

# THE SEASONS OF A WOMAN'S LIFE

DANIEL J. LEVINSON



BALLANTINE BOOKS

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# THE SEASONS OF A WOMAN'S LIFE

by  
Daniel J. Levinson  
in collaboration with  
Judy D. Levinson

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If we are to learn about lives in adulthood, people must be willing to tell their life stories and trust that their privacy and the privacy of others will be respected. As a researcher I am committed to honoring this trust. Pseudonyms, "Anonymous," and disguised details have been used in this book in an effort to protect the privacy of the forty-five women research participants as well as the privacy of others.

# Contents

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*Cover*  
*Title Page*  
*Copyright*  
*Preface*

## **PART I A *View of Adult Development and a View of Gender***

- 1 The Study of Women's Lives**
- 2 The Human Life Cycle: Eras and Developmental Periods**
- 3 The Significance of Gender in Women's Lives**

## **PART II *The Homemaker Sample***

- 4 Adolescent Life Structure: Homemakers**
- 5 Early Adult Transition: Homemakers**
- 6 Entry Life Structure for Early Adulthood: Homemakers**
- 7 Age 30 Transition: Homemakers**
- 8 Culminating Life Structure for Early Adulthood: Homemakers**
- 9 Mid-life Transition: Homemakers**

## **PART III *The Career Women Samples: The Businesswomen and the Faculty Members***

- 10 Adolescent Life Structure: Career Women**
- 11 Early Adult Transition: Career Women**
- 12 Entry Life Structure for Early Adulthood: Career Women**
- 13 Age 30 Transition: Career Women**
- 14 Culminating Life Structure for Early Adulthood: Career Women**
- 15 Mid-life Transition: Career Women**

## **PART IV *Conclusions***

- 16 Concluding Thoughts: Adult Development, Gender, and Historical Change**

*Selected Bibliography*  
*Dedication*  
*Permissions Acknowledgments*  
*Other Books by This Author*  
*About the Author*

## Preface

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How does it happen that a man like myself at the culmination of his career, wishing to choose wisely the few remaining projects to which he can devote himself, should spend fifteen years attempting to understand the adult development of women? It is partially the legacy of a mother who left her Russian shtetl alone in 1890, at the age of 14, worked in the garment industry sweatshops of London and New York City for many years, became a union organizer and a passionate advocate of women's rights, and, after marrying and becoming a mother at 34, spent the next sixty years as a housewife and private feminist. It comes, too, from a father who admired and shared his wife's feminism while also wanting her traditionalism. Perhaps the most important result is not that I have incorporated both the feminism and the traditionalism—but that I have had a keen awareness of these contradictory themes in myself, in other men and women, and in female-male relationships. That awareness has been intensified and developed further by the current phase of the long-term gender revolution in which I believe our species is now engaged.

My research on adult development began in 1967. Eleven years later I published *The Seasons of a Man's Life*. Exploring the research literature, I concluded that very little was known about the adult life course and that the standard research methods (questionnaire surveys, tests, structured interviews) would be of limited value in exploring this new field. I chose instead to develop a new method of Intensive Biographical Interviewing through which individual lives could be examined in greater depth. The use of this method limited the sample size to a maximum of forty. It seemed to me that there were significant gender differences in adult life and development. To include twenty men and twenty women would do justice to neither and might result—as it often has in the past—in an allegedly “general” theory based primarily on the evidence from men. My final decision to study men rather than women was based largely on personal considerations: I had an intense desire to understand my own adult development.

The seeds of this book lie in that earlier one. While deciding to focus initially on men, I promised myself to do a second, parallel study of women. The present book fulfills that promise. The study of women is central in my vision of my own work and of the field of adult development in general. As I wrote in *The Seasons of a Man's Life*, “It is essential to study the adult development of both genders if we are to understand either.” We cannot adequately understand men by the study of men alone, nor women solely by the study of women. It is also important—perhaps essential until our footing is more secure—that women and men work together in the study of each gender.

I have been keenly aware that I began the study of women with concepts and findings derived chiefly from the study of men. I do not believe that it is possible today for anyone, male or female, to undertake the study of women's development without being heavily influenced by concepts, assumptions, and ways of thinking based primarily upon the experience and writing of men. A strongly male-centered view of adult life has for centuries been prevalent in our scientific and cultural institutions. It will take time, effort, and a sharpened awareness of gender issues to achieve a more balanced view.

In *The Seasons of a Man's Life*, it was difficult to say which aspects of the theory and findings were true of human development generally and which held for men only. The present study provided the opportunity (and indeed the necessity) of arriving at a clear distinction. My primary aim was to tap as directly as possible into the lives of women. I wanted to generate new concepts based on the actualities of women's lives, without losing what was valuable from the study of men. Conversely, I wanted to make appropriate use of what I already knew, without blinding myself to new evidence and insights. Work on this dilemma led me to explore two questions of basic importance in the study of development:

- (1) Can we create a gender-free conception of adult human development, a framework that captures what is most essentially human and common to both genders?
- (2) Within that general framework, can we create a gender-specific conception of the adult development of women? This is the driving question of the present book.

I have made strenuous efforts to overcome the limitations stemming from my own gender and from my previous study of men. These efforts began in the early 1970s, when I was engaged in the study of men. I encouraged Wendy Stewart to do her doctoral dissertation on the adult life structure development of women, and was an adviser on her study, one of the first to deal solely with women. A few years later, I was similarly involved in a dissertation by Susan Taylor Jackson. I also consulted with Janice Ruffin on her dissertation, which studied the adult development of African-American women. These studies indicated that my theory of adult development held in its broad outlines for women as well as men, while also giving evidence of some important gender differences within the general framework.

