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## Life Plan Development in Young Adult Women: An Exploration Using Grounded Theory

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### Abstract

Although research exists that explores career planning, romantic relationships, and decision making in women, it is not yet known how women understand and develop the goals that they hope to achieve throughout their lives. The current study aims to answer how women understand and go through the process of developing the life plans that they hope to pursue after college graduation. This research question was answered with Charmaz's (2006) model of grounded theory by conducting 13 interviews with young adult women approaching college graduation, followed by one focus group which was used to validate emergent themes. It was found that life plan development is a longitudinal process that begins in childhood, but becomes more focused during college, with the help of mentors, tangible learning opportunities, and the growth that exists from experiencing hardship. These young adult women were able to identify important factors throughout the entire lifespan that had helped them hone in on their dreams, identifying positive and negative experiences they had had, particularly in regards to their gender development, which had helped motivate them to work towards their ultimate goals for their lives.

### Keywords

Life Plan Development, Gender, Career Goals, Grounded Theory

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*Although research exists that explores career planning, romantic relationships, and decision making in women, it is not yet known how women understand and develop the goals that they hope to achieve throughout their lives. The current study aims to answer how women understand and go through the process of developing the life plans that they hope to pursue after college graduation. This research question was answered with Charmaz's (2006) model of grounded theory by conducting 13 interviews with young adult women approaching college graduation, followed by one focus group which was used to validate emergent themes. It was found that life plan development is a longitudinal process that begins in childhood, but becomes more focused during college, with the help of mentors, tangible learning opportunities, and the growth that exists from experiencing hardship. These young adult women were able to identify important factors throughout the entire lifespan that had helped them hone in on their dreams, identifying positive and negative experiences they had had, particularly in regards to their gender development, which had helped motivate them to work towards their ultimate goals for their lives. Keywords: Life Plan Development, Gender, Career Goals, Grounded Theory*

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In the 1970s, men earned the majority of bachelors, master's, and doctoral degrees, so a plethora of justifications could be made to explain why women earned only 60 cents to every dollar earned by men (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). However, in 2015, women were earning the majority of post-secondary degrees at every level, yet still only earning 78 cents to every dollar that men were making (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Before getting into gender discrimination, the "glass-ceiling," access to family leave and childcare, and other very important social issues, it is important to look at the life stories among the women around us.

Studies have repeatedly found that women are more heavily represented in lower-paying fields, and the highest paying careers continue to be male-dominated. Rather than look at the statistics in dismay or ask underpaid women to reflect back upon their life experiences, I set out to explore the development of women's life plans as they experience one of the most crucial periods in that development: the culmination of their undergraduate degrees. What makes young women pursue the paths that they choose to pursue? Which events and people limit them from following paths that could open up the doors to their highest potentials? What barriers and obstacles have been overcome in following the journeys that women create for themselves?

In this study, I explored how young adult women describe the process of understanding their life plans that they hope to pursue following college graduation. Life plans change constantly, and we are often affected by things that we did not plan for; however, when students are working towards finishing their undergraduate degrees, they are bombarded with questions and decisions about who they will inevitably become. Choices to pursue graduate studies, entry-level employment, or marriage, among other things, can directly and indirectly affect the later pay gaps that many of these women will eventually experience. If educators and researchers could grasp what resources are helpful for young adult women and which barriers closed doors on them, we could work to address these gender differences before the damage

has already been done. We can try to understand the pay gap before a gap exists, on an individual level.

### **Literature Review**

The role that gender plays in one's identity has been studied in samples including girls as young as 11 years old (Elliott, 2010), 9 years old (Brown, Alabi, Huynh, & Masten, 2011), and even 5 years old (Stroeher, 1994). Girls become aware of gender discrimination and differential treatment at a very young age (Brown et al., 2011). That awareness of discrimination can lead to different aspirations for adulthood, with boys imagining their future lives as revolving around careers and girls more likely to imagine their future families (Elliott, 2010). Girls even aspired to work fewer hours or stop working to take care of their imagined families (Elliott, 2010). It appears that females are beginning to limit their prospects and aspirations at such a young age without question.

