

Introduction and Overview

What is a life? Suddenly, it exists . . . and equally suddenly, as if with the flip of a switch, that unique embodied individual person is no more. In between? A life. Framed by our birth and our death, the threads of our days weave into the fabric of our lifetime, drawing from the raw materials that are available to us in our particular inner and outer environments. We each look out at our world, and inward at ourselves, from our own unique standpoint, powerfully informed by our inner life—the domain of psychology. A human life is the life of a self that can step back, look at itself, and reflect.

This is a book that chronicles and gives form to life stories. It presents discoveries found through a study of women across their adult lifespan. In 1958, 142 young women, seniors at Mills College, became participants in a study of women's creative potential. They were about age 21. Contacted again at about ages 27, 42, 53, 61, and 72, they have shared their experience and understandings at each of these points in their lives. For over fifty years we've asked, in different ways and with different words: "What is your life about? Where is it going? How is it going?" In the situations and environments in which they have lived, we see the evolution of their lives through their eyes and in their own words. In addition, with a goal to study the whole person, we go beneath the surface, identifying personality traits and revealing aspects of inner life. Patterns and groupings have emerged that create shape and organization. Connections are drawn across time, showing the beginnings of

attitudes and styles that come to fruition in a distant future. No other study has looked at women's lives in such a full panorama, or with the depth allowed by obtaining a full range of information, both qualitative and quantitative, from scales and inventories, ratings and checklists, to open-ended questions, paragraphs, short essays and interviews.

This is an extraordinary undertaking, and all the more so when we consider that, in many ways, women were invisible in psychology when the project was conceived, over a half century ago. At that time, there was no "psychology of women," no "women's studies" or "gender studies." In fact, there was no women's movement or second-wave feminism. And yet, Ravenna Helson began . . . and as we like to say in today's world, she persisted.

The Mills study is a work of scholarship and academic rigor. Throughout, hypotheses were generated and tested and findings subjected to the cold objectivity of statistical analysis and its high standards for significance. Numerical responses—checklists and ratings, questionnaires and personality inventories—tell us about how a woman's inner resources and personality traits affect her life (and are affected by it), as well as showing the impact of externals—society, environments, constraints and opportunities. We can see patterns shared by women who are high and low in particular traits. Every chapter of this book is based on published journal articles, chapters, or conference presentations.

However, in the interest of making the discoveries of the Mills study available to many, we have chosen to convey those discoveries primarily in words and pictures rather than numbers. We have also limited our referencing of source material to increase the readability of our text. An appendix lists the references for the main Mills study publications on which each chapter is based. The interested reader is strongly encouraged to obtain the original material. By turning to these sources, readers can delve more deeply into our research designs, our choice of measures, the statistics we used to test hypotheses, and the works by others that informed our own work on that topic.

When we follow these lives as they have been lived, we must not be overwhelmed by the richness of the stories. To see these lives in their wholeness, we cannot look at the forest one tree at a time, nor these lives day by day. But stepping back, we see trends and patterns, and below the surface, distinct forces at work over time. We have found and created concepts that focus and organize adult lives, sometimes into "chapters" or "seasons," sometimes expressing fundamental themes—purpose in life, maturity, satisfaction or disappointment, passion, creativity, openness or

wisdom. These concepts show the patterns in the lives, and the influences that create or obstruct opportunities and life paths, support or diminish individual styles and sets of values. While we have established patterns and connections among subgroups of women statistically, we bring these discoveries to life by turning to the words and experiences of individual women who exemplify them. In some instances, we have selected a small group of women who exemplify a particular pattern, and compared them with another small group that exemplifies the contrasting pattern, in order to make this contrast clear. In these instances, we use information from subsets of our Mills women instead of attempting to include everyone.

WHAT DO WE FIND?

What will be the leading themes and constructs that organize our understanding of these lives? Taking an overview of the chapters of the book, we see the shape of lives unfold.

Chapters 1–3 set the stage, explaining how the Mills study began, was transformed, and then sustained across fifty years.

The five chapters in part 1 (chapters 4–8) describe early adulthood, the two decades between about ages 20 and 40. Because the Mills study was originally conceived as a study of women’s creative potential, we begin with a chapter about the roots of women’s creativity. When they were college seniors, about 20 percent of our Mills women were identified by their teachers as entering early adulthood with creative potential. Where did this creative potential come from? We look back into their childhood to discover the answer.

We have seen that much energy in these early adult years is devoted to launching and living out one or both of the two major projects sanctioned for young adults in American society—the family project and the work project. Nearly all the Mills women did initiate a project during those years, though they differed in the projects they chose and the timing of their launch, and these differences were influenced by personality, situation and social norms. For the Mills women, norms of their day urged that marriage and childrearing begin in their early twenties, and the pressure to be on time led to an array of outcomes, both successes and failures. At that time, norms held that women would either work or have children, not both; perhaps as a result, only a minority of women pursued careers in early adulthood. We begin our look at the consequences of these cultural mandates, consequences for what women did (or didn’t do) and how they felt about themselves.