In 1979, a year after the publication of *The Seasons of a Man's Life*, I began exploratory work on this project. By one of those curious synchronicities in human life, I was approached just then by the Financial Women's Association of New York (FWA). The members of the Financial Women's Association are women executives and professionals working in the financial district and corporate headquarters and banks of New York City. Their level of achievement and income would make a large part of the population of the United States envious. The FWA was interested in sponsoring and raising funds for a study of the kind that I was planning. After canvassing the field, they came up with a list of researchers on which I was the only male. Other things being equal, they would have chosen a female. However, they were interested in careers and, like me, wanted to place career development in the context of individual life development. They felt, as I did, that an intensive study using in-depth interviewing would be more productive than standard survey research. They supported my interest in comparing businesswomen with other samples. When the FWA proposed to sponsor my work, I felt that I had passed an important test. And, in deciding to accept, I understood that much more than funding was involved. It made historical as well as personal sense to me that this project should involve a cross-gender collaboration in its sponsorship. In the years since then I have come to understand more deeply the importance of cross-gender collaboration in human life generally, and certainly in the study of development.

My thanks to the committee members of the FWA who planned the study with me: Patricia (Tosh) Barron, Susan Fisher, Jo Ann Heffernan Heisen, Madie Ivy, Ilene Leff, Melinda Lloyd, and Candice Straight. Tosh Barron kept the vision of this project alive through several years.

of fund raising. Contributions from many corporate sources allowed the research to become reality. My thanks for their generous support to the following corporations: American Can Company, American Standard, Bankers Trust, Colgate-Palmolive, General Electric Foundation, INA, Marsh & McLennan, McKinsey & Company, Ogilvy & Mather, Reader Digest Association, Seiden & De Cuevas, Sperry & Hutchinson, Sun Oil, Textron, U.S. Home Xerox, and John Whitehead Foundation. In addition to contributing funds to this project Xerox also donated a word processor on which the book manuscript was typed. My thanks to Jim McGuire of Xerox, who kept the Xerox 860 running in good order for over a decade.

Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association entered the project as a co-sponsor in 1980. Their support expanded the scope of the study to include the sample of academic women. I am grateful to Peggy Heim, senior research officer of TIAA, for her support of the project. My gratitude goes to Carol Schreiber, who has been a supportive friend and colleague in this enterprise. She gave generously of her time and helped in the fund raising.

Early in 1980 I had the funds to hire an initial staff and begin the interviewing. The interviewing was done between 1980 and 1982. Cross-gender collaboration was important in every aspect of this project. I formed a staff group of eight women and three men, besides myself. We varied in age, social origins, race, ethnicity, discipline, and point of view. The staff members included Lesley Bottoms, Ann Dahl, Elizabeth Dickey, Kelin Gersick, Winston Gooden, Judy Levinson, Maria Levinson, Judith Meyers, Susan Taylor Jackson, Edward Wallace, and MaryBeth Whiton.

Our weekly staff meetings were devoted chiefly to the discussion of biographical interviewing, of individual lives, and of theoretical issues. There was often heated controversy about the relevance of various concepts from my own and others' theories. As the work progressed, we found that there were at least as many differences in outlook and insight among the women, and among the men, as between women and men. The intensive study of other lives led each of us to a closer examination of our own lives. We became more aware of the complex meanings of gender in ourselves and in our relationships with women and men. The staff meetings thus furthered not only the research but also our own intellectual and emotional growth. The final product has been crucially influenced by the group effort. Later, the writing of the book was shaped and colored by my collaboration with Judy Levinson. From the beginning to end, then, this has been a bi-gendered effort.

Each staff member on this study made a heroic effort to grasp the life experience of each subject and to avoid the trap of assuming that women's lives and experiences are either totally the same as men's or totally different. I want to thank each staff member for her contribution to this part in this effort and for all contributions to the research. My thanks also to staff member Judith Meyers for her coding and analysis of the questionnaire data.

In the summer of 1982 the interviewing was completed, the funds depleted, and the staff group dispersed. Since then, this project has essentially been a collaboration between myself and my wife, Judy Levinson. Together we analyzed individual lives, compared samples, and wrote this book. She has been my partner in this enterprise from the start. Judy has made a major contribution to this book; she developed the method of biographical reconstruction to analyze the qualitative interviews and wrote all of the vignettes. She also made significant contributions to the theoretical work. She has helped me personally to understand the elemental conflict that exists between women and men, as well as the forces that bring it



together and make each gender much more than it could be without the other.

For me personally this project has been a profound developmental experience. I have been living for fifteen years with forty-five women in my head, trying to see life from their perspective and to work out my relationship with them. Through this biographical work, I have come to see more clearly how much women and men have to offer each other. I see, too, how strong are the barriers that separate men from women, and the feminine from the masculine within the self. I believe I have been able to claim more of the feminine in myself without losing what I value of the masculine.

Many individuals and institutions have been of great help over the past fifteen years. My appreciation to the Department of Psychiatry, Yale University. Boris M. Astrachan, the Director of the Connecticut Mental Health Center, has been a valued colleague and friend. This study has benefited in countless ways from his personal interest and administrative support.

The day-to-day operation of this project was managed with great competence by Immaculata Ferrucci and Arlene O'Brien. Bonnie Grawoig made excellent transcriptions of the interviews. These three women helped to make the research run more smoothly, and I thank them.

I wish to thank anonymously the academic institutions who welcomed us and allowed us to conduct questionnaire surveys and the interviewing. Several faculty members and administrators were of essential help to me on this project. Their names must remain anonymous as well, but they have my deepest thanks and appreciation.

My greatest thanks go to the forty-five pioneering women in this study who shared their life stories. They sacrificed much in an attempt to lead fuller lives more on their own terms and to create the basis for more choice for tomorrow's daughters and sons. I cannot thank you by name but I express my gratitude to you anonymously for the gifts of your experiences and insights.

Daniel J. Levinson

Daniel Jacob Levinson died on April 12, 1994. He had completed the manuscript of this book several months before he died, and since then I have worked with the book's editor, Charles A. Elliott, on the final editorial process. Elliott has been a wise and very patient editor.