The research conducted by Elliott (2010) suggests that girls and boys hope for different life plans in the future, but another study by Stroeher (1994) suggests that girls may not even believe they are capable of achieving the life plans that boys are capable of. When kindergarten students were asked to label various pictures of occupations as masculine, feminine, or either, the majority of female students indicated that only boys could be firefighters or astronauts, while boys thought that both boys and girls could have any job (Stroeher, 1994).

These limitations and biases placed upon females appear to continue throughout the lifespan. In one study of 14 adult women and 17 undergraduate women, every single participant reported having been a victim of discrimination or harassment in either school or work (Settles, Pratt-Hyatt, & Buchanan, 2008). In regards to life plan development, many of these women reported being pressured by others to have children, and those who had children reported that this often came along with many negative responsibilities (Settles et al., 2008).

These gender differences do not cease to exist as individuals become more educated; the same results have been found with students pursuing advanced degrees. Both male and female medical students reported that a balance between work and family was an important aspiration in their lives when they had children of their own; however, only female students said that they would stop their careers to take care of their children, and many reported that they feared they would be bad mothers if they were not stay-at-home mothers (Drinkwater, Tully, & Dorman, 2008). Even when female students did have aspirations to maintain their careers, many reported that they had received many overt comments from faculty, encouraging them to go into medical specialties that were more "female-friendly" (Phillips, 2009).

Role models appeared to be extremely important in having an influence upon the medical school population, but in quite gender stereotyped ways. Many students reported that male role models are considered successful if they are successful within their careers, but female role models are only considered successful if they are successful both within their careers and within their families (Drinkwater et al., 2008). Both male and female students reported having same gender role models who helped to influence their career decisions, and they could clearly identify "female specialties" within medicine, which were consistently lower paying than "male specialties" (Phillips, 2009).

These studies suggest that women and men are given different information regarding the life plans that they should pursue, and these pushes towards or away from various careers are often explicit in nature (Drinkwater et al., 2008; Phillips, 2009). Not only does this discrimination keep women and men from considering a full range of potential careers, but it limits fields from recruiting the most qualified professionals because half of the population was deterred from pursuing that career, beginning with early messages in elementary school (Brown et al., 2011).

It has been suggested that mothers' perceptions of their children's academic performance, competence, and beliefs about inherent abilities strongly predicted academic performance one year later (Pomerantz & Dong, 2006), yet parents had more negative views of females' abilities in math, even before their daughters entered school for the first time (Räty, Kasanen, & Honkalampi, 2006). Parents', particularly mothers', beliefs about their children can have a paramount effect on development, potentially causing any negative stereotypes regarding a female's abilities and performance to have a detrimental effect throughout one's life (Pomerantz & Dong, 2006; Räty et al., 2006). Multiple research studies have indicated that even as college students, individuals may continue to be negatively affected by internalized stereotypes, through the self-fulfilling prophecy (Hebl & King, 2004; Sakamoto, Miura, Sakamoto, & Mori, 2000).

However, some of the differences that may exist between men's and women's paths in life may be the result of simply defining their aspirations differently. Dyke and Murphy (2006) explored the ways in which successful men and women defined success and how those definitions affected their lives. Men's descriptions of success focused upon career elements, such as financial successes and freedoms, whereas women's descriptions of success relied upon having balance in life, not simply being successful in one's career (Dyke & Murphy, 2006).

It is crucial to understand the influences upon the life plan development of young adult women, as they begin to embark on a variety of life plans. Experiences with discrimination, stereotypes, mentoring, and the self-fulfilling prophecy should be explored to see if women have held themselves back from a full range of potential life plans or if they have been deterred from following their life plans in any explicit ways. Studying the unique experiences of women can allow the reader to begin to comprehend how the gender pay gap currently exists, through the lens of gender segregation within various occupational fields.

The current study explored various aspects of women's life plans as they were uniquely defined by the women who were developing them, as they were approaching college graduation within the following year. This research was not limited to one aspect of one's life plans (e.g., work, graduate school, relationships), but explored the life plans that were viewed as most important by the women who were in the process of developing those life plans. Thus, the current study addresses the research question: *How do young women describe the process of understanding their life plans after college?*

### **The Context of the Researcher**

I currently am employed as a Teaching Instructor of Psychology, and I have training in mental health counseling and multicultural issues. In the past, I have provided individual, family, and group counseling to adolescent females; there I began to observe the struggles that my clients felt as they developed and attempted to pursue their various life plans. Since teaching at the university level, I have advised and mentored many female students as they approached graduation and wrestled with the plans that they were pursuing. My goal in conducting this study is to help educators, like myself, learn more about what is effective or harmful to undergraduate students as they work towards their life goals, so that educators could provide better guidance as their students overcome adversities and hone in on the life plans that work best.

