

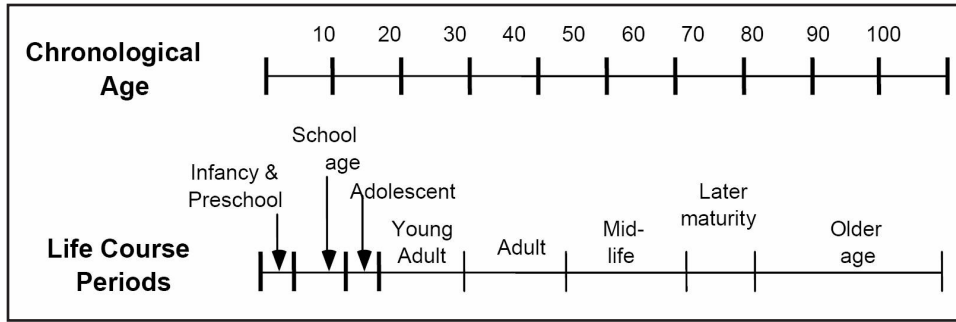
Chapter 5

Changes Across the Life Course

Women's Lives from Adolescence through Old Age

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Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we explore issues of gender and aging. Just as we have seen that gender is socially constructed, there is a socially constructed, normative pattern expected for aging. This is captured in the concept of the **life course**, a cultural ideal of an age-related progression or sequence of roles and group memberships that an individual is expected to follow



Box 5.1 A time line of an expected life course, with thinner vertical lines indicating discretionary time frames. Some time periods are legally mandated, like when to start school, be employed, and drink alcohol. Others are more subjective, such as at what age are you an adult? Reach midlife? Where do your own education, employment, and relationships fit into this time line? Do they unfold in nice, neat, linear progressions? Think both about what you have already done as well as your projections for your future.

as she or he matures (Atchley, 1994). Before you read on, take a look at Box 5.1 and think about your own life course.

My goals for this chapter are twofold: (1) to examine how gender identity changes across women's and men's lives and (2) to explore the life work women do across the course of their lives. A lifespan perspective regards aging as an active and individualized process. Each of us will work out our own life paths in response to our own interests and desires, to the opportunities that present themselves, and to our broader culture (George, 1996). We'll make choices that will move us along certain trajectories and away from others, sometimes in patterns that are neither linear nor progressive. Understanding how others have worked through their own aging may give us a fuller picture of where our present choices may lead and what our future options may be.

AGING ACROSS THE LIFE COURSE

Two conceptually distinct influences are intermeshed in discussions of age-related change. How people grapple with their life's work may be affected by their chronological age (the effects of age itself) and by their experiences because they matured during a specific time period (the effects of a specific **cohort** or generation with its own unique history). For example, Alyssa Zucker and Abigail Stewart (2007) explored the relationships three cohorts of women, who graduated from the University of Michigan in 1951/52, 1972, and 1992, had with feminism. Each identified social and historical events that occurred during their own identity-forming adolescence as most important, such as identifying different influential figures (Eleanor Roosevelt for the oldest, Gloria Steinem for the middle group, and Hillary Clinton for the youngest). Notice that although the process and timing of feminist development was largely shared, the events that shaped each cohort's views both unified that cohort and distinguished it from the others.

Emphasizing age or cohort may lead to very different expectations. For example, if a change is indeed related to age, then we would expect most people around a certain age to experience similar changes. Thus, on our time line we'd all do the same things at age 60. If,

in contrast, change is bound to cohort, we would expect the change being studied to result only for those with shared historical experiences.

For example, women in their late 60s who were born in the 1920s recorded retrospective accounts of their work lives. None of the married women studied described uninterrupted, continuous career paths, compared to fully 55% of the never married women (Keating & Jeffrey, 1983). These women's work lives spanned a world war and the baby boom of the late 1940s through 1960s. Do you think their work patterns will parallel those of current high-school girls who expect to combine career and family (Davey, 1998) or currently employed women, the majority of whom are employed even when they have preschoolers? Probably not. To extrapolate from this cohort of women to successive cohorts of women would likely lead to faulty overgeneralizations about the continuity of women's work-force participation.

Is aging, then, an unpredictable, individualistic process that defies generalizations? Clearly, we each forge our own unique path through life. Following a national sample of high-school graduates across 8 years, researchers found that it took fully 1,827 different sequences to capture the experiences of 7,095 women (Rindfuss et al., 1987). Longitudinal data from 592 African American and 3,001 White women begun after the birth of their first child identified 105 and 255 role sequences across 10 years, respectively, using only two classifications of employed or not (Vandenhoevel, 1997). In fact, continuous employment was enacted by only 11% of the Black and 13% of the White women. These mothers followed all kinds of unique employment paths by dropping in and out of the labor force across a 10-year period. Thus, the common expectations we hold about the various stages on our timeline in Box 5.1 may not play out so neatly in our own lived experiences.

In addition, even these expectations about how a "normal" life course should play out can change across cohorts. For example, there are normative beliefs about "developmental deadlines"—that is, when a developmental marker should be completed, such as finishing college or having a baby (Wrosch & Heckhausen, 2005). Reviewing these changing patterns for having a child, Claire Etaugh (2008) points out that rates of being childfree have gone up (in 1976, only 10% of U.S. women age 40 to 44 had no children; in 2004, this figure rose to 19%), and U.S. women are having babies at later ages (reaching record highs in 2003 when 100,000 women between 40 to 44 years-old and 6,000 between 45 and 49 had a baby). Thus, this highly salient developmental marker for women, having a baby, is shifting overall—and even dropping off the life course timeline for a growing number of women.

Still, the life course remains an important part of understanding "lifespan development" in stages. Together with an understanding of aging as a process (Fuller-Iglesias et al., 2008), it becomes a good starting point from which to explore women's lives. Although many concepts have been studied across the life course, gender role attitudes (our expectations about being female and male) and behaviors are especially central to feminist psychology, so we start here. We then examine selected issues likely to involve women at the expected periods of the life course diagrammed in Figure 5.1.

GENDER IDENTITY ACROSS THE LIFE COURSE

A generally accepted truism about gender-role attitudes and behaviors is that they pass through phases (James et al., 1995). In early childhood, they are thought to be vague and unorganized, becoming more rigid throughout childhood and slowly gaining in flexibility through adolescence and into adulthood, until an androgynous conceptualization that



Box 5.2

My father may display more feminine traits and roles in retirement than he did when I was growing up, not simply because he aged, but because times have changed across his lifetime. Thus what look like age-related cross-over effects may actually be cohort effects.

blends femininity with masculinity emerges in old age. To reach this eventual **androgyny**, a cross-over occurs for women and men, such that women gain in masculinity as they age in contrast to men who add feminine traits (Gutmann, 1987).

Folk wisdom tends to accept the **cross-over model**. Undergraduates asked to project ratings of femininity and masculinity for themselves into the future, and retirees asked to complete these scales retrospectively, described their older selves as both more feminine-typed *and* more masculine-typed than their younger selves (McCreary, 1990). However, is this move toward similar gender identities the result of simple aging? Maybe not. Few studies have followed people longitudinally as they age so that changes in societal attitudes across cohorts may play a role in such apparent cross-over. A longitudinal study finds that: (1) a majority (54%) of older people remained in the same gender-identity category over the past 10 years and (2) the largest proportion of men labeled feminine/expressive appear in the *youngest* age group (Hyde et al., 1991).

The first finding suggests limited change across the age span, contrary to the predictions of cross-over theory for this age period. The second finding is consistent with our speculation about changing times—in the 1990s, young men’s descriptions are more likely to include “feminine” terms. Another study with older participants finds limited evidence of cross-over, and much of what little is found is restricted to women and men who have lived traditional lives (James et al., 1995).

Additionally, the attitudes and behaviors of different cohorts appear to be more complex than our likely simple belief that young adults are the most flexible. For example, more recent comparisons of six age groups ranging from 12 to 17 years old to over 80 documented that the oldest women were *less* likely than the youngest and midlife women to endorsed masculine and androgynous traits, whereas men in their 70s *more* strongly endorsed androgynous traits than younger men aged 12 to 29 (Strough et al., 2007). The overall message here, then, is that gender-role attitudes and behaviors appear to depend largely on cohorts, with no clear patterns of simple changes as people age.