So many friends and family members have helped me through this painful and important process of completing the book manuscript, and I wish to express my appreciation to them. Florence Ficocelli, Jeannie Hayes, and Stella Palm have been the best of friends. My love and thanks to Daniel's family, especially to his sons, Mark and Douglas Levinson, and to his grandchildren, Amber, Michael, Matthew, and David. My love and thanks also to my family: Nan, Karen, Jaime, Arthur, Reta, and especially my nephew-son Dan Gawlak, who reminded my heart to laugh again. My love and gratitude go also to my nephew-son Bryan Gawlak, who stayed with me during those initial dark days and weeks after Daniel's death. Bryan helped to keep my spirit alive, and he helped me remain engaged in life. He worked as my assistant in the final editorial process. I could not have done this work without him.

The manuscript received the careful scrutiny of Bryan J. Gawlak, Connie J. G. Gersick, Kelin E. Gersick, Douglas F. Levinson, Dorian S. Newton, Peter M. Newton, Carol

Schreiber, and Susan Taylor Jackson. I am grateful for their helpful suggestions and emotional support. Each gave generously to the editing of the manuscript, and it is a better book because of their contributions.

Daniel had not made final reference notations in the book manuscript. The help of Peter Newton, Carol Schreiber, and Susan Taylor Jackson were of central importance in my effort to make reference notations. I thank them and apologize for any references that have been omitted.

My eternal love and gratitude go to my husband, Daniel, with whom I had a most remarkable journey. For Daniel and me, love and work were inextricably intertwined. We formed a collaborative partnership in the writing of this book that enriched each of our lives as well as our joint relationship. Daniel was the theoretician/writer, and I was the biographical reconstructor. Working on the completion of this book manuscript without Daniel has been a time of great sorrow and great joy, and it is my final gift to my beloved Daniel.

Daniel was a wise and gentle man who touched the hearts and lives of many. This book represents the final installment of his legacy to the world; his spirit will live on as long as his work has a relevance to other people's work and lives and offers them something of value to help them on their journey through the seasons of life.

Judy D. Levinson

Note: Over the years since the interviews were conducted for this research project, we have lost track of many of the women who were interviewed, as well as some staff members. If you participated in this project, please write to Judy Levinson, in care of the publisher, The Ballantine Publishing Group; I'd like to make sure you receive a copy of this book.

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I

*A View of Adult Development  
and a View of Gender*

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# The Study of Women's Lives

How do women's lives evolve in adulthood? This question, seemingly so simple and straightforward, has rarely been asked in psychology or the other human sciences. Very little research has been done on the life course of the individual human being, female or male, in psychology, psychiatry, biology, the social sciences, and the humanities. Indeed, "life course" is one of the most important yet least examined terms in these fields. It refers to the evolution of an individual life from beginning to end. The key words are "evolution" and "life."

The word "evolution" indicates sequence, temporal flow, the unfolding of a life—be it an individual, a society, an organization, or any other open system—over the years. The evolution of a life involves stability and change, continuity and discontinuity, order and progression as well as stasis, regression, chaotic flux. It is not enough to focus solely on a single moment or chapter in the life, nor to study the same individuals at intervals of several years as in standard longitudinal research, assuming simple continuity in the intervening periods. Rather, we must examine "lives in progress" (the felicitous phrase is Robert White's) and follow the temporal sequence closely and continuously over a span of years.

The word "life" is also of crucial importance. A life is, above all, about the engagement of a person in the world. To study an individual life we must include all aspects of living. A life involves significant interpersonal relationships—with friends and lovers, parents and siblings, spouses and children, bosses, colleagues, and mentors. It also involves significant relationships with groups and institutions of all kinds: family, occupational world, religious community. When we study any of these significant relationships, we must consider the nature of the social context in which it occurs, what goes on in the relationship at a relative, overt, behavioral level, and the subjective wishes and meanings that shape the person's involvement in it. We must include as well the bodily aspects of life—genetic endowment, biological development, health and illness, bodily fitness and impairment. To study the life course it is necessary to look at an individual life in its complexity at a given time and to delineate its evolution over time.

The study of the life course has presented almost insuperable problems to the human sciences. Each discipline has claimed as its own special domain one aspect of life, such as personality, social structure, culture, or biological functioning, and has neglected or minimized the others. The life course itself has been split into unconnected segments, such as childhood or old age, without recognizing the place of each segment in the life cycle as a whole. The result is fragmentation. I believe that a new multidisciplinary field of study will emerge in the next few decades.

Biography, the description of an individual life, offers another approach. For the most part, biographers have focused on their subjects' public work (be it fiction, painting, political leadership, or whatever) without considering sufficiently how the work is in the life and the life in the work. In addition, most biographies are concerned with a single life, not with

comparison of several lives or with broader theoretical issues. Well-done biographies can be of enormous value to the understanding of the life course generally. The present study is strongly biographical in method and spirit. It is part of an effort to form a boundary between the humanities and the sciences. Rather than one book-length biography of a single woman, this book contains briefer biographies of forty-five women. I have sought to capture the uniqueness of each individual life and, at the same time, to define and describe developmental principles that shape women's lives generally.

### *Major Aims and Questions*

My primary aim was to learn about the life course and development of women from the late teens to the mid-forties. This is not a comparative study of women *versus* men. It is, rather, an in-depth exploration of women's lives. Equal attention has been given to common themes that hold for women generally, to differences between various groups of women, and to the unique character of each individual life. I wanted to gain a detailed picture of every life in order to show the diversity of women's lives under various social and psychological conditions. Much of the recent research on gender differences has tended to create an oversimplified image of "woman" in opposition to an equally stereotypical image of "man." My findings support the view that women are similar to men in certain basic respects and different in others, and that the lives of both genders are wonderfully varied.