In the current study, I used the qualitative research methodology of grounded theory, in which the goal of the research was to create a new theory to explain the process by which something occurs (Charmaz, 2006). As my goal in this research was to develop a brand-new theory, my main purpose was not to build upon any past theories. Regardless of the limited theoretical orientation utilized in grounded theory research, some previous psychological theories were used as initial conceptualization of gender and the development of life plans.

Multicultural psychology is the study of the way in which one's various group identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, disability status) play a role in his or her daily interactions and essence of being; however, multicultural psychologists have asserted that gender must be included in a discussion of multiculturalism (Reid, 2002). One of the major tasks that need to be accomplished during the last years of college is the development of life plans that will be pursued after graduation (Josselson, 1996; Stiwne & Jungert, 2010). The last 2 years of college represent a critical time during which students must decide whether they will pursue careers, further education, or any other life plans (Farner & Brown, 2008). Multicultural psychologists had not yet studied the impact that gender may have on the development of one's life plans post-college. My hope in this study is to build upon the database of multicultural psychology by addressing an often-neglected aspect of identity, gender, in a new arena, particularly the development of one's life plans.

In terms of life plan development, Heinz, Kelle, Witzel, and Zinn (1998) have conceptualized symbolic interactionism to be a major concept in the way in which young adults begin to develop life plans. Symbolic interactionism, a major theory in career development literature, posits that during major transitional periods, individuals are forced to look at the roles they play, along with their relationships, in order to make decisions about the future (Heinz et al., 1998). Consequently, the way in which one thinks about an upcoming transition shapes his or her views about the future and inevitably guides the decisions he or she makes regarding the future (Heinz et al., 1998). Young adults who are facing an upcoming transitory period will look at the future through the lens of the societal norms established for them and will attempt to balance their true aspirations with the limitations and obstacles that have been set before them blocking the obtainment of those aspirations (Heinz et al., 1998). Heinz et al. (1998) state that the resolution of this process culminates in one's decisions about the future. In the current study, I explore how young adults are conceptualizing their life plans for the future, as they are approaching a major life transition, graduation from college. College graduation is often a major transitory period in the United States, as this is a final transition that forces young adults to adopt adult roles and make major decisions regarding the future (Josselson, 1996). However, the current zeitgeist has changed this transitory period into one that results in further education for many individuals, prolonging the transition into full adulthood, resulting in a new developmental period termed emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2007).

A final concept of relevance to life plan development is "biological action orientation," which was developed within social cognitive theory (Heinz et al., 1998, p. 94). This orientation indicates that individuals make intentional decisions and are driven in specific, predetermined ways in the development of life plans (Heinz et al., 1998). This is a major assumption of great relevance and importance to the current study. I based the current study upon the idea that young adults do in fact make decisions regarding the development of their future life plans, and that this process is intellectualized and goal-oriented. This assumption may not be true of all young adults in other countries, or even within the United States. However, for the purposes of the current study, I used the lens of social cognitive theory, particularly biological action orientation, to explore the development of life plans for the young adult female students anticipating college graduation in the Northeast (Heinz et al., 1998).

## Method

In the current study, I aim to explore the way in which young adult women develop and go through the process of making the life plans that they hope to pursue following college graduation. I have used the method of grounded theory proposed by Charmaz (2006) to explore this research question. In each individual interview, I asked open-ended questions, so that the

theory describing life plan development in young adult women would be grounded in the actual experiences of those women.

Since previous research has failed to simultaneously explore multiple aspects of life plan development in young adult women, I determined that grounded theory would be most appropriate to explore the development of life plans. I chose to conduct this research using grounded theory in order to determine which influences are important within this developmental process, through the points of view of those who are experiencing those influences (Charmaz, 2006). The goal of this research study was to explore how life plan development unfolds and is experienced, so that future clinicians and educators are better prepared to support and foster life plan development for young adult women who are experiencing this developmental process. In addition, young adult women would benefit from better resources can be offered to them in the future.