GOALS FOR A LIFE COURSE ANALYSIS

The most obvious life course changes for women are those readily identified by biological changes such as menarche (the onset of menstruation), child bearing, and menopause (the end of menstruation). Overemphasis on biological events in women’s lives readily can lead

to **biological essentialism** (an over-reliance on biological explanations). When women's life course centers on attractiveness, fertility, and youth, aging becomes the loss of these defining womanly functions.

Furthermore, **androcentric bias** has fostered the assumption that understanding men's life course will inform us equally about women's (Wine, 1985). When we studied men's retirement patterns, for example, women were expected to either follow the same trends or be irrelevant because they didn't participate in the workforce. Mary Gergen (1990) concludes that by moving beyond biology and andocentric bias, we can construct women's lives in richer and more diverse ways. Indeed, our goals here are: (1) to debunk simple biologizing myths about women's life course and (2) to sketch a richer picture of developmental issues central to women's lives.

Through the remainder of this chapter, I will describe a sampling of challenges that are typically confronted by women at certain periods of their life course. The list is by no means exhaustive. Some issues are exclusive to women (e.g., menarche); most are not. However, all may be approached somewhat differently by girls and women compared to boys and men.

Furthermore, I'll try to avoid thinking in terms of "development," which assumes a linear progression such that decisions made at earlier stages limit later choices. Life is not that restrictive. For example, women who forego college during early adulthood certainly can assume the role of student, but with a different orientation, later in life. Not having children in one's twenties does not preclude having children in one's forties. (I had mine when I was 33 and 38.) Indeed, recent research shows that among college-educated women who expressed regrets about either traditional or nontraditional family role choices, those who made desired changes in response to those regrets achieved favorable midlife well-being (Stewart & Vandewater, 1999).

However, our culture dictates normative periods for making life course decisions, and these will be vaguely followed here, with the understanding that each individual's life cycle is flexible. The following discussion is framed using each of these normative periods: adolescence, young adulthood, midlife, and old age. (Note that I skip much on adulthood, and only look at the choice to be a mother in young adulthood, because these two periods are assumed by much of the subsequent research in this book.)

ADOLESCENCE

A clear biological marker of adolescence is the onset of puberty; but a more social indicator of adolescence tied to progression through the school system is simple chronological age, typically the second decade of life (Petersen, 1988). Folk wisdom alleges that this developmental period is stormy (the "terrible teens") because adolescents struggle to control their "raging hormones" (Offer & Schonert-Reichl, 1992). This assessment is believed to be especially true for adolescent girls,¹ whose progression through adolescence is unmistakably distinguished by the onset of menstruation (**menarche**), on average at age 12 in the United States.²

¹As we have seen, language influences how we think, so the terms we use to designate different ages become important. I will follow the guidelines of APA's *Publication Manual* (2010) by referring to girls (12 and younger), young women or adolescents (13 to 17), and women (18 and older).

²For good information about menstruation provided by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services,

Christy Buchanan and her colleagues (1992) conclude that when we compare adolescents to both younger children and adults, teenagers do indeed experience more mood swings, more intense moods, lower or more variable energy levels, more restlessness, higher anxiety, and heightened self-consciousness. But there's a lot of variability across individuals and within genders. Little evidence exists to support the myths that adolescence is stormier for girls and that changes in mood are linked to hormonal fluctuations. The myth of the "terrible teens" is generally just that—a socially constructed exaggeration reflective of overly simplified "biologizing."

What is the major life work for girls during this phase of their life course? Adolescence itself presents a variety of challenges for girls, including maintenance of self-esteem, identity formation, social development, and future planning (Petersen, 1988).

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is a complex construct for psychologists who have developed a variety of standardized and well-researched measures to assess it.³ A meta-analysis of this well-grounded scholarship was done by Kristen Kling and her associates (1999). Defining self-esteem as global positive or negative feelings one has about oneself, they confirmed a difference between girls'/women's and boys'/men's self-esteem that was small ($d = +0.21$) and favored males. The gender gap widened as girls and boys aged, reaching its peak at age 15 to 18 years old and closing through adulthood.⁴

A consistent finding across these studies is that children's self-esteem changes across their school years. In addition, women's self-esteem is negatively affected by lower socioeconomic status (Twenge & Campbell, 2002) and immediately by poor grades, especially in nontraditional classes such as engineering (Crocker et al., 2003). Girls' team sports achievements in early adolescence predict positive self-esteem in middle adolescence (Pedersen & Seidman, 2004), but this relationship between sports participation and bolstered self-esteem can be threatened by disapproving peers (Daniels & Leaper, 2006). Thus, self-esteem changes in different contexts across girls' and women's lives.

Additionally, there are individual variations in self-esteem among women. The more important college women believe it is to be like their ideal woman, the more these women tie their self-worth to their appearance, academic competence, approval from others, and winning a competition (Sanchez & Crocker, 2005). In turn, the more contingent these women feel their self-worth is, the lower their self-esteem.

Both these individual differences and the impact of contexts make it clear that girls can be inoculated against potential drops in their self-esteem. Girls who take a variety of math and science courses throughout middle and high school typically maintain higher levels of self-esteem (AAUW, 1992), and advanced-level course-taking is associated positively

visit The National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.womenshealth.gov> (retrieved June 2011).

³A common assumption, rooted in the classic doll studies of racial preference used to argue for the desegregation of public schools, is that African Americans struggle with deficits in self-esteem. Distinguishing between Blacks' perceptions of what others may think of them (as tapped by the doll studies) and what Blacks think of themselves (self-esteem), a recent meta-analysis of 261 comparisons found no differences in standard measures of the self-esteem of Black and White children, adolescents, and adults (Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000).

⁴Grouping by age, the effect sizes were +0.16 at ages 7 to 10; +0.23 at ages 11 to 14; +0.33 at ages 15 to 18; +0.18 at ages 19 to 22; +0.10 at ages 23 to 59; and -0.03 after 60 years.

with sports participation (Pearson et al., 2009). Physically active young women have a more positive self-image than inactive peers (Covey & Feltz, 1991), and college women athletes exhibit favorable levels of instrumentality and internal locus of control (Parsons & Betz, 2001). Precollege participation in sports by girls is related to positive self-esteem (Bowker et al., 2003; Richman & Shaffer, 2000). Supportive parenting practices, which foster pride in female identity, point out sexist barriers, and encourage nontraditional conduct, are linked to daughters' positive esteem (Michaelieu, 1997).

Since Title IX⁵ was passed in the United States in 1972, girls' participation in interscholastic sports has shown an eightfold increase, and the number of intercollegiate women athletes has shot up 300% (Sklover, 1997). Although NCAA coverage of women's college sports has improved (Cunningham et al., 2004), women's inclusion in athletic administration has lagged behind women's participation as athletes (Whisenant, 2003; Whisenant et al., 2002), especially at schools with sexist nicknames (Ward, 2004). Male college athletes benefit from \$179 million more in athletic scholarships than female students (Sklover, 1997). It seems that sports affects not only self-image, but opportunities as well.

Although a key issue for girls throughout their middle and high school years is to maintain self-esteem, the gender gap in self-esteem disappears in adulthood (Kling et al., 1999). April Chatham-Carpenter and Victoria DeFrancisco (1998) took an informative look at the meaning of self-esteem to adult women. A diverse group of 59 women, ages 21 to 94, participated in 1 to 2 hour interviews that explored their definition of self-esteem and the characteristics of people with high and low levels. Their lay definition of self-esteem conformed to that of psychologists (i.e., an evaluation of self) and included awareness that self-esteem changes across contexts and requires attention and tending to be maintained. African American women especially noted the importance of family and churches in childhood as protections against racism. White women were more likely to mention struggles for approval and with dependency as threats to their developing self-esteem. Across all women, three themes emerged as central to maintaining positive esteem: voice (speaking out, confidence, self-reliance, willingness to take risks, and living life fully); the importance of one's inner self or self-perspective; and concern for others.

Identity Formation

Erik Erikson (1959) regards identity development as the primary life work of adolescence. The type of identity Erikson envisions is one of autonomy and individualism—learning to be one's self, independent of others. According to Carol Gilligan and other researchers associated with the Harvard Project on Women's Psychology and Girls' Development, Erikson's views conflict with girls' desires for intimacy and connection with other people as well as cultural stereotypes about girls' relational values (see Tolman & Brown, 2001). For **self-in-relation theorists**, the main developmental challenge for adolescent girls is to connect in relation with others *and* form an autonomous identity (Lytle et al., 1997).