The method of study was Intensive Biographical Interviewing. I sought to draw out each woman's life story, as she experienced it, from childhood to the present. I explored the major events, relationships, strivings, and imaginings of her life, with attention to both external realities and subjective meanings. This method, which I initially developed during the research for my book *The Seasons of a Man's Life*, has proved to be ideally suited to the exploration of the individual life course, without built-in assumptions about gender and gender differences.

The key questions animating the present study were these:

- (1) Is there a human life cycle—an underlying order in the human life course, a sequence of seasons through which our lives must pass, each in its own unique way? Earlier I found that the male life cycle evolves through an age-linked sequence of *eras*: childhood, early adulthood, middle adulthood, late adulthood, and late late adulthood. Do women have a fundamentally different life cycle? Since the concrete life circumstances and the timing of specific events are different in many ways for women, I could not assume in advance that they would go through the same sequence of eras. (Indeed, I initially decided to study the two genders separately in order to attend fully to the differences.) To my surprise, the findings indicate that *women go through the same sequence of eras as men, and at the same ages*. There is, in short, a single human life cycle through which all our lives evolve, with myriad variations related to gender, class, race, culture, historical epoch, specific circumstances, and genetics. My view of this life cycle is given in [Chapter 2](#).
- (2) Is there a process of adult development analogous to the earlier process of child

development? The human sciences have been studying child development for over a century. It is generally recognized that there is a basic developmental pattern in the first twenty years or so of life. All human beings apparently go through a sequence of developmental periods—prenatal, infancy, early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence—before reaching that final amorphous state called adulthood. The study of child development seeks to determine the universal order and the general developmental principles that operate to produce uniquely individual lives. Research on child development is concerned equally with the universal and the idiosyncratic; it is concerned with the emergence of the unique individual out of the universal human. Of course the idea of developmental order includes the existence of disorder, even chaos. A period of relatively stable structure, we find, is followed by a period of flux in which we move from one structure to another.

What about adult development? Does it make sense to look at adult life from a developmental perspective similar to that used in childhood? Until recently this question was rarely asked. It was assumed that development is in its nature a childhood phenomenon: the process by which we evolve from conception to adulthood. Likewise, it has been assumed that senescence is a process of decline or negative growth that shapes our evolution in old age. In between, it would seem, we are on our own, changing in response to specific events but without any developmental order. The study of adult development is in its infancy and struggling to establish itself in the neglected space between child development and gerontology. Paradoxically, we know a lot about specific features of adult life—marriage, divorce, child-rearing, work, illness, stress—but very little about the meaning of adulthood as a season in the life cycle. We have, as it were, a detailed picture of many trees but no conception of the forest and no map to guide our journeys through it. One of my major aims is to form a conception of the life cycle and a map broad enough to provide guidelines for the infinitely varied pathways by which it may be traversed.

In *The Seasons of a Man's Life* I presented my own initial map of the developmental periods in men's lives over the course of early and middle adulthood, from roughly 17 to 65. These periods are *not* periods in a single aspect of living, such as personality, cognitive, moral, or career development. They are, rather, periods in the development of the adult *life structure*—the underlying pattern or design of a person's life at a given time. The life structure of a man, I found, evolves through a sequence of alternating periods, each lasting some five to seven years. A period of building and maintaining a life structure is followed by a transitional period in which we terminate the existing structure and move toward a new one that will fully emerge in the ensuing structure building-maintaining period.

I did not assume that the periods in life structure development would be the same in their nature and timing for women as for men. As with the eras, however, I made the surprising discovery that women and men go through the same sequence of periods at the same ages. At the same time, there are wide variations between

and within the genders, and in concrete ways of traversing each period. My current view of human adult development is given in [Chapter 2](#). This view is still provisional, but it has strong empirical grounding in my own and others' research.

- (3) What is the significance of gender in women's lives? In my opinion, equal attention should be given to the gender differences in concrete life course and to the gender similarities in basic developmental pattern. In seeking to understand the deeper sources of the observed gender differences, I have developed a theoretical perspective on the meanings of gender and the differential place of females and males in our society.

My perspective on gender is presented in [Chapter 3](#). The central concept is *gender splitting*—a sharp division between feminine and masculine that permeates every aspect of human life. Gender splitting takes many forms: the rigid distinction between feminine and masculine in the culture and in the individual psyche; the division between the domestic world and the public occupational world; the Traditional Marriage Enterprise, with its distinction between the male husband/father/provisioner and the female wife/mother/homemaker; the linkage between masculinity and authority, which makes it “natural” that the man be head of household, executive and leader within the occupational domain, and predominant in a patriarchal social structure.

The actual forms of gender splitting vary widely among cultures and historical periods, but the underlying process has operated powerfully in most societies we know about. In the last few centuries the forces of institutional and technological change have tended to modify and blur the traditional gender splitting. This in turn has led to changes in the meanings of gender and the relationships between women and men generally. We are now in the early stages of a vast historical transition. The traditional patterns are eroding but satisfactory new ones have not yet been discovered and legitimized. Evidence of our confusion and conflict is given in the current social-political turmoil regarding reproductive rights, “family values,” and the place of women in the occupational world.

- (4) How are these conceptions of development and of gender reflected in the lives of individual women? [Chapters 4](#) through [15](#) follow the women studied through the successive developmental periods to age 45. I will try to show how my concepts emerge out of, and are grounded in, the individual biographies. At the same time, I will show how this theoretical perspective helps to illuminate and make sense of an actual life. My goal throughout is to demonstrate both the underlying order and the manifest diversity, uniqueness, and frequent disorder in the lives of women. I turn now to a brief consideration of the methods employed to answer the above questions, especially on the methods of interviewing and selecting a sample. My purpose is not to give a highly technical account, but to show how the choice of research methods was shaped by the questions and my way of thinking about them. The questions, substantive ideas, and procedures for gaining relevant evidence were organically connected. Most of the commonly used methods would have prevented me from exploring what I had in mind.