## **Sample**

In this study, I utilized theoretical sampling, which involved recruiting participants who share a relevant experience and using them as experts on that topic, allowing the participants to help develop the themes to be explored (Morse, 2007). I recruited participants, who could provide rich, informative data regarding their understanding of their life plans post-college and were women in their last 2 years of college, between the ages of 20 and 25, and attending a 4-year institution of higher education, as this has been viewed as inclusion criteria for the transitory period of graduating from college (Josselson, 1996). I constantly analyzed the data and as new themes emerged, I recruited new participants to expand upon those themes (Morse, 2007).

I recruited the participants by advertising the research study on the Facebook pages of every college and university in a Northeast state, where I would be able to easily travel to conduct the interviews. I created a Facebook page that stated the purposes of the research study. Then, I posted messages on the college Facebook pages, asking women who were ages 20 to 25 and approaching graduation to participate in the research study by clicking on a hyperlink to the research page. Interested participants were asked to call or email the researcher to participate. When eligible participants (females aged 20 to 25 during their junior or senior years of college) called or emailed the researcher, the study was explained in more depth. If the potential participants agreed to participate, a date and time was scheduled for them to participate in an individual interview.

The goal of this sampling strategy was to enable the researcher to obtain access to a diverse group of women from a variety of different types of colleges and universities, rather than limiting the results to a homogenous demographic makeup. It was not yet known what factors influenced life plan development, so I hoped to obtain a sample that included students from public, private, small, large, religious, and secular institutions. The final sample included 13 young adult women, who were in their final 2 years of college and could provide rich, informative data regarding their understanding of their life plans post-college.

This sample included 8 students at private colleges and universities and 5 students from public colleges and universities. The sample was made up of five majors in psychology, two majors in criminal justice, two majors in history, one major in international studies, one major in accounting, one major in English and education, and one major in nursing. The ages of the participants ranged from 20 to 25 with a mean of 21.85. The sample consisted of 7 White participants, 4 Latina participants, and 2 Asian participants. Ethnically, the sample consisted of four women who were European-American, one who was American, one who was Hindu, one who was Polish, one who was Native American, one who was Dominican-American, one

who was Filipino, one who was Puerto-Rican-Colombian, one who was Colombian, and one who was Cuban-Irish.

### **Protection of Participants**

The Institutional Review Board at Capella University approved this study, including research methodology, sampling procedures, and all recruitment material. When potential participants contacted the primary investigator regarding the study, the researcher explained the study in depth to each person. If the potential participant did agree to take part in the study, the study was explained once again in detail when the participant and researcher met for the interview. Again, the potential participant had the option to decline to participate in the study, and she was always welcome to skip questions that she did not feel comfortable answering or to stop the interview at any time. Finally, the potential participant was provided with an informed consent form that was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Capella University. In order to participate in the study, the potential participant was required to sign this form and needed to sign again agreeing to be recorded for data collection purposes. Audio recordings of the interviews were stored on a password protected computer, and after the interviews were transcribed, the original audio recordings were destroyed. The written transcriptions of the audio recordings, diagrams of the participants' life plans, and signed informed consent forms are all in a locked cabinet in the primary investigator's home

### **Data Collection**

At the start of each interview, I provided the participant with a blank piece of paper and writing utensils and asked the participant to draw a diagram of the life plans that she hoped to pursue following college graduation. The participants were able to complete this activity in any way that they desired, and then they discussed their diagrams with the researcher. I hoped for participants to express themselves in a way which might feel more comfortable than verbal expression (Varga-Atkins & O'Brien, 2009). Furthermore, I hoped that these diagrams would help the interviewees to guide the interview process in discussing what was most important to them, rather than the interviewer influencing what the women would eventually discuss (Varga-Atkins & O'Brien, 2009).

Next, I conducted "intensive interviewing," in which I conducted conversational-type interviews with the goal of gathering very detailed information about the development of life plans in the participants (Charmaz, 2006, p. 25). I adapted the interview process for each individual participant, so that the interview really fit with that individual's unique experiences; however, I used specific protocols that have been developed by Charmaz (2006) as a guide. In the interviews, we explored how each participant understands and describes the process of developing her life plans after college. I audio-recorded the interviews on two separate devices and then transcribed them verbatim.