Finding voice. An individual woman's identity development is disrupted to the extent that she engages in four processes, each of which trades away individual independence in

⁵Title IX of the U.S. Education Amendments of 1972 states: "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any educational program or activity receiving federal financial assistance."

exchange for connection with others (Jack & Dill, 1992; Remen et al., 2002; Smolak & Munstertieger, 2002). Women scoring high in *Externalized Self-Perception* tend to judge themselves using external standards. A high degree of *Care as Self-Sacrifice* subverts one's own needs in favor of those of other people. *Silencing the Self* involves inhibiting self-statements and actions in order to avoid conflict and the potential loss of relationship. *Divided Self* complies with feminine role demands as the inner self grows angry and hostile with these accommodations.

Drawing on intensive interviews with 100 educationally privileged young women across 5 years, L. M. Brown and Carol Gilligan (1993) describe how these adolescents struggle to stay true to their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences as they increasingly come into conflict with White, middle-class cultural expectations for girls/women and ideals of femininity, captured in a "tyranny of nice and kind" (p. 53). In Gilligan's words, they struggled to find their "voice"; that is, their essence as human beings.

Brown and Gilligan found that some young women bury their feelings underground, leading double lives. Others work so hard to conform to conventional feminine ideals that they lose touch with their suppressed feelings and begin to show signs of psychological disturbance. Still others resist and come into open conflict with other people. Most commonly, these resisters are working-class or young women of color (e.g., Latinas; Denner & Dunbar, 2004) who were already marginalized at the exclusive private school they attended.

Self-silencing is not confined to young women's adolescence. For example, women care-providers for their intimate partner with cancer often self-silenced in order to fulfill their perceived feminine role of putting another person first (in contrast to self-silencing masculine stoicism for men; Ussher & Perz, 2010). For both women and men caregivers, self-silencing was linked to depression and anxiety, with women reporting higher levels than men of each. Among college women, high degrees of self-silencing combined with high levels of awareness of one's emotional states make women more vulnerable to disordered eating (Shouse & Nilsson, 2011).

Returning to adolescence, subsequent studies with obvious resisters (specifically, culturally diverse and economically disadvantaged young women) make resisting a less appealing strategy than it may appear at first blush. For example, a study with 26 "at-risk" young women confirmed a pattern of resistance complete with loud expressions of voice (J. M. Taylor et al., 1995). Still, these adolescents reported losses or betrayals in relationships as well as some disconnection from their own feelings and desires. For example, African American young women frequently commented on how their opposition to conventional standards of femininity brought them into conflict with powerful institutions such as schools. Often these adolescents were not effective in resisting oppression, both individually and collectively, and struggled to maintain their self-esteem (Way, 1998).

Helping young women find their voice may be as simple as listening and validating, yet many girls do not find these opportunities often with parents or in their schools (AAUW, 1999). An effective intervention brought young women together to talk about their experiences and the harm they felt as part of their school (Piran, 2001). Finding one teacher was enough to let girls express themselves and verified their experiences (L.M. Brown, 1998). An approach to helping girls and young women that has achieved popularity both within and outside of professional psychology is offered by Mary Pipher (1994) in her book *Reviving Ophelia*.

Moral development. Like Erickson's singular focus on independent identity formation, Lawrence Kohlberg (1981) based his ideas about moral development solely on a **justice orientation**, which sought to balance rights and responsibilities. According to Kohlberg, at the most rudimentary level, *preconventional* reasoning is egocentric so that what's regarded as just is what gets rewarded and/or avoids punishment. At the next, *conventional* level, societal conventions about fairness become important so that approval and disapproval of others influence moral reasoning. At the most advanced, *postconventional* stage, abstract principles about justice are considered that move beyond the individual and what others regard as moral.

Analyzing women's decision making about abortion, Carol Gilligan (1982) concluded that women constructed their moral reasoning using a "different voice" that reflected a **caring orientation** (weighing concerns about hurt and caring). Paralleling Kohlberg's levels, Gilligan argued that this caring orientation could range from simple egocentrism through complex, abstract thinking. Furthermore, she concluded that this "different voice" was largely women's. Meta analysis shows that in some ways Gilligan was right, although gender differences in both a justice ($d = +0.19$) and caring ($d = -.28$) orientation are small (Jaffee & Hyde, 2000). A recent large-scale study further challenges this gender difference by showing that women outscored men in both caring and justice, wanting to *both* connect with others and take action in response to media coverage of crisis events with moral implications (Mainiero et al., 2008).

Although Gilligan's addition of a caring orientation does fill in a gap left by Kohlberg's exclusive focus on justice, there are individual and context variations that undermine the ideas that women's morality is different, inferior, or superior to men's. Gender differences in both caring and justice reasoning change with age,⁶ and gender discrepancies in caring reasoning increase with higher socioeconomic status (Jaffee & Hyde, 2000).

The gap between women and men can be narrowed by using moral dilemmas specifically designed to elicit either caring or justice reasoning, and care-based approaches are more likely to be used by both women and men when interacting with friends than with strangers (Ryan et al., 2004). Furthermore, stereotyping about women being caring may contribute to this apparent gender difference. Gender differences in caring rationales are bigger when respondents generate their own dilemmas, as opposed to using standardized content (Jaffee & Hyde, 2000 and when gender is made salient to respondents (Ryan et al., 2004). Overall, these findings confirm that a caring orientation is not exclusive to women's thinking, just as a justice perspective is not exclusive to men's (Crandall et al., 1999).

Lesbian identity formation. Heterosexual identity development in our culture is relatively easy—it's what's expected of us. But, how does a girl or woman develop a lesbian or bisexual identity?⁷ There are at least two approaches to this question (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). The **essentialist** position assumes that homosexuality is part of one's true nature so that "coming out" is simply a series of stages through which one must pass in

⁶Gender differences in caring orientation: $d = -0.08$ (children under 12); $d = -0.53$ (12 to 19 years old); $d = -0.18$ (college students); and $d = -0.33$ (20 to 49 year old). Justice orientation: $d = +0.35$ (children under 12); $d = +0.22$ (12 to 19 years old); $d = +0.04$ (college students); and $d = +0.40$ (20 to 49 years old).

⁷For information about transgender identity development, see Gagne et al., 1997.

order to accept the inevitable. Indeed, this often is how gays describe their identity development (Epstein, 1987). On the other hand, there is evidence that the development of our sexual identities does not follow a progressive, stage-wise pattern (Rust, 1993).

A **social constructionist** position, in contrast, argues that lesbian and bisexual identity is pieced together from scraps of evidence interpreted as indicative of one's own sexual identity. Celia Kitzinger and Sue Wilkinson (1995) describe many barriers that illustrate lesbians' resistance to claiming a lesbian identity. For example, although most lesbians report having heterosexual experiences, the myth that lesbians feel no heterosexual attraction keeps some women from interpreting even direct sexual experience as lesbianism: "It's just sex—I was only experimenting, and anyway I'm sexually attracted to men, too" (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995, p. 99).⁸ These authors go on to detail how women make the transition to a lesbian identity and how, even after claiming this identity, lesbians continue to work at constructing it, often by becoming involved in lesbian communities.

Social Development

Jane Loevinger (1976) defines social maturity as a progression through stages of increasingly complex perceptions of ourselves and others. (This argument parallels the logic of moral development we just reviewed.) As people mature, we become increasingly aware of our own motivations, moving from concrete to abstract thinking and from an orientation rooted in the immediate present to considerations for the future. For all adolescents, dramatic personality advances occur between seventh and twelfth grades, with young women forging ahead at a faster rate of development. Pulling together data from 65 studies, Lawrence Cohn (1991) finds that, by adolescence, moderately large differences between young women and men appear. Through beginning adulthood, this difference is slight, then disappears in the thirties. Thus gender differences in social maturity at one phase of the life course (adolescence) fade at later periods (young adulthood).

