogue. Participative dialogue is foundational in generating data concerning the lived experiences from the viewpoint of those who experience it.

Action researchers are not restricted to particular methods of data collection. Thus, both cooperative and appreciative inquiry use multiple qualitative research methods, for example, interviewing, focus groups, workshops, conferences, core group inquiry, summits, or a combination, as deemed appropriate, given the people involved and the aims of the study (Bradbury, & Reason, 2003, p. 157; Ludema, & Fry, 2009, p. 284). This study uses the workshop as form of research engagement. Workshops are flexible and can easily be modified to meet the needs of participants; furthermore, they characteristically encourage collaboration and the active involvement of participants. Distinct characteristics of a workshop also include small-group interaction, interactive learning and the application of new learning. Accordingly, Brooks-Harris and Stock-Ward (1999, p. 6) define a workshop as a “short-term learning experience that encourages active experiential learning and uses a variety of learning activities to meet the needs of diverse learners”. The format of the workshop is well suited to the research agenda of this study, as it emphasises the active involvement of participants as dictated by the strengths perspective, offers the opportunity to generate new knowledge about spiritual

strengths through interaction in the group and to apply the knowledge. Moreover, the flexibility and endorsement of diverse learning opportunities are amenable to endeavours to explore spiritual strengths through an extended epistemology.

A survey of cooperative and appreciative research projects reveal that these modes of inquiry use a variety of methods to evoke data in particular experiential and tacit knowledge. Examples of these methods include creative writing, toe painting, dancing, drumming, singing, using photos, crafts, meditation and staging an 'unfashion show' (Mullett, 2009, p. 452). Further examples cited by Heron and Reason (2009, p. 372) and Fieldhouse and Onyett (2012, p. 13) include using video, film, a Brahms concerto for violin, reproductions of paintings, guided visualization, symbolic ritual movement, Black Angel cards, a game of tag, clay sculpture and watercolour designs, free-fall writing and story circles. When tacit and experiential knowledge is evoked it might be manifested in a variety of ways, for example, through poetry, art, verbal and non-verbal symbols, metaphors, drawings, diagrams, choreographed mime and songs (presentational knowing) (Heron, & Reason, 2009, p. 372; Zandee, & Cooperrider, 2009, p. 194). This study will avail itself of the creative ways in which action researchers engage to evoke data about experiential knowledge and encourage expression of this knowledge through presentational knowing. Knowledge expressed through presentational knowing forms part of the data set, together with notes on researcher observations, photos, audio recordings of activities (action phase) and discussions (reflection phase).

The participants in this study are midlife women between the ages of 40 and 60 years. Women will be identified by a public relations agency by way of purposive sampling (Babbie, 2007, p. 184). Participants include women of all races and religious orientations, or with no particular religious orientation.

## **5.5 THE PROCESS OF DATA ANALYSIS**

The aim in qualitative analysis is to see if trends and patterns emerge from the data (Greeff, 2003, p. 319). In action research too, conceptual ordering (thematic analysis) of data (Berg, 2004, p. 200) is done. The process is similar to the basic methods used in qualitative research, for example, reviewing collected data, categorizing and coding, identifying themes, organising a category system and

developing a report framework (Stringer, 2007, p. 100). However, in addition, action researchers strongly endorse the involvement of participants when analysing data by inviting their input (Spaniol, 2005, p. 90; Hanson, & Hanson, 2010, p. 187). In this study participants will be involved in the process of data analysis. A draft of the findings will be sent to participants, inviting their comments. For the purposes of this study the foundational steps in qualitative data analysis, as dictated by thematic analysis, will be combined with methods of data analysis proposed by action research.

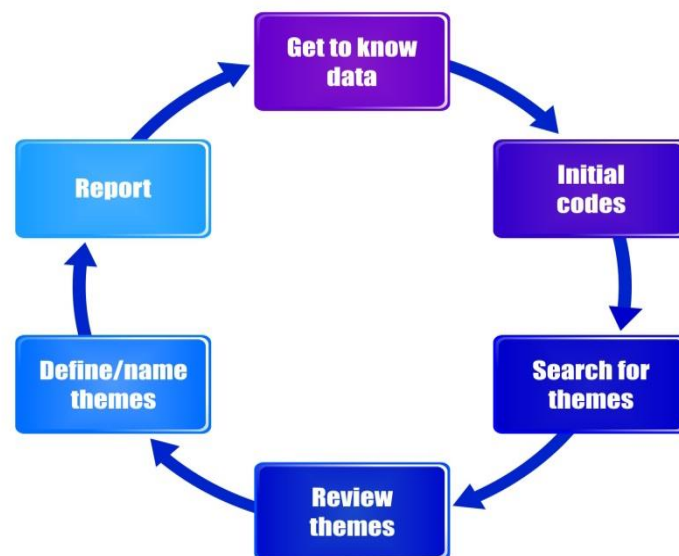
### **5.5.1 Thematic analysis**

According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 78), thematic analysis “should be considered a method in its own right” as it is a foundational method, which provides core skills for conducting many forms of qualitative analysis. Moreover, it can be applied across a wide scope of theoretical and epistemological approaches, “as it is not wedded to any pre-existing theoretical framework”. This theoretical flexibility proves to be a “useful tool”, which has the potential to “provide a rich, yet complex, account of data”. However, Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 78) caution that flexibility does not mean ‘anything goes’. Ideally, the researcher should attempt to find a balance between the demarcated guidelines that ensures that analysis is theoretically and methodologically sound, and flexibility in how it is used. To demarcate thematic analysis more clearly as a “named analysis”, Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79) propose the following definition, “[t]hematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data.” Thematic analysis is described by McLeod (2011, p. 146) simply as a flexible and a “straightforward approach to exacting meaning from transcript data”. As a foundational method of analysis, thematic analysis provides the core skills for conducting analysis in this study.

To ensure sound methodological practice, Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 81, 84) advise researchers to make the theoretical position of a thematic analysis clear. The theoretical framework explicates a study’s philosophical stance on ontology and epistemology. This is a vital step, as “the research epistemology guides what you can say about your data and informs how you theorise meaning”. Thus, analysis of

data cannot be “coded in an epistemological vacuum”. Without transparency regarding the theoretical framework and epistemological assumptions there is no explanation for what researchers do and how they analyse data. The constructivist/interpretive perspective, as theoretical perspective directing this study, endorses a relative ontology and subjective epistemology. Furthermore, this study adopts a phenomenological orientation; thus, when analysing data there is a commitment to understand participants’ point of view (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 79). Thus, when analysing data this study recognises that spiritual strengths are socially constructed and individually interpreted; thus, women’s experiences of spiritual strengths are varied and as a result would engender equally valid multiple realities. Hence, when analysing data, the study does not seek, in the words of Ponterotto (2005, p. 130), to “unearth a single truth from the realities of participants”. In accordance with its stance on ontology, the study does not sanction the notion that there is single truth (theme) with respect to midlife experiences, spirituality and spiritual strengths.

The analytical process in thematic analysis includes the following six phases:



Adapted from: Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87)

**Figure 10: Six phases of thematic analysis**

As in other approaches to qualitative data analysis, thematic analysis does not follow a linear process where one phase is followed by the next, but is a recursive process,

with back and forth movement between phases. The phases serve as guidelines that “need to be applied flexibly to fit the research questions and data” (Braun, & Clarke, 2009, p. 86). The phases are:

- ***Phase one: Getting to know the data***

The raw data will include audio tapes, photographs, the researcher’s field notes, the feedback from participants and all forms of presentational knowledge. Thematic analysis is not prescriptive as to transcribing data, but emphasises that it is important “that the transcript retains the information you need, from the verbal account, and in a way which is true its original nature” (Braun, & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). In this study, this process entails transcribing audio tapes, typing field notes and sorting all other forms of data. The researcher will be actively involved in transcribing data, heeding the dictum of Padgett (2008, p. 135) that transcribing one’s own data is the best approach, as it has the advantage that the researcher can relive what happened and clarify unclear passages or insert explanations where needed. After the preparation of the data the researcher engages in an active process of reading, taking notes of initial ideas, and attempts to gain a sense of what participants are saying and the overall tone of ideas (Padgett, 2008, p. 140; Creswell, 2009, p. 185).

- ***Phase two: Generating initial codes***

After listing the initial ideas from the data, the next phase entails coding the interesting features across the entire data set. A good code can be defined as one that captures the richness of the phenomenon being studied (Fereday, & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 83). According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 89), the researcher might “approach the data with specific questions in mind” he/she wishes “to code around”. For the purposes of coding data, this study will approach the data with questions such as “What do women consider as their spiritual strengths?”, “How do women experience midlife?” and “What do they think should be included in a programme?” The definition of spirituality and spiritual strengths will also be used as touchstone to identify codes related to spirituality and spiritual strengths. The aim of coding is to set the stage for broader conceptualisation, further questions about the data and the interpretation of data (Padgett, 2008, p. 150).



- ***Phase three: Searching for themes***

When all data have been coded, the long list of codes is then sorted into a broader level of themes, with some codes forming sub-themes, or a set of miscellaneous codes that do not seem to belong anywhere. At this stage, nothing is abandoned (Braun, & Clarke, 2006, p. 90). According to Padgett (2008, p. 159), the emerging themes and sub-themes should ideally capture all the relevant and salient information.

Developing themes entails “interpretive analysis of the data” (Braun, & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). The interpretation of the data is related to the arguments about the phenomenon being examined. This study argues that certain aspects of spirituality are sources of strength. These aspects, for example, meditation or sacred rituals, if identified by participants as having a beneficial outcome on their sense of wellbeing, will be considered a theme.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 82), what counts as a theme is “some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set”; however, there are no prescriptive directives as to what proportion of the data “needs to display evidence of the theme for it to be considered a theme”. As a theme might appear in little of the data set, Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 5) suggest that the researcher’s judgement is required to determine the contours of the theme. This approach to the identification of themes underscores Hesse-Biber and Leavy’s (2011, p. 302) assertion that qualitative analysis does not “proceed in a cookbook fashion”, but rather requires intellectual artisanship. Although the researcher in this study might be guided by theory when developing themes as it pertains to spiritual strengths, participants’ own accounts of what they experience as spiritual strengths, would be the most compelling reason for determining themes. Furthermore, even if only a few or even one participant identifies a particular aspect of spirituality as strength, it might be considered a theme. This is in accordance with the study’s stance on ontology and epistemology.

- ***Phase four: Reviewing themes***

In this phase the set of preliminary themes are reviewed and refined. It should then become clear which of the initial themes are not really themes; which ones cohere

together meaningfully; and which ones should be broken down into separate themes. Once satisfied that the themes appear to form a coherent pattern and “capture the contours of the coded data”, the researcher moves on to the next level of refinement (Braun, & Clark, 2006, p. 91). The dual purpose of this second level of refinement is to determine whether the themes are an accurate representation of the meanings evident in the whole data set and to code additional data that have been overlooked previously. Conceding that it is impossible to provide clear guidelines when to stop refining themes, Braun and Clarke (2006:92) advise researchers to stop when nothing substantial is added to the thematic map. Concurring, Padgett (2008, p. 171) observes that saturation is reached when no new codes are added, and themes and sub-themes are fully expanded.

- ***Phase five: Defining and naming themes***

When the themes have been refined, the researcher goes back to the collated data extracts associated with each theme, and identifies the essence of the theme. Then an account is given of what about the theme is interesting and why it is interesting. A detailed analysis is given for every theme identified, which includes the story every theme tells, how “it fits into the broader overall story that you are telling about your data” and whether the theme contains sub-themes (Braun, & Clarke, 2006, p. 92). To be able to do this, the researcher goes beyond the surface of the data, by asking questions such as:

“What does this theme mean?”

“What are the assumptions underpinning it?” and

“What are the implications of this theme?” (Braun, & Clarke, 2006, p. 94).

Thus, at the end of this phase, researchers should be able to define their themes clearly and to describe the scope of the themes succinctly.

- ***Phase six: Producing the report***

The final phase entails writing the report and telling the story of the data in such a way that the reader is convinced of the merit and validity of the analysis. The report must contain sufficient evidence of the themes captured in the data. This can be done by giving vivid examples or extracts from the data, which clearly illustrate the

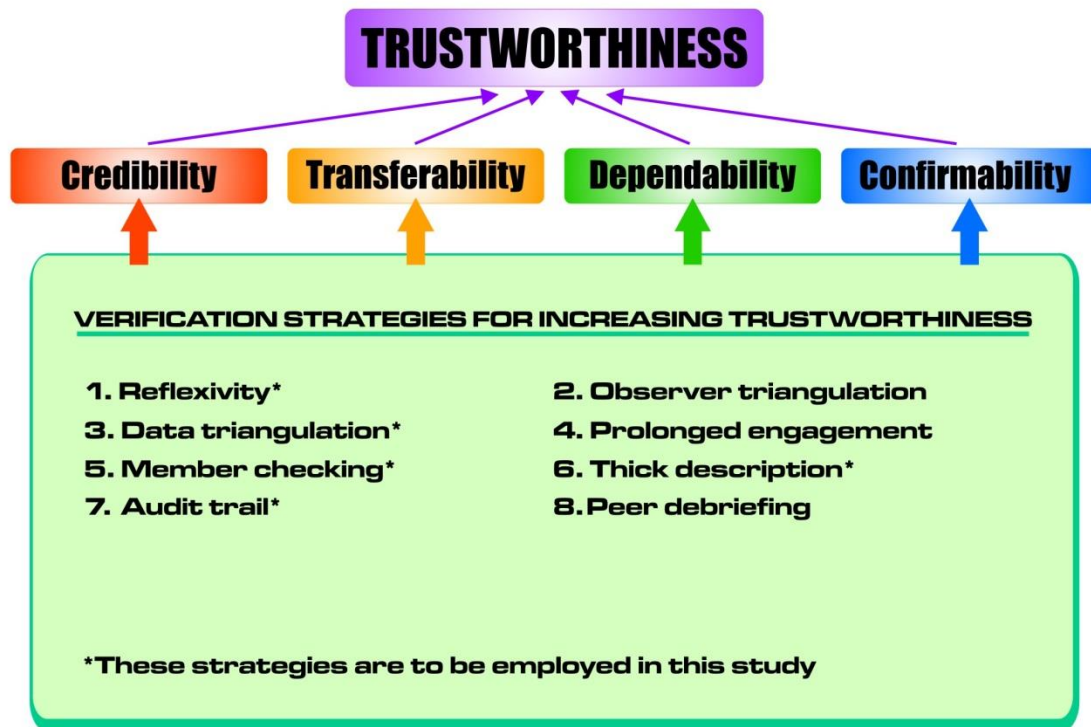
essence of what is described. However, the report entails more than a mere description of data; extracts of data should be embedded in an analytic narrative to illustrate what is discussed about the data. Moreover, the analytic narrative should go even further “to make an argument in relation to your research question” (Braun, & Clarke, 2006, p. 93). According to Creswell (2009, p. 189), the narrative report includes a chronology of events, a deliberation on the themes and sub-themes and the interconnectedness of themes. In this study, findings will be reported in the narrative writing style and, where applicable, illustrated with visual material and direct quotations from the data.

## **5.6 MAINTAINING METHODOLOGICAL RIGOUR IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS**

A vexing question in qualitative research revolves around the problem of when a study can be considered good or worthy of accreditation. It goes without saying that sound or scientific research would require “a systematic and rigorous approach to the design and implementation of the study, the collection of data, and the interpretation and reporting of the findings” (Fossey et al., 2002, p. 720). Commenting on rigor in qualitative research Padgett (2008, p. 184) asserts that it entails “self-discipline and vigilance about methods”, and adds, “rigorous research is accountable even if it follows flexible guidelines”. While remaining flexible to the unfolding process, this study also aims to uphold methodological rigour throughout the research process.

According to Lietz and Zayas (2010, p. 191), the most cited conceptualisation of criteria for evaluation of standards in qualitative research stems from the seminal work of Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 289). Social work researchers endorse the criteria for methodological rigour in qualitative research proposed by Lincoln and Guba (Padgett, 2008, p. 181; Lietz, & Zayas, 2010, p. 191) as do action researchers (Stringer 2007, p. 57). Therefore, this study will avail itself of these benchmarks. The criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 289) are *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability (auditability)* and *confirmability* which, taken together, connote the *trustworthiness* of a study. In this study these criteria will be applied, but in such a

way as to be aligned with the constructivist/interpretive perspective stance on ontology and epistemology.



Adapted from: Fossey et al. (2002, p.725); Padgett (2008, p.187); Lietz and Zayas (2010, p. 198)

**Figure 11: Establishing trustworthiness**

This model demonstrates that trustworthiness is evaluated to the degree that credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability can be demonstrated through the application of various verification strategies. In the words of Padgett (2008, p. 186), “each strategy addresses one or more of the threats to trustworthiness”. However, not all strategies are relevant or feasible to a study, intimating that not all strategies need to be employed to establish the trustworthiness of a study (Padgett, 2008, p. 186; Lietz, & Zayas, 2010, p. 198). The strategies that will be used to enhance trustworthiness in this study include reflexivity, data triangulation, member checking, thick description and audit trail.

### 5.6.1 Credibility

Credibility pertains to the plausibility and integrity of the study (Stringer, 2007, p. 57). In their definition of credibility Lietz and Zayas (2010, p. p. 191), maintain that it “[r]efers to the degree to which a study’s findings represent the meanings of the research participants”. Implied in the descriptions of credibility is the notion that the researchers’ interpretations should be authentic and faithful to the accounts of the participants.

Axiology is pertinent to the role of the researcher’s values during the research, and the need to control the values carefully, so as not to bias the study (Ponterotto, & Grieger, 2007, p. 410). This study is mindful of Ponterotto’s (2005, p. 131) argument that working from a constructivist/interpretive perspective it would be a fallacy to believe that the lived experience and values of the researcher can be divorced from the research process. Instead, “the researcher should acknowledge, describe, and ‘bracket’ his or her values, not eliminate them”. This is often referred to as owning one’s perspective”. According to Finlay (2009, p. 12), researchers should aim to “bracket” their previous understandings, past knowledge and assumptions about the phenomenon to “focus on the phenomenon as it appears”. Reflexivity is vital when attempting to bracket one’s own values and knowledge. Social work scholars Lietz and Zayas (2010, p. 192) encourage researchers to keep a journal describing their efforts to be reflexive. To promote reflexivity the researcher of this study will endeavour to bracket her personal views regarding spirituality by recording personal values, opinions, beliefs and experiences.

Another strategy to increase credibility is *data triangulation*, referring to the use of more than one source of data, for example, interviews, field notes and written feedback (Padgett, 2008, p. 187; Lietz, & Zayas, 2010, p. 193). According to Stringer (2007, p. 57), the credibility of is study is enhanced when “the inclusion of perspectives from diverse sources enables the inquirer to clarify meaning by identifying different ways the phenomenon is being perceived”. When data from different sources are convergent, there is “greater confidence that the observations are trustworthy” (Padgett, 2008, p. 188). In a similar stance, Creswell (2009, p. 191) asserts that when themes emerge from converging several sources of data there might be a greater claim to the trustworthiness of the study. This study will consult

various sources of data, including the field notes of the researcher, audio tapes, written feedback and various forms of presentational knowing (drawings, works of art).

*Member checking* as a strategy entails feedback from participants. Participants are given an opportunity to review the research report and to verify that their perspectives and experiences are acceptably represented. They have the opportunity to “clarify and extend information related to their experience” (Stringer, 2007, p. 58). In this regard, Lietz and Zayas (2010, p. 194) point out that for many qualitative researchers member checking is “one of the most valuable strategies for increasing trustworthiness”. This study will include member checking as strategy to enhance credibility by inviting feedback from participants.

To augment trustworthiness, qualitative researchers are encouraged to use *thick descriptions* to convey their findings. A thick description “transports the reader to the setting” conveying “an element of [a] shared experience” and when the description includes many perspectives about a theme the “results become more realistic and richer” (Creswell, 2009, p. 192). Concurring, Lietz and Zayas (2010, p. 194) affirm that thick descriptions promote trustworthiness, adding that it is particularly significant in constructivist research. This study will use thick descriptions to enhance credibility.

### **5.6.2 Transferability**

Transferability denotes the possibility that the outcomes of the study can be applied in other contexts. For example, transferability might be achieved “when the findings have applicability to another setting, to theory, to practice or to future research” (Lietz, & Zayas, 2010, p. 195). Researchers, when reporting on their findings, can suggest how the findings might find application in similar situations. This study does not make extravagant claims regarding transferability, but strives to contribute to the knowledge framework in social work regarding the spiritual strengths of midlife women and to motivate practitioners to consider the use of a social work programme to explore and mobilise the spiritual strengths of midlife women.

### **5.6.3 Dependability**

Dependability or auditability focuses “on the extent to which people can trust that all measures required for a systematic research process have been followed” (Stringer, 2007, p. 59). Thus, the sequence of procedures in the research needs to be clearly defined, described and well documented. The researcher is advised to leave ‘an audit trail’ including notes on all decisions made during the research process, raw data, coding and analysis. Auditing is described by Padgett (2008, p. 191) as “a mega-structure for enhancing rigour because it documents” that strategies were used appropriately. The audit trail of this study includes an electronic journal on personal reflexivity, diary of the empirical process, meetings, interviews, field notes and documentation of various international conferences on spirituality that were attended.