I conducted semi-structured, conversational interviews, which included each of the following questions, which were not always addressed in order. I developed the interview questions ahead of time; however, I asked additional questions during each interview based upon the information that emerged during that session. I field tested the original interview questions with a diverse group of five experts within the fields of psychology and gender research. During each interview, I included each of the following questions.

- How would you define "life plans" as they relate to one's life after college?
- How would you describe your own life plans that you plan to pursue immediately after college? Describe each of these life plans in detail.

- How would you describe your own life plans that you plan to pursue far into the future? Describe each of these life plans in detail.
- How do you feel when you think about the life plans that you have developed?
- What were the major events or experiences that influenced the development of your life plans? How did those events and experiences influence you?
- Who was influential in helping to develop your life plans? How did they participate in that development?
- What do you think a typical day will be like for you after you graduate from college?
- Has your gender played a role in the development of your life plans that you plan to pursue after college? If so, how?
- Has your culture played a role in the development of your life plans that you plan to pursue after college? If so, how?
- Are you currently experiencing any obstacles related to your life plans? Do you envision any obstacles as you move forward?
- Demographic questions—what is your age? How would you describe your race? How would you describe your ethnicity? How would you describe your spirituality?
- Those are all of the questions that I had planned to ask you. Is there anything that you would like to discuss further or anything that I missed?

As part of grounded theory, I added some additional interview questions, as new areas of interest began to emerge (Charmaz, 2006). I added the following questions:

- Do you remember any particular moment when you felt like you had decided upon your life plans?
- What advice do you have for women approaching college graduation?
- Do you remember anything as being the most helpful in helping you to decide on your life plans?
- Did you experience any setbacks or obstacles as you worked towards your life plans?
- How do you think you will respond to any changes that might occur in your life plans?
- Have you experienced any changes in past life plans that you have pursued?

At this point, I concluded the interview with each participant.

After each interview, I used the data analysis procedures described by Charmaz (2006), including initial coding, focused coding, axial coding, and theoretical coding. I then made a conditional matrix for each participant and wrote memos regarding the emergent theory. I conducted additional interviews with new participants until I achieved theoretical saturation.

After I completed all interviews, I ran a focus group to determine whether the theory that I was developing matched the experiences of the participants. I contacted all participants who had engaged in individual interviews and asked whether they would be interested in participating in a focus group, which would be used to validate emergent themes (Charmaz, 2006). I decided to include audio recordings of the individual interviews, the participants' visual diagrams, and an audio recording of the focus group to triangulate the data, granting me increased confidence in the theory that eventually resulted from the research (Snowden & Martin, 2011). I conducted the focus group with 4 participants meeting at the same time, along with three research assistants. I planned to hold focus groups until the women agreed that the

data presented to them accurately described their personal experiences; however, I was able to validate the theory during the first focus group meeting.

## Data Analysis

After each interview, I began the data analysis procedures described by Charmaz (2006). I conducted initial line-by-line coding by highlighting and then naming pieces of the interview with specific phrases or words that summarized the essence of an interviewee's statement (Charmaz, 2006; Holton, 2007). I worked to remain extremely close to the participants' original words and often used of their actual words to name the codes (Charmaz, 2006). For example, the first participant stated, "Um, very nervous, actually, obviously, cuz I don't have perfect set plans yet cuz there are so many things that can go wrong like if there aren't job opportunities but um, I do, it's very exciting, like I want to be a police officer" in response to the question, "So how do you feel when you envision your life in the future and you think about being a police officer?" During initial line-by-line coding, this sentence was broken down and labeled "feeling nervous about the future," "not having perfect set plans yet," "thinking that things can go wrong in the future," "not having job opportunities," "feeling excited," and "wanting to be a police officer."

The next step that I conducted was focused coding, which involved looking among all of the codes that had been developed in the previous step and focusing on which were most important to the research question (Holton, 2007). During this process, I looked at the interview as a whole and began to make interpretations about the meaning of the information (Charmaz, 2006). I only kept codes that answered questions about the interviewee's life plans or the processes that influenced the development of those plans for further analysis (Charmaz, 2006). In continuing the earlier example, I include the focused codes: "feeling nervous about things going wrong as future plans unfold" and "feeling excited about future career."