Another expression of adolescents' social development revolves around how prestige is achieved. Research with high-school graduates of the early 1980s (1979 to 1982) and late 1980s (1988 to 1989) shows that gender norms defining social status for women and men remain different and basically constant across the decade (Suitor & Reavis, 1995). Young women acquire prestige mainly through physical appearance, sociability, and school achievement. Young men achieve status through sports, grades, and intelligence. There were a few changes for young women that reflect less traditionalism across the decade: young women's acquisition of prestige through both sports and sexual activity increased, whereas the importance of cheerleading declined. This is a pattern we'll see often in gender research: things change a bit, but basically remain the same.

Future Planning

Future planning is a central issue for adolescents because choices made here mark the beginnings of some trajectories and the rejection of others. Jari-Erik Nurmi (1991, p. 34) concludes that "studies show unexpected similarity in adolescents' interests across cul-

⁸Paula Rust (2000) reports data collected for the National Health and Social Life Survey finding that 3.3% of women had both female and male sexual partners since puberty, whereas only 0.2% of women had only women partners.

tures: they all seem to be most interested in two main domains of their future life, work and education.”

Look around any college or university, and you’ll surely find the gender composition of classes, majors, and even departmental faculty varies widely from largely female to balanced to largely male domains. How these divisions come about depends on the choices individuals make, as well as gendered social forces that simultaneously push women and men away from some possibilities and pull them toward others. The language we use to talk about research in this area, occupational “choice,” adequately captures the role played by the individual but misses the often subtle *channeling* that gendered socialization and contexts exert to ultimately limit the full range of educational and occupational possibilities that ideally should be open to everyone.

As we continue to see, contexts matter. For example, sociologist Chardie Baird (2008) concluded that young women living in U.S. counties where the divorce rate and percentage of employed women were low and most people were employed in the wholesale and retail industrial sector were *less* likely to aspire to paid employment, after controlling for obvious influences like socioeconomic status and education. Of course, there are individual variations within these communities that speak to the importance of individual choices and pursuits, but such broader influences (like the community in which one lives) should not be overlooked.

Furthermore, if this process is culturally gendered, we would expect **intergroup differences** in the interests, goals, and actions of women and men. A meta analysis of gender differences in vocational interests did find some large and consistent differences between women and men as groups (Su et al., 2009). Men generally prefer working with things; women, with people ($d = +.93$). Specifically, women show stronger interests in artistic (creative expression, including writing; $-.35$), social (helping people; $-.68$), and conventional (structured environments like business; $-.33$) areas and less in realistic (working with gadgets or outdoors; $+.84$) and investigative/science ($+.26$) domains. Not surprisingly, men favor engineering ($+1.11$), science ($+.36$), and math ($+.34$).

Women are more likely than men to strategize about combining work and family (Konrad, 2003) and to consider the timing of childbearing (Mahaffy & Ward, 2002). Throughout middle and high school, girls and boys share similar ideal and real aspirations for prestigious careers (Watson et al., 2002), although college women pull back from powerful masculine-stereotyped careers more than high school women, possibly showing signs that reality is setting in (Lips, 2004). A large-scale meta analysis concluded that gender similarities in preferences for job attributes are more prevalent than differences (Konrad et al., 2000).

The model diagrammed in Figure 5.3 describes two paths leading to group differences in interests, goals, and actions (actual pursuits) involving both socialization and proximal (immediate) contexts. In the previous chapter, we examined socialization practices and how these occur within a gendered culture. Taking this socio-cognitive model and extending it to occupational pursuits, these socialization practices affect both individual girls’ and boys’ expectations about success and subjective task values.

Expectancies and values. Expectations for success in any college major or occupation are shaped by beliefs in the congeniality of the area itself, as well as one’s own competence. For example, women in male-dominated academic areas (math, science, and engineering)

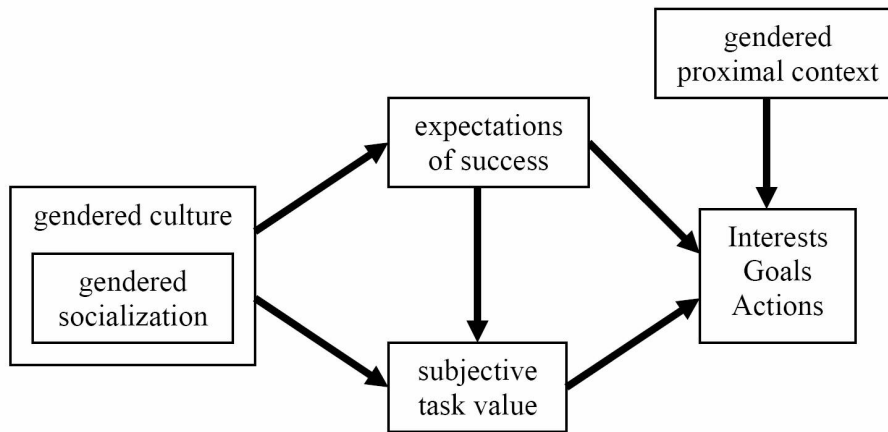


Figure 5.3 A simplified model of educational and occupational decision making. It synthesizes elements of Lent, Brown, and Hackett's (1994) Social Cognitive Career Theory with Eccles' (1994) Model of Achievement-Related Choices, showing how gender affects both the individual and her or his social context.

reported higher levels of **sexist discrimination** and **stereotype threat** and thought more about changing their major than did women in traditional majors (Steele et al., 2002). Girls starting high school were more likely to enroll in math classes if they held favorable beliefs about their math competence (whereas for boys, grades predicted enrollment; Crombie et al., 2005). There's some evidence that although gifted girls' math confidence may match boys', girls' confidence in other areas, such as reading, outstripped their own math confidence so that their movement away from math was less of a push than a pull toward reading (Eccles & Harold, 1992). Obviously, what shapes expectancies is very complex.

The values of girls and boys also can differ, possibly reflecting different family/work mandates for women (mother) and men (breadwinner) (Eccles, 1994; Riggs, 1997). If indeed men fulfill their family role through successful employment, then their values will lead them to perceive utility in job training (perceived utility values), to be interested in pay and status reward (intrinsic interest values), to regard employment as central to self-image (attainment values), and to perceive costs mainly in relation to failed employment, not jeopardized parenting (perceived costs). For women, work and family are separate, and sometimes conflicting, spheres. Consistent with this reasoning, men are more likely than women to report single-minded devotion to one specific goal (employment). In contrast, women seem to value competence in a wider range of activities (including work and family).

Proximal contexts. Our interests, goals, and "choices" also are affected by the immediate (proximal) gender-typing of college majors and occupations within our culture. Such gender-typing rests largely on who we see doing and not doing different jobs, the language we use to talk about jobs, and how jobs are presented.

Potential explanations for the gender-typing of occupations have considered job content, occupational demands, and gender ratios. The arguments centered on job content suggest that women and men bring different personality characteristics with them to employment; in other words, they are cut out for different occupations. Reasoning regarding occupa-

**Box 5.4**

Is this who we picture when we think of a fireman? Both the language we use (“fireman”) and who we likely see do this job (over 95% of firefighters are men) converge to shape our thinking about firefighting as a masculine occupation.

tional demands reverses this logic: the work demands of the occupations themselves necessitate differential hiring. Finally, the logic of *gender ratios* simply suggests that who does a job predicts future candidates. Research teasing apart these three possibilities is consistent with the gender ratios explanation (Krefting et al., 1978). In sum, who we see engaged in a specific occupation cues us as to the appropriateness of that occupation for ourselves.

How jobs are presented and language also play a role in this process. Danielle Gaucher and her colleagues (2011) conducted a clever series of five studies that first looked at how over 4,000 real-world job advertisements described the jobs for which they were recruiting applicants. Ads for jobs in male-dominated occupations and in male-dominated academic fields used more masculine-stereotyped wording (e.g., leader, competitive, dominant) than did ads in female-dominated areas. In contrast, there were no differences across ads in their use of feminine-stereotyped words (support, understanding, interpersonal). As we will see later when we talk about stereotyping in Chapter 7, these differences are quite subtle, but as Gaucher and her co-authors go on to show, they are not without consequences.

Across their next three experimental studies, these authors documented that college students perceived occupations as employing more men than women (the gender ratios we just discussed) when ads for jobs used masculine- over feminine-typed wording. Furthermore, college women considered these subtly masculine-typed jobs to be less appealing and did so because they felt a weaker sense of belongingness (but did not feel under-qualified) toward these jobs. In sum, there is strong evidence that gendered wording in job advertisements persists (also see Pedriana, 2004) and subtly works to shape how adults and children (Liben et al., 2002) think about the gender-appropriateness of various occupations and academic fields.