### **5.6.4 Confirmability**

Researchers are required to confirm that the research process did take place as described, corroborating that the findings and the data are linked and are the result of participants’ experiences (Stringer, 2007, p. 59). To achieve confirmability, a researcher might use strategies such as member checking and an audit trail, allowing observers to evaluate and confirm the veracity of the study (Lietz, & Zayas, 2010, p. 197). To demonstrate confirmability, this study will use the strategies of an audit trail and member checking.

This study proposes to follow the verification strategies in a rigorous fashion to ensure the trustworthiness of the research process and produce a qualitative inquiry that is beyond question.

## **5.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Researchers need to be diligent and meticulous in their ethical approach; therefore, sound ethical practices should be built into the research design. However, ultimately, ethical conduct in any research practice depends on the researcher. This is aptly demonstrated in Neuman’s (2003, p. 116) observation that “[t]he researcher has a moral and professional obligation to be ethical, even when research subjects are

unaware or unconcerned about ethics". Concurring, Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011, p. 83) stress that the moral integrity of the researcher is critically important, urging researchers to be reflexive by asking themselves questions such as "What moral principle's guide my study?", "How will ethical issues affect how I conduct my research?" and "What are my responsibility towards participants?" It is the view of this study that the integrity of a research project hinges on the awareness of the researcher of his or her ethical standpoint. It determines the researcher's orientation towards the research project, for example, it informs every decision made, how the researcher interacts with participants and how data are collected and analysed.

Although there are no ethical absolutes, there are some "important ethical agreements that prevail in social research" (Babbie, 2007, p. 62). These include informed consent; no harm should come to participants; confidentiality and anonymity; and professional codes of ethics. The majority of qualitative research engages participants in a personal manner. One of the ways to establish ethical practice is to ensure that participants are well informed about the research project, for example, the purpose of the study, the research methods, and how results will be used (Stringer, 2007, p. 54). Each participant receives a letter that gives a brief description of the nature of the study, procedures that will be followed, the full identification of the researcher and contact details. The letter also outlines the role the participant will play in the research and provides details about possible risks or benefits. Participants also need to know that their participation is completely voluntary and that they have the right to withdraw at any time of the project. Assurances of strict confidentiality and anonymity and the steps that will be taken to ensure confidentiality must be conveyed to participants (Stringer, 2007, p. 54; Padgett, 2008, p. 65; Hesse-Biber, & Leavy, 2011, p. 64). The participants in this study will receive two copies of an informed consent letter. One copy is to be kept by participants (Appendix C). Assurances of confidentiality and the right to withdraw will be reiterated during the course of the workshop.

Confidentiality should guarantee that the identities of the participants are never revealed or that any information can be linked to them. In qualitative research, there is the risk of a breach of confidence when findings are reported. Thus, all identifying information should be removed, for example, using pseudonyms in written material or discussions about the project (Babbie, 2007, p. 64; Padgett, 2008, p. 69; Hesse-



Biber, & Leavy, 2011, p. 68). To maintain confidentiality, this study will use pseudonyms and excerpts from raw data will contain no identifying information.

Preparing for a research project, the researcher should assess the possibility of physical harm and would thus attend to basic safety concerns. Under no circumstances should participants be placed in stressful, embarrassing, anxiety-producing or unpleasant situations (Neuman, 2003, p. 119-125). In qualitative research, interviews might elicit intense emotions or anxiety; however, Padgett (2008, p. 69), points out that “emotional displays by respondents are not uncommon and rarely cause for alarm”. Although the planned workshops do not pose a physical threat, when preparing for the workshop the comfort and safety of participants are primary concerns.

As a registered social worker the conduct of the researcher during the research is subjected to the code of ethics as delineated by the South African Council of Social Service Professions (SACSSP).

## **5.8 CONCLUSION**

Qualitative research is deemed the most eligible paradigm to direct this study, as its stance on ontology and epistemology allows for the investigation of spiritual strengths as subjective experience. Within the broader context of the qualitative paradigm, the constructivist/interpretive approach as ideological perspective provides the blueprint for the conceptualisation of a research process. To execute the research process in accordance with the dictates of the ideological perspective, action research is employed as research design.

Action research supports the constructivist/interpretive stance on epistemology and ontology as exemplified in the use of an extended epistemology to explore the lived experience of participants. This approach recognises participants as experts of their own experiences and emphasises participatory democracy. However, to generate the experiential knowledge required to address the research questions, a more narrowly refined approach is called for. Thus, two practical inquiry models, namely cooperative inquiry and appreciative inquiry, are appointed to this task. The four-step inquiry model of cooperative inquiry and the 4-D model of appreciative inquiry are

fused and used as touchstones to guide the inquiry into the spiritual strengths of midlife women. A workshop will be used as the format for research engagement, as workshops are flexible, easily modified to meet the needs of participants and encourage collaboration and the active involvement of participants.

The method of data analysis is thematic analysis, a flexible format that accommodates different theoretical perspectives. Informed by the constructivist/interpretive perspective, this method of data analysis is appointed to analyse data through six basic steps. To observe the demand for methodological rigour or trustworthiness, this study would avail itself of strategies such as reflexivity, data triangulation and member checking to increase credibility, transferability, dependability (auditability) and confirmability. Ethical concerns are addressed by implementing the ethical practices that prevail in social research for example; no harm should come to participants, confidentiality and anonymity, informed consent and the professional code of conduct as stipulated by the SACSSP.

## **CHAPTER 6:**

# **EMPIRICAL INQUIRY INTO A SOCIAL WORK PROGRAMME FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SPIRITUAL STRENGTHS OF MIDLIFE WOMEN**

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As a course of action, the empirical investigation endeavours to collaborate in realising the aim of the study to delineate guidelines for a social work programme that will facilitate the identification and development of the spiritual strengths of midlife women. Thus, the assignment of the empirical investigation was to collect, analyse and interpret data that would contribute to the resolution of the research goal. This chapter reported on how this assignment was executed and consists of two parts, namely the engagement with participants to collect data and the preparation, interpretation and presentation of the data.

## **6.1 THE RESEARCHER'S PREPARATION FOR THE EMPIRICAL INQUIRY**

Without an understanding of that which is under investigation, it is inconceivable that a researcher will know *how* or *which* data to collect. To be more competent and well prepared to collect the most eligible data to delineate guidelines for a social work programme required from the researcher to gain an understanding of the midlife transition of women; the nature and contours of spirituality; and spiritual strengths. Given its stance on ontology and epistemology, the researcher had to be educated and gained practical experience on how to collect data that would represent women's subjective experiences, also to analyse data in such a way that participants' point of view was represented (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 79). Various preparatory measures were taken to expand the researcher's theoretical knowledge about these themes beyond the information in the literature study.

To allow participants to express their individualised understanding of spirituality and spiritual strengths calls for an openness to, and appreciation for the diversity of spiritual expressions and spiritual resources individuals employ. Furthermore, to

guard against misinformation regarding spiritual coping mechanisms and avoid spiritual stereotyping, the researcher was petitioned to broaden her knowledge regarding the diversity of spiritual traditions, practices, rituals and resources. Additionally, to employ an extended epistemology requires practical knowledge on how to elicit tacit knowledge of the ways in which this knowledge can be presented through art, poetry, dancing and music. To address these concerns, the researcher attended international conferences on spirituality in social work (Canada 2008, United States 2009, and England 2011). The researcher attended a public lecture, presented at the University of Johannesburg in 2011, at which the keynote speaker, Dr Edward Canda, addressed the role of religion and spirituality in the promotion of a resilient response to illnesses, with particular reference to spiritually sensitive practice. In 2010, the researcher attended the European Conference on Religion, Spirituality and Health, which focused on the link between spirituality and spiritual practices and improved physical and mental health. Other conferences on wellness the researcher attended included Wellness in the Workplace Conferences (2007, 2009, 2011) presented by the Health and Wellness Centre at the University of the Free State. These conferences focused on the factors that influenced the experience of wellness at work, including spirituality. During the course of the conferences, the researcher was a participant in various workshops informed by an array of religious and spiritual orientations, for example, working with pagans, witches and wiccans, Zen wisdom in social work, healing practices from Aboriginal North America and Divine Warrior training. The researcher gained empirical experience in the use of various techniques and methods as it pertains to the role of spirituality in clients' lives, for example, the use of mandala art projects, drawing, working with play dough, music and the use of stories. The various workshops the researcher took part in offered the opportunity to gain experience about a wide range of spiritual practices and rituals, for example, the creation of a sacred space, meditation, mindfulness and using the labyrinth as healing tool. As part of the audit trail, a folder was kept with attendance certificates issued at the various conferences and workshops, as well as hand-outs and notes about the researcher's observations and experiences.

The researcher's personal spiritual development include a three-year training programme and retreats by a Jungian psychologist on various aspects of meditation, chakra meditation, Tibetan sound healing, conscious embodiment, Tai Chi and

authentic movement. The researcher was also part of a faith community and had been a member of a woman's spiritual support group for the last twenty years. As member of the Jung Study Circle, the researcher attended various workshops and seminars on feminine psychology, for example, the Heroine's Journey as Individuation; Creativity (psychic aliveness), using the Mandorla as Ancient Symbol of Wholeness; an African Rhythm Workshop on Sound and Feeling; and Uncovering your Inner Essence a Life Images Workshop. The personal spiritual development programme and the Jungian seminars and workshops served to extend the researcher's knowledge and experience of a variety of spiritual practices and using art, dance, authentic movement, stories and drumming as methods to gain access to tacit knowledge and as forms of presentational knowing. Notes were kept about the researchers observations as well as all material received during workshops.

Valuable resources when planning the workshop included information in the literature study, for example, the contemporary meaning of spirituality, aspects of spirituality deemed strengths and the delineation of spiritual strengths as internal or external strengths (Chapter 2), the nature of the midlife transition (Chapter 4) and research methodology (Chapter 5). The researcher's experience in developing and presenting workshops on personal development for corporate clients over the past twelve years had helped to construct the research workshop to not only yield the data required, but also help participants to identify their spiritual strengths.

A three-day workshop on holistic learning in which the researcher participated in 2012 was of particular significance when preparing for the empirical investigation. The workshop focused on creating an authentic communicative, as well as how to promote experiential learning through movement, art, sound, nature, stories, poetry, humour and silence. The use of the circle as communicative space was informed by the researcher's experience in this workshop.

In the course of the empirical engagement, the participants do not only report their experiences of spirituality, but they are also involved in identifying their own spiritual strengths. This is in effect the same as integrating spirituality in practice. Thus, it is the view of this study that the empirical investigation is subject to the same principles that govern spiritually competent or spiritually sensitive social work practice (Hodge, 2002, p. 86; Williams, & Smolak, 2007, p. 26). The researcher's schooling as a social

worker did not include training in spiritually competent practice; therefore, in preparation the researcher undertook a literature study and complemented the theoretical knowledge with practical experience through the workshops she attended. The researcher had the opportunity to refine the skills of spiritually sensitive practice further through the workshops she presents on personal development, which amongst others, focus on the role of spirituality in stress management and resilience. A series of workshops on *Care of the Soul* in 2011 also contributed to the researcher's practical experience of implementing the principles of spiritually sensitive practice.

## **6.2 OBJECTIVITY OF THE RESEARCHER**

Qualitative research is characterised by a high level of researcher involvement during the processes of data collection and data analysis (Padgett, 2008, p. 2). Because of the intimate relationship between researcher and participants, the researcher's own perspectives (in this study on midlife, spirituality and spiritual strengths) and values need to be carefully controlled (Ponterotto, & Grieger, 2007, p. 410). As this was a social work research project, the principles for spiritually sensitive practice as it pertained to practitioner biases were applied during the empirical engagement.

Social workers are advised to gain an awareness of their own biases, prejudices, opinions and beliefs regarding spirituality when integrating spirituality in practice (Barker, 2008, p. 92; Wagenfeld-Heinz, 2009, p. 182; Canda, & Furman, 2010, p. 215). Therefore, they are requested to reflect on their own spiritual belief system (Wagenfeld-Heinz, 2009, p. 183; Mutter, & Neves, 2010, p. 169) and to be knowledgeable about spiritual diversity. Without an awareness of their own opinions of spirituality, social workers might find it difficult to respect the differences between their spiritual beliefs and those of the client, to preserve professional boundaries and be oblivious to how their biases might affect their reactions (Praglin, 2004, p. 79; Wagenfeld-Heinz, 2009, p. 182; Barker, 2008, p. 92). To promote self-awareness, Pargament (2007, p. 335) urges therapists to do their own spiritual autobiography and spiritual genogram, as these tools will help them to know themselves better spiritually. In preparation for this study, to gain awareness of possible biases,

prejudices and to clarify her own spiritual beliefs, the researcher compiled a spiritual autobiography, genogram, completed the same spiritual assessment forms as the participants, kept a spiritual diary and had discussions with a spiritual mentor. To promote a greater level of objectivity, the researcher extended her knowledge about the diversity of spiritual perspectives by exploring the sacred literature of different spiritual traditions and attended workshops on various spiritual traditions (see 6.1). The enhanced level of self-awareness aided the researcher to “bracket” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 131) her own spiritual perspectives, creating the communicative space during the workshops, in which participants felt accepted and free to express their diverse spiritual views and explore unfamiliar sources of spiritual strengths.

The researcher was mindful of Ponterotto’s (2005, p. 131) observation that it is a fallacy to believe that the experiences and values of the researcher can be totally eradicated from the research project. To limit the contamination of the researcher’s own biases as a midlife woman, various measures were taken. For example, to avoid compromising her objectivity regarding this phase of life, the researcher broadened her perception of midlife by reviewing studies on women’s midlife development and reading non-academic books to gain an understanding of the popular view of midlife. To be able to “bracket” (Finlay, 2009, p. 12) her own perception about midlife also required self-reflection and keeping a journal about her own experiences. The journal about the researcher’s midlife experiences as well as the spiritual diary, spiritual autobiography and genogram formed part of the audit trail.

### **6.3 METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION**

The aim of the discussion about the method of data collection was to explain how the design of the research was implemented, elaborating on the procedures taken to evoke data. It explained the steps taken to recruit participants and the modes taken to record data.

### **6.3.1 Workshop as research engagement**

Data were collected by means of an interactive workshop, which encouraged the involvement of participants and was amenable to the generation of data through an extended epistemology. The participants of the workshop were recruited by a public relations agency with whom the researcher collaborated on previous occasions in the course of presenting workshops for women in the corporate environment. The agency has access to women of all ages, racial and spiritual orientations in the Free State. The target population was women between 40 and 60 years of age (of all spiritual orientations) in the greater Bloemfontein area. Initially the company inadvertently sent out invitations to all women on their database, an interesting consequence was the overwhelming interest of women in the age group 34 to 39 years to attend the workshop. Subsequently, the invitation was sent to the women on their database that fit the age criteria for midlife. From those who responded the public relations agency selected the first sixteen respondents on the list to take part in the research, including both black and white participants as well as religious and non-religious mid-life women. (Subsequently one participant did not turn up at the first workshop). This study used purposive sampling to select participants. It is described by Padgett (2008, p. 53) as “a deliberate process selecting respondents on their ability to provide the needed information”. It was this study’s stance that only midlife women were able to provide the information needed to achieve the research goal. As such, purposive sampling is supportive of this study’s argument that midlife women as the experts of their lives are in the best position to impart knowledge about their experiences of midlife, spirituality and their spiritual strengths (Blundo, 2006, p. 37).

Fifteen participants attended the two workshops. The youngest participant had just turned 40 and two women were 60. Professional and businesswomen were included in the group. All the women but two had higher-education training. White and black South African women were represented in the study. Workshops were presented in English. Two participants were non-religious and the rest were Christians from different denominations. The first workshop with seven participants extended over two days as it started at 16:00 in the afternoon until 21:00 and from 9:00 the next morning until 14:00 the next day. The second workshop with eight participants was a



one-day workshop. The workshops were presented two weeks apart at different venues (due to availability), but both venues offered privacy and were in quiet locations free from disturbance; therefore, well suited to presenting the workshops.

Upon acceptance of the invitation to take part in the workshop, the public relations agency sent an information letter (Appendix B) to all participants. It explained the purpose and style of the workshop and the participants' role as co-researchers, asking them to bring a poem, quote, verse or short story that has spiritual significance for them, as well as music that inspires them. A letter of consent (Appendix C) was attached to the information letter, stipulating how confidentiality would be achieved. An identical copy (to be kept by the researcher) was signed at the beginning of the workshop. Each woman also received a folder with pen, notebook, the contact details of the researcher and the study advisor, a recommended reading list, inspirational quotes, information about midlife and spiritual practices such as meditation and walking the labyrinth.

Qualitative research is not prescriptive, nor does it follow step-by-step instructions (Padgett, 2008, p. 3). Therefore, the workshop was planned in such a way as to be flexible and open to emerging themes as the research process unfolded. However, to prevent the inquiry from regressing to an activity that was muddled, disorderly and trivial, a PowerPoint presentation (Appendix D) was designed to provide a broad framework with "awareness milestones" (Beyleveld, 2012)\*<sup>4</sup> to steer the process in such a way that data that would answer the research questions could be provoked. The topics included the midlife transition; spirituality; internal and external spiritual strengths; barriers that prevent access to spirituality; how to identify spiritual strengths; the heroine's journey as spiritual quest; and information on various spiritual practices such as creating a sacred space, meditation and creating rituals. Also included in the PowerPoint presentation were thought-provoking quotes, pictures, poems, music and movie clips (a profile of the entire workshop is attached – Appendix E). The theoretical information on the PowerPoint represented propositional knowing (Heron, & Reason, 2009, p. 374), and was used to clarify and expand on the topics discussed during the workshops, like the midlife transition; the

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<sup>4</sup> \*Prof. A.A. Beyleveld, Associate Professor: Office of the Dean: Education, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein.

constructs spirituality; and spiritual strengths; and a review of prospective spiritual strengths such as spiritual reading, spiritual journal and spiritual energy work. Although the participants were not involved in the planning before the workshop, they were invited at the beginning of the workshop to offer suggestions as to related topics they wanted to discuss. To enhance rigour a file on all aspects of the workshop were kept including all materials used, appendixes and notes about the venues. There was also an e-file containing all correspondence between the researcher and the public relations agency regarding communication with participants, the selection of participants and the choice of venues. The information thus captured give insight in the steps taken to select participants, the initiation of the workshops as well as the content of the workshops.

The second part of the workshop entailed the active participation in a variety of activities, for example, the heroine's journey as spiritual quest to discover the authentic self; and spiritual practices such as guided meditation, mindfulness and sacred breathing. The spiritual practices presented during the workshop only included those the researcher has been trained to do. This is in accordance with the ethical spiritual practice mandates that social workers "only provide the services or techniques for which they are qualified by education, training, or experience" (Northcut, 2000, p. 160). After every activity participants reflected on the experience, considering the possibility of including the spiritual practice or ritual in their repertoire of strengths. As it was beyond the scope of the workshops to explore all possible spiritual practices and rituals, a list of spiritual practices were provided. Included on this list were practices such as spiritual energy work, Tibetan sound healing, fasting and silence. At the end of the workshops participants were invited, based on their experiences during the course of the workshops, to comment on what they thought should be included in a programme.

After an introductory orientation, which was done while the women sat behind their desks (lecture style), the participants moved to the back of the room to sit in a circle. According to Bolen (Rountree, 1993, p. 212), "a circle of women is a place where you listen to another woman's truth and it mirrors back who you are. It is a place where women find their own voice and courage, where true emotions are expressed". The forming of the circle was the first step to create a communicative space, to establish collaborative relationships and to inspire interaction and

participation (Bradbury, & Reason, 2003, p. 161; Stringer, 2007, p. 27). The women were offered the opportunity to express their feelings about the workshop, being part of a circle of women and invited to voice their views on how they thought the circle should function. Thereafter a ritual was performed to afford the circle the status of a sacred space, using various spiritual symbols. This enticed women to reflect on the use of a sacred space as a spiritual strength. To celebrate the start of the workshop, another ritual of lighting a candle was performed, with every woman attaching her own meaning as to what the symbol of the candle represented to her, and if they were so inclined, they were invited to privately say a prayer or blessing (Fig. 12). For the duration of the workshops, the women preferred to sit in the circle. Only when completing questionnaires or creating art did they sit at their tables. With the communicative space established the workshop proceeded to review and discuss the themes identified in the PowerPoint as well as those introduced by participants.



**Figure 12: Lighting a candle at the beginning of the workshop**

The interaction between researcher and participant is a key component in action research as it is “explicitly used for the process of data gathering” (Berg 2004, p. 431). In this study, the nature of the interaction reflected the requirements for a spiritually sensitive approach and the directives of the strengths perspective. For example, the dictate of spiritually sensitive work to observe a client-centred approach was adhered to when participants explored their experiences of midlife, spirituality

and spiritual strengths. The researcher adopted a non-judgemental attitude and a readiness to listen and to honour participants' descriptions of the Sacred and their spiritual experiences (Heyman et al., 2006, p. 12; Bhagwan, 2007, p. 29). The principle of self-determination was demonstrated by respecting participants' choice to be religious or non-religious and their freedom to choose particular spiritual strengths (Canda, & Furman, 2010, p. 153; Sherr et al., 2009, p. 159). In accordance with the directives of the strengths perspective, the researcher relinquished the role of expert, but rather viewed the participants as experts of their own lives; thus, the interactions were collaborative in nature and amenable to explore participants lived experiences (Blundo, 2006, p. 37; Saleeby, 2006a, p. 18).