This study is biographical in approach and method. My primary goals were: (1) to elicit the life stories of a number of women; (2) to construct a biography of each one in her own words; and (3) to learn something from this rich material about the nature of women's adult development and about specific life issues relating to friendship, work, love, marriage, motherhood, good times and bad times, the stuff that life is made of. These goals strongly influenced the research methods.

The standard quantitative methods of survey research, testing, and brief structured interviewing are very useful for certain purposes, as I know from my earlier research. They allow us to study the largest sample in the shortest time, using a staff composed mainly of technicians and a computer that makes statistical order out of masses of raw numbers. It is hardly more difficult or costly to study a sample of 500 than of 100. At their best, these methods provide the aura of rigor, quantification, and high technology which gives this mode of research the ring of objectivity and true science, which in turn makes it easier to obtain research grants. Considering the convenience and the appearance of scientific legitimacy such methods offer, they are hard to give up, even when it makes no real sense to use them. Unfortunately, they are poorly suited to exploratory research in a field relatively lacking in theory, in descriptive knowledge, and in measuring instruments of demonstrated validity.

I decided that, despite the difficulties involved, it was essential to use and develop further the method of Intensive Biographical Interviewing initially developed in *The Seasons of Man's Life*. This is a time-consuming process. In the present study, an interviewer and research participant typically met weekly for a series of eight to ten sessions over a two- or three-month period. A session lasted one and a half to two hours. For each participant there were fifteen to twenty hours of taped interviews yielding some two hundred to three hundred typed pages. Owing to budget constraints, six of the faculty members were interviewed two to four times, for a total of four to eight hours. The interviews were held when and where the participant preferred, usually in her home or workplace or in the interviewer's office. The interviewing was done by a staff of eight women and four men, including myself (see [Preface](#)). The staff met regularly to discuss individual lives, the sample as a whole, and various subsamples, issues in interviewing, our evolving ideas about gender and adult development, specific concepts and controversies, and the work of others.

The primary aim of Intensive Biographical Interviewing is to enable the participant to tell her life story from childhood to the present. The word "story" is of fundamental importance here. It is common in academic settings to say that we are getting a "history"—a clinical case history, developmental history, work history, or family history. Such histories focus selectively on particular events and issues of importance to the history taker. When we want to learn about the life course, however, the term "story" is more appropriate. The person telling her story is identified by the researcher, and experiences herself not as a patient, client, or research subject (that is, object), but as a *participant* in a joint effort. The participant is more freely and fully engaged when she feels invited to tell her story in her own terms and when she feels that the interviewer is a truly interested listener/participant in the storytelling. The story is the medium in which various messages are delivered—about joy and sorrows, times of abundance and times of depletion, the sense of wasting one's life or



using it well, efforts at building, maintaining, and ending significant relationships.

The task of telling the story is mainly the participant's. The interviewer's task is to facilitate the storytelling: to listen actively and empathically, to affirm the value of what she or he is hearing, to offer questions and comments that help the participant give a fuller, more coherent, and more textured account. The biographical interviewer is different from the survey interviewer, whose task is to obtain specific information on specific topics, and from the psychotherapist, whose task is to help the participant understand and modify her inner problems. The interviewer's interest in the life story and responsiveness to it are crucial factors in the participant's readiness to tell it, especially those parts that are deeply satisfying and/or painful.

My collaborator, Judy D. Levinson, developed the method of Biographical Reconstruction in the analysis of the qualitative interview material, which helped us hear the many subjective voices of the women. As I have said, the primary aim of Intensive Biographical Interviewing is to enable the participant to tell her *life story*—to give a relatively full account of the life course—from childhood to the present. The story is the raw material out of which the biography is reconstructed. The great challenge is to describe the individual life course as richly as possible and to generate concepts that represent its underlying complexity, order, and chaos. The method of Biographical Reconstruction enables us to condense and order some two hundred to three hundred pages of interview transcript pages while preserving the life story in the woman's own voice. This method provides a crucially important first step in the construction of the life. It shortens and makes more manageable the many hours of interview material while maintaining its qualitative meanings and themes. Once this step has been taken, we are in a much better position to identify major life themes that hold for all three samples, to develop concepts and hypotheses, and to give rich descriptive findings about the adult development and meanings of gender for women generally.

The biographical method has inherent limitations, especially in the reliance on memory and reconstruction, but it also has major advantages and ought to be recovered from the limbo to which psychology has relegated it. This method has special value for the study of life structure development. It is the only one that enables us to obtain a complex picture of the life structure at a given time and to delineate its evolution over a span of years. It is well suited for gaining a concrete sense of the individual life course, for generating new concepts, and for developing new hypotheses that are rooted in theory and relevant to the lived life.

### ***The Women Studied: Homemakers and Career Women***

The choice of research method influenced the size and character of the sample. I decided to study forty-five women in all, fifteen in each of three samples. This number was small enough so that we could obtain relatively full life stories, yet large enough to provide a picture of individual lives under widely varying conditions. In addition, we obtained questionnaire data from several hundred women, the pool from which our interviewees were selected. Since the study dealt with the life course until age 45, there were arguments for selecting a sample currently in their middle to late forties. Instead, I chose to include women ranging in age from 35 to 45. This age distribution has the disadvantage that its youngest members have not completed the entire sequence to 45, but it has several compensating

advantages. Women of about 45 can describe their lives until that age and give a rich account of the recent years, but their story of the earlier years may not be as full. Women in the late thirties generally describe their twenties and early thirties with more immediacy and vividness. In eliciting and interpreting a life story, we must take into account the vantage point from which it is told. A person of 45 reviewing her life until 30 is telling the story from a different vantage point than she would have at 30 or 40. All research, no matter how rigorous its design and measurement, inevitably presents problems of interpretation. No single study can be conclusive.

On what basis should the sample for this kind of study be formed? There are many possibilities. Some are clearly better than others but no single one is "best." I decided on the following: (1) homemakers; (2) women with careers in the corporate-financial world; (3) women with careers in the academic world.

