UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

BERKELEY • DAVIS • IRVINE • LOS ANGELES • RIVERSIDE • SAN DIEGO • SAN FRANCISCO

SANTA BARBARA • SANTA CRUZ

INSTITUTE OF PERSONALITY ASSESSMENT
AND RESEARCH

2240 PIEDMONT AVENUE
BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA 94720

When you were a senior at Mills College, you contributed to a study of personality characterisitics of college women, conducted by the Institute of Personality Assessment & Research (IPAR) at the University of California. Somewhat later you participated in a follow-up study designed to record decisions, experiences, and personality changes in the important years after graduation. The findings have provided valuable insights into the personality development of college women, and we are very grateful for your help.

I would like to invite you now to participate in a study of your life in the intervening years. We have designed a questionnaire that we believe will be very helpful in enabling you to review your life and find patterns in it. One might spend $500 to take a workshop for this purpose and learn less about oneself than you can from participating in our study.

Furthermore, by joining the study, you will make a real contribution to social science. The development of women between adolescence and mid-life is largely unstudied. Yet to know under what conditions and in what ways women change is of urgent importance for social policies, therapeutic interventions, and our general appraisal of the potentialities of women. Our proposal of a study to contribute to this area of knowledge has been funded by the National Institute of Mental Health, whose leaders agree with us about the importance of the undertaking.

We have enclosed a sheet containing a fuller description of the aims and significance of the study. There is also a return folder that asks about your willingness to participate and during which of the next few months you would like to receive the materials. It also requests some factual information that will help us in our planning. WHETHER OR NOT you wish to participate, PLEASE FILL OUT THIS FORM AND RETURN IT AT YOUR EARLIEST CONVENIENCE.

If you agree to join the study, you will be sent the questionnaire and three inventories. These can be completed in about eight hours, distributed at your convenience over several weeks. Upon receipt of your complete materials we will send you a token honorarium of $20, a personal report about how you have changed over the years, and other information. If you would like to talk over the report or your life experiences, it would be possible to arrange an interview, especially if you can come to Berkeley.

Please know that we are interested in you whatever your life style and however well life is going for you at the moment. We deeply appreciate your help in the past and hope that with your help now, IPAR can realize the potential of its rich store of information about the Mills classes of 1958 and 1960, women who became young adults at a very important time in social history.

Sincerely,

Ravenna Helson
Principal Investigator

enclosures

Some Ideas Behind

The Study of Personality Change in Women from Age 22 to 45

We thought you might like a fuller explanation of why we are conducting this follow-up study of your class. The material below is taken from the grant proposal which was funded by the National Institute of Mental Health.

* * *

Recently, theories of adult development have been gaining attention. The theorists hold that most people do and should change their behavior and grow in personality as they move through a fairly predictable series of life situations. They describe a series of stages in this process.

One of the limitations of these theories is that they are based on the lives of men. It has been assumed that men's lives and women's lives are the same, or else that women's lives are largely determined by marriage, motherhood, and menopause. Neither of these somewhat facile and unexamined assumptions does justice to the complexity of the lives of modern women. Whether women today have a predictable adult development is an open empirical question.

In the present study we will seek information about the current life and recent experience of 135 women, now in their early forties, who were studied earlier when they were seniors at Mills College and then again several years after their graduation. The main purpose of the study is to ascertain whether there are major patterns of personality change among these women and, if so, what they are and how they came about.

One of the fascinating aspects of the Mills study is the fact that these women became young adults during the 1960's, a period of enormous social change. It is important to find out how much they were affected by these changes and in what ways. Some members of the classes of 1958 and 1960 had career aspirations before women's careers received much encouragement from society. We will want to know how uncomfortable they felt, and what they did to reduce discomfort.

The study of personality change in women is not only of great theoretical interest but also of social urgency. Traditionally, many factors have restricted personality development in adult women. Some individuals managed to grow anyway, and we would like to identify factors associated with such growth.

Many women choose to live a traditional life, even though it is not an easy one in a time of changing values. Some women show a variation of the traditional pattern, or one of a variety of new life styles. There are those who develop a certain level of competence and confidence in the occupational world before they marry, those who maintain "double-track" careers, those who don't marry, don't have children, have two sets of children,etc. There are those who go to work with enthusiasm after their children are in school, as well as those who begin to work unwillingly after divorce or widowhood.

Social policies, therapeutic interventions, and educational and counseling programs need knowledge about the strains these ways of life impose, and about what coping strategies and personality and community resources are needed by women who live them.

Remarks from Reviewers About the Study

"The topic of personality development in adult women is just beginning to receive attention, despite the fact that half the world's population is female. The proposed research would do much to improve developmental concepts now based on the lives of men and would provide an empirical base for the beginnings of a theory of personality development in adult females."

"The proposal reflects considerable awareness and sensitivity to issues that are especially important to women's development."

"The women in this study occupy a pivotal position in the social history of women. College graduates, educated at a time when middle-class women were expected to marry soon after graduation and devote the rest of their lives to being mothers and homemakers, many of these women were well into these roles when a radical change in values and expectations for women occurred. This sample is thus an excellent one for understanding the means by which woman reduce dissonance between old values and new."

"Previous articles by Dr. Helson show many Mills women to be thoughtful, articulate individuals, well able to convey their experience to researchers."

"The research provides the interesting opportunity to study a number of women who chose to pursue careers continuously since graduation, although such a choice was considered deviant at that time. The sample contains a relatively large number of women in creative fields, and since the career development of creative women is virtually unstudies, this research should make a substantial contribution."

The Staff

The study is under the direction of Ravenna Helson, Research Psychologist at the Institute of Personality Assessment and Research, and Adjunct Professor, Department of Psychology, at the University of California, Berkeley. Dr. Helson began her work on the psychology of women in 1958, with the beginning of the Mills study. She teaches courses on personality, sex, and society at the University of California and has published many papers in this and other areas. Last year she was president of the Division of Psychology and the Arts of the American Psychological Association. She is particularly interested in expressive styles, interest patterns, and personality change at midlife.

Working with Dr. Helson are Valory Mitchell, Geraldine Moane, and Dan Ozer. Helson and Mitchell wrote the chapter on personality in the Annual Review of Psychology in 1978. Mitchell has worked on attitude-change in mid-1960's youth and their parents after ten years, and is now interested in the way one's sense of self changes in the course of the formation, growth, and dissolution of relationships. Moane is interested in interpersonal relationships, especially friendships and social networks; Ozer in conceptualization and measurement in longitudinal studies.