The cycles of action and reflection (Reason, 2002, p. 172) were used in the process of collecting data, for example, after performing a ritual, drawing, or taking part in a spiritual practice such as meditation, participants reflected on their experiences. Although the discussion of the method of data collection might create the impression of a well-ordered process that proceeded strictly in a step by step manner, the cycles were not pursued in a rigid fashion, as there was a back and forth movement between different themes as participants reflected on their experiences.

When spiritual strengths were explored, the 4-D cycle of appreciative inquiry was used (Ludema, & Fry, 2009, p. 283). Appreciative inquiry focuses on strengths and uses the four steps of the 4-D model (discovery, dream, design and destiny) to recognise existing strengths, inquiry into possible new strengths, design strategies to discover new strengths, and commit to actions to sustain strengths (Chapter 5 – 5.3.4.2). The spiritual strengths-assessment questionnaire (Appendix F) was inspired by the 4-D cycle. Accordingly, the assessment questionnaire focused on *present* spiritual strengths used by participants; those they used in the *past*, which were helpful; and the spiritual strengths participants want to develop in *future* to broaden the scope of their spiritual strengths.

The discussions and participants' reflections on their experiences of midlife, spirituality and spiritual strengths were recorded. The researcher also kept notes about the group process and her own observations. To record the presentational knowledge of participants' midlife experiences and conception of spirituality, photographs were taken of their drawings and clay sculptures. In the first workshop,

participants were photographed while engaged in activities; however, this proved to be disturbing; therefore, during the second workshop photos of the dough sculptures and art works were photographed after the workshop (Fig. 25, 26, 27). All the pictures and drawings included in the research report are used with the verbal permission of the participants. At the end of the workshop participants completed a feedback form, commenting on what they thought should be included in the programme.

The results pertaining to the essential nature of the midlife transition (Fig. 13); women's experiences of spirituality (Fig. 24) and internal and external spiritual strengths (Tables 5 & 6) were e-mailed to participants. Additionally the conclusions as it relates to the variability of women's midlife experiences (7.13); the wide ranging experiences of spirituality and spiritual strengths (7.14); and recommendations with particular reference to the content and format of the programme (7.21) were also included in the e-mail. Four participants did not respond to the request to comment. All those who responded affirmed the variability of women's midlife experiences and wide ranging experiences of spirituality as reported in the results and conclusions of this study. Most of those who responded reiterated that spirituality is an important source of strength as captured in the words of one participant "*taking part in the research reminded me how important spirituality is in my life*". Commenting on spiritual strengths a participant added that she realised that praying with a friend was an important source of strength for her. One participant suggested the inclusion of colour therapy and mandala work in the programme. No further recommendations were offered in relation to the format of the programme. Most of the participants were of the opinion that midlife women would benefit from the workshops. All e-mail correspondence was kept in a separate file as part of the audit trail.

## **6.4 RESULTS OBTAINED FROM THE WORKSHOPS**

The raw data include transcriptions of the audio recordings, field notes of the researcher, photos of the drawings and the play dough models, e-mail correspondence, the completed questionnaires of the spiritual assessment, and feedback forms. The raw data were filed as well as notes on how coding and analysis were undertaken.

All the sources of data were integrated and results were obtained from the integrated data. The evaluation and interpretation of the data are informed by the constructivist/interpretive approach as theoretical perspective and the strengths perspective as theoretical model (Chapter 5). Participants ascribed meaning to their drawings and dough sculptures, not the researcher. The study employs thematic analysis as analytical model to identify the patterns and themes in the data (Braun, & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). The six phases of the analytical process were followed to code data, sort it into themes and sub-themes in order to define and name those themes that represented the meanings in the data set accurately (Chapter 5 – 5.5.1). Data were broadly coded around the research questions. It was further refined by identifying sub-themes and themes, using definitions and descriptions of the phenomenon in the literature review. For example, to determine the essence of the midlife transition of women, the Model of Midlife Women's Transition (Chapter 4 – 4.3) and the discussion of each life domain were used as benchmark to identify sub-themes and themes. The data are reported in a narrative writing style, and systemised and disseminated in accordance with the following research questions:

#### **6.4.1 The essence of the midlife transition of women**

Heeding the social work decree, “begin where the client is”, by listening and honouring their stories and accounts of their reality (Saleeby, 2006b, p. 88; Kisthardt, 2006, p. 176), the starting point of the inquiry was an invitation to participants to share their perception and stories about midlife. This was followed by a PowerPoint presentation of a more theoretical explanation of the midlife transition, which included video clips, pictures, poems and quotes. The Model of Women's Midlife Transition (Chapter 4 – 4.3) was also used. Participants were invited to reflect and discuss the PowerPoint presentation and the Model of Midlife Women's Transition. Afterwards participants created drawings using various mediums to express how they experienced themselves and their lives as midlife women.

The research question about the nature of women's midlife experiences was initially used to categorise data broadly. The data were then further encoded using predefined codes. The Model of Women's Midlife Transition (Chapter 4 – 4.3) was used to predefine codes as it pertained to women's midlife experiences in the

physical, psychological, social and spiritual domain. In the following step, affiliated codes were meaningfully cohered together, from which sets of themes in the different life domains emerged. The themes captured the meaning participants ascribed to their midlife transition as it unfolded across the *physical*, *psychological*, *social*, and *spiritual* domains. The themes in each of life domains were named (Fig. 13); thereafter, the sets of themes were examined to determine the existence of differences, similarities or patterns across all theme-sets in all the life domains. Apart from participants' remarkable lack of interest in the physical changes associated with midlife, a pattern that appeared consistently across the other three life domains was the variability of experiences in relation to particular themes in these domains.

The findings of the inquiry are summarised in Figure 13, followed by a discussion of findings as they pertain to the four life domains. The general themes that emerged from the data are indicated in each life domain, for example, the lack of concern about menopause and signs of ageing in the physical domain. The themes around which there is the greatest variation in women's experiences in the different life domains are indicated in red, for example, the timing of life-events and individuation. It is the variation in these areas, which in the main contributes to the wide-ranging developmental patterns reported by participants.

## The Essential Nature of the Midlife Transition of Women

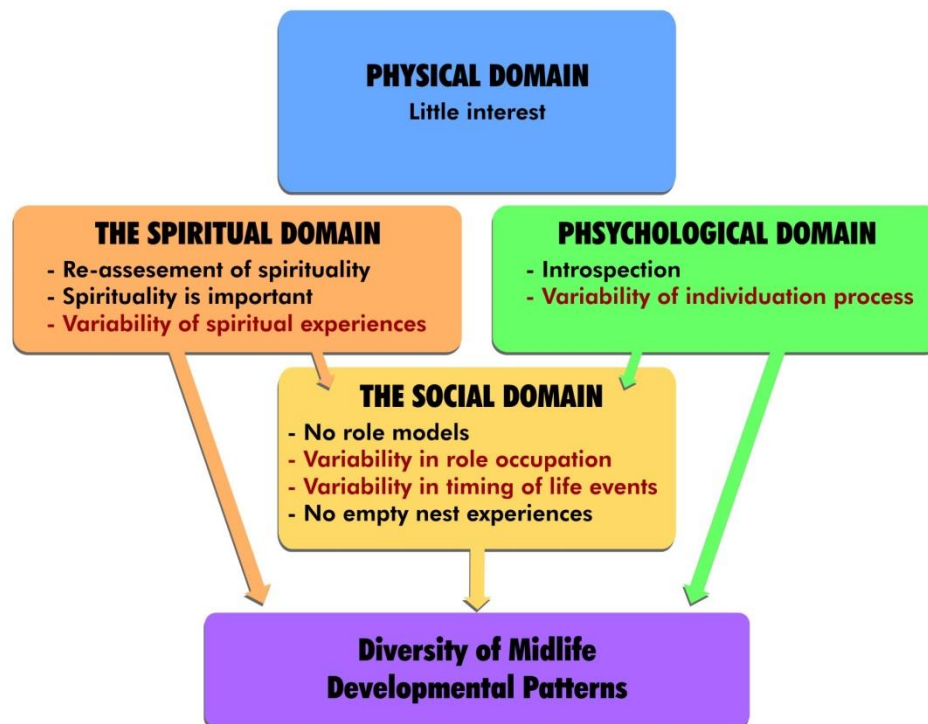


Figure 13: The essential nature of the midlife transition of women

- **The physical domain**

One of the inescapable truths about the midlife passage of women is the inevitable physical and biological changes associated with this stage of life. (Hunter et al., 2002, p. 13). These changes include the physical signs of ageing; the cessation of menses and the onset of chronic illness. When invited to describe their midlife experiences, not one of the participants introduced the topic of physical changes, nor was it depicted in any of their drawings. Thus, initially participants did not express great interest in the physical changes associated with midlife. However, after the researcher initiated a discussion on the subject of physical changes associated with midlife, participants voiced their views. In answer to a question from the researcher how they experienced menopause, participants agreed it was a normative event and not something that they thought about a lot. They were more articulate about the signs of ageing, and well aware of the cultural pressure to look young. Reflecting on the cultural pressure, participants were dismissive about cultural intimidation to look younger than one is. This is evidenced in the remark of a participant, who said,



*“There is simply no way you can look as you did as when you were a young woman. The middle-aged women who are desperate not to look older than their daughters simply look ridiculous.”*

Most of the participants agreed that it was more important to be healthy than to look young.

In popular culture, the midlife transition of women is often principally equated with the physical changes associated with midlife. However, none of the participants in this study reported that either menopause or the signs of ageing were of particular significance to them. They were rather philosophical in their acceptance that the physical changes were an inevitable consequence of midlife. This might be why participants did not feel that they had to yield to cultural pressure to look young, or why they did not invest in the cultural stereotype that menopause was central to midlife development (Lippert, 1997, p. 17). The participants' reactions were similar to those of an increasing number of midlife women as reported in recent studies. For example, a study on women's attitude towards menopause indicated that most women did not “seem to feel that transitioning into menopause was remarkable in any way” (Hunter et al., 2002, p. 176). Similarly, a study on the effect of cultural pressure on midlife women to look younger reported that the current cohort of midlife women “are carrying new values and images of ageing” and are increasingly disregarding cultural stereotypes about ageing (Ballard et al., 2005, p. 184; Evans, 2008, p. 97). The physical changes associated with midlife were not a primary concern for the participants of this study, and it might be true for many midlife women.

Although there was not great variability in participants' experiences of the physical changes associated with midlife, this study recognised that it was not representative of all midlife women. It acknowledged that there might be midlife women for whom menopause was a disruptive event, and who struggled to overcome the negative cultural messages about ageing women (Ogle, & Damhorst, 2005, p. 1). Thus, in contrast to the participants of this study, midlife women's experiences might vary considerably when adapting to physical changes.

- **The psychological domain**

During the descriptions of their midlife experiences participants indicated that one of the changes they noted was that they asked more questions as they assessed their lives. For example, a participant said that at midlife she realised,

*“I need to figure out what I want to do with my life and decide what is really important to me.”*

One of the participants articulated it this way,

*“I am more analytical about what is happening in my life”,*

and another participant observed,

*“At times I feel happy, but at other times empty and disconnected from my soul.”*

She added that when she was younger she was not so keenly aware of her own inner processes. The change in the level of self-reflection noted by participants was initiated by a greater level of self-reflection, which is often associated with midlife development (Chapter 4; Ogle, & Damhorst, 2005, p. 2; Degges-White, & Myers, 2006a, p. 147; Wiggs, 2010, p. 222). The propensity in midlife towards introspection is also evidenced in studies with midlife women, for example, a study by Degges-White and Myers (2006a, p. 147) attests that the majority of the women in the study reported that they indeed “noticed a marked increase in introspection”. It seems the midlife development entails a shift from an outer focus to an inner focus as women increasingly reflect more on their lives.

Exploring their experiences of midlife, participants expressed the urge towards individuation in different ways (Chapter 4; Arnold, 2005, p. 639; Ogle, & Damhorst, 2005, p. 2). For example, a participant described how she became aware in midlife that the way in which she dressed was not a true reflection of who she was, so she began to change the way she dressed. She explained that she loved wearing a bandana, something her conservative mother found unacceptable, so she never wore it in her mother’s presence. However, during a recent visit to her parents she wore the bandana, despite the disapproval of her mother. For her this was the first small step in expressing her true identity. This participant’s description is an example

of how the midlife women's individuation is often impelled by the question, "Who am I really?", and the consequent realisation that there is a discrepancy between their inner reality and how they present themselves to the world (Marston, 2002, p. 2, 4). Thus, through the process of individuation midlife, women begin to align their inner reality of who they are with how they present themselves to the world.

One participant narrated how even as a child she liked drawing and painting; yet, as an adult never pursued this interest. She earned a degree in media studies and journalism. She worked in this field for a few years. After getting married and the birth of her children, she became a stay-at-home mother. In all that time, she never paid attention to art. In midlife that changed and she started training with various artists. She has since established herself as a noted artist. Similar to this participant, some midlife women's individuation entail reclaiming the neglected or repressed parts of them (Lewchanin, & Zubrod, 2001, p. 195). Thus, by giving expression to a repressed part of them midlife women can expand their sense of self.

For most of the participants, individuation helped them to gain confidence and to be more assertive and freely express who they are. For example, one participant said,

*"I find I have more courage to say what I think and am less concerned with how other people may react."*

The drawing of a big red mouth by one of the participants was her explanation of how important the ability to express herself truthfully was for her. She elaborated,

*"I can still smile to people, but now I can also be assertive. It makes me feel good about myself."* (Fig.14):



**Figure 14: The red mouth**

A participant explained that the ability to express herself freely in midlife had the following effect,

*“For the first time in my life I feel comfortable in my own skin.”*

Another participant said that, as she was more able to be true to herself,

*“I feel freer to choose how I want to live.”*

Midlife women might vary in the way in which the process of individuation unfolds (as expressed by participants), but all reap the benefits when they succeed to achieve a greater level of individuation. For example, they become more assertive, as well as gain confidence and a sense of fulfilment. Studies by Arnold (2005, p. 641) and Degges-White and Myers (2006a, p. 147) not only affirm the move towards greater individuation as pre-condition for growth in midlife, but also that there is a positive correlation between individuation and self-esteem, confidence, assertiveness, inner balance and creative self-expression. It would appear that an important aspect of the midlife developmental pattern of women is to relinquish the sense of identity that no longer holds true for them, and to define a sense of self that more accurately portrays how they experience themselves.

- **The social domain**

Participants acknowledged that at times they were confused as to what was happening in their lives, and the meaning of the changes they experienced. They believed that their confusion stemmed in part from the fact that they felt they could not ask their mothers for advice about midlife. For example, one participant explained her predicament as follows: at midlife she was the busy mother of three teenage children, had a husband who commuted between two cities for work, and she ran her own business. In comparison, when her mother was her age, she and her siblings had left home, her mother did not work outside her home, and therefore her lifestyle at midlife was tranquil and uneventful. Because of the disparity between their midlife experiences, this participant felt that her mother could not counsel her on how to cope in midlife. Another participant expressed it as that the previous generation did not question the “restricted roles” (which she perceived as revolving mainly around their husbands and later grandchildren) they were expected to play in midlife. She could not accept that, as she felt her life was only beginning now. She was eager to discover new interests

*“to expand my horizons”,*

for example, to take up dancing and to explore different spiritual practices. One of the participants remarked that, unlike her mother’s generation.

*“I believe I can still grow in midlife.”*

Yet another participant recounted an event where she realised for the first time that the midlife women she knew did not inspire her to be like them at midlife. As a young woman in her late twenties, she attended a birthday celebration of her mother-in-law. Both her mother-in-law and her friends were in midlife at that time. Not one of the women was employed and, although most of them had graduated from university, they had not re-entered the labour market once their children had been born, or when the last child had been launched. Her perception, based on the discussion around the birthday table, was that these women were resigned to “disappear” at midlife, defining themselves mainly in terms of being a wife or grandmother. It was an episode that made her apprehensive about midlife; however, firmly resolving not to follow their example. Thus, from the discussion it transpired that the participants

did not consider previous generations of women as **role models** for the midlife transition. One of the reasons was that participants noticed the differences in their lifestyles and expectations about midlife from those of their mothers. According to Percheski (2008, p. 498) and Newton and Stewart (2010, p. 76), the differences in the lifestyles of the current cohort of midlife women and those of previous generations were brought about by the cultural and legal changes introduced by the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which profoundly revised women's social roles and expectations regarding marriage, family and career. Consequently, women's midlife developmental patterns have become more diverse than those of previous generations; hence, the lack of role models.

Some participants said they wanted "*to be better prepared*" to counsel their daughters about midlife. Understanding their own midlife passage was therefore important to them, and for some participants this was one of the reasons they attended the workshop. Participants also strongly advocated for the workshop to be presented to younger women in order to prepare them for their midlife transition.

One participant had no children, but all other participants had children and some grandchildren. Although many of the participants were more or less of the same age the ages of their children varied, for example, some were teenagers, while others were young adults, and four participants had grandchildren. The differences might be ascribed to the more recent changes in the **timing of life-events** in midlife. Due to changes in the cultural stereotypes regarding the timing of life-events, there was a greater fluidity of life-events; thus, unlike previous generations the life course was less predictable as women delayed childbearing or entering the labour market for the first time in midlife (Hunter et al., 2002, p. 8; Lachman, 2004, p. 312; Degges-White, & Myers, 2006a, p. 135). Two participants explained that when their children left home, they chose a new career path in midlife, and another launched a career as an artist. The greater variation in the timing of life-events was not only one of the reasons why participants' midlife experiences differed vastly from those of their mothers, but was one of the main contributing factors to the diversity of the midlife pattern of women.

Reflecting on her life, a participant said that as wife, mother, daughter, friend and a member of various groups in the community, she had a very busy life. She felt pressured to fulfil all these roles, lamenting,

*“I have to keep a lot of plates spinning.”*

Discussing her drawing of a tree with various flowers blooming under it (Fig. 15) the participant described her as

*“a tree which has to provide shade”*

to the various people in her life, particularly her teenage children on the one hand and various older members in her family on the other hand. This is a vivid depiction of midlife women as the “sandwich generation”, taking responsibility for both the younger and older members of a family (McFadden, & Rawson Swan, 2012, p. 313).



**Figure 15: The tree with flowers**

Participants like these experienced a role overload and the struggle to balance the different roles at midlife. By contrast, for some of the participants this was a time to expand their connection to other people, to include new roles in their lives, for example, new friends, reconnecting with old friends. The drawing of the red heart (Fig. 16) is one participant's portrayal of her midlife as time in which there was room in her heart for new friends and connection to other people. Another participant explained that the sun she drew was a metaphor for her new, added role as

grandmother, as well as “wisdom figure” to the younger generation of women in her extended family (Fig. 17).



**Figure 16: The red heart**



**Figure 17: The sun**

In midlife, the participants occupied many social roles; however, some experienced conflict between roles, or a role-overload, which was a source of tension, and for others multiple role involvement was a source of fulfilment. Midlife women's experiences of their role occupancy might influence their sense of wellbeing in a positive or negative way, depending on either feeling content or overwhelmed by the multiple roles they occupied (Lippert, 1997, p. 18; Clark, & Schwiebert, 2001, p. 163).

The variance in the role occupancy of midlife women is not only influenced by personal circumstances, but also, as previously discussed, by changes in the social and cultural context, such as changes in the timing of life-events, more career opportunities for women, changes in expectations about marriage and family life. The change in the timing of life-events is linked to the changes midlife women's role occupancy. For example, a midlife woman who returned to university might find she had to balance the roles of student with that of mother, wife and employee. Thus, due to the changes in the cultural context, there was greater fluidity in midlife women's role occupancy; hence, greater variability in their midlife experiences.

Discussing their midlife experiences, participants did not mention that any of them experienced the so-called “*empty-nest syndrome*”. When the researcher introduced



the topic when the Model for the Development of Midlife Women (Chapter 4 – 4.3) was discussed, participants whose children had left home said it was not a major disruptive event in their lives. The participants whose children were still living at home said that o them that would mean more time for them; something they were looking forward to. Participants did not suffer the symptoms associated with the empty-nest syndrome, such as depression with the loss of the mothering role, as a matter of course. It seems the empty-nest syndrome is not a common occurrence amongst most midlife women (Chapter 4 – 4.3.2.3). This is supported by recent studies, which report that most midlife women's lives are not upset when the last child leaves home (Hunter et al., 2002, p. 34; McFadden, & Rawson Swan, 2012, p. 319). However, the study recognised that, although not a general trend, the launch of the last child might be major disruptive event for some women.

- **The spiritual domain**

Discussing spirituality in midlife, one participant said that in midlife she re-examined her spiritual perspective and decided to leave the traditional church to which she belonged. Since leaving the church, she had explored different spiritual traditions. Another participant also said that she had started to question the faith tradition of her youth, which she found to be cold and dogmatic. She did not leave the church she belonged to, but in midlife her perspective on the matter of faith had changed, and she expressed it on the following way:

*“It is as if I have a softer outlook and is less critical.”*

Yet another participant noted that her desire in midlife is to experience an

*“inner sense of peace and calm.”*

She realised that her spirituality graced her with these qualities, and therefore she vowed in midlife to deepen her spiritual commitment. In midlife, some participants **reassessed** their spiritual beliefs and either committed themselves to a deeper exploration of their spirituality within the context of their religion, or to explore non-religious spiritual traditions. It seems as if midlife women do not necessarily experience “a powerful spiritual awakening” (Howell, 2001, p. 52). However, they do reassess their spirituality, and might often express a greater interest in spirituality (Marston, 2002, p. 9; Wink, & Dillon, 2002, p. 80).