### **The Homemakers**

The fifteen homemakers were drawn randomly from the city directory of the greater New Haven area (excluding only the small number in careers of the kind represented by the other two samples). They were a good cross section of the general population and varied widely in social class, education, religion, ethnicity, work, and marital history. They lived mainly as traditional homemakers in a family-centered pattern. The nature and extent of their outside work were quite varied: a few had not worked at all outside the home; some had worked on and on at unskilled or semiskilled jobs; still others were in "female" occupations such as nursing and schoolteaching. They differed also in the evolution of their involvement in outside work. For some, a job had always been a burden to be undertaken only out of financial necessity, and not a source of satisfaction or meaning in life. For others, outside work became increasingly important, joining family as a central component of their lives. This sample reveals the durability of the traditional pattern as well as the profound forces that are changing it.

### **Women with Corporate-Financial Careers**

These fifteen career women were at the opposite extreme from the homemakers. They were employed in major corporate-financial organizations in the New York City area. They were part of the first generation in which a sizable number of women (though still a small minority) entered a high-status male occupational system and tried to make occupation a central component of their life structure. Some of them held professional-technical positions such as investment analyst or portfolio manager, with no managerial responsibilities. Others had management staff positions in areas such as human resources, public relations, and corporate planning, which were not on a track leading to the highest levels. Very few women in this sample, or in the corporate world, had positions involving line authority in the corporate structure. Their average annual income in the early 1980s was about \$60,000, with a range of roughly \$25,000 to over \$200,000. It would be considerably higher in 1990 dollars. In the larger pool from which the sample was selected, the great majority were in their thirties; a smaller number were in their early forties and very few over 45; before the 1970s a career path in this field was virtually closed to women. About half were unmarried.

slightly more childless. Both the benefits and the costs of this life were substantial.

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## **The Women with Academic Careers**

The sample of fifteen faculty members in colleges and universities was intermedia between the first two. Like the businesswomen they were struggling to combine career and family, but the corporate world is even more stressful and sexist than the academic and provides even less support for combining career and family. They all were employed at one of several institutions located in the New York–Boston corridor. Each of these institutions provided rather different career paths for women, and their faculty members varied somewhat in social and educational background. In all of the institutions, however, the female faculty were largely in junior faculty or marginal (non-tenure track) positions and more were in the humanities than the sciences. The women in this sample were highly diverse with regard to academic rank, field of study, and social background, as well as educational, occupational, and marital/family history.

These samples are certainly not an accurate cross section of the national population, but this is not a statistical study. The great majority of American women are still primarily homemakers. Although most of them have jobs, few have a long-term occupational career. Women with corporate or academic careers such as those studied here are still in a small minority. Their numbers are increasing, however. A better understanding of their lives will be of growing importance to individual women and men, to work organizations, and to the direction of our future social policies.

Many significant groups are not represented in our sample. However, there are great differences between the samples and great variation within each. The intensive study of individual lives enabled us to explore the complexity, subtlety, and variety of those lives and to free ourselves from the stereotypical images of “woman” that flourish in this time of gender splitting. In comparing the lives of the homemakers and the career women, it became clear that we have much to learn about the current state of the Traditional Marriage Enterprise and the issues women face when they attempt to modify it.

[Chapters 2](#) and [3](#) present more fully the perspectives on adult development and on gender which form the twin vantage points from which I shall then examine women’s lives. [Chapters 4](#) through [9](#) follow the homemakers through the successive developmental periods to age 40. [Chapters 10](#) through [15](#) do the same for the career women, identifying themes common to both career samples while also noting differences between the faculty members and those in the corporate-financial world.

## The Human Life Cycle: Eras and Developmental Periods

Is there a fundamental order in the human life course? Most people would say no. After all, each life is unique in its pattern at a given time and in its evolution over time, and many lives are notable for their disorderly, even chaotic quality. Yet two images common to virtually all societies suggest that underlying the manifest variety and disorder there is a basic sequence that all lives go through in their own individual ways.

- (1) The *life cycle*: there may be seasons in the life course just as there are seasons in the year and evolving phases in many aspects of nature.
- (2) *Development* is now ingrained in our thinking about childhood and can be extended into adulthood. The study of childhood is largely about child development—about the ways in which we develop, biologically, psychologically, and socially, from infancy to adulthood. Does development then stop? May not our adult lives evolve in accordance with developmental principles? These questions have been largely neglected in the human sciences.

My own conception of the life cycle and of developmental periods in adulthood is in part a product of the present study and might have been reserved for a concluding chapter. I discuss it here, however, because it gives the reader a perspective from which to examine and understand the individual lives described in subsequent chapters.

### *The Life Cycle*

The idea of the life cycle goes beyond that of the life course. In its origin this idea is metaphorical, not descriptive or conceptual, but it is useful to retain the primary imagery while moving toward something more precise. The imagery implies an underlying order in the human life course; although each individual life is unique, everyone goes through the same basic sequence. The course of a life is not a simple, continuous process; there are qualitatively different phases or seasons. The metaphor of seasons appears in many contexts. There are seasons of the year. Spring is a time of blossoming, and poets allude to youth as the springtime of the life cycle. Summer is the season of greatest passion and ripeness. An elderly ruler is “the lion in winter.” There are seasons within a single day—dawn, noon, twilight, the full dark of night—each having its counterpart in the life cycle. There are seasons in love, war, politics, artistic creation, illness. The imagery suggests that the life course evolves through a sequence of definable seasons or segments. Change goes on within each season, and a transition is required for the shift from one to the next. Every season has its own time, although it is part of and colored by the whole. No season is intrinsically better or more important than any other. Each has its necessary place and contributes its special character to the whole.

What are the major seasons of the life cycle? Neither popular culture nor the human sciences provide a clear answer to this question. The modern world has no established conception—scientific, philosophical, religious, or literary—of the life cycle as a whole and of its component phases. We have no popular language to describe a series of age levels after adolescence. We use words such as youth, maturity, and middle age, but they are ambiguous in their age linkages and meanings. The ambiguity of language stems from the lack of an established cultural or scientific definition of adulthood and how people's lives evolve within it.