Gender ratios, language, and recruiting strategies all conspire to limit the field of viable occupational options considered by girls and boys. In fact, in my own studies with women firefighters, we began our interviews by asking women how they decided to be firefighters. Most said that they never even contemplated firefighting—it was not one of the options they considered viable. Then, someone in firefighting (typically a husband, relative, or friend) told them of openings for women, or they saw a woman firefighter, or they chanced upon some recruitment campaign specifically aimed at women. In other words, a person or event had to challenge their long-held perception of firefighting as closed to women. Similar stereotyping of occupations has been shown to limit the set of viable options considered by lesbians (Morrow et al., 1996), and 6 to 8 year-old girls continue to prefer occupations regarded as feminine over masculine ones (Teig & Susskind, 2008).

In sum, we have seen that the vocational and educational choices of adolescent girls and boys differ and that this **intergroup difference** arises from their expectations for success, their values, and the options they consider viable. These factors have been shown to affect career development patterns of White women, African American women (Hackett & Byars, 1996), and Latinas (Gomez & Fassinger, 1994). Although we each exercise some choice in what future plans we elect to pursue, there are many external forces channeling us away from some options and encouraging others. To focus exclusively on “choices” tends to root differences within girls and boys, women and men, and can support the **essentializing** conclusion that girls and women, because of deficiencies within (e.g., lack of confidence), make less lucrative choices. The model we explored blends influences both within and outside individuals, leading up to vocational interests, goals, and pursuits.

YOUNG ADULTHOOD: CHOOSING MOTHERHOOD?

One critical decision often encountered in women’s young adulthood concerns mothering. As we have seen, an overwhelming majority of women have or will have a baby sometime during their lives, and college women implicitly identify strongly with the concept of motherhood (as strongly as they identify with their college education; Devos et al., 2008). Biologizing arguments evoke evolutionary maternal instincts, penis envy, and “biological clocks” (Schwartz, 1989), ignoring the social pressures that both encourage motherhood and discourage being childfree—pressures that are so forceful that Nancy Russo and Kim Vaz (2001) refer to a “motherhood mandate.” Women who struggle to conceive blend these reasons for having children into their own thinking, referring to motherhood as a “natural instinct,” as “a stage in the development of a relationship,” and as a “social expectation” (Ulrich & Weatherall, 2000).

Some interesting exceptions to the motherhood mandate speak volumes about how we think about mothering (also see Chapter 8). First, single motherhood is devalued in both the popular press and within psychology (Smith, 1997). Interviews with 26 women who chose single motherhood reveal that they legitimate their choice with their age, responsibility, social maturity, and fiscal soundness (Bock, 2000). Second, lesbian mothers combine a marginalized identity (being lesbian) with a mainstream one (being a mother) (Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999) to challenge heterosexual norms that underlie our thinking about parenting (Dalton & Bielby, 2000; Dunne, 2000). Third, physically disabled women oftentimes face opposition to, or even restriction of, their reproductive freedom (Lonsdale, 1992).

One of the clearest ways to see a norm like the motherhood mandate in action is to watch what happens when it is violated. If there is a mandate dictating motherhood for women, then remaining *voluntarily* childfree should be regarded as deviant, and as such, should be demeaned. A study using hypothetical vignettes describing heterosexual childless couples found that college students rated neither infertility nor childlessness very negatively—although being temporarily, rather than permanently, childfree was considered more acceptable (Koropecykj-Cox et al., 2007). In sum, there may be some signs of change regarding the continuing acceptance of the motherhood mandate.

Rosemary Gillespie (2003) interviewed 25 White women aged 21 to 50 about their desire/decision to be childfree. Their comments illustrated two patterns. The first centered on the attractions (or “pulls” toward childlessness), such as increased freedom and autonomy, a closer relationship with a partner, and a wider range of opportunities. The second

theme centered on disincentives (or “pushes”) away from motherhood, like loss of other opportunities and disinterest in the activities associated with mothering.

Deciding whether or not to become a mother is intimately intertwined today with decisions about employment—with tradeoffs between career and family more commonly contemplated by women (Brown & Diekmann, 2010). Statistically, the normative woman is employed, even if she has preschool children (*Statistical Abstracts of the United States*, 2011, p. 385, Table 598). About 62% of mothers with children under 6 were in the workforce in 2009, a figure that reached a plateau across the 1990s and 2000s after increasing from 30% in 1970 to 45% in 1980. Furthermore, many college students aspire to combine both employment and motherhood in their lives (Erchull et al., 2010).

Kathleen Gerson (1985) interviewed three groups of heterosexual women (homemakers, childfree career women, and combiners) about how they made their decisions. Surprisingly, she found that homemakers and careerists were the most attitudinally similar: they shared the assumption that motherhood and careers are incompatible—they simply took opposite paths. The attitudinal gulf now between employed and at-home mothers may be even more intense than when Gerson did her research, with at-home mothers especially vulnerable to devaluation of the mother role (Johnston & Swanson, 2004).

Gerson also found that what these adult women thought they would do when they themselves were children (their aspirations) were only somewhat related to what they did as adults. Fully 67% of those who aspired to be homemakers when they grew up veered toward employment as adults; 60% of those who expected employment ended up as homemakers. What were more closely related to adult pursuits were largely unanticipated *pulls* and *pushes*. For example, some women were pushed out of the workforce by deadend, unstimulating jobs and pulled into the domestic sphere by a spouse who looked askance at employed mothers. Others were pulled into the workforce by financial pressures resulting from a divorce or fulfilling work successes and pushed away from domestic activities by the isolation of homemaking. A more recent study found similar patterns highlighting that early gender-role attitudes do predict marriage, children, and employment, but with interference from various situational factors (pulls and pushes) (Corrigan & Konrad, 2007).

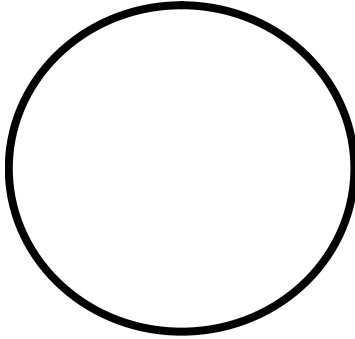
All women in Gerson’s study described costs and benefits associated with their decisions, but careerists, homemakers, and combiners weighed them differently. All thought that having children would be fulfilling, but *careerists* oftentimes dismissed this and/or found themselves in positions where their spouses either didn’t want children or made it clear that they would not participate sufficiently in their care. They highlighted the costs children would exact on their careers. Some *homemakers* described deadend jobs that pushed them from the workforce and spousal attitudes and comfortable finances that pulled them toward home. *Combiners* reported failed marriages or egalitarian fathers who shared in domestic responsibilities as well as enthusiasm for their employment.

Strategies for combining career and family include limiting family size and interrupting employment. (The possibility of sharing child rearing with a partner is explored in Chapter 8.) Indeed, the more college students expected work-family conflict, the more they endorsed delaying marriage and restricting the number of children they will have (or for men, having none) (Weer et al., 2006).

As for interruptions, research exploring the combination of employment and motherhood has found that continuously employed mothers are belittled, as compared to those who interrupted their careers (Bridges & Etaugh, 1995). Also, employed mothers are regarded

Box 5.5
Combining Career and Family

Consider your post-college plans for a career, an intimate relationship, and parenting. In the circle, make a pie chart graphing how much of your life you expect to devote to each of these three areas. For example, you would divide the circle into three equal slices if you expect to give each equal weight.



This is what Jennifer Kerpelman and Paul Schvaneveldt (1999) asked of 969 never married, childless women and men between the ages of 18 to 25 years. They sorted each response into one of four categories: balanced (equal thirds), family-oriented (both relationship and parental roles exceeded one-third of the pie), career-oriented (the career slice was greater than one-third, with both the other two less than one-third), and career/relationship-oriented (both career and relationship exceed one-third each). A family-oriented pattern emerged as the most popular configuration for both women and men, but even stronger for women. A similar pattern was found among married women and men in computer and law firms (Cinamon & Rich, 2002)

	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>
Balanced	22%	24%
Family oriented	57%	45%
Career oriented	9%	15%
Career/Relationship oriented	12%	16%

as less well-adjusted (Etaugh & Poertner, 1991), more stressed (Etaugh & Moss, 2001), and less dedicated to their families (Etaugh & Nokolny, 1990) than nonemployed mothers, as well as less effective than fathers (Bridges et al., 2002). Mothers employed full-time are seen as less nurturing than mothers who reduced their work hours (Etaugh & Folger, 1998).