Reflecting on the role of spirituality in this phase of their lives a participant wrote,

*“Without spirituality my life would be dull.”*

Another participant said,

*“My life would be empty with no purpose.”*

One participant’s profound statement was,

*“The cookie will crumble without it.”*

Implicit in these responses is that participants made no conception of their lives without spirituality. All participants confessed that spirituality was of fundamental importance to them. The importance the participants ascribed to spirituality in their lives was attested to by participants’ drawings, which included symbols of spirituality such as the cross (Fig. 18) and the sacred heart (Fig. 19).



**Figure 18: The cross**



**Figure 19: The sacred heart**

Participants testified that spirituality was of importance to them throughout life, and therefore in midlife it was an important aspect of their midlife experiences. Although participants concurred about the importance of spirituality, there was great variability in the experience and expression of spirituality amongst participants (6.4.2)

This study recognised that there were many women who did not consider themselves to be spiritual and that the study was too small to claim to be

representative of all midlife women; however, it seemed for those who were spiritual (religious and non-religious), their spirituality was of cardinal importance.

- **Diversity in midlife experiences**

Participants differed in their experiences of their midlife passage as it pertained to particular aspects in the psychological, social and spiritual life domains. For example, some participants reported that multiple role occupations was a source of tension, while others dealt with it with equanimity; there were participants of the same age who were still raising children, while others' children were launched. For some the process of individuation entailed integration of repressed aspects of their lives, while for others it involved discarding beliefs about themselves they no longer subscribed to. Some participants described their entry into the world of work for the first time, while other changed their career paths, and still others were retired. These contradictory experiences of women accounts for the diverse ways in which participants experienced their midlife passage and was graphically expressed in their drawings. The yin-yang drawing (Fig. 20) a participant explained as her experience of midlife as a good place to be, adding,

*"I do not understand the hype of the midlife crisis."*

Similarly, a participant testified that for her midlife was a time of contentment, and when describing her drawing said it was because of her experience of

*"living in the light of God"* (Fig. 21).



**Figure 20: Yin and yang**



**Figure 21: Light of God**

In contrast, a participant said that she felt as if she was losing her mind; she felt confused about what was happening in her life. Discussing her drawing (Fig. 22), she explained that the empty circle was representative of not knowing what to expect in midlife, the little stairwell was the difficulties she is facing, and the flower was the part of her that hoped it would get better. Another participant described her experience of midlife as ambivalent, explaining her drawing of the “The crying queen” (Fig. 23) she said,

*“Sometimes I feel overwhelmed by my circumstances and I completely lose my cool, and at other times I feel I manage and my life is actually OK.”*

Alternating between the two extreme positions left the participant feeling confused.



**Figure 22: The empty circle**



**Figure 23: The crying queen**

There were recurring themes (e.g. individuation, multiple role occupation) in participants' narratives of their midlife experiences, and it is these themes which, in the words of Lachman (2004, p. 306), make it “possible to characterise midlife in broad strokes”. However, participants reported differences in how they experienced similar aspects of midlife like role occupancy and spirituality. There were also differences between participants as it applied to the timing of life-events; consequently, there was great variance in participants' midlife developmental patterns. These findings are corroborated by Clark and Schwiebert (2001, p. 169), who point out that women's midlife experiences are continually becoming more diverse as they uniquely chart innovative models of the midlife passage. Hence, in

this study the variability of developmental patterns defines the essential nature of the midlife passage of women.

#### **6.4.2 Midlife women's experiences of spirituality**

The reflection on spirituality encouraged participants to express their conceptualisation of spirituality in their own words. The discussion was followed by the opportunity to mould their spirituality by using different colours of play dough. A PowerPoint presentation on spirituality offered more information on spirituality.

Initially the entire data set was broadly coded, using the research question about midlife women's experiences about spirituality to demarcate the relevant data. The concept analysis of spirituality in the literature review (Chapter 2) was used to predefine codes in order to systemise data according to those components, which represent individuals' experience of spirituality. Related codes were combined, forming themes, which were then named search; source of strength; and linked with Sacred. A theme emerged from the data that was not coded using the predefined codes. The theme was named *religious and non-religious*, and added to the set of themes that represent participants' experiences of spirituality (Fig. 24). The next step entailed a review of the theme set to look for similarities, relationships and patterns between the components of participants' spiritual experiences. There is a reciprocal relationship between the different themes (components), for example, the experience of a connection to the Sacred, is also experienced as a source of strength. A similarity between all components was that they were all based on participants' subjective and lived experience. A pattern that was discerned across all themes was the diverseness of participants' spiritual experiences as it related to the themes.

The findings of the inquiry into the nature of midlife women's experiences of spirituality are outlined in Figure 24, and are followed by a discussion of findings in relation to the participants' experiences of the different components of spirituality.

# Midlife Women's Experiences of Spirituality

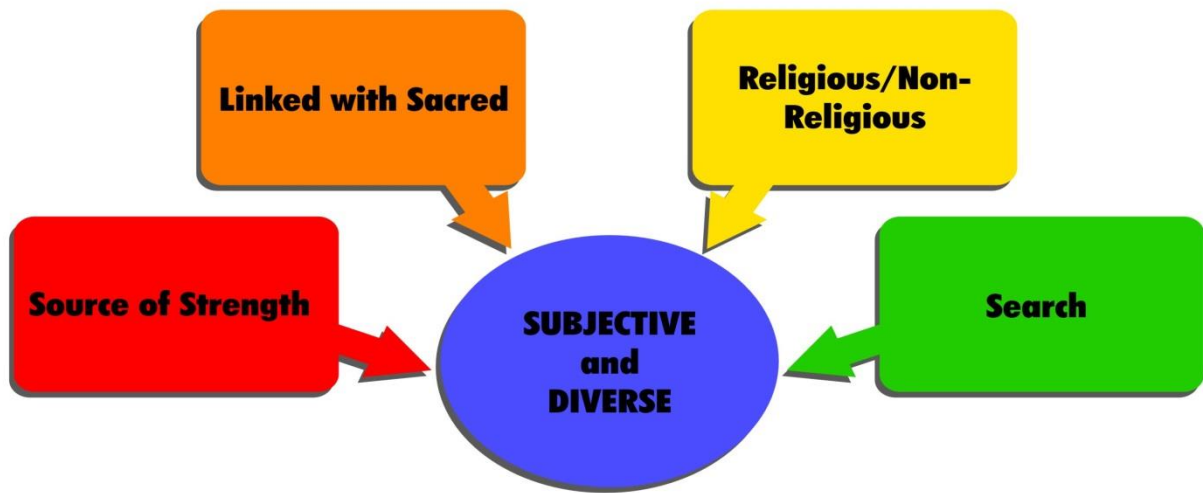


Figure 24: Midlife women's of experiences of spirituality

- **Spirituality as source of strength**

Participants expressed their experiences of spirituality as a source of strengths in various ways, for example,

*"God anchors me; it prevents me from getting lost in life",*

and

*"My spirituality is like wings which carries and supports me."*

One participant explained that her spirituality inspired her

*"to speak up where I usually would say nothing",*

and another said,

*"When I am at my weakest it makes me get up again."*

A participant describing her dough sculpture (Fig. 25) explained the hills and valleys were a reminder that her spirituality carried her through valleys and over mountains. She said,

*"God is everywhere throughout life in difficult times and in good times."*

From these descriptions, it is evident that participants' experiences of spirituality as source of strength were based on their lived experience, explaining the diversity of their experiences. It is also apparent that participants' assessment of spirituality as source of strength was connected to their perceptions of the Sacred (God), and informed by a religious or non-religious orientation. The understanding of spirituality as a source of strength is corroborated by social work scholars who reiterate that for many clients spirituality is a significant source of strength (Hodge, 2002, p. 85; Saleeby, 2006b, p. 84; Bhagwan, 2010a, p. 189; Canda, & Furman, 2010, p. 75). It would appear that for some midlife women spirituality is an important strength when adapting to midlife changes.



**Figure 25: Hills and valleys**

- **Spirituality is linked with the Sacred**

All participants' descriptions of spirituality included a reference to the Sacred. For them spirituality encompassed the experience of a connection to a transcendent reality. The connection to the Sacred is considered "the common thread in all spiritualities" (Miller, & Thoreson, 2003, p. 24), and the notion of a transcendent dimension is not exceptional in academic inquiries, as it enjoys recognition by major theorists (Hodge, 2002, p. 110). Most participants referred to the Sacred as "God" or "Jesus", but descriptions such as "Great Mystery" and "Divine Power" were also used. This is reflected in participants' observations that:

*“My hope and faith in the resurrection of Christ gives me strength to continue when I struggle”*

and

*“I know that a Divine Power look after all life on earth, I find that a comfort”*

The differences in participants’ descriptions are an indication that not only is participants’ conception of the Sacred based on their individualised understanding, but it is also informed by their religious or non-religious beliefs. Seemingly, for some midlife women their experience of spirituality cannot be divorced from their experience of a connection to the Sacred, which have a profound impact on their perception of spirituality. Social workers should not only be cognizant that for many midlife women spirituality is associated with the Sacred, but also that it incorporates different ideas of the Sacred.

- **Spiritual experiences are religious or non-religious**

Most of the participants’ spiritual experiences were framed by their religious beliefs, and articulated in religious lexicon. For example, participants’ voiced their spiritual experience as follows,

*“I feel peaceful because I know that God has chosen me to be His child”,*

*“The Holy Spirit dwells in me”,*

and

*“I am connected to God who protect me and uplifts me.”*

However, other participants’ descriptions of their spiritual experiences reflected their non-religious spiritual beliefs, as exemplified in the following statements,

*“My spirituality is like light, colourful yet misty, always there around me and in me”,*

and

*“For me spirituality is an inner knowledge of something divine or magic in the miracles of nature.”*



Thus, participants' spiritual experiences were diverse, as they included both religious and non-religious expressions of spirituality. The religious or non-religious orientation as a matter of course influences women's conceptualisation of the Sacred, their appraisal of spirituality as source of strength, and the spiritual pathway they follow. Evidently, midlife women's spiritual experiences are neither exclusively secular nor religious, but can be experienced in a religious context, or have no association with religion (Chapter 2 – 2.3.2)

- **Spiritual experiences involves a search**

A participant who moulded her spirituality without a clear shape (Fig. 26), explained,

*“My spirituality is a bit of a mess, but it is evolving.”*

Another participant commented,

*“I want to keep on searching and growing, knowing the best is yet to come!”*

All participants indicated that they were actively engaged in various spiritual practices (e.g. prayer), rituals (e.g. lighting candles) and used symbols (e.g. angels, cross) to enhance their experience of a connection to the Sacred. For example, a participant wrote,

*“I seek the presence of God through reading, singing and dancing.”*

Another said,

*“I feel closest to God in nature”,*

and one participant stated,

*“Sitting in a beautiful old church inspires me.”*

All participants indicated that they wanted to revisit old practices they had previously used, and to explore novel ways to enhance their spiritual experiences. Thus, participants did not experience their spirituality as static, but rather as an on-going quest to seek and connect to the Sacred. It seems for midlife women their spirituality is experienced as a dynamic and still unfolding quest in which they are actively participating (Wink, & Dillon, 2002, p. 80). Therefore, they believed that they could

still grow spiritually in midlife. The ways in which participants undertook the search to connect and experience the Sacred were diverse, defined in a personal and unique way. It was informed by their subjective experience of those practices, rituals or symbols that foster a connection to the Sacred. Hence, when aiming to develop their spiritual strengths, social workers need to take into account that midlife women do not endorse a universal spiritual path (search).



**Figure 26: Spirituality is evolving**

- **Diversity of spiritual experiences**

All aspects of their spiritual experiences, including spirituality as source of strength, a search, and connection to the Sacred were personalised through participants' subjective experiences. Therefore, spirituality was distinct for every participant; the outcome was a diversity of spiritual experiences. The diversity of participants' experiences of spirituality was clearly illustrated in the play dough sculptures, none of which was identical (Fig. 27).



**Figure 27: Play dough sculptures of spirituality**

The diversification of spiritual experiences was further expanded through the religious and non-religious expressions of spirituality; hence, the distinctive features of midlife women's experiences, in this study, were identified as a subjective understanding of spirituality and the diversity of spiritual experiences.

### **6.4.3 The characteristics of midlife women's spiritual strengths**

The initial discussion of the spiritual strengths the participants employed was followed by a PowerPoint presentation on spirituality and spiritual strengths. The participants completed a three-part spiritual strengths-assessment questionnaire (Appendix F) about past and current spiritual strengths and strengths they would like to develop in future.

At the outset, the research question was used to encode data broadly across the entire data set. The strengths perspective's classification of strengths (Chapter 2 – 2.5.4), were used to develop a set of predefined codes to categorise data and identify possible spiritual strengths. The list of codes, as it pertains to spiritual strengths, was sorted and related codes were grouped together. Subsequently, themes were formulated and named, for example, clarity about spiritual beliefs, spiritual relationships, and spiritual symbols. Guided by the prescriptions of the strengths perspective, all the themes were then reviewed to distinguish similarities, differences and possible patterns. Consequently, two types of spiritual strengths were identified, namely those of a private and personal nature, and spiritual

strengths located in the social context. These two types were named **internal spiritual strengths** and **external spiritual strengths** (Chapter 2 – 2.5.4).

The findings as they relate to the internal and external spiritual strengths of the participants are listed in Tables 5 and 6, and elucidated with examples provided by participants:

- **Internal spiritual strengths**

Themes are elucidated with examples of significant statements (Table 5), defining those aspects of spiritual engagement, which is of a private and intimate nature:

**Table 5: Internal spiritual strengths:**

COMPONENTS OF INTERNAL SPIRITUAL STRENGTHS
<p><b>Perceived closeness to Sacred/God</b></p> <p>“I feel as if I am being held in God’s hand”</p> <p>“God is light and He wants to share that light with me”</p> <p>“I sometimes experience the presence of the Holy Spirit in my life”</p> <p>“I talk to God about my problems, and then wait”</p>
<p><b>Recognising and nurturing your spiritual core</b></p> <p>“I know God chose me to be His child”</p> <p>“As I understand more about my divine nature, I want to listen more to my inner self, it helps me to accept myself, good and bad”.</p>
<p><b>Clarity about spiritual beliefs – (e.g. ultimate meaning of life)</b></p> <p>“God has a plan for my life”</p> <p>“I never doubt my heavenly home awaits me after death”</p> <p>“There is a ultimate source of energy of which we are all part”</p> <p>“My hope and my faith is in the resurrection of Christ”</p> <p>“God is the owner of our lives”</p>
<p><b>Inner change (e.g. feelings of peace, hope, joy)</b></p> <p>“I feel peaceful because I know God is in control of my life”</p> <p>“I trust in God”</p> <p>“I am content because I know I am of value to God”</p> <p>“I am now less judgemental than I was when I was younger”</p> <p>“... an ever-present joy and deep sense of peace in my heart”</p>

- **External spiritual strengths**

Various examples of external spiritual resources illuminate participants’ utilisation of the different categories of external spiritual resources:

**Table 6: External spiritual strengths**

ASPECTS OF EXTERNAL SPIRITUAL STRENGTHS	
<b>Faith communities and spiritual Groups</b>	Member of a church congregation; Bible study group; prayer group; attend worship services
<b>Spiritual relationships</b>	Husband; sister; members of family (grandmother and aunt); other women; my mother; few special friends; old university friend; fellow believers; specific women friends; brother
<b>Spiritual directors, clergy and spiritual mentors</b>	Certain writers serve as mentor, church minister; spiritual teacher; pastor; counsellor at church
<b>Spiritual practices</b>	Praying; spiritual journal; visual diary; reading spiritual books, studying scripture; reading poetry; listening to spiritual programmes on TV and radio; creating works of art, singing; drumming; listening to spiritual music; dancing; meditation; prayer walking; silence, retreat to sacred space (nature, beach, garden); spiritual retreat; praying with a close friend
<b>Spiritual rituals</b>	Lighting candles; evening ritual; burning incense; communion dancing; blowing shofar
<b>Spiritual symbols</b>	Christian cross; menorah; tallit; doves; stars; angels in art; olive oil; artworks of great masters; stones and tree-stumps

All participants reported that their spiritual resources included a combination of internal and external strengths. The participants differed in what they experienced as spiritual strengths, as demonstrated by the variety of rituals, symbols, practices they used, and the differences in their experiences of inner change, the connection to the Sacred and their spiritual beliefs (Fig. 23 & 24). They also agreed that they had a preference for particular spiritual strengths, but no interest in, or were biased about other spiritual strengths. For example, one participant explained that she did not find the use of symbols a source of strength, while another admitted that she did not like dancing, so would not consider it a spiritual strength. Thus, midlife women's identification of spiritual strengths is dependent upon their subjective experience of them as strengths and therefore come in a "variety of shapes and sizes" (Pargament, 2007, p. 99). It appears that the spiritual strengths employed by midlife women are wide-ranging; therefore, a one-size-fits-all approach to developing spiritual strengths

would be ineffective. Women would only adopt spiritual strengths that are personally meaningful to them.

After participating in various spiritual practices (e.g. meditation), the participants indicated that they were interested in expanding their repertoire of spiritual strengths by investigating the possibility of new spiritual practices, and re-introduce previously used spiritual resources. For example, one participant said,

*“I like the idea of a spiritual mentor. It is an idea I really want to pursue.”*

Most participants also disclosed that there were particular spiritual strengths they wanted to explore more deeply. One participant articulated it this way,

*“I want to be involved more in my spiritual group.”*

Hence, the spiritual strengths of participants were not an inanimate collection of resources, but were dynamic, as they continually strive to grow and expand their repertoire of spiritual strengths. Social workers should note that in midlife there is the potential that women might still grow and expand their spiritual strengths.

## **6.5 SUMMARY**

Preparing for the empirical inquiry, the researcher attended various international conferences on spirituality in social work, as well as local workshops and seminars relevant to the inquiry. The researcher gained hands-on experience of a variety of spiritual practices and rituals, as well as about the use of creative methods such as art and music to elicit tacit knowledge. To attain a greater level of objectivity during the research, a spiritual diary was kept, and a spiritual autobiography, genogram and a spiritual strengths assessment form was completed. The researcher is a midlife woman and “to bracket” her own perception of midlife, she reviewed studies on women’s midlife development, reading non-academic books on the subject and kept a journal about her midlife experiences.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit fifteen women between the ages of 40 and 60 years for participation in the two workshops. The workshops as research engagement encouraged the generation of data through an extended epistemology using various aids such as stories, poems, music, and open discussions in the

groups. Data were captured using audio recordings, field notes and photographs. The raw data included transcriptions of audio recordings, field notes, photos of drawings and dough sculptures, e-mail correspondence and the completed spiritual strengths assessment and feedback forms.

The six phases of the analytical process, as dictated by thematic analysis, were used to code and identify patterns and themes in the data and the findings were reported in a narrative style. Data were encoded using the research question about the nature of women's midlife experiences to categorise data broadly. Using predefined codes as it pertains to women's midlife experiences in the physical, psychological, social and spiritual domain, the data were further refined. In the following step all related codes were meaningfully merged, from which sets of themes, which captured the meaning participants ascribed their midlife transition in the different life domains, emerged. When theme sets were reviewed, it revealed variability as a pattern that consistently appeared in relation to particular themes in the psychological, social and spiritual life domains. The variation in these areas in the main contributed to the wide-ranging developmental patterns reported by participants. Thus, the essential nature of women's midlife experiences can be defined as diverse.

The research question regarding the nature of midlife women's experiences of spirituality was initially used to code the data set broadly. The broadly coded data were then reviewed for themes, using the concept analysis of spirituality (Chapter 2) to identify those components that represent individuals' experience of spirituality. The themes representing these components were identified and named. The identified themes were appraised to discern possible relationships between themes and patterns across the theme set. A reciprocal relationship between the different themes was revealed. In this study, the subjective understanding of spirituality and diversity of spiritual experiences are recognised as distinctive features of midlife women's experiences of spirituality.

After initially coding data according to the research question about the characteristics of the spiritual strengths women employ, the directives of the strengths perspective were used to identify themes, as they pertained to those aspects of spirituality that are deemed sources of strengths. When the themes were analysed for similarities, differences and possible patterns, two groups of themes were identified as main



sources of strengths. These two sources are internal spiritual strengths, referring to spiritual strengths that are of a private and personal nature, and external spiritual strengths, which apply to strengths located in the social context. The spiritual strengths participants used were based on their subjective experiences and therefore extensive in scope. Furthermore, participants were actively engaged in expanding and developing their spiritual strengths.

## **CHAPTER 7:**

# **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

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The key argument in this dissertation was that women have spiritual strengths that can support their midlife transition, and that this is of particular relevance to the current cohort of midlife women who are charting unorthodox models of midlife development. The study also maintained that social work's mission to promote clients' wellbeing compels the recognition of the role of spiritual strengths in advancing a sense of wellbeing. Guided by these arguments the literature review set out to delineate the meaning of spirituality, thereby demarcating the parameters of the investigation and substantiating claims of spirituality as a source of strength. An account was given of the discourse on spirituality in social work, affirming social work's recognition of spirituality as a salient component of clients' lives. The strengths perspective as practice approach in social work, which provides directives for the integration of spirituality in accordance with the profession's mandate, was discussed. The rationale for the study was explained by calling attention to the unique challenges midlife women negotiate in the midlife transition, as well as their recruitment of spiritual resources to support the transition. As part of the preparation for the empirical investigation, the literature review explored action research's stance on ontology and epistemology, the engagement of participants as co-researchers, and this research design's commitment to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

To supplement the literature study, an empirical investigation was undertaken. The empirical investigation entailed the presentation of two workshops during which data were generated through an extended epistemology. The data were captured using audio recordings, field notes, photos, e-mail correspondence, completed assessment and feedback questionnaires. Conclusions and recommendations informed by the literature study and empirical investigation are presented in this chapter.