The predominant view divides the life course into three parts: (1) An initial segment of about twenty years is usually identified as *childhood*, or childhood and adolescence, or the “formative years” prior to adulthood. (2) A final segment starting at around 65 is known as *old age*, which is commonly regarded both as part of “adulthood” and as a sequel to it. Various euphemisms, such as “senior citizen” or “golden years,” have been used at times but do little to dispel our deep anxiety about this season of the life cycle. (3) Between these two segments lies an amorphous time vaguely known as *adulthood*.

The study of child development seeks to determine the universal order and the process by which our lives become increasingly individualized. Historically, the great psychologists in this field, such as Freud and Piaget, conceived of development as the process by which we become adult—which means that it stops with the cessation of adolescence. Given this view, they had no basis for concerning themselves with the possibilities for adult development or with the nature of the life cycle as a whole.

An impetus to change came in the 1950s when geriatrics and gerontology were established as fields of human service and research. Unfortunately, gerontology has not gone far toward generating a conception of the life cycle or of development in adulthood. One reason, perhaps, is that it skipped from childhood to old age without examining the intervening adult years. Our present understanding of old age will be enhanced when more is known about adulthood; the later seasons can then be connected more organically to the earlier ones.

Early in this century, Carl G. Jung was perhaps the first modern voice in psychiatry and psychology to focus on the possibility of adult personality development. He took the position that personality development simply cannot progress very far by the end of adolescence—just far enough to allow us to begin living as adults and assuming the responsibilities required by family, work, and community. The inner struggles of the twenties and thirties, said Jung, deal mainly with the “shadow,” the repressed childhood desires and attributes that Freud had brought to light. After 40, we may begin to develop many archetypes—potentials within the self—that remain relatively primitive until mid-life. The archetypes and the self assume increasing importance in middle and late adulthood.

At about the same time, the Dutch anthropologist Arnold van Gennep was examining the life cycle from a more societal perspective. His book *Rites of Passage* (first published in 1909) dealt with major life events such as birth, death, marriage, and divorce. Many societies deal with these events by constructing rites of passage—ceremonial occasions that shape the person's movement from one status or group to another. Persons in passage or transition are a potential threat to society because they are poorly integrated in the groups they are leaving as well as in the groups they are entering. For society, rituals are a form of social control; they help to ensure that individuals properly terminate their membership in a particular generation or social position and become securely ensconced in a new one. For the individual,

the rituals provide a collective vehicle for gaining personal control over the anxieties that such transitions generate.

As an anthropologist, van Gennep understandably dealt more with the cultural than the psychological aspects of this phenomenon. Psychologists and psychiatrists tend to go to the other extreme. An adequate understanding ultimately requires joint consideration of both culture and personality. Van Gennep viewed the life cycle as a series of major life events and passages occurring within a cultural framework. This approach must be combined with one that takes account of personality and that examines the entire life course, rather than just the highlighting events.

José Ortega y Gasset, the great Spanish historian-philosopher, presented in *Man and Civilization* (first published in 1933) a remarkable conception of the life cycle and the flow of generations in history. On the basis of both individual and societal considerations he identified five generations, each representing a season of the life cycle: *childhood*, age 0 to 15; *youth*, 15 to 30; *initiation*, 30 to 45; *dominant*, 45 to 60; and *old age*, 60+. Collectively, all five generations coexist at any moment in human society. Life in each generation is shaped by the particular point in history at which it exists. Each of us moves over time from one generation to the next. The generational divisions thus contribute to the shape of the life cycle, and the potentials in the life cycle affect the ways in which generational boundaries are drawn.

Ortega's youth generation (age 15–30) roughly corresponds to what I call the *novice phase* of early adulthood. In this phase, we take our first tentative steps toward working, building a family, and establishing a place in the adult world. His initiation generation (30–45) is, from my perspective, in the *culminating phase* of early adulthood. In our early thirties we are responsible but junior members of a social world. By our early forties we are entering a more senior position and joining the dominant generation. In the initiation generation we receive the wisdom and control of our seniors; we also begin slowly to assert our own authority and to create moderately or radically new ideas and goals. In the dominant generation we join and to some degree modify the establishment that governs every social institution. At any given moment in history, the initiation and dominant generations largely determine the future of society, and the relations between them are of tremendous historical importance. It is ironic that the years from approximately age 30 to 60, about which we know the least, have the most fundamental significance for the collective as well as individual well-being of humanity.

The culminating figure in this brief review is Erik H. Erikson. With the publication of *Childhood and Society* in 1950, he became the most influential developmental theorist of the time. The book might well have been called "Life Cycle and Society." Its distinctive creativity was to place childhood within an articulated framework of the life cycle and to generate the study of adult development. Erikson's developmental concepts deal primarily with the individual life course. He emphasized the process of living, the idea of life history rather than case history, the use of biography rather than therapy or testing as the chief research method. In studying a life, his first step was to examine its course over the years. He then sought to explore the ways in which the life course reflected the engagement of *self* (psychology, personality, inner world) and *external world* (society, culture, institutions, history).

Erikson posited a sequence of eight *ego stages*. Each stage predominates in, and is most appropriate for, a specific *age segment* of the life cycle. The first five stages cover a series of

age segments from infancy through adolescence. The last three stages occur in age segments identified by Erikson as young adulthood, adulthood, and old age. Stage six, Intimacy vs. Isolation, clearly begins at the start of “young adulthood” at around 20. Stage eight, Integrity vs. Despair, initiates “old age” in the sixties. Erikson was most elusive about the onset of stage seven, Generativity vs. Stagnation, and has been interpreted variously. My own reading of his texts, especially *Gandhi’s Truth*, is that generativity begins at about 40 and remains a primary concern throughout middle adulthood. A key issue in this stage is one’s relationship to the generations of younger adults. In Ortega’s terms, generativity is a major task of the dominant generation, which has the responsibility for educating the youth generation and fostering the development of the initiation generation so that they will, in time, be ready to succeed (and perhaps exceed) their seniors.