I conducted axial coding next, which involved looking for the bigger picture and making sense out of the way that different codes and categories were related to each other (Holton, 2007). Although the axial codes were interrelated to each other and thus involved larger pieces of the interviews, the focused codes from the previous example fell under the final axial code of "experiencing mixed emotions as the plans unfold." I was in the beginning steps of forming the theory during this step because I began to make interpretations about the overall process and relationships involved that told the whole story of how women develop their life plans that will be pursued after college (Charmaz, 2006). Finally, I used theoretical coding to actually build the theory that was grounded in the information shared by the participants (Holton, 2007). During this step, I built hypotheses about the relationships among experiences and aimed to make sense out of the entire process of the development of one's life plans (Charmaz, 2006). This enabled me to tell a story about each participant's development and eventually an overall story that described the way in which most women develop their life plans (Holton, 2007). In continuing the same example, I wrote a narrative about how this participant overcame many obstacles throughout her life, which enabled her to persevere and become a strong person, who planned to empower other people when they were not feeling strong. She encountered people who inspired her to do better, as well as others who challenged her and treated her negatively because of her gender. She felt that her plans changed, as she gained new experiences, but she remained motivated to achieve her goals and prove herself to others. Throughout her past and future, she experienced so many mixed emotions, ups, and down.

Throughout the data analysis process, I made conditional matrices that visually displayed the development of life plans as they have unfolded for each individual participant (Holton, 2007). This helped me to clearly see how each participant had been conceptualized and also promoted brainstorming when developing the overall theory of life plan development

for women in general. In addition, after each interview was conducted and after each piece of data had been analyzed, I wrote a memo to take note of my current thoughts regarding the research study (Lempert, 2007). This helped me to look back and see how my thoughts developed and unfolded in the process of reaching the final theory upon the culmination of this study (Lempert, 2007). For example, after I conducted this first interview, I wrote extensively about the strength and resilience that I saw in this participant in overcoming so much hardship. I speculated whether this was a unique experience, or whether it was common for those who achieve great things to experience the most despair in climbing their personal mountains.

I continued this process of coding and memo-writing throughout the research process. After each interview, I transcribed and then coded the data through a process of constant comparative analysis (Charmaz, 2006). I constantly went back and forth between analyzing the current interview and analyzing all of the interviews conducted thus far, in order to develop an overall generalized theory (Charmaz, 2006). This aspect of grounded theory, which involved simultaneous data collection and data analysis throughout the research process, helped to keep me deep within the data and ensured that the theory that was developed was grounded in the experiences of the participants (Charmaz, 2006).

Finally, I created a theory to describe the process of how young adult women understand and develop the life plans that they hope to pursue following college graduation. I created this theory by weaving together the process of life plan development that occurred for each of the women individually and describing the aspects of that process that were experienced by the majority of the research participants. I will present this theory in narrative format and as a diagram.

### **Rigor and Trustworthiness**

I utilized common safeguards in grounded theory research in this study to protect against threats to credibility, dependability, and transferability. I achieved credibility by spending a significant amount of time interviewing the women in this sample and using different types of data collection methods (individual interviews, a focus group, and visual representations of the life plans that the participants have developed; Shah & Corley, 2006). First of all, I ensured descriptive validity by accurately representing the actual words that were shared by the research participants (Winter, 2000). I audio-recorded all interviews, which were then transcribed verbatim.

In order to achieve interpretive validity, I remained close to the participants' actual words throughout the process of data analysis and then returned to those transcriptions to provide support for the results during data presentation (Winter, 2000). Finally, I achieved theoretical validity by contacting the participants a second time to provide insight regarding their thoughts on the theory, and the participants validated the theory before it was determined to be complete (Winter, 2000). Theoretical validity was essential to this study (Hoare, Mills, & Francis, 2012), as the goal of a strong study using grounded theory was to create a theory that explains the influences on the process of life plan development in young adult women.

I achieved transferability by obtaining thorough, rich pieces of data (Shah & Corley, 2006) through extensive interviews, and then I used that raw data in the data analysis and data presentation. I took great measures to ensure that the sample accurately represented the target population of female college students nearing graduation. After I conducted some initial interviews, I added new questions to explore any potential themes of interest and to determine whether those themes were true for all young adult women. The final participants can be considered "experts" on this topic because they are the most knowledgeable and relevant sources of information, as they discussed their own lives and their own experiences.