## 7.1 CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this investigation was the delineation of guidelines for a social work programme to facilitate the identification and mobilisation of spiritual strengths to support women's midlife transition in order to enhance a sense of wellbeing in this phase of life.

The following conclusions can be drawn from the study:

### 7.1.1 A working definition of spirituality

The definition for spirituality used in the investigation was "the personal search for the sacred and for ultimate meaning through an individualised understanding of the sacred" (2.4.2). The definition was constructed in such a way as to reflect the contemporary meaning of spirituality; emphasise the subjective nature of spirituality; to be clinically useful; and not to be so broadly delineated that it yields to the contemporary tendency to regard almost any experience as spiritual. For example, by including the concept of the sacred, spirituality is delineated with reference to a transcendent reality – a "common thread" in all spirituality, curbing the vagueness often surrounding the popular conceptualisation of spirituality. During the course of the empirical investigation, all the participants, when describing their spiritual experiences, included a reference to the sacred, for example, a participant articulated it this way:

*"I am connected to God who protect me and uplifts me."* (6.4.2)

Spirituality was also described in terms of a search, as expressed by a participant who said,

*"I want to keep on searching and growing – knowing the best is yet to come!"* (6.4.2)

Participants' descriptions of spirituality also reflected both the personal meaning they ascribed to their spirituality and their religious and non-religious orientations towards spirituality, for example,

*"The Holy Spirit dwells in me",*

and

*“For me spirituality is an inner knowledge of something divine or magic in the miracles of nature.” (6.4.2)*

Thus, participants’ descriptions of their spirituality were compatible with the definition of spirituality used in this study. These findings not only suggested that the criteria for spirituality as delineated by this study were met, but also that the definition was clinically useful. Hence, there was empirical evidence that the definition was responsive to midlife women’s subjective understanding of spirituality; attentive to the contemporary meaning of spirituality (internal awareness – 2.1.3); empathetic to an inclusive approach (religious and non-religious -2.3.2); and distinguished between spiritual experiences and other worthwhile or fulfilling experiences (through reference to the Sacred – 2.4.2). The empirical support for the functional value of the definition addressed the concern of social work theorists such as Barker (2008, p. 25 – 2.4.1) to some extent, who observes that the existing definitions of spirituality in social work are primarily based on theory, with scant empirical support of why they should be used. Endorsed by empirical evidence, the study concluded that the definition of spirituality used for this research project is competent to identify that which is subjectively experienced as spiritual strengths and can therefore be employed effectively to assist in the delineation of guidelines for a programme to develop midlife women’s spiritual strengths. However, this study did not suggest that the definition of spirituality be adopted as the final or only definition of spirituality in social work. This open definition invites further dialogue.

### **7.1.2 Midlife women are bio-psychosocial and spiritual beings**

The participants unanimously affirmed the significance of spirituality and spiritual strengths in their lives, to the point of confessing that their lives would be inconceivable without spirituality. For example, one participant expressed it this way, *“The cookie will crumble without it” (6.4.1)*. The central role afforded to spirituality attests to many modern-day scholars’ argument that spirituality is an integral human phenomenon central to human existence (2.2.1). Spirituality as the essential or deepest core of the individual (Miller, & Thoreson, 2003, p. 28) is a universal feature shared by everyone (although people might vary in the amount they focus on

spirituality (Canda, & Furman, 2010, p. 88). As such, it accounts for the presence of spirituality throughout human history and endorses the notion of spirituality as inextricable dimension of being human. Based on the testimonies of participants and corroborating evidence in the literature review, this study concluded that spirituality is a fundamental aspect of being human, corroborating the conceptualisation of midlife women as bio-psychosocial and spiritual beings. The significance of these findings was the impact it had on social work intervention strategies aimed at promoting wellbeing in midlife. These findings seemed to suggest that the bio-medical model (product of the modernist epistemology – 1.1) would be ill equipped to promote wellbeing. Thus, it upheld the argument of the study that the promotion of wellbeing in midlife was best served through a holistic approach that recognised the role of spirituality and spiritual strengths in enhancing midlife women's sense of wellbeing.

### **7.1.3 The variability of women's midlife transition**

The fluidity in developmental patterns reported by participants seemed to be part of a universal trend (6.4.1). The flux in women's midlife developmental patterns was corroborated by studies on women's midlife development reported in the literature study (Degges-White, 2001, p. 6; Lachman, 2004, p. 306). The most significant factors contributing to the dissimilarities in participants' midlife trajectories were role occupancy and timing of life-events. It was also in these areas that their midlife developmental patterns were distinctly different from those of their mothers. For example, one participant remarked that, unlike her mother's generation, "*I believe I can still grow in midlife*" (6.4.1). The differences between the previous generation and the current cohort of midlife women were mostly attributed to transformations in the social context brought about by the Women's Movement. Because of these changes, negative cultural stereotypes regarding menopause, ageing, and empty-nest syndrome, which were regarded as the factors in the social context, and which had a profound impact on women's experiences of midlife, became marginal in its impact (4.3.2.1). This was corroborated by participants' lack of interest in menopause, the signs of ageing and the empty-nest syndrome. As these negative cultural messages are increasingly disregarded by many women, it is less likely to shape their midlife experiences as it did those of previous generations. It affirms the observation that the historical time in which midlife development unfolds has an impact on the pattern

of the midlife trajectory (Weiten, 2002, p. 345). Noteworthy of these findings is that they seem to indicate that the culturally defined models of midlife development of the previous generations cannot be superimposed onto midlife women in this historical moment in time.

The fluidity and diversity of developmental patterns are the result of the unique and unorthodox nature of the midlife development of the current cohort of midlife women. This was endorsed by the participants of this study. For example, some participants launched a new career in midlife, while others were retired (7.1.3). For some midlife was a time of calm and content, as depicted in the drawing of the yin and yang (7.1.3 – Fig. 20), while for others it was a time of ambivalences, as explained by the participant who made the drawing of “The crying queen” (7.1.3 – Fig. 23). Thus, notwithstanding the shared experiences such as adaption to physical changes, individuation and multiple-role occupancy, every participant’s midlife passage was original, as depicted in their drawings (7.1.3 – Fig.14–23). The findings support the new convention that the current cohort of midlife women is “pioneers in a new passage of time” (Evans, 2008, p. 79), progressively moving away from a universally supported or fixed pattern of midlife development to a personally defined pattern with almost boundless and unceasing possibilities for development and growth. These are notable findings, which are of relevance to social workers working with midlife women. For example, it implies that social workers should be wary of any pre-conceived ideas of what women’s midlife passage should entail, but instead be sensitive to the idiosyncratic ways in which women chart their midlife passage. Therefore, social workers will be well advised to adopt a flexible approach, one in which the normative, multifaceted developmental tasks of midlife is supported, yet at the same time encourages women to shape a personally meaningful midlife passage. The application of social work principles such as individuation, self-determination and a client-centred approach would be of central importance when assisting women in shaping a distinct midlife passage. The implication for delineating guidelines for a programme to develop the spiritual strengths of midlife women is that they should acquaint women with those spiritual strengths that support normative developmental tasks, but at the same time reinforce their endeavours to chart a life course in their own unique way.

#### **7.1.4 The wide-ranging experiences of spirituality and spiritual strengths**

The e-mail marketing the workshops (Appendix A) was drafted to focus attention specifically on the development of the spiritual strengths of midlife women. Consequently, it was assumed that the women who attended were either spiritual or interested in spirituality. As this study was not representative of all midlife women, the conclusions about midlife women's spirituality pertained to individual women taking part in the study. Therefore, it could not claim its findings to be universally true for all midlife women.

Spirituality was endorsed by all participants as a source of strength, and all admitted that they used a variety of spiritual strengths. This was exemplified by participants' statements such as,

*"God anchors me; it prevents me from getting lost in life",*

and

*"God is everywhere throughout life in difficult times and in good times."*

(6.4.2)

These accounts of participants about spirituality as a source of strength were corroborated by the researcher's own experiences in practice (Chapter 1), and by findings from studies, which confirmed that for many midlife women spiritual strengths are important resources in their arsenal of strengths (King et al., 2005, p. 73; Arnold 2005, p. 643). The testimonies substantiated the growing evidence in social work that spirituality is a source of strength for many clients, and vindicated the argument of this study that spirituality is a resource used by many midlife women (Hodge, 2005, p. 77; Saleeby, 2006b, p. 84; Canda, & Furman, 2010, p. 4). The significance of these findings is that they provide empirical grounding for social work strategies aimed at the identification and mobilisation of spiritual strengths to support the midlife passage. Thus, it bestows the status of an undertaking sanctioned by empirical evidence upon the delineation of guidelines for a programme to develop midlife women's spiritual strengths.

There were similarities in participants' experiences of spirituality, particularly pertaining to the role of spirituality in their lives, which all agreed played a central role in their lives (6.4.1). However, participants' experiences of spirituality in relation to their conception of the Sacred; their search to connect to the Sacred; and spirituality as resource were varied, as exemplified in the diverse shapes of the play dough sculptures representing their spiritual experiences (Fig. 27 – 6.2.3). The diversity of spiritual experiences was further emphasised by participants' religious or non-religious orientations (6.2.3, 6.2.4). The diversity of spiritual experiences was exacerbated by participants' subjective interpretation of spirituality in both religious and non-religious forms of spirituality. For example, a non-religious participant expressed her experience of spirituality as:

*“My spirituality is like light, colourful yet misty, always there around me and in me”, (6.4.2)*

and a religious participant as,

*“The Holy Spirit dwells in me.” (6.4.2)*

The participants' disparate descriptions of their experiences of spirituality and spiritual strengths confirmed theorists' assertion that spirituality takes many forms, because individuals develop spirituality in their own unique way (Hill et al., 2000, p. 68; Schneiders, 2003, p. 166). Therefore, a distinguishing feature of the participants' spirituality and spiritual strengths was the diversity of their understanding and experiences of the concepts. These findings confirmed that midlife women's conceptualisation of spirituality and spiritual strengths is subjectively informed and therefore distinct for every woman (6.4.2). It also corroborated the observation that spirituality is increasingly equated with an internal awareness (2.1.3); therefore, individuals' experience is predicated on their “interior empiricism” (Wilber 2006, p. 47) of spirituality and spiritual strengths. These findings have a significant bearing on the social work approach, which aims to promote women's wellbeing in midlife, particularly when aiming to harness spiritual strengths to support midlife development. As women's conception of spiritual strengths is subjectively informed, it necessitates an approach that embraces a subjective epistemology and ontology (1.1), which recognises women's construction of their lived experience of spiritual strengths (3.3.3). Consequently, the empirical evidence from these findings



validates the employment of a practice approach that adopts a subjective epistemology, acknowledging that clients' reality is constructed from their lived experience.

### **7.1.5 The strengths perspective – a holistic approach to wellbeing**

The review of the theoretical grounding disclosed that a foundational assumption of the strengths perspective is that clients have resources that can be marshalled to improve their quality of life (Weick et al., 2006, p. 121). This assumption translates into the strengths perspective's goal to identify, enumerate and mobilise strengths (Rapp, 2006, p. 129; Saleebey, 2006a, p. 1). The strengths perspective delineates particular practice principles to achieve this goal, for example, it advises the social worker to relinquish the role of expert, and instead to recognise that clients have expert knowledge about their own strengths and capacities. It urges social workers to collaborate with clients; to follow a client-centred approach; to adopt a strengths attitude that consistently draws attention to and builds clients' internal and external strengths (Blundo, 2006, p. 41; Nelson-Becker et al., 2006, p. 150; Rapp, 2006, p. 131; Saleebey, 2006a, p. 18; Saleebey, 2006b, p. 88; Bhagwan, 2007, p. 34). Therefore, the stance of the strengths perspective is that midlife women have subjectively informed resources (including spiritual strengths), which can be marshalled to support midlife development. To identify and mobilise these strengths, social workers relinquish claims of expert knowledge about midlife women's spiritual strengths and instead follow a client-centred approach in which they collaborate with midlife women to enumerate their unique internal and external spiritual strengths.

The practice principles of the strengths perspective were implemented during the empirical investigation. As a result, they facilitated participants' articulation and identification of their internal and external spiritual strengths (6.4.3). Feedback from participants confirmed that they did indeed identify their spiritual strengths, for example, a participant wrote,

*"It helped me know to more about my own spiritual strengths."* (7.2.1.1)

Based on the literature study, which revealed that the strengths perspective is philosophically compatible with a holistic approach (Chapter 4), the findings of the

empirical inquiry (Chapter 6), and the researcher's practice experience (6.1), this study concluded that the strengths perspective is well suited to assist in developing the spiritual strengths of midlife women. The relevance of these findings is the assertion that, as an existing social work approach, the strengths perspective is eligible to provide guidelines for a programme to develop the spiritual strengths of midlife women.

### **7.1.6 Achieving the research aims**

Based on the data discussed above, conclusions were reached as to the achievement of the overall as well as the primary aims of the study:

#### ***7.1.6.1 The overall aim – delineation of guidelines for the social work programme***

This study set out to determine guidelines for a programme to develop midlife women's spiritual strengths. The delineation of the guidelines (7.2.1) was firstly arrived at by doing a concept analysis of spirituality to gain an in-depth understanding of the contemporary meaning of spirituality and to articulate what is attributed to the term clearly (2.3). By demarcating spirituality, parameters were outlined for the identification and mobilisation of spiritual strengths in the programme to prevent misguided attempts to promote fulfilling experiences devoid of any spiritual content erroneously. The categorisation of spiritual strengths was further refined by following the directives of the strengths perspective to catalogue them as internal and external spiritual strengths (2.5.4). The participants' reports of their spiritual experiences and descriptions of the nature of their spiritual strengths resonated with the definition of spirituality and spiritual strengths in the literature review (6.4.2; 6.4.3). This confirmed the suitability of the definition of spirituality and the demarcation of spiritual strengths to inform guidelines for the programme as they pertained to the identification of spiritual strengths.

The literature review on the midlife transition of women (Chapter 4) and the participants' reports about their midlife experiences (6.4.1) informed the formulation of guidelines as they apply to the inclusion of information about midlife in the programme. The guidelines pertaining to the format of the programme were based

on the practical experiences gained during the workshops, the researchers' own extensive experience in the field, and feedback from the participants, as well as the directives of the strengths perspective (Chapter 3; Chapter 4). The literature review on the discourse on spirituality in social work, the strengths perspective as practice approach, as well as the practical application of spiritually sensitive social work practice principles assisted in outlining guidelines as they pertain to the role and preparation of the social worker.

By utilising the information in the literature study and empirical experiences during the presentation of the workshops, recommendations (7.3.1) were made regarding the potential material to be included, modes of actions to be undertaken, the format of the programme, the role of the social worker, the engagement of participants in accordance with the strengths perspective as theoretical model, and the protocol for spiritually sensitive social work practice. One could therefore draw the conclusion that the aim to delineate guidelines for a social work programme to facilitate the identification and development of the spiritual strengths of midlife women was achieved. The significance of achieving this research aim was that by identifying guidelines on *how* to develop spiritual strengths, it moved the research project beyond the description of women's subjective experiences of their spiritual strengths to a focus on practical application, thus heeding the appeal of social work scholars to close the gap between scientific knowledge and social work practice (5.3.1).

#### ***7.1.6.2 Understanding the nature of women's midlife transition***

An extensive overview of the midlife transition of women was given in Chapter 4. The age parameters for midlife were elucidated and the lifespan perspective was used as orientating framework to explain the multifaceted and multidirectional nature of the midlife development of women. Informed by the bio-psychosocial and spiritual conceptualisation of midlife women, a *Model of Women's Midlife Transition* (Chapter 4 -4.3) was developed as holistic framework to portray the salient factors that have an impact on midlife development across the four life domains. The impact of social and cultural factors on the midlife trajectory of the current cohort of midlife women was also considered. The theoretical overview was supplemented by participants' vivid descriptions of their midlife experiences, for example, a participant's description,

*“For the first time in my life I feel comfortable in my own skin”,*

and another’s description of her midlife experience as

*“I have to keep a lot of plates spinning.”* (6.4.1)

The partnership between the literature review and empirical findings contributed to an understanding of the diverse and unique ways in which midlife women address the challenges, normative developmental tasks and opportunities for growth in all life domains. Thus, the aim of understanding the nature of women’s midlife development was achieved by identifying the variability of developmental patterns as the essential nature of the midlife transition of the current cohort of midlife women. The achievement of the research aim enhanced the understanding of women’s midlife transition; therefore, this study contributes to the expansion of the knowledge framework in social work as it pertains to women’s midlife developmental patterns.

#### ***7.1.6.3. Exploring midlife women’s experiences of spirituality***

The definition of spirituality provided the context for understanding midlife women’s perception of spirituality (2.3). A review of research on the role of spirituality in midlife, and of midlife women’s experiences of spirituality also served as point of reference for the appreciation of these spiritual experiences (4.3.2.4). The empirical investigation produced further insight into the central role of spirituality in participants’ lives, for example, a participant’s assertion that without spirituality,

*“My life would be empty with no purpose”* (6.4.1).

The participants’ descriptions of their spiritual experiences were related to particular components of spirituality (the Sacred, source of strength, search) and coloured by their religious or non-religious orientation. The participants’ experiences of the different aspects of spirituality were informed by their individual understanding of spirituality; therefore, the spiritual experience of every participant was distinct, as depicted in the diversity of play dough sculptures representing their spirituality (Fig. 27 – 6.4.2). When the theoretical knowledge and the findings from the empirical investigation were integrated, the essence of midlife women’s spiritual experiences were defined as diverse and subjectively experienced. Evidence of the central role of spirituality and spiritual strengths in participants’ lives was also emphasised. Thus,

the research goal of an appreciation of midlife women's experiences of spirituality and its relevance for the enhancement of wellbeing were achieved (1.3.2). The realisation of this research goal corroborates spirituality as an important aspect of their lives for many midlife women, and therefore serves to alert social workers when planning practice interventions to consider the significant role of spirituality in midlife women's experiences of wellbeing.

#### ***7.1.6.4 Appraising the characteristics of midlife women's spiritual strengths***

The concept analysis revealed the potential of spirituality to be a source of strength, by pinpointing those elements of spirituality associated with strength and fortitude (2.5.2). The literature study also reviewed the classification of strengths in accordance with the directives of the strengths perspective; accordingly, spiritual strengths were categorised to form two main groups, namely internal and external spiritual strengths (2.5.4).

The reports of participants on their spiritual strengths disclosed that they employed a variety of spiritual strengths, and all participants' spiritual strengths included a combination of internal and external strengths. The participants indicated that their identification of spiritual strengths were dependent on their lived experience of that resource as a strength, which also accounted for a wide range of spiritual strengths reported. A key feature of participants' repertoire of spiritual strengths was its distinctly dynamic nature, as evidenced in participants' on-going quest to develop and expand their spiritual strengths (6.4.3).

The collaboration between the literature review and the empirical inquiry resulted in the realisation of the aim of the study to appraise the characteristics of midlife women's spiritual strengths by distinguishing the dynamic nature of spiritual strengths and exemplifying the variability of both internal and external spiritual strengths. The conclusion of this aim confirmed a key assumption of this study, namely that spiritual strengths are employed by midlife women to assist their midlife development.

Furthermore, the appraisal of the characteristics of spiritual strengths also addressed the concern of social work scholars that the strengths perspective often fails to account for *why* certain strengths are considered strengths (Healy 2005, p. 169;

3.3.4). The resolution of the research aim also has important implications for social work intervention strategies. Not only does the corroboration of spirituality as resource authorise endeavour to inquire into midlife women's spiritual strengths, but an appreciation of the characteristics of spiritual strengths also directs social workers to employ the most fitting practices to identify spiritual strengths.

#### ***7.1.6.5. Elucidating the eligibility of the strengths perspective***

The evaluation of the strengths perspective in Chapter 3 (3.3) identified it as an accepted practice approach in social work. The distinctive characteristics that distinguished it from other practice approaches were highlighted, for example, its emphasis on collaboration with clients, recognition of clients' constructions of their reality, the focus on strengths, and a client-centred approach. The practice principles of the strengths perspective as appraised in the literature review were applied during the workshops (6.3.1). Consequently, the assessment of the suitability of the strengths perspective was based on the literature review and corroborated by the findings of the empirical investigation. Therefore, it was concluded that the aim of confirming the eligibility of the strengths perspective in order to inform guidelines for the programme to develop spiritual strengths was achieved. The relevance of achieving this research goal is that it has identified a bone fide social work practice approach empathetic to the identification of spiritual strengths. Moreover, it extends social workers' practice capacity to promote the wellbeing of midlife women beyond the dominant modernist approaches, and in this way preserves the profession's mission to promote clients' wellbeing.