Erikson had a complex view of the childhood years. His view of the adult years from roughly 20 to 60, and of the two ego stages within them, provides a valuable starting point for the study of adult development, but much more is needed. The problem of segments of the life cycle is not Erikson’s alone; it is a fundamental issue that has generally been ignored or blurred. Most textbooks on human development devote 60 percent or more of their pages to childhood, 20 percent or less to adulthood, and about 20 percent to old age.

On what basis can we distinguish one season of the life cycle from another? A segment of the life cycle must be characterized by an underlying unity in the overall character of living during those years. It cannot be defined solely in terms of one aspect of living. There is now a well-established life cycle framework for the first twenty years or so. We refer to it broadly as childhood: the season of growth toward adulthood. Within it is a series of smaller segments such as early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence (which is, in effect, late childhood). There is no corresponding consensus about the adult seasons of the life cycle, even though a good deal has been learned about specific features of adult life—social roles and relationships in family, work, and other contexts, adaptation to major life events, stability and change in personality.

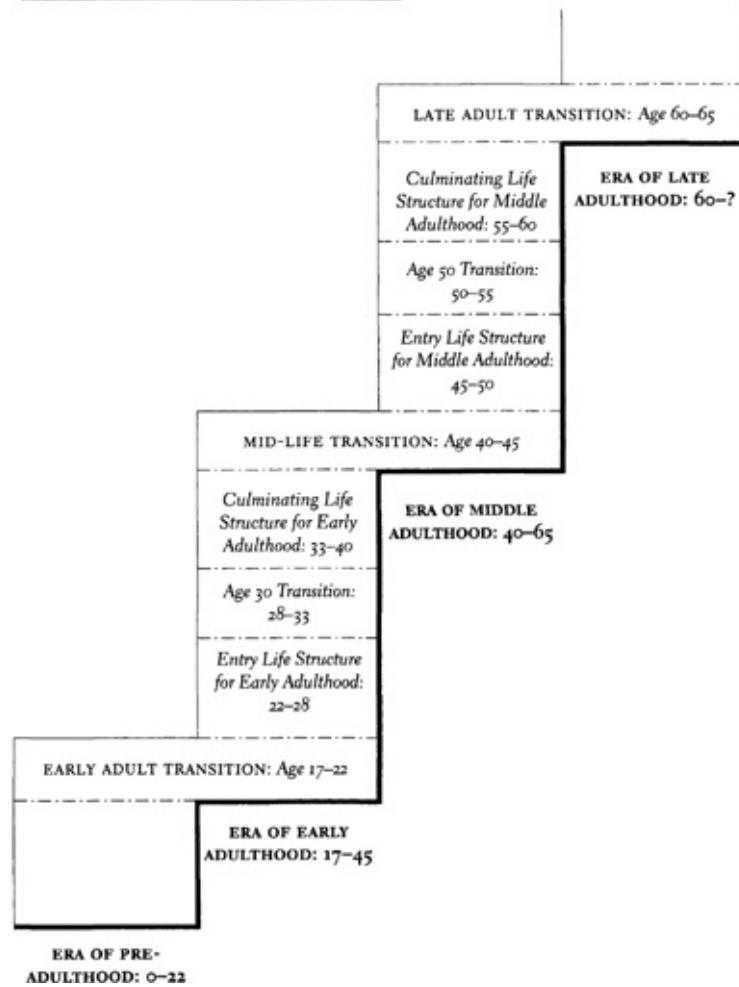
In order to establish adult development as a major field of study, we must address three major tasks: to describe the individual life course as it evolves; to form a conception of the life cycle and the place of adulthood within it; and to determine how development proceeds in adulthood. This will provide a framework within which specific events, roles, relationships, and developmental processes can be studied in a more integrated fashion. I turn now to my own conception of the life cycle and adult development.

### ***Eras: The Macrostructure of the Life Cycle***

I conceive of the life cycle as a sequence of eras (see [this page](#)). Each era has its own basic psycho-social character, and each makes its distinctive contribution to the whole. There are major changes in the nature of our lives from one era to the next, and lesser though still crucially important changes within eras. They are partially overlapping; a new era begins as the previous one approaches its end. A *cross-era transition*, which generally lasts about five years, terminates the outgoing era and initiates the next. The eras and the cross-era transitional periods form the broad structure of the life cycle, providing an underlying order in the flow of all human lives yet permitting myriad variations in the individual life course.

**DEVELOPMENTAL PERIODS  
IN THE ERAS OF EARLY AND  
MIDDLE ADULTHOOD**

(adapted from *The Seasons of  
a Man's Life*, Knopf, 1978)



Every era and developmental period begins and ends at a well-defined average age, with a range of about two years above and below this average. The idea of age-linked phases of adult life goes against our conventional wisdom. Nevertheless, research on women as well as men consistently reveals these age linkages.

The first era, *childhood*, extends from birth to roughly age 22. It is the era of most rapid growth. The first few years of life provide a transition from birth into childhood. During this time the newborn becomes biologically and psychologically separate from the mother and establishes an initial distinction between the “me” and the “not-me”—the first step in the continuing process of individuation. Early childhood is followed by middle childhood and adolescence.

The years from about 17 to 22 constitute the *Early Adult Transition*, a developmental period in which the era of childhood draws to a close and early adulthood gets under way. It is part of both eras and not fully within either. We modify our relationships with family and other components of the childhood world, we begin forming an adult identity, and we begin taking our place as adults in the adult world. From a childhood-centered perspective, one can say that development is now largely completed and the child has gained the maturity to be an adult. Textbooks on developmental psychology commonly take this view. Taking the perspective of the life cycle as a whole, however, we recognize that the development



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