An important question has been whether adult developmental theories, mainly authored by men and based on men's lives, are useful in accurately describing the lives of women. We tried out three of these theories, applying them to the early adult period in the lives of seven Mills women in their early forties, to evaluate how well they fit.

Before venturing into the middle adulthood era, we pause in part II to consider three major influences on the lives of this group of women who are traveling through historical time together. The Mills women began early adulthood feeling the enormous pressure of gender role expectations; chapter 9 shows how these gender expectations dictated what they would do and how their personalities would change. Soon, we saw how the vast contrast of the women's liberation movement led many Mills women to question these gendered mandates and to revise their vision of a good life. Considering the sweep of history (chapter 10), we document the rise of the counterculture, gay liberation, and a growing individualism, and the profound effects these influences had on some women. At a time when the culture failed to endorse work expectations for women, our final chapter in this section on major influences (chapter 11) reveals the impact of personality traits on women's work lives.

Next, we turn in Part III to the middle years, from about age 40 to 60 (chapters 12–15). Middle age is a long stretch, with an initial fuzzy boundary during which we make a transition from being novices who need to prove themselves, to a concluding fuzzy boundary where we move toward being carriers and transmitters of the culture. There are many factors that affect how a woman (or a man, a generation or a culture) experiences middle age. In chapter 12, we watch how our Mills women's work and family projects evolve with time, and the extent to which particular women become traditional, neotraditional, or nontraditional in the lives they create. We discover changes in personality, identity, goals and values. Chapter 13 conceptualizes three phases in middle age and maps patterns of ups and downs: personality traits and life experiences that trend up and down. In chapter 14, we witness the challenge of surviving young adulthood as a creative woman in midcentury America, and trace the divergent paths of creative women as they become creative careerists, frustrated careerists, or self-actualizers. A woman's creation and recognition of her own life story will have powerful implications for the life she lives. In our fourth chapter on middle age, chapter 15, our data convincingly show that, in contrast to myths and stereotypes about women's lives, many women have a prime of

life—a period they regard as “first rate”—in their fifties. We demonstrate how we have learned this, and what constitutes this prime of life.

In middle age, women’s lives show patterns of change and improved functioning. In the next four chapters, part IV, we describe the basis on which some women have achieved considerable personal growth: secure attachment, maturity, wisdom, generativity, and/or individuation. Chapter 16 is a recounting, in her own words, of one woman’s work to transform her relational worldview and achieve a sense of secure attachment. In our second chapter on developmental achievements (chapter 17) we trace three paths of positive mental health—paths followed by women who we recognize as conservers, achievers, or seekers. We do this by looking at the Mills women’s greater and lesser abilities in the areas of environmental mastery and psychological growth. Our third developmental achievement is wisdom; in chapter 18 we explore two distinct kinds of wisdom and the kinds of women who achieve each. We also consider the ways that creativity and wisdom are similar, and the ways they differ. In the final chapter of our section on developmental achievements, chapter 19, we see how women at the peak of their powers, having reared children, had careers, and cared for partners, recognize their contributions to helping leave the world a better place—their generativity. Soon, they also find themselves stepping back and devoting energy to heightened introspection, a reassessment of self and restructuring of experience (individuation), as well as a vision and sense of meaning that unites the whole of life (integrity).

Late adulthood, the period from about age 60 to 80, has distinct developmental challenges, which we discuss in part V (chapters 20–23). Looking back across the span of adulthood, we seek answers in chapter 20 to questions about the place of creativity in the life course—is it enduring? how is it related to personality growth? why is it often related to negative characteristics? and what affects the timing of creative late bloomers? In chapters 21 and 22 we explore changes in the sense of purpose in life between the sixties and the seventies—looking at women whose purpose was high at both times, low at both times, or whose purpose decreased or increased across this decade. We show how the impact of inner resources and limitations, happy and painful events, and women’s feelings about each of these, profoundly affects the shape of their lives, their sense of purpose, and their perspectives in the late adulthood years. We finish by showing, in chapter 23, how development across adulthood comes to fruition in our Mills women in their sixties and seventies. Personality continues to contribute to the ways women handle

challenges—how they re-structure their time in response to retirement; how they design their lives in the absence of direction from the culture; how they regard their future in new ways. We look at differences in the trajectory of development across adulthood that are the result of differences in identity structure and in self vs. other orientation.

DOING THE MILLS STUDY ACROSS HALF A CENTURY

Ravenna founded the Mills study in 1958, and has been its principal investigator for over fifty years. At the beginning, it was hers alone. In chapter 1, she recalls the invigorating and fecund earliest days of UC–Berkeley’s Institute of Personality Assessment and Research (IPAR), where the study was born. In those days, the Institute’s focus was the psychology of creativity, and when the opportunity emerged to consider creativity in women, she was offered the job. As part of that undertaking, she designed and implemented the first round of data collection in what was to become the fifty-year longitudinal study that is the subject of this book. Five years later, to discover what had become of the creativity and leadership potential of those college girls, she conducted a followup, and also obtained data from their husbands, siblings, and parents. She produced a monograph and five journal articles that made her findings available to the academic community, and these findings inform our chapter 4.