A study of 194 college women reported that nearly all expected new mothers to quit their jobs or reduce their hours of employment temporarily (Weinshenker, 2006). Although the interrupted career may represent the ideal of many college women, the realities of employment with limited maternity leave (current U.S. law mandates only 12 weeks of *unpaid* leave and does not cover all workers) may constrain the realization of such an ideal. (We'll explore this point further in Chapters 8 and 9.)

A key to successfully blending marriage with career may be, somewhat paradoxically, to anticipate and plan for conflict. Survey data from 117 women who were college seniors in 1967 and who were surveyed again in 1981 revealed that those women who as seniors anticipated conflict combined work and family more often than women who also wanted careers as seniors but unrealistically expected no conflict (Tangri & Jenkins, 1997). Those women who expected conflict asserted their career intentions with their spouse, postponed childbearing, and had fewer children (just like Gerson's combiners). Ironically, the women

who as seniors did not anticipate conflict ended up experiencing more actual conflict in their marriage than those who had anticipated it. In sum, the decision about whether or not to have children and combine this with employment is complex, and the burden and consequences of this decision fall disproportionately on the shoulders of women.

MIDLIFE: UPS AND DOWNS

A student working with a team of undergraduates doing some research for the first edition of this book approached her charge to find studies about “what it’s like to be an older woman” with a very simple question: “What’s old?” (She suggested 40, which immediately struck me, then 44, as way too low!) Going back to the life course diagrammed in Box 5.1 at the start of this chapter, my question here has to do with the subjective merger of chronological age with life course (e.g., when does adulthood start?).

When researchers ask people to designate ages for different life events and stages, a general consensus does emerge. For example, 462 women and men aged 16 to 70 generally agreed that women are middle aged at about 42 (45 for men); old at about 65 (70 for men); best looking at approximately 25 (30 for men); and in their prime around 35 (38 for men) (Zeppelin et al., 1987). The pattern of consistently younger ages for women than men is statistically significant, suggesting that women “age” earlier and differently than men (Canetto et al., 1995).

There’s an old adage that you’re as old as you feel. Not surprisingly, even elderly women and men think of themselves as younger than they are (averaging 13 years) (Kleinspehn-Ammerlahn et al., 2008). Seven related markers remind us of our age: body signals (more frequent aches and pains); time markers (birthdays and anniversaries); generational reminders (being a senior member of one’s work group and watching parents age); contextual reminders (as not being fully welcomed in certain places and with people of different ages); mortality reminders (the death of friends and others one’s age); human development reminders (being aware of the wisdom of one’s judgment); and life-course reminders (becoming a grandparent). We all encounter reminders in our day-to-day lives that make us stop and become increasingly sensitive to our own aging.

Biological Decline?

Evolutionary psychologists and psychoanalysts, who link women’s psychology to reproduction, regard menopause (the end of menstruation and hence fertility) as the defining time marker of midlife (Gergen, 1990).⁹ For American women, early signs of menopause typically begin about 7 years prior to reaching full **menopause** (defined as 1 full year without menstruating) at age 50 (see Chrisler, 2008). The most consistently reported sign¹⁰

⁹For information about menopause decisions, such as the decision to use hormone replacement therapy, visit the website for the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective at <http://www.ourbodiesourselves.org> (Retrieved June 2011). Other good resources are *Menopause: Me and You* (Voda, 1997) and *Mind over Menopause* (Kagan, Kessel, & Benson, 2004).

¹⁰Typically, the term “symptom” is used to designate a sign or indicator of menopause, implying that menopause is a disease rather than a normal stage of female physiological development (Cole & Rothblum, 1990). This perception of menopause as related to disease is promoted by discussions of menopause that use terms to

of menopause is the hot flash, a sensation of heat, typically restricted to the face and upper torso, which lasts for a few minutes. Estimates of the prevalence of hot flashes range from 43% to 93% of menopausal American women, but anywhere between 16% to 80% of women report experiencing no menopausal indicators. Previously dismissed as figments of women's imaginations, hot flashes may be linked to reductions in estrogen. Cross-cultural variations emerge in women's attitudes about and experiences with menopause, suggesting that at least some menopausal symptoms are socially constructed (Etaugh, 2008) For example, Japanese women are less likely than U.S. and Canadian women to report having hot flashes.

In popular lore, menopause is associated with depression, irritability, and mood swings. There is no solid evidence that these or other psychological indicators are more prevalent in menopausal women than other women (Avis, 2003). Even if individual women seem to experience elevated levels of psychological distress during menopause, there are a host of other nonbiological factors that could play a role. For many women, menopause coincides with other life events such as children leaving home, changes in identity and body image, possible divorce or widowhood, career changes, illness of parents or partners, and so on. Indeed, among many women themselves, menopause just isn't regarded as that big a deal (Stewart & Newton, 2010). Focusing on menopause as the single or most critical contributor to psychological distress in the midst of such a long list of social possibilities and disregarding many women's subjective experiences is simply another example of misplaced **biological essentialism** (Rostosky & Travis, 1996). In fact, middle-aged women themselves generally report positive as well as negative attitudes toward menopause (Huffman et al., 2005). (I personally regarded every hot flash as a step toward greater liberation.)

Related to women's waning fertility is the life-course reminder of the passage of children from their parental home, presumably leaving women with an "empty nest." Folklore links "empty nest syndrome" to a variety of maladies for midlife women like depression. Studies of marital satisfaction indeed do record changes associated with the presence and ages of children (Etaugh & Bridges, 2006), such that satisfaction peaks before the birth of the first child and hits lows when children are preschoolers and teenagers. However, satisfaction levels *grow* with the passage of children from the home, almost returning to the peak of the "honeymoon" years. Clearly, this pattern is inconsistent with the gloomy prospects portended by "empty nest" speculation. A new trend throughout the 1990s in which fully 25% of adult children returned to live at home needs to spark new research in this area (Whitbourne & Skultely, 2006). In addition, by age 47, half of American women have a grandchild and will spend half their lives as grandmothers (Etaugh & Bridges, 2006).

The biologizing of women's aging has challenged their sexuality as well by using some frightful and fatalistic terminology, such as "vaginal atrophy" (Cole & Rothblum, 1990), which contributes to women's misperceptions of menopause as a "deficiency disease" (Shore, 1999). Although clitoral response does not seem to change with age, less muscle tension can develop during sexual arousal, vaginal secretions can decrease, and orgasmic contractions can decline in number and intensity (Etaugh, 2008). Yet other women point out that increased satisfaction with their partner at this age and freedom from fears of pregnancy contribute to heightened sexual desire and pleasure. An ongoing survey of 280

pathologize it (Tavris, 1992) and is shared by many adult women whose primary sources of information are friends and popular books and magazines (Mansfield & Voda, 1993).

women averaging 51 years old, taking part in the Midlife Women's Health Survey found that a majority experienced no changes in their sexual responses across the past year (Mansfield & Koch, 1998). Ellen Cole and Esther Rothblum (1990) report that lesbian sexuality at midlife can be "as good or better than ever."

This overemphasis on a biomedical model of menopause paints an overall picture of decline and degeneration that is not consistent with the fuller consideration of women's midlife we are examining here (Rostosky & Travis, 2000). One area that attracts much attention about women's aging (possibly because it is linked with sexuality and fertility?) is physical attractiveness. Indeed, there are a variety of body signals associated with aging for women (Etaugh, 2008). Typically, hair becomes thinner and grayer; weight increases until about age 50 and redistributes to the abdomen, buttocks, and upper arms; wrinkles and age spots may appear; and even height may shrink an inch or two. Personally, I don't find it coincidental that as my generation of baby boomers ages, there's a newfound interest in tight "abs" (abdominal muscles)—our surest sign of aging. Mary Gergen (1990) sums up this forecast of decline with the title of her rejoinder to it: "Finished at 40."