#### ***7.1.6.6 Research methodology***

The study concluded that the qualitative research paradigm (5.1) was amenable to the exploration of participants' experiences of midlife, spirituality and spiritual strengths. For example, the responsiveness of the internal design (5.1.1) to participants' subjective constructions of their lived experience such as spirituality was demonstrated in the variation of the play dough representations of spirituality (6.4.2 – Fig. 27). Consequently, the data that were generated could be used to assist in the delineation of guidelines, for example, the recommendation regarding the inclusion of a deliberation on the construct of spirituality. The phenomenological orientation

adopted by the study supported the agenda of the qualitative paradigm by defining the principles for a holistic understanding of midlife women's subjective experience of spirituality and spiritual strengths within the context of their life world (2.1.1). For example, it focused attention on spiritual strengths located in the social context such as faith communities and spiritual support groups (6.4.3 – Table 6). This promoted the recommendation to identify external spiritual resources located in the community as part of an overall assessment of spiritual strengths (7.2.1).

The workshops as research engagement (5.4; 6.3.1) were receptive to the implementation of the multi-model action research design (cooperative inquiry and appreciative inquiry – 5.3.4.1), and the application of the practice principles of the strengths perspective and spiritually sensitive practice. The successful merger of these components resulted in the generation of empirical evidence, which in concert with the findings in the literature study, contributed to the achievement of the research goals. For example, moving through cycles of action (e.g. PowerPoint presentation, meditation), reflection (5.3.4.1) and an extended epistemology (drawings, play dough sculptures) data were generated about midlife, spirituality and spiritual strengths (5.3.4.1). The data about the characteristics of spiritual strengths were supplemented by employing the 4-D Model (5.3.4.2), using a questionnaire to focus on past, present and future spiritual strengths. The information in the questionnaires (Appendix F) as well as participants' discussions about their spiritual strengths provided the data to classify their spiritual strengths as internal and external strengths, and to report on the wide-ranging and dynamic nature of these spiritual strengths (6.4.3).

The merit of using a group of midlife women to facilitate the delineation of guidelines for the programme was affirmed by the valuable data generated when participants explored mutual concerns such as those associated with midlife development, spirituality and spiritual strengths. For example, the reported differences in participants' experiences of midlife informed the definition of the essential nature of the midlife passage of women as variable. This in turn inspired the recommended guidelines not only of including information about midlife in the programme, but also of assisting women to identify spiritual strengths that would be the most beneficial to address the unique challenges of their midlife development (7.2.1). Similarly, from the interaction in the group it became evident that women differed regarding the way

in which they experienced internal and external spiritual strengths (6.4.3). The data generated in this way motivated the recommended guideline of doing a spiritual strengths assessment to support women in distinguishing those spiritual strengths that are meaningful to them (7.2.1).

The practice principles of the strengths perspective were applied during the workshop, providing information on the suitability of this approach as experienced in the empirical setting (6.3.1). This information was expanded by participants' feedback about the format of the workshops and the researcher's field notes. The overall aim of delineating guidelines as they pertain to the content, format and role of a social worker was achieved by using the data from participants' discussions and the feedback about what they considered important to be included in the programme. Additional data were provided by the researcher's field notes about the activities, procedures, own experiences and observations during the workshops, as well as notes on the preparation for the workshops. The resolution of the research aims persuaded this study that the research methodology, as prescribed by action research, was successfully employed by the study.

## **7.2 RECOMMENDATIONS**

The recommendations made regarding the inclusion of spirituality in curricula, research and practice application did take into account that the discourse on spirituality in social work in South Africa was still in its infancy. By making these recommendations this study aspired in a modest way to demonstrate that this dialogue could no longer be evaded; moreover, that the discourse on spirituality has long moved beyond the dispute of whether social work should address spirituality. Therefore, recommendations were focused not on *if* social work should address spirituality, but rather on *how* spirituality could be incorporated in practice, as exemplified by the recommendations regarding the guidelines for a programme to develop spiritual strengths.

The context in which all recommendations were made was informed by the argument that the social work mandate to promote wellbeing requires a holistic approach, which also demands attention to spirituality.



### 7.2.1 Guidelines for a social work programme to develop the spiritual strengths of midlife women

The recommendations for the guidelines for the social work programme were informed by the literature study and the empirical investigation. The term *programme* did not denote a fixed blueprint of actions that had to be followed to the letter; rather, *programme* referred to guidelines and recommendations as they pertained to potential material included; modes of actions to be undertaken; possible format; and the preparation and role of the social worker.

In Table 7 the guidelines for the programme is summarised and followed by a discussion about the recommended components of the programme:

**Table 7: Guidelines for a social work programme**

GUIDELINES FOR A SOCIAL WORK PROGRAMME	
<b>Content</b>	Information about midlife
	Deliberation on the constructs: spirituality and spiritual strengths
	Spiritual strengths assessment
	Exploration of prospective spiritual strengths, for example, practising meditation and performing spiritual rituals
<b>Format</b>	Attention to administrative aspects such as the composition of the group, number of group members and the number of meetings
	Practice approach: Informed by the strengths perspective, spiritually sensitive practice; theoretical framework for social group work
	Employment of resources such as music, PowerPoint presentations and art supplies
<b>Preparation and role of social worker</b>	Role of facilitator
	Preparation: knowledge about midlife; strengths perspective; spiritually sensitive practice; and personal preparation as it pertains to possible biases and the comfort level to work with spirituality

#### 7.2.1.1 The content

The guidelines relating to the possible content of the programme were not meant to be prescriptive or dogmatic, but were suggested as a point of departure for a programme to develop the spiritual strengths of midlife women. Social workers are

advised to appraise the relevance of proposed guidelines in collaboration with midlife women and only include those aspects that are meaningful to them.

- **Information about midlife**

All participants' responses to the question of whether information about midlife should be included were overwhelmingly affirmative. This was evidenced in participants' statement that the group discussion about midlife helped them not only to understand their own midlife transition, but also to learn from other women engaged in the same transition. The information about midlife as portrayed in the *Model of Women's Midlife Transition* (Chapter 4 – 4.3) was welcomed by participants. For example, one participant said,

*"I liked the visual representation about midlife that was used after the discussion as it gave a coherent picture of midlife."*

The recommendation to include information about midlife was inspired by the endorsement of the participants; the emphasis of the literature study that many of the misconceptions about midlife stem from a lack of information; and the conclusion of the research project that there was no culturally defined models of midlife development to guide women (7.1.3). The conviction to include the information was also advanced by the study's argument that the effective deployment of spiritual strengths would be hampered without an understanding of the multifaceted impact of changes in all life domains on women's experiences of midlife (Chapter 4). Thus, the exploration of midlife development offered the opportunity not only to increase theoretical knowledge about midlife, but also experiential knowledge about midlife when participants share their experiences of midlife. For example, in this study participants found the discussion of their midlife experiences insightful. As one participant observed,

*"You get more clarity about what is happening to you by listening to other women."*

The knowledge might assist women in interpreting their experiences in a different way, clarify misconceptions about midlife, and adapt the way in which they pursue their midlife development. It is recommended that social workers support women in their endeavours to chart a unique midlife passage and encourage the discovery of

those spiritual strengths that would be most beneficial to address the challenges particular to their midlife development.

- **Deliberation on the constructs: spirituality and spiritual strengths**

The participants agreed that deliberation on the meaning of the constructs *spirituality* and *spiritual strengths* should be included in the programme. They motivated their recommendation by stating that the discussions about spirituality and making dough sculptures helped them to clarify their conception of the meaning of spirituality and to understand the central role of spirituality and spiritual strengths in their lives. It also raised their awareness about the variety and the value of spiritual strengths. For example, one participant observed,

*“It helped me know more about my own spiritual strengths.”*

Another participant wrote that listening to other women’s stories about their spiritual strengths inspired her. She wanted to explore new and different sources of spiritual strengths. Participants also suggested that the scope of the discussion about spirituality should entail more than religious instruction, as reflected in a participant’s remark that

*“This programme should be more than the religious instruction which I do in by Bible study group.”*

Most participants endorsed the view that deliberation on spirituality had to include the exploration of various spiritual perspectives.

The discussion about the construct of spiritual strengths included an investigation of possible barriers that could prevent access to spiritual strengths, for example, ignorance about spiritual strengths and a busy daily schedule. Most participants indicated that investigating barriers should be included, as they might offer explanations why women find it difficult to access spiritual strengths. For example, a participant said,

*“It makes you more aware of why you are struggling sometimes.”*

Therefore, the exploration of possible barriers was recommended as they might serve to create an awareness of the existence of barriers and inspire participants to

be more astute in recognising that which prevents them from accessing spiritual strengths. Insight about the impact of barriers might inspire participants to focus on what needed to change in their lives to experience the rewards of greater access to spiritual strengths, for example, to dedicate more time to spiritual activities such as meditation.

Deliberation on what is required to experience the full benefits from spiritual strengths such as commitment and intentional activities (for example, regular prayer time) were discussed in the workshop. Most participants recommended that an investigation of what is required to gain access to spiritual strengths should be included in the programme. Thus, a suggested guideline for the programme was an exploration of the requirements that might enhance access to spiritual strengths.

It is recommended that the deliberation on the constructs *spirituality* and *spiritual strengths* be followed by a spiritual strengths assessment.

- **A spiritual strengths assessment**

After completing a spiritual strengths-assessment questionnaire (Appendix F), participants recommended its inclusion in the programme. The recommendations were substantiated by participants' comments such as,

*"It helps you to know what will work for you",*

and

*"It forces you to think about your own strengths."*

One participant noted that

*"It helped me to see that I rely much more on internal spiritual strengths and that external spiritual strengths are an area that I could explore further."*

Considering the past spiritual strengths inspired some participants to reconsider the spiritual strengths they had neglected or forgotten such as meditation. All but one of the participants indicated that there were spiritual strengths they would like to develop in future to broaden the scope of their spiritual strengths, for example, by joining a spiritual group and spending more time alone with God. It was not only the

endorsement of participants that motivated the recommendation to include a spiritual strengths assessment, but also the strengths perspective's appeal to do an assessment of strengths, as this is an aid which assists clients in enumerating and identifying their resources (Rapp, 2006, p. 129). Thus, it is recommended that a spiritual strengths assessment be included in the programme, not only to assist midlife women in identifying the external and internal spiritual strengths that are meaningful to them, but also to inspire the mobilisation of forgotten strengths and the exploration of prospective spiritual strengths.

The spiritual strengths-assessment questionnaire (Appendix F) or "the exploratory questions for clarifying spiritual assets" delineated by Hodge (2005a, p. 82) might be of assistance in the assessment of spiritual strengths. Alternatively, the assessment of spiritual sources of support and transformation proposed by Canda and Furman (2010, p. 382) are recommended for use to assess women's spiritual strengths.

- **Exploration of prospective spiritual strengths**

The exploration of prospective spiritual strengths included a discussion of various spiritual strengths, for example, spiritual reading, worship, keeping a spiritual journal and spiritual support groups. Also included were participation in various spiritual practices such as sacred breathing, mindfulness and meditation and spiritual rituals such as lighting a candle. Evaluating the exploration of prospective spiritual strengths, all but one participant advocated the inclusion of the exploration of spiritual strengths in the programme. They validated their approval by observations such as

*"You may be negative towards something [spiritual practices] but once you have experienced it you might change your mind",*

and

*"It [spiritual strength] may be meaningful to you, but you will not know until you explore it."*

The identification of the guideline to explore prospective spiritual strengths was further inspired by the findings of the empirical inquiry that midlife women's spiritual strengths were diverse (6.3.4) and dynamic (7.1.6.4) by nature. Consequently, it is

recommended that spiritual strengths be explored through the discussion of various internal and external strengths embedded in religious and non-religious traditions (participants' completed spiritual strength-assessment questionnaire might serve as point of departure for the exploration of spiritual strengths – Appendix F).

A further recommendation is that participants explore spiritual strengths through participation in spiritual activities such as writing a spiritual journal, spiritual dancing and spiritual reading, or spiritual practices such as spiritual energy work and meditation or the performance of spiritual rituals such as creating a sacred space. Although the social worker might initially offer suggestions regarding prospective spiritual strengths, it is recommended that he or she collaborates with participants in the identification of the spiritual strengths they want to explore.

#### ***7.2.1.2 The format of the programme***

Informed by the literature study and empirical findings, the study presented an outline of how to put the programme together so that it collaborated with achieving the goal of developing midlife women's spiritual strengths. These suggestions were submitted for consideration, and not offered as the ultimate mode of conceiving the composition of the programme:

- **Administrative aspects**

The testimonials of the participants confirmed that being part of a group was experienced as supportive and enlightening. Participants expressed their experience of being part of the group in various ways, for example,

*“I feel there is a great need for women to have a feeling of belonging, not only in her home”,*

and

*“I want to be part of such a group as I was inspired by the stories and music. I would like more of that.”*

Thus, how the engagement was structured – be it a workshop format, informal group, or any of the categories of groups identified in social group work – seemed to be immaterial. Instead, being part of a group of midlife women appeared to be the

key aspect when presenting the programme; therefore, the recommended context for introducing the programme is in groups.

Arrangements regarding administrative aspects such as closed or open groups, composition of the group, number of meetings, and length of meetings should be adapted to the circumstances and needs of group members. However, the study did recommend a closed group if the programme were presented in instalments over a prolonged period, with each group session building on the next. A further recommendation is that the group membership be restricted to six to twelve members, as small groups are more amenable to involve all members actively in hands-on practices such as learning to meditate, or applying new skills, for example, performing a spiritual ritual.

Membership to the group should be homogeneous, as it applies to midlife women. The proposed age parameters are between the ages of 40–60 years. However, the age parameters are negotiable. As noted in the literature study (4.1.1.3), there is disparity as to the entry and exit ages for midlife. Therefore, after consultation with group members, the age parameters for memberships could be instituted. There need not be uniformity as to the religious or non-religious orientations of members. In this study, both workshops consisted of a mix of religious and non-religious women and did not present problems. On the contrary, the women indicated that they learnt from one another. It has to be acknowledged that some women are less open to different religious perspectives. Members of a group might use religious references that have no meaning to non-religious members and vice versa. In such an instance, a more homogeneous group as pertaining to spiritual orientation is advisable. Although membership as regards to religious or non-religious orientation can be negotiated, the preferred approach in social work is an inclusive one. Thus, the social worker's presentation is not coloured by the particular spiritual perspective of the group.

- **Practice approaches**

The engagement with midlife women in the group should be organised and structured in such a way that it creates an environment empathetic to experiential learning; the application of new skills; reflection on experiences, collaboration, and the exploration of the lived experience of spirituality and spiritual strengths. The

practice approaches recommended to achieve this goal are the strengths perspective, spiritually sensitive social work and the theoretical framework for social group work.

The setting of the group is broadly structured by following the instructions prescribed by the theoretical framework for social group work, for example, attending to administrative aspects, clarifying the goals of the group, applying social work principles and facilitating the group process. These measures will largely address aspects like the call for experiential learning, applying new skills and reflection on experiences. However, to establish a more nuanced ambience conducive to the development of spiritual strengths, the study recommends the implementation of the practice principles of the strengths perspective (3.3.3). For example, when social workers relinquish their role of expert and recognise clients' constructions of their lived experiences (Blundo, 2006, p. 4; Saleeby, 2006a, p. 14; 3.3.4), it greatly contributes to the creation of a collaborative communicative space, which in turn allows for the exploration of that which is subjectively experienced, such as spiritual strengths. Thus, as this study concludes that midlife women's spiritual strengths are subjectively experienced (7.1.6.4), it deems the implementation of the practice principles of strengths perspective vital when attempting to identify spiritual strengths. The study confirmed that midlife women did employ spiritual strengths (7.1.6.4). Therefore, it was the view of this study that it compelled the adoption of a "strengths attitude", which would dispose social workers to focus on clients' strengths (Rapp 2006, p. 131). Consequently, when implementing the programme, social workers are advised to assume a strengths attitude as it engenders a practice orientation that makes them more responsive to the identification of possible spiritual resources (and other additional resources).

The programme for the development of spiritual strengths integrated spirituality into social work practice, demanding the application of the principles for spiritually sensitive social work, such as following an inclusive, non-biased approach, applying person-centred strategies, and complying with the principles of self-determination, individuation and a non-judgemental attitude (Hodge, 2005a, p. 38; Sherr et al., 2009, p. 159). The study concluded that midlife women's spiritual strengths are wide ranging and include religious and non-religious spiritual strengths (7.1.5), which emphasise the need for an inclusive approach and a non-judgemental attitude. It



also concluded that spiritual strengths are subjectively informed and therefore highly individualised (7.1.5), pressing for the utilisation of person-centred strategies and the practice of principles such as self-determination and individuation. Therefore, it was the view of this study that the introduction of this practice approach is vital not only to ensure ethical practices, but also to shape a setting in the group that encourages the identification of spiritual strengths that are personally meaningful.

- **Resources**

The use of various resources and tools is recommended as it is the view of this study that they enhance the competency of the programme to identify and develop spiritual strengths. The examples given of the resources used during the empirical investigation are not meant to be followed rigidly, but rather meant to draw attention to the benefits of using resources and to inspire social workers to be inventive in their choice of tools:

To encourage the active involvement of participants, they were invited to bring music, a poem, quote or short story that have spiritual significance for them (Appendix B), to share with the group. The explanation why they chose a particular poem, quote or music created an opportunity, not only for participation, but also to learn from one another about a variety of spiritual strengths. The communication of knowledge about midlife, spirituality, spiritual strengths and spiritual practices were embellished using resources such as PowerPoint presentations, hand-outs and a folder with a reading list, inspirational quotes and information about midlife and spiritual practices.

Prospective spiritual strengths were explored through discussions and experiential learning. Various aids were used to embellish the experience of spiritual practices and rituals, for example, using poems, stories, music and the finger labyrinth. Applying new skills were practised in the workshop by using aids like candles to perform a ritual (Fig. 12 – 6.3.1), and creating a sacred space by using objects that have spiritual significance, such as a cross (6.3.1). Reviewing their participation in several spiritual practices and rituals, participants endorsed the inclusion of spiritual practices and rituals in the programme. Articulating their endorsement included comments such as

*“Include more rituals, or do a separate workshop on different practices and rituals such as meditation”,*

and

*“Please include dancing in the programme.”*

Also suggested for inclusion in the programme was meditative-based relaxation, tai chi, yoga, colour therapy and mandala work. A guideline for social workers who want to introduce spiritual practices in the programme is to recognise the parameters of their own expertise as they pertain to spiritual practices (Northcut, 2000, p. 160; Bhagwan, 2007, p. 34). Social workers cannot presume to know the full scope of spiritual strengths embedded in all spiritual traditions. Therefore, in collaboration with participants, spiritual practices that are deemed qualified to amplify existing spiritual strengths, or will add to the repertoire of strengths, could be considered for inclusion.

Articulating that which is subjectively experienced in communicable form, such as spirituality and spiritual strengths, might be aided by using visual arts, drama and storytelling (Reason, 2006, p. 195; 5.3.4.1). In the study, participants were encouraged to reflect on their experiences of midlife and spirituality, and art supplies and play dough were provided to assist them in expressing their experiences. They made drawings of their midlife experiences (Fig. 14 – 17; 6.4.1) and play dough sculptures representing their spirituality (Fig. 27; 6.4.2). Participants found it a fun way to learn about themselves and their spiritual strengths. For example, a participant remarked the following about the drawing she made of herself,

*“It challenges my boundaries to use art to express myself, but it is a good thing”,*

while another observed,

*“It makes the discussions practical and interesting.”*

Enumerating and discovering spiritual strengths were assisted by the use of the spiritual strengths-assessment questionnaires (Appendix F). Although not prescriptive as to the use of these tools, the study recommends the imaginative use of resources and aids as they promote access to tacit and experiential knowledge and enhance experiential learning and the practice of new skills.

### **7.2.1.3 The role of the social worker**

The following guidelines are offered as suggestions to invigorate social workers' professional conduct to enact the vision of the programme:

The study recommends the inclusion of information about midlife in the programme to assist the current cohort of midlife women in understanding their own passage. Therefore, social workers would be required to update their knowledge of the midlife development of women, particularly as it pertains to the most recent research.

Incorporating spirituality in social work practice, as proposed in the programme, would require social workers to act in accordance with the directives of spiritually sensitive practice (Hodge, 2005a, p. 38; Sherr et al., 2009, p. 159). Thus, it is suggested that social workers be knowledgeable and skilled in the practice of spiritually sensitive work. For reading matter, the study recommends *Part III – Spiritually Sensitive Social Work in Action* in *Spiritual Diversity in Social Work – Practice the Heart of Helping* (Canda, & Furman, 2010, p. 213). It is a prerequisite that social workers gain an awareness of their own possible biases and opinions about spirituality to maintain a spiritually sensitive approach (Wagenfeld-Heinz, 2009, p. 183; Mutter, & Neves, 2010, p. 169). To aid social workers in reflecting on their belief systems, prejudices and comfort level with spirituality, the study encourages social workers to keep a spiritual journal, consult a spiritual mentor, or do a spiritual autobiography (the guidelines provided by Pargament, 2007, p. 336, might prove to be helpful). Chapter 2 on *Incorporating spirituality into the therapeutic setting: safeguarding ethical use of spirituality through therapist self-reflection* in *The therapist's notebook for integrating spirituality in counselling* (Maher, 2006, p. 19) might offer further assistance. Spiritually sensitive practice insists on an inclusive approach to spirituality, which implies that social workers are informed about the diversity in spiritual practices and beliefs (Rice, 2002, p. 309; Hodge, 2005a, p. 41). Thus, the study urges social workers to expand their theoretical and practical knowledge about the diversity of spiritual beliefs, practices and possible spiritual strengths by exploring sacred literature from different spiritual orientations. (In South Africa, this would include reading material about indigenous African spiritual traditions.) They should consult with religious and spiritual leaders of diverse groups, attend conferences on spirituality in social work like those offered by the Canadian

and American Societies for Spirituality and Social work, or visit their websites for access to conference papers and the latest developments in the field.