I achieved dependability through the use of theoretical sampling, ensuring complete confidentiality of the participants, and having all steps of the research process monitored (Shah & Corley, 2006). I wrote the research methodology with specificity and precision, so that other researchers would be able to replicate this study in a different geographic location or with a different demographic makeup of the participants. Furthermore, I used a research journal to log every step of the research process, so that I could report not only each planned step of the research process, but also anything that may have occurred that was not planned for.

I also met with a mentor throughout the entire research process to check in and ensure that potential assumptions or biases were not playing a role in the development of the emergent theory. Because I had experience working with young adult women in both a clinical and educational setting, I wanted to be sure that I was not looking for any preconceived ideas about the population, but truly understanding the participants' stories through their own points of view. In addition, multiple research assistants worked independently on various steps in the research process, so that the researchers could compare findings and any discrepancies could be addressed. Finally, I made sure to follow the research procedures, particularly the interview protocol, as planned, to ensure that the results that follow are grounded in the experiences of the research participants, and have not been influenced whatsoever by the expectations of the researcher.

### **Data Presentation**

Below I will present various pieces of information to support the theory that was inevitably developed. I will describe the final axial codes, with brief summaries of the code, a listing of the supporting focused codes, the number of times that the code was endorsed in all of the interviews, and direct quotes that can be used as evidence of the existence of that code in the words of the participants. Then, I will present the theoretical codes, in the form of the theory that explains the way in which young adult women develop the life plans that they hope to pursue following college graduation. This includes an overall description of the way in which this process unfolds and the way that process is experienced, through the points of view of the participants. This theory has been supported by the women taking part in the focus group, who agreed that this theory describes their experiences. Finally, I created a conditional matrix that visually depicts the process by which young adult women develop and experience their life plans (see Figure 1). This includes a clear diagram that adds another layer of depth in the understanding of this process of development.