The aging human body and mind are both believed to decline with age (Stewart & Newton, 2010). Men's feelings about physical decrements tend to focus on losing capabilities and functionality; women, on losing attractiveness—although not to the extreme that some media sources claim. There even may be an upside to liberation from demands for women's attractiveness, including greater independence (Niemela & Lento, 1993) and self-confidence (Helson & Wink, 1992). However, women also describe how lowered demands for attractiveness seem to be accompanied by reduced social visibility and loss of power (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2003).

We have been exploring the **intersection** of both ageism and sexism in women's lives. **Ageism** refers to prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory practices directed toward the aged and the process of aging (Schaie, 1988). If we move beyond visions of women rooted in their reproductive capacities, then images of older women become more balanced. When we view women as *more* than physically attractive mechanisms for reproduction, even physical aging need not be regarded as declining.

Not Finished at 40

This fuller view of midlife and older women encourages us to take another look at life beyond age 40. Valory Mitchell and Ravenna Helson (1990) reviewed data from a sample of 700 college alumnae aged 26 to 80, and concluded that many women in their fifties seemed to be in the "prime of life." Fully half of the 51-year-old women in their longitudinal study evaluated their lives as "first-rate," the most favorable endorsement of any age group tested. These women portrayed themselves as financially comfortable, as healthier than women in their forties, as less concerned about loneliness, as engaged in politics and social issues, as valuing friendships, as autonomous, and as having high levels of life satisfaction (also see Helson et al., 2002). Life for these affluent, college-educated women was far from finished!

These positive patterns of aging ring true for many lesbians as well. A study of 110 midlife lesbians found that the majority reported feeling fulfilled, self-confident, self-accepting, and self-directed (Sang, 1993). They described heightened desires to have fun and lowered achievement orientation.

In a second analysis with the college alumnae described above who are now in their fifties, Ravenna Helson (1992) reviewed 88 written accounts in which they recounted a “time of personal difficulty” during different periods of their adult lives. A majority was in stable heterosexual relationships, and most were employed at least part-time. Different themes dominated their stories at different ages. Although these themes were not restricted to any one age, they did tend to cluster in certain age periods.

When these midlife women looked back over their lives, stories attributed to ages 21 to 26 oftentimes described themselves as lonely, isolated, unattractive, and inferior. A second theme focused on a bad partner—someone who possessed an unknown and undesirable characteristic (e.g., being alcoholic), or who developed a serious weakness (e.g., being suicidal), or who was a neglectful workaholic. Around both age 30 and 40, their most common struggle centered on a search for independent identity, typically separate from that of a spouse. The sequel of this search for independence appeared in the stories describing events around ages 36 to 46. These critical periods generally took one of two forms: grappling with discrimination at work or dealing with a partner’s abandonment. Finally, two themes dominated the years from 47 to 53 focusing on destructive relationships with partner, parents, or children or overload, pressure from work, parental care, and so on. Although themes changed with age, nothing in these women’s stories suggests that life at 50 is any more or less difficult than at any other time period.

In fact, life for many women in their 50s is best described as a time of *review*; that is, a time to step back and evaluate the different aspects of their lives (Etaugh, 2008; Etaugh & Bridges, 2006). Oftentimes, the dominant theme of this review centers on developing or strengthening an independent identity; that is, on affirming one’s own well-being. Women who express regrets with their choices when younger experience heightened well-being if they make modifications to their current life course in response to those regrets (e.g., switching jobs and going back to school). The success of this assessment focuses not so much on the path one has taken (careerist, homemaker, combiner), but rather on how well one has fulfilled her chosen role. Women who have attained their occupational goals, who continue to build their career, or who have fulfilled their goals as homemakers exhibit strong levels of psychological and physical health.

Many of our misconceptions about aging come from misleading media representations and our own ignorance; researchers find that both younger and older people are largely uninformed about the normal changes that accompany aging (Bailey, 1991). Until recently, social scientists have provided little to fill in the gaps, but this is changing. Balanced views of a full range of changes across this point in women’s life cycles are appearing (for example, see Etaugh & Bridges, 2006).

LATER MATURITY AND OLDER WOMEN: UPS AND DOWNS

If life isn’t over at 40, it’s certainly not over when women reach 60 and beyond. With life expectancies creeping upward, more and more women and men will be grappling with the issues associated with being elderly. Women tend to face different retirement and financial circumstances than men and a greater likelihood of widowhood, both of which (along with health issues) can affect women’s well-being.

Retirement and Financial Security

We tend to think of retirement as the cessation of employment—pretty simple. However, for many people retirement is not such an all-or-nothing proposition. Some older people “retire” from a long-term job and then go on to accept “bridge” employment that is part- or even full-time (Feldman, 1994). This is especially true for working-class women who have had less opportunity to save for a financially secure retirement (Perkins, 1993). Consequently, researchers define retirement in a variety of ways, including self-attributed (the person reports that she or he is retired), pension (receiving Social Security and/or other pension arrangements), and degree of retirement (measured by reported number of hours employed per week) (Talaga & Beehr, 1995).

Exploring the factors that influence women’s and men’s decisions to retire, interesting similarities and differences were found (Talaga & Beehr, 1995). Folk wisdom contends that women retire when their spouses do, but when we look at degree of retirement, women actually worked for pay for more hours each week when their spouses were retired than when they were employed. Women described themselves as retired more often when their spouse reported ill health (self-report), but they worked as many hours as women with a healthy spouse (degree of retirement). The former may be in keeping with gender-role expectations that women should retire when their husband needs them, but the latter speaks to the reality of these women’s working lives. Again, as we’d predict given women’s expected caretaker role, women were more likely to report retirement and actually worked for pay less often when they had dependents in the home. When couples were both employed during childrearing, they tended to retire together; in couples where the woman reentered the workforce after childrearing, women retired more slowly (Henretta, et al., 1993). Thus, the decision to retire for a woman is complexly linked to her work history and familial obligations and expectations.

One of the clearest obstacles differentially impacting women and men retirees is *financial*. In 1980, women’s chances to retire with a private pension were less than men’s, and when women did have such resources, their income averaged only 59% of men’s (Arber & Ginn, 1994). Financial insecurity tends to be even more severe for African American women (Logue, 1991). Not surprisingly, older women report experiencing more psychological distress related to finances than men (Keith, 1993). The average woman over 65 in 2005 lived on an annual income of \$15,615, compared to an average of \$29,171 for men (Older Women’s League, 2005). These gender differences have been attributed to women’s typically shorter employment histories, greater likelihood of interruptions, and lower wages. A link between poverty and gender among the elderly holds across African American, Latina, and White women (Hardy & Hazelrigg, 1995).

Widowhood

Because women tend to marry older men and because women’s average life expectancy is longer, widowhood is a more likely prospect for women than men. In 2009 in the United States, there were 2.8 million widowers and 11.4 million widows (*Statistical Abstracts of the United States*, 2011, p. 52, Table 56). Additionally, widowers are more likely than widows to remarry so that elderly women are 3 times as likely to live alone as elderly men (Etaugh, 2008).

Being widowed is one of life's most stressful events, affecting women's mental and physical health during the first year and generally extending to 2 to 4 years (Etaugh, 2008). However, studies comparing the physical and mental health of widows with married women of the same age generally find no differences between the two groups. Two critical factors in how well a woman adjusts to widowhood may be her financial security and the expectedness of her husband's death. Loss of the husband's income can be exacerbated by medical costs incurred by his illness. Younger widows typically experience more distress than older women, possibly because they did not anticipate the death of their spouse. Additionally, younger widows are less likely to be financially secure, to be free of childrearing responsibilities, and to have friends in similar circumstances.

Loneliness is thought to be one of the most pressing difficulties of widowhood. Researchers find that older women tend to expand their social support networks more so than older men. These friendships and community ties serve as buffers against loneliness (Patrick et al., 2001) and even bolster physical health (Hessler et al., 1995; Shye et al., 1995). With years of experience as the social planners for their families, women report less loneliness and more connection to an active social network. Religious participation provides strong social supports for African American (Nye, 1993) and White (Neill & Kahn, 1999) women, as does involvement in the gay community for older lesbians (Quam & Whitford, 1992). Although living alone is related to depression among both elderly women and men, women report less depressive symptomology than men (Dean et al., 1992). More active day-to-day socializing may be a key to women's positive adjustment (Barer, 1994).