The findings of the study confirm that the strengths perspective is eligible to present the programme (7.1.6.5). Consequently, it is recommended in the guidelines as preferred practice approach. Social workers not well versed in practice principles of the strengths perspective are implored to acquaint themselves with the principles. The strengths perspective acknowledgment of clients as experts of their own lives calls into question the more traditional relationship between social worker and clients, in which the social worker often adopts a stance of superior knowledge. The strengths perspective also represents a shift from a focus on pathology (characteristic of most conventional social work practices), to a focus on strengths. This is a departure from the more normative social work perspective (3.3.1). Thus, the study advises social workers to reflect on their ability to conceptualise their work in a different way, for example, what it would imply to adopt a “strengths attitude” (Rapp 2006, p. 131), to relinquish the role of expert, to follow a client-centred approach, and to employ practice methods focused on discovering, embellishing and mobilising women’s strengths. Although the study recommends that social workers acquaint themselves with the tenets of the strengths perspective as practice approach when implementing the programme, it does not negate the use of other clinical practice approaches such as the risk and resilience framework or client empowerment, which also focuses on clients’ strengths (Walsh, 2010, p. 19, 24).

According to the directives of the strengths perspective, social workers collaborate with clients when focusing on the discovery and development of strengths. This is also the approach advocated for social workers presenting the programme. However, this does not entail the abdication of the social worker’s role as facilitator. Therefore, the study recommends that social workers adhere to the directives of the theoretical framework for social group work, regarding their role as facilitator such as identifying the group process, establish communication networks, building relationships and steering the process in a flexible, yet purposeful way to achieve the goals set by the group. Most participants on the feedback form expressed appreciation for the role of the researcher as facilitator, for example, a participant observed,

*“I like it if there is someone to give direction and then leave the, discussion open.”*

Thus, although open discussion and fluidity as to how the process unfolds during sessions are encouraged, the social worker as facilitator delicately guides the process to prevent it from turning into a meaningless and incoherent undertaking

### **7.2.2 Theory**

To plan and execute a social work programme to identify, embellish and mobilise the spiritual strengths of midlife women require well-founded theoretical knowledge about the midlife development of women; the contemporary meaning of spirituality; and the social work mandate as it pertains to the integration of spirituality with special reference to spiritual strengths.

- **Midlife development**

Based on the literature review and empirical findings, it is recommended that social work theory about the midlife development of women should be propagated and extended. Social work theorists Crawford and Walker (2007, p. 2) insist that relevant service delivery requires social workers to be familiar with the life experiences in each phase of life. Social work scholars McFadden and Rawson Swan (2012, p. 315) also endorse this view. They are particularly concerned about the dearth of research on the midlife development of women, as it leaves social workers working in this field with inadequate information to guide their professional work. The views of these scholars confirm the necessity of the inclusion of information not only of the life phases of human development, but particularly of the midlife development of women.

To promote the wellbeing of midlife women requires an understanding of the unique and unorthodox ways in which the current cohort of midlife women's developmental patterns is shaped. This necessitates scientific knowledge about all salient factors as they pertain to women's individual circumstances, as well as those in the environmental context that shape their midlife experiences. Therefore, to understand the diversity of the midlife experiences of women, it is recommended that data about the multifaceted and multi-directional (gains, losses and challenges), as well as normative developmental tasks associated with midlife developmental patterns

across all life domains (physical, psychological, social and spiritual) be included in theory. As midlife development does not unfold in a vacuum, material about the social, cultural and historical context and the factors in the context that have an impact on midlife experiences, such as cultural stereotypes, lack of role models and changes in social clock projects must be included in social work theory.

The assumption is that knowledge about the unorthodox ways in which midlife women chart their midlife passage is essential to direct social work intervention strategies to achieve the practice purpose of supporting their midlife transition.

- **Spirituality**

To promote midlife women's wellbeing through the identification and development of their spiritual strengths, as a matter of course necessitates knowledge about spirituality, and, as this study argues, the contemporary meaning of spirituality. Thus, research-based knowledge about spirituality's evolvment within the historical cultural context, which explains the bifurcation between religion and spirituality, should be included in social work theory. Additional information, which might enhance an understanding of spirituality, is the more recent focus on individuals' subjective experience of spirituality and the acceptance of plurality of spiritual narratives. This knowledge is vital, as it would be difficult to conceptualise the nature of spiritual strengths without a comprehension of the fundamental meaning of spirituality.

It is recommended that information about the distinctions and overlaps between spirituality and religion be included in social work theory. It provides the background to understanding why some midlife women describe themselves as spiritual but not religious; others as spiritual and religious (2.3.2); and why for some their spiritual strengths are imbued with their religious beliefs; while for others spiritual strengths have no connection with religion. It also explains the rationale for social work's inclusive approach as it applies to the diversity of religious and non-religious expressions.

The uncertainty surrounding a clear conception of spirituality is often cited as one of the reasons for the difficulty to implement spirituality in social work (Taylor, 2004,

p. 6). Thus, to integrate the development of midlife women's spiritual strengths in social work practice calls for an empirically informed concept analysis of spirituality, as it not only identifies those aspects of spirituality associated with fortitude, but also distinguishes between spiritual and non-spiritual strengths. For this reason, social work theory needs to include material about the challenges in defining spirituality (2.3.1), and review the existing definitions of spirituality in social work as well as those of related professions such as psychology. Additionally, a detailed analysis of the different components of spirituality (for example, the concept of the Sacred) and their association with spiritual strengths should be included.

The assumption is that to promote midlife women's sense of wellbeing calls for a holistic approach that appreciates subjectively informed spiritual strengths as supportive of midlife development.

- **Social work and spiritual strengths**

To understand social work's mandate to develop the spiritual strengths of midlife women, it is recommended that social work theory include a chronicle of the discourse on spirituality in social work (with reference to developments in South Africa). To be included is a focus on the re-emergence of spirituality in social work and the arguments that defend spirituality as bone fide discourse in social work. It must give an account of guidelines that ensure that the integration of spirituality in practice adheres to the principles of ethical social work practice. Therefore, it must emphasise the principles of spiritually sensitive practice.

Developing spiritual strengths would petition social workers to have knowledge about spiritual strengths and about an accepted practice approach that locates the development of spiritual strengths within the professional domain of social work. The strengths perspective answers the call for a recognised social work approach and provides the theoretical framework to convey knowledge about spirituality as a resource. Therefore, it is recommended that detail about the strengths perspective as it pertains to the philosophical underpinnings, post-modern orientation, practice principles, and purposes to be included in social work theory. Social work theory should also focus on the strengths perspective classification of strengths and

specifically the catalogue of spiritual strengths as they apply to the internal and external spiritual strengths midlife women employ.

The assumption is that attending to spirituality (spiritual strengths) is reconcilable with the social work mandate; moreover, social work's mission to promote wellbeing demands the consideration of spirituality as a salient component of clients' lives.

### **7.2.3 Training**

The midlife transition of women is a growing field of interest in social work, and a concomitant interest in the role of those factors such as spiritual strengths that promote wellbeing in this phase of life (2.5.4; 4.1.1.2; 4.3.2.4). This is a significant development in social work service delivery to midlife women. Therefore, the training of social workers should include training on the midlife developmental patterns of women, as well as how spiritual strengths could ameliorate an overall sense of wellbeing. Rather than being educated about generic theories of adult development, social workers in practice and undergraduate and post-graduate social work students should be informed about the latest research on the developmental trajectories of women that would help to explain the unique experiences of midlife women. It would entail instructing social workers and social work students about the multifaceted processes of development across all life domains, as well as the multiple factors in the social and cultural contexts that colour women's experiences of their midlife transition. This instruction provides social workers and students with a holistic framework to understand the midlife trajectories of women and to plan holistic intervention strategies, such as the programme recommended by this study.

Service delivery aimed at identifying and mobilising the spiritual strengths of midlife women at the most basic level would call for social workers and students to be schooled about the contemporary meaning of spirituality; the distinction between spirituality and religion; the diversity of spiritual experiences; women's individualised understanding of spirituality; and the role of spirituality in their lives (2.3; 2.4.2). Social workers and students should be advised on how to gain an awareness of their own biases and prejudices as they relate to diverse spiritual practices and beliefs and are encouraged to reflect on their own spiritual beliefs system. To put this advice into practice, social workers and students should be instructed on how to complete



their own spiritual autobiography and spiritual genogram. Keeping a spiritual journal and having discussions with a spiritual mentor might also be encouraged. Greater objectivity can also be promoted by extending practitioners' and students' knowledge about the diversity of spiritual perspectives by including information about different spiritual traditions and a range of practical experiences of different spiritual rituals in training programmes.

All social work intervention strategies aimed at integrating spirituality in practice (for example, identifying spiritual strengths) are governed by the principles for spiritually sensitive social work. Training of social workers and students should move beyond theoretical knowledge of these principles to include practical experience in the use of these principles, for example, how to master a person-centred approach when exploring women's spiritual strengths. Thus, social workers should be astute in the use of spirituality-in-practice approaches.

The extent to which women would succeed in identifying their spiritual strengths largely hinges on the social worker's ability to implement the guidelines like establishing a collaborative relationship, adopt a strengths attitude and acknowledge women as the experts of their own lives. The execution of these guidelines requires the practical training of social workers and students.

A training programme is recommended for social workers who are interested in executing the guidelines of the programme for the development of the spiritual strengths of midlife women, as introduced in this study. Apart from the training discussed above, the preparation of social workers should also include training in creative strategies to elicit tacit knowledge about spiritual strengths and to understand how tacit knowledge is presented through, for example, art, music and poetry. The social worker should at least be instructed in the presentation of two or more spiritual practices and spiritual rituals. The training programme assists social workers in the planning of a broad framework to structure the workshop or group sessions (Appendix E); offers suggestions for initial topics for discussions as point of departure for further planning; provides examples of the content and design of a PowerPoint presentation, as well as proposals for questionnaires, hand-outs and reading lists.

The assumption is that training social workers to integrate spirituality in social work practice would extend the capacity of social work to enhance clients' wellbeing, beyond the habit bound practice approaches informed by a modernist epistemology.

#### 7.2.4 Practice

The holistic approach to wellbeing advocated by this study could be adapted for use in the primary social work methods, namely casework, social group work and community work.

- **Social case work**

Although the guidelines for the programme to develop midlife women's spiritual strengths are primarily focused on application in groups, aspects of the programme can be adapted for use in casework. As part of an on-going psychosocial developmental programme, the social worker, working in a one-on-one therapeutic setting with a midlife woman might introduce the identification of spiritual strengths as an aspect of the programme. The identification and mobilisation of spiritual strengths can be a single intervention strategy, or form part of a series of interviews to develop spiritual strengths. If the social worker and client's plan of action is the personal empowerment of the client through the creation of a personalised repertoire of strengths, the inclusion of spiritual strengths might form part of their schedule. The development of spiritual strengths might also be part of a preventative strategy.

The strengths perspective is recommended as a practice approach in casework with midlife women. It provides guidelines to direct social workers to explore the subjective experiences of spiritual strengths and to identify those spiritual strengths that are personally meaningful to the client. The social worker and client collaborate in finding a fit between the spiritual strengths and the unique challenges of the client. All the social worker's actions are directed at encouraging clients to chart their midlife course on their own terms, employing spiritual strengths to support their endeavours. The spiritual strengths-assessment questionnaires that were used in the programme could be also used, as well as more creative ways like using play dough, or drawings to assist clients to identify spiritual strengths. When called for,

the social worker should also connect the client with spiritual resources in the community like pastors or clergy (2.5.4).

The preparation of the social worker should include an appraisal of diverse spiritual beliefs, practices and rituals, and of women's midlife developmental patterns. The caseworkers' actions are also governed by the principles for spiritually sensitive work, for example, following an inclusive approach to spirituality and gaining an awareness of his or her spiritual biases.

- **Social group work**

The participants in the study testified that being part of a group of women was inspiring and enlightening, as it was in interaction with others that they learned about themselves and experienced support and a sense of belonging. In this sense, the group process became the instrument for change in women (Davis, & Barton, 2006, p. 148). Being part of a group of midlife women is a key aspect of presenting the programme. The presentation of the programme is not depended upon the type of social work group. Thus, whether it is a support, growth, therapeutic or educational group, if the group decides that the development of spiritual strengths is an area of interest to them, it can be introduced. Alternatively, a group might specifically be created for the purposes of developing midlife women's spiritual strengths.

The programme can be presented as an introductory two-day workshop as introduction to the programme, followed by shorter one- or two-hour group sessions. It can also be presented as a series of short, morning or evening workshops extending over a period of six to eight weeks. The social worker is advised to follow the proposed guidelines as they pertain to the preparation for presenting the programme (7.2.1.3).

- **Community work**

Community work aims to develop the human potential (for example, through the enhancement of coping capabilities) of the various groups that form part of the community system. It is the view of this study that midlife women as a particular community group might benefit from the implementation of the recommended guidelines for the programme, as the development of spiritual strengths enhances their repertoire of coping strategies (7.2.1). However, this is dependent on the

approval of all stakeholders, community leaders, social workers and group members. The programme might be introduced into existing groups, or a group might be established for the specific purpose of presenting the programme.

The popular press often conveys outdated messages about midlife development, perpetuating cultural myths such as the inevitability of the midlife crisis, and equating women's midlife development with cultural stereotypes surrounding menopause, ageing and the empty-nest syndrome (4.3.2.1; 4.3.2.2.; 4.3.2.3). In contrast to these portrayals of midlife, the research findings in both the literature review (Chapter 4) and the empirical investigation (Chapter 6) report that the current cohort of midlife women is increasingly disregarding the stereotypes about the midlife developmental patterns of women. Social workers should address the inaccurate stereotypical views and sociocultural messages that stigmatise the midlife trajectory of women. Accurate information based on the latest research should be communicated to women; thus, it is recommended that social workers utilise community forums to educate women about midlife development.

### **7.2.5 Research**

One of the findings of the empirical investigation was participants' expression of the need to be better prepared for midlife (6.4.1). For example, most participants said they would have benefited if they had the information about midlife (as discussed during the workshop) before they entered this phase of life. Based on their own experiences, they recommended that the programme be presented to younger women. Younger women also expressed an interest to attend the workshop (6.3.1). The possibility of presenting the programme for the development of spiritual strengths to younger women needs further investigation; therefore, this study recommends that research be undertaken to examine:

- Why would younger women be interested in attending a programme about midlife development? What are their concerns about midlife? Is it the lack of role models as pointed out by participants, or does the diversity of midlife developmental patterns confuse them?

- Which topics would they like to be included in the programme? How do they think they could prepare for the midlife transitions? What are their expectations about the midlife transition?
- What are younger women's experiences of spirituality? How do they see the role of spiritual strengths in their lives?
- The age parameters for midlife: Should the entry age for midlife be lowered because women younger than 40 years consider themselves as being in midlife? What should be the criteria to determine midlife chronological age or the subjective experience of being middle-aged?

The literature review and the empirical investigation affirmed that the midlife development of women is in many ways still inadequately explained. As in other helping professions, there is also a pressing need in social work for theories that could guide service delivery to midlife women (4.1.1.2). Thus, this study recommends that social work research be undertaken on the midlife development of women as it pertains to the following aspects:

- an in-depth investigation of the gains, losses, challenges and developmental tasks across all four life domains. The research findings might enhance the holistic understanding of all factors having an impact on women's experiences of midlife, a prerequisite for the promotion of wellbeing in midlife.
- an analysis of how the on-going changes in the social context have an impact on women's development in current historical time. The changes in the cultural context, particularly as it pertains to the timing of life-events and social roles, had a profound impact on midlife developmental patterns. In this regard, the following proposed questions might be addressed in future research: Are these factors still potent in affecting how midlife development is shaped? What other factors in the current society have an impact on women's midlife experiences? What are the prevailing societal expectations about women's midlife experiences (also as it pertains to the different cultural groups in South Africa)?

- the identification of guidelines to direct social workers' professional work with midlife women. The following questions might give direction to future research on this topic: What knowledge about midlife is required to address the concerns of the current cohort of midlife women? In view of the diversity of women's midlife experiences, how can social workers assist them to shape a midlife passage that is uniquely meaningful? How can social workers support women to transcend negative cultural stereotypes about midlife? Which practice methods in social work is best suited to use a holistic approach to promote wellbeing in midlife?

Social work theory yields scant information about spiritual strengths, particularly as it pertains to *why* the different aspects of spirituality are considered strengths; the classification of internal and external spiritual strengths; and the characteristics of spiritual strengths. There is also a dearth of social work research on the spiritual strengths of midlife women. Thus, this study recommends that research be undertaken to:

- examine the different aspects of spirituality in greater depth, such as the relationship with the Sacred as source of strength. The following questions might guide further research: Which aspects of spirituality are regarded as strengths? Why are they considered strengths? How can spiritual strengths (which are subjectively experienced) be assessed? Which spiritual strengths are considered external spiritual strengths and which internal spiritual strengths? Research is also needed to distinguish spiritual strengths that are distinctive of different religions (e.g. Islam, Judaism). In South Africa, the indigenous spiritual traditions are of interest.
- conceptualise women's experiences of spirituality and spiritual strengths. The following questions might contribute to an appreciation of midlife women's spirituality: What is women's understanding of their spirituality? Do they consider spirituality a source of strength? If so, why? Why does the current cohort of women seem to be more interested in spirituality in midlife? Are there specific factors in the cultural context that contribute to a greater interest in spirituality?

- Further research is required to assess the outcomes of the programme to develop midlife women's spiritual strengths. This might entail the development of a measurement instrument to evaluate if the programme does contribute to an enhanced sense of wellbeing. Applied research such as intervention research might be undertaken to test the programme's proficiency to develop spiritual strengths to support midlife development and to identify those aspects of the programme that need to be modified in order to be more beneficial to midlife women. Research on programme development in social work might assist in expanding and honing guidelines, or it might propose a new approach to developing a programme for the development of spiritual strengths in social work.

### **7.2.6 Social work mission**

It is the mission of social work to promote the wellbeing of individuals, groups and communities (1.6.4). A key argument in this study is that social work cannot profess faithfulness to its mission to promote wellbeing when spirituality as salient component of people's lives is dismissed; moreover, it nullifies all claims that social work endorses a holistic approach to wellbeing. This argument is endorsed by the conclusion of the study that spirituality is of central importance to midlife women (7.1.2), and that spiritual strengths support their midlife development (7.1.4). It is the view of this study that the South African community of social workers' failure to come to terms with spirituality as bona fide area of study (3.1.4) compromises its mission to promote the wellbeing, not only of midlife women, but also of its entire client base. Therefore, this study recommends that the social work profession in South Africa should reconsider its position on spirituality as a first step. Following that, practice approaches should be tailored to be locally relevant. In this regard, the study joins the call of scholars such as Ross (2010, p. 44), who petitions for the inclusion of indigenous African spirituality in practice approaches. To be faithful to the inclusive approach of the profession, South African social workers should, in collaboration with action groups and all stakeholders, be more articulate and vigorously pursue the inclusion of indigenous African spirituality in practice approaches aimed at promoting the wellbeing of individuals, groups and communities.

### 7.3 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Midlife women as research population were represented in this study by 15 participants, and although this group included black and white South Africans, it did not include all racial groups in the country. The group did consist of Christians of various denominations and non-religious spiritual adherents, but cannot claim to represent the “rich spiritual mosaic” (Bhagwan, 2007, p. 26) of the South African society, as no participants followed any of the many forms of African traditional religions, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism. All participants were well educated, and apart from two participants who were retired, all were employed and lived in the city. Thus, the groups did not include women who were not properly educated, unemployed, poor or lived in rural communities.

This study concludes that the findings for this research project are valid as they adhere to the criteria to establish trustworthiness such as data triangulation, audit trail, axiology, and member checking (5.6). However, considering the small number of participants and the particular profile of the participants, the study cannot claim to be representative of all South African midlife women; therefore, the study concedes that it is difficult to achieve transferability (5.6.2). Thus, it would be difficult to extrapolate findings to the broad population of midlife women or to draw or make sweeping conclusions regarding the findings. Therefore, the guidelines for programme should be sensitively adjusted to meet the requirements for the identification and development of the spiritual strengths as they apply to every individual group of midlife women.

### 7.4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The changes brought about by modern society have rendered the developmental designs of previous generations obsolete; consequently, the current cohort of midlife women is shaping new midlife developmental patterns innovatively. The idiosyncratic way in which women are forging their midlife passages precipitated *variability* as the most striking feature of their midlife transition. The absence of uniform developmental patterns, engendered uncertainty and confusion, which in turn inspired many women to recruit spiritual strengths to ameliorate adaption in this



phase of life. Hence, it is the view of this study that a holistic approach to wellbeing, which includes the development of spiritual strengths, is best suited to promote wellbeing in midlife.