In 1977, twenty years after their college graduation, she had the idea to look again at the lives of these women—this time from the perspective of their psychological development across early adulthood. She invited Valory Mitchell, then a psychology graduate student, to collaborate with her in drafting a grant proposal that would enable the study to continue. This was an extraordinary step—it is rare that senior researchers invite graduate students into grant writing—and it is the first example of decades of collaboration that Ravenna nurtured within the Mills study. In chapter 2, Valory, who is about ten years younger than the Mills women, describes her own early adulthood as an example of the changing zeitgeist that contrasts with the young adulthood of the Mills women in the 1950s. This chapter also describes cultural and technological changes that affected the study over time, changes that also affected the lives of the Mills women. The methods used in the study are also described in this chapter.

In 1980 they got the grant and embarked together on the assessment of the Mills women. This round of contact yielded a treasure trove of understandings and discoveries about their young adult lives. Two book

chapters and nine journal articles were published during the 1980s. Over time, other grants were obtained; the Mills study would come to fruition as the only study of women across their entire adult lifespan.

In the decades that followed, the Mills project became a major undertaking. Ravenna welcomed many graduate students as well as visiting faculty and their students to join her in exploring topics. In so doing, she nurtured the excitement and passion of new generations of psychologists. Their commitment to unearthing the realities of women's adult development gave the ongoing study its vibrance. After the Mills women were studied in their early fifties, no less than fifty-four articles or chapters were published during the 1990s. In the new century, in the decade surrounding the age 61 round of data collection, thirty-three more publications emerged from the Mills study, and three additional publications (thus far) have followed the age 70 followup.

So, while the content of the Mills study is women's lifespan development, the process of the Mills study across nearly sixty years is a record of not only Ravenna's continuous publications, but also of the continual cultivation of collaboration, the nurturing of graduate students in their own professional development, and the willingness to join with professional colleagues from near and far to study new ideas. In doing so, we faced the major challenge of bringing data sets into synchrony. In all these ways, Ravenna modeled a feminist collaborative approach to research. Chapter 3 describes this more fully as we look "behind the scenes" at the people who staffed the Mills project and the changing times in academic psychology that influenced it.

WHO ARE THE MILLS WOMEN?

The Mills women were born between 1936 and 1939, when the country was emerging from the Great Depression and the clouds of war were building on the horizon. Few of their fathers served in World War II, but many enjoyed the postwar economic expansion of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Whether because they were born to affluence, acquired it during those years, or received scholarships, these parents were able to send their daughters to a private college for women.

The 1950s were known as the age of conformity, and as they passed through adolescence, these young women internalized the narrow margins of a woman's acceptable life—to be married to a promising young man, start a family, and find fulfillment in the homemaker role. As college seniors, ALL of the Mills women wrote that they expected to marry,

and nearly all expected children. Those seeking careers were in the minority, and felt their marginality.

The Mills women also represent a very homogeneous demographic. The importance of diversity had not been recognized in the 1950s; there were very few women of color at Mills College at that time, and women who did not identify as heterosexual remained closeted and invisible. The composition of the Mills study echoes this homogeneity. It primarily consists of white women whose fathers were businessmen or professionals, whose mothers were homemakers, and who graduated from Mills College, soon to enter into the social ferment of the 1960s. However, as they made their own lives, it became apparent that they were heterogeneous in personality, interests, income, career emphasis, and values.

Because the Mills study began as an investigation of women's creative potential, it was important to researchers to locate a group of women who had sufficient privilege and resources to be able to actualize their potential: college-educated white women were such a group. A similar argument might be made about the potential to take advantage of developmental changes. Looking at the evidence from the Mills study, the reader should always ask whether the personal life changes and developments shown here would have been possible for women who were less privileged, more marginalized, or whose lives required greater attention to financial need.

As we describe the women in early adulthood, we show the profound struggle some felt as they tried to love the narrow life path they had been assigned, while others found contentment and accomplishment in the traditional role. Later, with the advent of the women's movement, we chronicle the expansion of life options and varied paths taken by the Mills women. In middle age and late adulthood, we show the rich panoply of perspectives and viewpoints that shape the lives of these women, launched into traditional midcentury lives, and eventually arriving in a new century. Some have transformed their identity and way of life along the way. Others continue to champion the conservative values of their youth. Many have found that individual and distinct features bring a uniqueness to their particular experience. Among the Mills women, there are homeless women, tai chi instructors, businesswomen, scientists, heads of dance companies, heads of animal shelters, heads of pizza parlors, radicals, conservatives, piano tuners, classical pianists, librarians, homemakers, artists, therapists, jazz musicians. And yet, as we show, there are patterns and groupings that allow us to see the contours of women's development. Most of these women are alive today and