Children perceived by their parents as supportive also play an important role. However, children are more likely to regard a widowed mother as self-sufficient than a widowed father, and thus may offer fewer supports to their mother. Similarly, older women report more positive beliefs about their own self-efficacy than do men (Bosscher et al., 1995). These attitudes often combine to leave women to face more caretaking responsibilities than similarly situated men.

Health and Well-Being

Physical and psychological well-being are obviously connected, especially so for the elderly. Although women, on average, live longer than men, elderly women are prone to chronic illnesses (Etaugh, 2008). These patterns leave more surviving women in need of physical caretaking.

Although a meta analysis of subjective well-being shows that the gap between women and men favors men, especially at older ages, gender explains little of this difference, especially when widowhood, health, and socioeconomic status are factored in (Pinquart & Sorensen, 2001). Indeed, one survey of 60 to 65-year-old Australians concluded that well-being is enhanced by reductions in previous life stressors (Burns & Leonard, 2005). Unlike men, women's feelings of positive well-being are not compromised by reliance on others for personal assistance (Penning & Strain, 1994). In fact, women are more likely than men to increase their feelings of personal control by entering into reciprocal helping relationships where they both give and receive assistance (Silverstein & Waite, 1993).

Not surprisingly, the major concerns of older women focus on health maintenance, household management, budgeting, and limitations of their own activities (Heidrich &

Warning

When I am an old woman I shall wear purple
 With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me.
 And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves
 And satin sandals, and say we've no money for butter.
 I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired
 And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells
 And run my stick along the public railings
 And make up for the sobriety of my youth.
 I shall go out in my slippers in the rain
 And pick the flowers in other people's gardens
 And learn to spit.

You can wear terrible shirts and grow more fat
 And eat three pounds of sausages at a go
 Or only bread and pickle for a week
 And hoard pens and pencils and beer mats and things in boxes.

But now we must have clothes that keep us dry
 And pay our rent and not swear in the street
 And set a good example for the children.
 We must have friends to dinner and read the papers.

But maybe I ought to practise a little now?
 So people who know me are not too shocked and surprised
 When suddenly I am old, and start to wear purple.

Source. "Warning" by Jenny Joseph, from *Selected Poems*, Bloodaxe/Dufour, 1992. Reprinted with permission of John Johnson Ltd.

Ryff, 1992). Because men generally remain more physically capable, men's daily routines include higher activity levels, more involvement in hobbies and household maintenance, more participation in organizational activities, and consequently greater independence (Barer, 1994). In contrast, more women describe a more passive approach to their daily schedules. A 90-year-old woman reports: "What used to take me three hours to do, now takes me three days. And then I need a two-hour nap in the middle of the day, so I lose those hours" (Barer, 1994, p. 35). Other women cope successfully by focusing on social comparisons with those less well-off than themselves (Heidrich, 1993), by engaging in physical activity such as walking or gymnastics (Ruuskanen & Ruoppila, 1994), and by maintaining a future orientation (Whitbourne & Powers, 1994).

POSITIVE AGING

When younger people read the literature describing late maturity and older ages, it is easy to be discouraged about their own prospects. Some of these feelings reasonably come from how we as a culture and within psychology have socially constructed aging as "...decline, deficits, disasters, and death" (Gergen & Gergen, 2010, p. 340). Kenneth and Mary Ger-

gen (2010, p. 354) have cleverly drawn on the concepts we have already explored surrounding **social constructionism** to put the common adage "...aging is what we make it" into practice. They launched a free, bimonthly newsletter to share ideas about "positive aging" (www.positiveaging.net).

They argue that aging involves a continually changing and unpredictable context that can successfully be negotiated through improvisation: "To sustain a condition of positive aging in a constantly changing ocean of contingencies requires imagination and innovation" (p. 347). In their workshops with older participants, they simply ask: "Are there ways in which these conditions may be reconstructed in such a way that a sense of well-being may be restored?" (p. 348). They find that even impending death can be "reconstructed" in ways that are acceptable and even adventuresome. Given that aging is inevitable for each of us, knowing about the "downs" we discussed here may help prepare us, as well as give us some insights about how to see the "up" side to growing older.

Live long and prosper.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

We explored two approaches to studying aging. First, we followed gender identity across the life course, noting that cohort, rather than age, may be the source of greater androgyny at older ages. Second, we described the issues that typically confront girls and women at different periods in their life course. Past attempts to restrict our understanding of women's life courses to unique biological markers, like menarche and menopause, have been replaced by feminist reconceptualizations of these biological markers as well as by a broadening of our focus to encompass psychological and sociological indicators of how women generally live their lives. This transformed view of human development moves beyond childhood to explore change across the life course and to describe women's lives independent from the patterns of men's lives.

In adolescence, key issues for girls and young women focus on maintaining high levels of self-esteem, forming an identity, developing socially, and planning for the future, including educational and vocational interests, goals, and pursuits. For example, we saw that occupational plans are affected by both individuals' choices as well as subtle channeling effects from both socialization practices and proximal contexts, including who does certain jobs (gender ratios), the language that is used to describe workers, and how jobs are presented. In young adulthood, one decision demand often focuses attention on the decision to be a mother as well as the pushes and pulls involved in the decision about combining employment with mothering.

A balanced view of women at midlife includes prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory practices (ageism) that diminish women's power, as well as close friendships and feelings of autonomy that enhance women's well-being. A similar balance of minuses and pluses emerges from the life stories of older women. On the one hand, these women are especially vulnerable to financial shortfalls and chronic, nonfatal illnesses. On the other hand, many older women nurture rich networks of social and physical supports as well as the freedoms to deviate from social dictates and to explore new opportunities. Growing research evidence suggests that we need not be finished at 40, or 60, or beyond, and that, through the art of improvisation, we can age positively.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Miller, J. B. (1986). All this, but not enough. Chapter 10 in *Toward a new psychology of women* (2nd ed.). (pp. 115-124). Boston, MA: Beacon.

Jean Baker Miller's book remains a mainstay for self-in-relation theorists, and this brief chapter in particular focuses this approach on a central theme of the present text: the power and empowerment of women and girls.

Abrams, L. S. (2003). Contextual variations in young women's gender identity negotiations. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 27, 64-74.

Laura Abrams interviewed and learned from adolescent girls from two high schools about how they were navigating their gender identity development, underscoring both the central role played by their understandings of power and stereotyping, as well as contextual variations in their different experiences related to their race/ethnicity, social class, and urbanization.

Jack, D. C. (2011). Reflections on the Silencing the Self Scale and its origins. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 35, 523-529.

Dana Jack provides a personally engaging and scholarly overview of what it means for young women to silence themselves by looking back at the development of this foundational measure for the area and by reflecting on its impact and future research directions.

Diamond, L. M. (2005). A new view of lesbian subtypes: Stable versus fluid identity trajectories over an 8-year period. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 29, 119-128.

Lisa Diamond takes a fresh look at identity development across the lifespan by focusing on the fluidity of lesbian identity and the slower evolving process of its long-term development.

Hyde, J. S., & Kling, K. C. (2001). Women, motivation, and achievement. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 25, 364-378.

Janet Hyde and Kristen Kling review psychological research on motivation and achievement, concluding that efforts to substantiate gender differences would be more usefully focused on stereotype threat and peer sexual harassment.

Nentwich, J. C. (2008). New fathers and mothers as gender troublemakers?: Exploring discursive constructions of heterosexual parenthood and their subversive potential. *Feminism & Psychology*, 18, 207-230.

Julia Nentwich describes four scenarios of parenthood that emerged from interviews with 21 employees at the Swiss science institute. Across these scenarios, she explores the gender binary of women mothering and men fathering to identify practices that might challenge these normative role assignments, finding some possibilities in heterosexual couples and not necessarily finding others among nontraditional families.

Calasanti, T. M., & Slevin, K. F. (2001). A gender lens on old age. In T. M. Calasanti & K. F. Slevin, *Gender, social inequalities, and aging* (pp. 13-28). New York: AltaMira.

This opening chapter looks at aging and ageism through a social constructionist perspective that is consistent with our emphases on understanding power and with sensitivity to diversity.

Older Women's League (OWL) <http://www.owl-national.org/>

The Older Women's League is a good resource for up-to-date information about issues relevant to the lives of older women, including political advocacy.