Recommendations for the guidelines of a social work programme are made pertaining to potential material included; modes of actions to be undertaken; possible format; and the preparation and role of the social worker. Informed by the literature review and empirical investigation recommendations are made regarding social work theory, practice training, research and social work's mission. The conclusions reached are based on the literature review and the empirical investigation is that women's midlife developmental patterns are not tailored according to previous patterns of development, but are customised to fit their own experiences of midlife, and are therefore variable. Furthermore, they consider spirituality and spiritual strengths as vital to their adaption to midlife, and are keenly interested in expanding their spiritual strengths. This study recommends further research to expand the social work knowledge base, not only on midlife development, but also on the identification and mobilisation of spiritual strengths. It is further recommended that social workers, who endeavour to promote the wellbeing of midlife women by utilising spiritual strengths, receive training in spiritually sensitive work, employ the strengths perspective practice as practice approach and extend their own knowledge and experience of the various spiritual perspectives. The study strongly advocates the active participation of all South African social workers, not only in a discussion about the inclusion of spirituality in practice, but also in a campaign to include indigenous African spirituality in theory and practice. The limitations of the study as it pertains to transferability are evaluated.

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# APPENDIX A: LETTER OF INVITATION

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## A WORKSHOP FOR MIDLIFE WOMEN

### *DEVELOPING THE SPIRITUAL STRENGTHS OF MIDLIFE WOMEN*

*In midlife, the soul wants a larger journey*

*– Hollis*

#### **The purpose of the workshop**

The aim of the workshop is to compile a repertoire of internal and external spiritual strengths to equip midlife women, not only to negotiate the demands of daily living, but also to flourish.

#### **Who Would Benefit from this Workshop?**

It is for midlife women who have become aware of a call for change in their lives, who have discovered that there is a gap between “their inner reality and the self they present to the world” (Marston 2002).

For women who are no longer satisfied to yield to pressure to play out scripts of what they should do, how they should behave or what they should be happy with.

It is for women who grapple with questions such as “Who am I really?”, “What do I believe in?” “What do I want out of life?” and “What are my needs?”

It is for women who intuitively know that they have the inner wisdom to live a rich and meaningful life.

*This is your life. Are you where you want to be?*

*- Switchfoot*

(For research purposes, there is an age parameter of 40 to 60 years of age)

## **Structure of the workshop**

The experiential workshop is based on the principle that midlife offers many opportunities for growth. This is an interactive workshop; thus, while being part of a group of wise women, learning is facilitated through creative art, storytelling, movement and music.

## **Outcomes of the workshop include:**

Understanding:

- the unique challenges of the midlife passage of the current generation of women;
- the link between spiritual wellbeing and overall sense of wellbeing;
- the concept of spiritual strengths and how they can be applied to address the challenges of the midlife passage; and
- to identify your own unique spiritual strengths.

*One of the many things nobody ever tells you about middle age is that it is such a nice change from being young.*

- Dorothy Cornfield Young

## APPENDIX B: INFORMATION LETTER

---

BLOEMFONTEIN

April 2013

### *Developing the spiritual strengths of midlife women*

Dear Participant

I am delighted that you have decided to be part of this workshop.

The workshop is highly interactive and aims to engage, entertain, enlighten and empower you. All programme materials are provided and you will receive hand-outs, pen and notebook.

Please wear casual, comfortable clothes and footwear. I would appreciate it if you could bring with you:

- a poem, quote, verse or short story that has spiritual significance for you;
- a piece of your favourite inspiring music on CD (should not exceed six minutes); and
- a small pillow to sit on

This is a research project, which aims, with your help, to generate data that could assist in delineating guidelines for a programme to develop the spiritual strengths of midlife women.

All the information you may provide will be strictly confidential; your name will not appear in any data, or published articles. The various methods of capturing data will be done in such a way so as not to reveal a participant's identity. A letter of consent is also attached, which further explains the process. We will sign the letter at the

workshop after you have had the opportunity to discuss any concerns you may have in this regard.

Although this is a research workshop, it is very much about you, about gaining an understanding of the unique challenges of the midlife passage of our generation of women, to understand the role of spiritual resources and to discover and develop your spiritual strengths!

Thank you for your willingness to be part of this endeavour to empower women and to help to promote wellbeing in this important phase of life.

Warm regards

Annette Weyers

*Many midlife women realise they have sold themselves out.*

- Ani Ligget

## APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

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### *A Social work Programme for the Development of the Spiritual Strengths of Midlife Women*

Dear Participant

Thank you for your interest in this research project.

The research stems from my work on the personal development of employees in the corporate world. During the course of this programme, clients (particularly midlife women) expressed an interest in spirituality as resource for resilience. This piqued my interest, as my professional training as a social worker did not include information regarding clients' spirituality. My inquiry into spirituality as possible resource revealed that this is a growing field not only in social work, but also in other professions such as nursing and psychology.

All individuals have untapped strengths and abilities, including spiritual strengths, which, once mobilised, can improve wellbeing. Thus, the premise of this study is that midlife women have innate spiritual strengths and that the utilisation of these strengths may assist midlife women not only to adapt, but also to grow. Therefore, the goal of this study is to delineate guidelines for a programme to develop the spiritual strengths of midlife women. With the help of participants, the study aims to generate data that could assist in developing guidelines for such a programme.

The format of the research project is that of an interactive workshop in which participants become co-researchers in the quest to understand spiritual strengths. To aid this process, various mediums such as drawing, art projects, and music will be used. During the reflection phase, participants are offered the opportunity to give feedback about their experiences either through discussion, written feedback or through any art medium. In cooperation with participants, recommendations are made as to the nature and content of a programme. Participants will receive the results of the research and are invited to give feedback. All answers about the research will be answered; my contact details as well as that of my study advisor are in the folder you have received.

Various methods will be used to capture data, for example, audio recordings, field notes and photos. The photo shoots will be done in such a way that it does not reveal any participant's identity. All the information you provide will be strictly confidential; your name will not appear in any data or published articles.

Your participation is voluntary. You are most welcome to discontinue at any time during the research process.



If you agree to participate in the study, I would appreciate your signing your name and date on the two forms (one form is to be kept by you).

I have read the information provided above. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

Participant

Name.....

Date.....

Researcher.....

Date.....

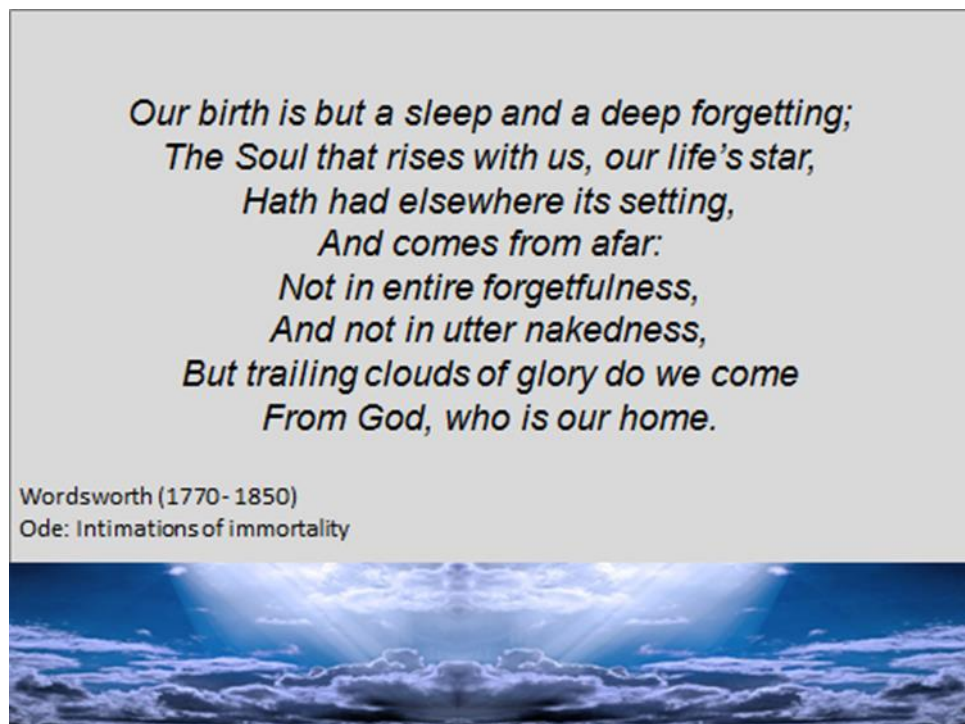
Thank you

Yours sincerely

Annette Weyers

## APPENDIX D: EXAMPLES OF POWERPOINT SLIDES

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## CONTENT

- **Orientation:**
- Understanding the midlife transition
- Discuss the meaning of spirituality
- What are spiritual strengths?
- Barriers
- **Lets get practical – Identify Spiritual Strengths:**
- Discover authentic self - a spiritual quest
- Divine Union
- Practices, rituals and symbols
- Closing

## THE NEW MIDLIFE WOMAN

The current cohort of midlife women are pioneers who are innovatively devising unorthodox and unique midlife passages, recruiting spiritual resources, not only to satisfactorily adapt to losses, but to invigorate growth and to transcend out-dated cultural stereotypes.

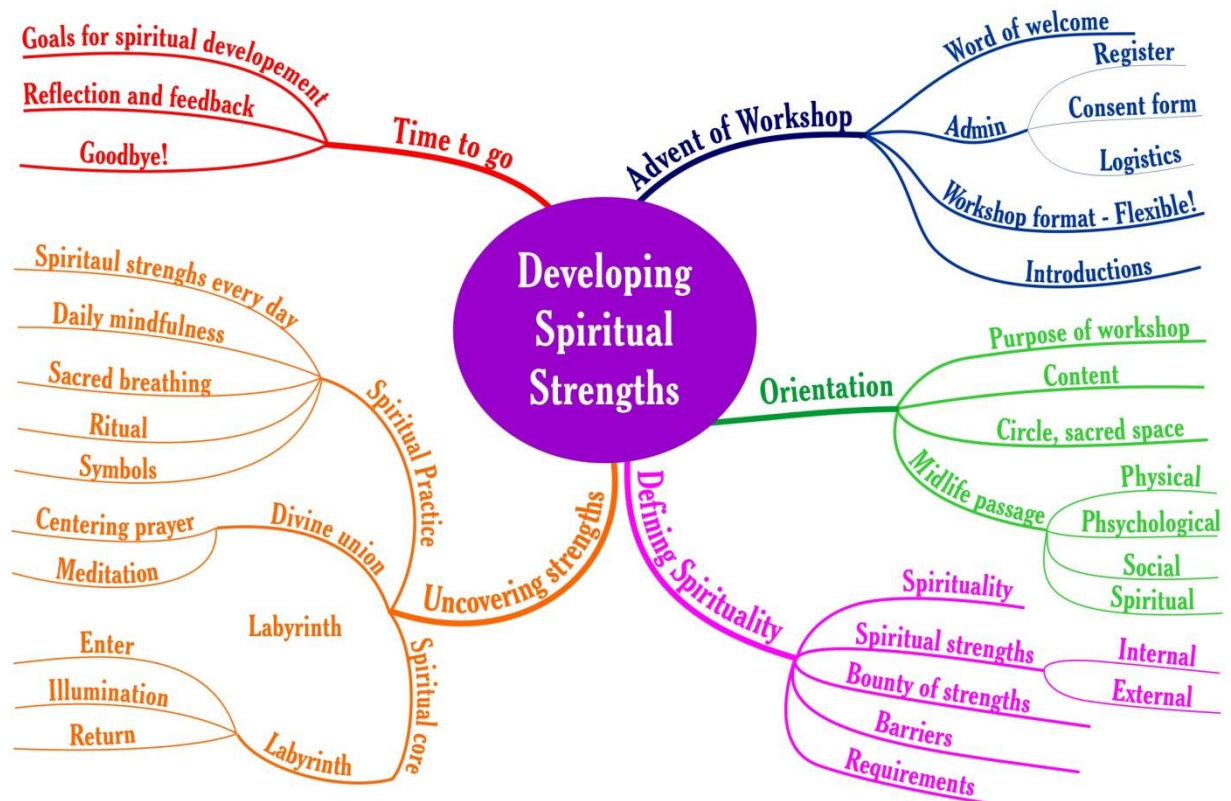
***Internal Strengths***

- Subjective experience of connectedness to God
- Beliefs regarding God/Sacred, authentic self
- Sense of ultimate meaning, purpose and place in the universe

***External Strengths***

- Spiritual practices (prayer, meditation)
- Spiritual rituals (Eucharist, lighting candle)
- Prayers groups, faith communities, spiritual mentor, spiritual support groups,

## APPENDIX E: MIND MAP OF THE WORKSHOP



## APPENDIX F: SPIRITUAL STRENGTHS ASSESSMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

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### Present spiritual strengths

Have you utilised spiritual resources recently? What are they?

.....  
.....

Are you a member of a spiritual group or faith community in which you can take part in spiritual activities that you find meaningful? Please explain:

.....

Have you attended a spiritual retreat or spiritual workshop recently? If so, did it contribute to your spiritual growth and spiritual wellbeing?

.....

What spiritual teachings, books, artwork or scriptures is a source of inspiration?

.....

Are there any rituals (e.g. Eucharist, lighting candle) that you find inspiring or provide a sense of spiritual connection?

.....

Are there spiritual practices (e.g. meditation, prayer, spiritual journal writing) that are meaningful to you?

.....

Are there spiritual symbols that give you a sense of inspiration or connection to God? Please name them:

.....

Do you have a core belief system about the ultimate meaning of your life that you can rely on? Please explain:

.....

Are there any spiritual places or sacred spaces that provide you with a sense of connection to God?

.....  
Are there any people in your life who serve as spiritual teachers or spiritual mentors?  
Who are they?

.....  
Do you have a spiritual support system? If the answer is yes, please explain:

.....  
What is your ultimate source of inspiration?

.....  
Did you recently have an experience in which you felt a sense of transcendence, a  
new awareness or “ah-ha” spiritual experience, joy, deep sense of connection to God  
or a sense of peace? Please explain:

.....  
Are there any other spiritual strengths (not mentioned above) that you find  
inspirational or supportive? What are they?

.....  
**Past Spiritual Strengths**

Think back on the spiritual strengths you are currently using. When did you develop  
these strengths, and how did it work for you in the past?

.....  
Are there any spiritual strengths that you have used previously that you have  
forgotten about, or have not used recently? Is there any way they can be used  
again?

.....  
Do you recall what used to be a source of spiritual inspiration, brought you fulfilment  
or a sense of contentment to your life? When did you last feel that?

.....  
Were the spiritual or faith communities (if any) of your childhood helpful? If it were  
not helpful how did you decide to change it and what did you learn from that that can  
be helpful?

Were there any personal spiritual activities (e.g. prayer) you used to use that can be helpful again?

.....

Did you have any spiritual mentors, friends, or helpers that you would like to reconnect with?

.....

### **Future spiritual strengths**

What things can you do to renew your deepest insights and inspiration from spiritual experiences and to have new spiritual experiences?

.....

How can you deepen your spiritual experience in your daily life?

.....

How can relationships with spiritual mentors or spiritual supporters be restored or improved?

.....

What particular spiritual activities would you like to restore and refine? Why?

.....

How do you envision your future involvement with your particular faith community or spiritual support group? Would you like to continue your present involvement, improve them or change them?

.....

How would you describe your ideal spiritual self of the future? What could move you toward that ideal?

.....

Adapted from: Eichler et al. (2006:69)



# ABSTRACT

---

Modern society is distinguished by on-going social change that restructures the ways in which individuals live, forcing them to reappraise their coping strategies continually. The midlife transition of women has not escaped the changes brought about by modern society. Many of the challenges women face in midlife are brought about by the changes introduced by modernity. A noted change is the developmental designs of previous generations that have become defunct, compelling women to shape new midlife developmental patterns innovatively. These women are now recruiting spiritual strengths to invigorate growth and support adaption in this phase of life.

A key argument of this study is that spirituality has the capacity to be a source of strength and that women can access their spiritual strengths to support their midlife transition. Furthermore, the study also maintains that social work's mission to promote clients' wellbeing compels a holistic approach that recognises the role of spiritual strengths in advancing a sense of wellbeing. Thus, primarily directed by the strengths perspective's stance that all individuals have strengths, capacities and resources that can be mobilised to enhance their quality of life, the study set about delineating guidelines for a social work programme to facilitate the identification and mobilisation of spiritual strengths to support women's midlife transition in order to enhance a sense of wellbeing.

Based on the literature review and the empirical investigation, the study concludes that women's midlife developmental patterns are indeed customised to fit their own experiences of midlife, and are therefore variable. Furthermore, for many midlife women their spirituality and spiritual strengths are vital to their adaption to midlife, and they are keenly interested in expanding their spiritual strengths. Thus, informed by the empirical investigation and literature review, the study recommends guidelines for a programme pertaining to potential material to be included; modes of actions to be undertaken; possible format; and the preparation and role of the social worker. It is further recommended that the programme be adjusted sensitively to meet the

requirements for the identification and development of the spiritual strengths as they apply to every individual group of midlife women.

# ABSTRAK

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Die moderne samelewing word gekenmerk deur voortdurende sosiale verandering wat die wyses waarop individue leef, herstruktureer, wat hulle dwing om voortdurend hulle hanteringstrategieë opnuut in oënskou te neem. Vroue se oorgang na die middeljare het ook nie ontsnap aan die veranderinge wat deur die moderne samelewing teweeg gebring word nie. Talle van die uitdaginge waarvoor vroue in hul middeljare te staan kom, word teweeggebring deur die veranderinge wat die moderne leefwyse meebring. 'n Besliste verandering is die ontwikkelingsontwerpe van vorige generasies wat uitgedien geraak het, en wat vroue dwing om op innoverende wyse nuwe ontwikkelingspatrone in die middeljare te skep. Dit is hierdie vroue wat nou met behulp van spirituele sterktes nuwe lewe in die aanpassing by groei en ondersteuning gedurende hierdie lewensfase blaas.

'n Sleutelargument van hierdie studie is dat spiritualiteit oor die vermoë beskik om 'n bron van sterkte te wees en dat vroue toegang tot hulle spirituele krag bekom om hulle oorgang in die middeljare te ondersteun. Verder huldig die studie die standpunt dat maatskaplike werk se missie om kliënte se welstand te bevorder 'n holistiese benadering vra wat erkenning verleen aan die rol van spirituele krag ter bevordering van 'n gevoel van welstand. Gevolglik, primêr gelei deur die uitgangspunt van die sterkteperspektief dat alle individue oor sterktes, kapasiteite en hulpbronne beskik wat gemobiliseer kan word om hulle lewensgehalte te verbeter, poog die studie om riglyne te omskryf vir 'n maatskaplikewerkprogram om die identifikasie en mobilisering van spirituele sterktes te fasiliteer ten einde vroue se oorgang in die middeljare te ondersteun, om sodoende 'n gevoel van welstand te versterk.

Gebaseer op die literatuuroorsig en die empiriese ondersoek, kom die studie tot die gevolgtrekking dat vroue se ontwikkelingspatrone in die middeljare inderdaad aanpas om by hulle eie ervarings van die middeljare te pas, en daarom veranderlik is. Verder is talle vroue in die middeljare se spiritualiteit en spirituele sterkte van lewensbelang vir hulle aanpassing by die middeljare, en stel hulle intens daarin belang om hulle spirituele krag uit te brei. Gevolglik, soos bevestig deur die empiriese ondersoek en literatuuroorsig, beveel die studie riglyne aan vir 'n program

vir potensiële materiaal wat ingesluit behoort te word; modusse van optrede wat onderneem moet word; moontlike formaat; en die voorbereiding en rol van die maatskaplike werker. Dit word verder aanbeveel dat die program sensitief aangepas behoort te word om te voldoen aan die vereistes vir die identifikasie en ontwikkeling van die spirituele sterktes soos wat dit op elke individuele groep vroue in hulle middeljare van toepassing is.

# GLOSSARY

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**Midlife:** *Although recognised as a distinct stage of life, there are no clear demarcations as to the modal years of entry or exit of midlife. In research, the most accepted chronological age-norm for midlife is the period of life between the ages of 40 to 60 years (Hunter et al. 2002:2)*

**Midlife women:** *Using the chronological age norm for midlife, midlife women are defined as women between the ages of 40 and 60 years.*

**Midlife transition:** *refers to the gains and losses that have to be negotiated in all life domains (biological, social, psychological and spiritual) to successfully progress from early adulthood to middle adulthood.*

**Religion:** *is an organised, structured set of beliefs, creeds, doctrines, practices and rituals shared by members of a formal religious institution.*

**Social work:** *is a professional and academic discipline that seeks to improve the quality of life and wellbeing of individuals, groups and communities, through the application of social work theory and methods in accordance with social work values and professional codes of conduct.*

**Spirituality:** *is the personal search for the sacred, and for ultimate meaning through an individualised understanding of the sacred.*

**Spiritual strengths:** *spiritual strengths are defined as those internal and external spiritual resources, which are subjectively experienced by individuals as having a salutary effect on their overall sense of wellbeing.*

**Strengths perspective:** *The strengths perspective is a postmodern approach in social work practice, which advocates a focus on clients' strengths.*

**Wellbeing:** *is the subjective experience of contentment and satisfaction as an outcome of positive functioning in the physical, psychological, social and spiritual life domains.*

DECLARATION: LANGUAGE EDITOR

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30 April 2014

**TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN**

Herewith I, **Cornelia Geldenhuys (ID 521114 0083 088)** declare that I have edited  
the PhD thesis of **Annette Weyers:**

**A SOCIAL WORK PROGRAMME FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF  
THE SPIRITUAL STRENGTHS OF MIDLIFE WOMEN**



.....  
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**MA (Lin), MA (Mus), HED, NDB, UTLM**