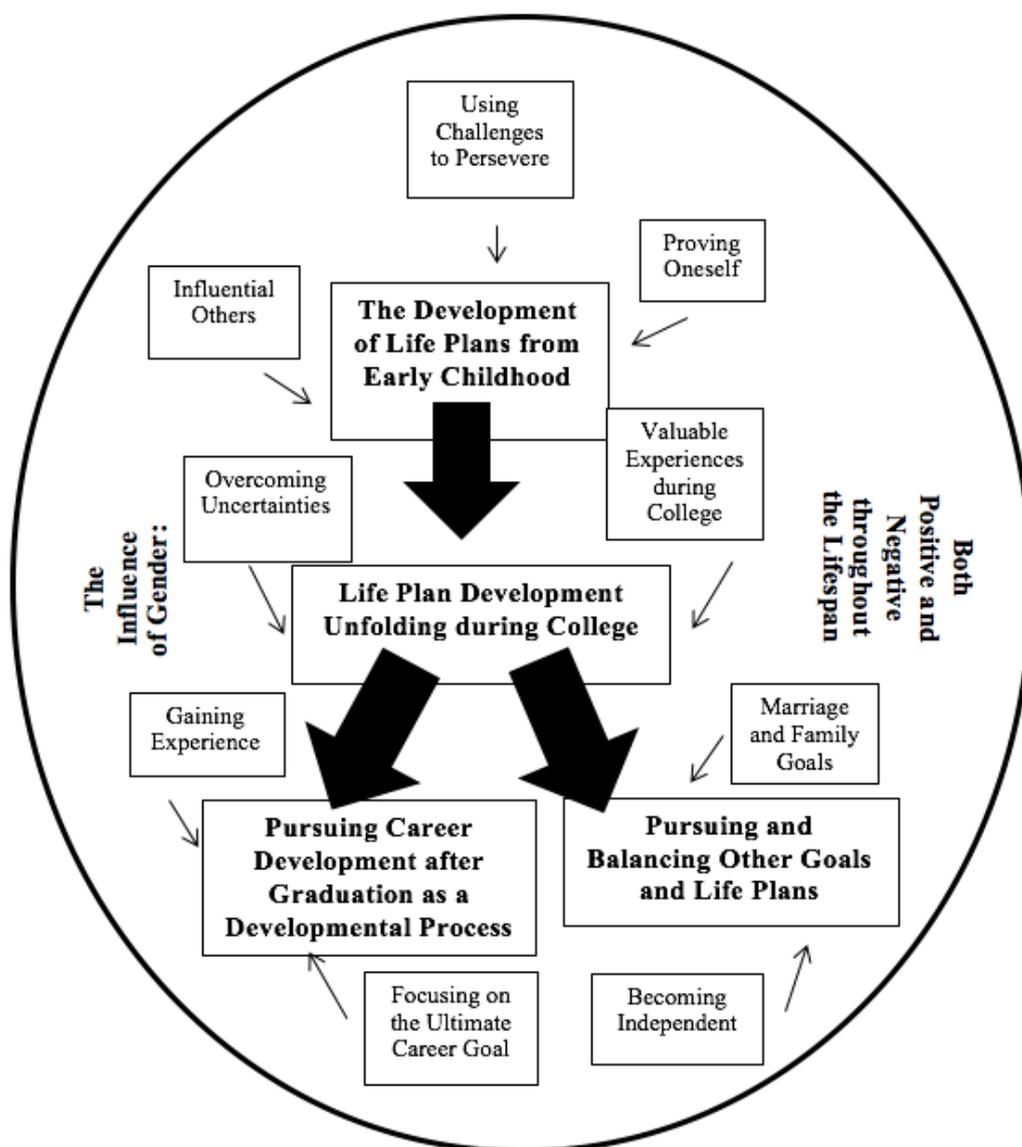


Figure 1. Conditional matrix of life plan development in young adult women.

## Results

A series of 35 focused codes and 5 axial codes emerged within the interviews to answer the research question: *how do young adult women describe and understand the process of developing the life plans that they hope to pursue following college graduation?* The axial codes, along with their supporting focused codes are described below.

### Multiple Influences throughout the Lifespan

All 13 of the participants described how many different things, people, and experiences have influenced the development of one's life plans, dating back to early childhood. This axial code, which appeared 588 times in the interviews, included six focused codes: being influenced and inspired by others; using challenges to become stronger and persevere; becoming interested in her chosen career from experiences during childhood; feeling motivated because of experiences and feeling a sense of responsibility to help others; proving oneself to others; and wanting to be a good role model to family members.

The participants were influenced by a wide array of people in their lives, from parents and grandparents to professors and supervisors at internships. Although many participants discussed the role of male influences, many participants expressed that having a female role model was much more influential and inspirational. These women stated that females have to overcome many hardships, so if they have the opportunity to observe another woman accomplish what they hope to accomplish themselves, it gives them added confidence that they will in fact achieve all of their goals in the future. Many of the women described college professors, family members, and internship coordinators who have provided them that extra push to work towards their goals. One participant described her academic department as having

always been very encouraging and they've always told me that you're in the right field and this is what you're meant to do and keep staying on this, you know you're very good at what you do and not a lot of people have always told me that, so I think it was probably their encouragement that put me on this path.

In addition to positive role models, many women expressed how they had taken a negative or potentially damaging experience in life and had spun it into a motivating factor in being able to achieve all that they hoped to accomplish. Many women expressed an intense desire to prove themselves to people who had put them down in the past. As one participant said in regards to her father who had left her and her mother, "I wanna prove him wrong. And I mean I also wanna do it for my mom too; she didn't raise garbage you know?" However, the challenge did not always have to be a person. Many women expressed that external stressors and hardships were able to motivate them in the same way, and they felt that without challenges, achievements are not able to bring the same level of satisfaction. One participant said:

Just trying to beat the odds of everything, because you know, there are so many statistics and reasons why I shouldn't be successful and the best way to tell me to do something is to tell me I can't do it.

Life plan development appeared to begin at an extremely young age, with experiences ranging from admiring family members' career paths and being exposed to those careers from childhood, to playing with toys and simulating the life plans that they still felt the same passion for, so many years later. Through both encouragement and discouragement, many women felt that they had the same drive during early childhood that they felt during college. One woman found her role models at home and at school, "I just grew up with both of my parents being teachers and then I had a couple really good English teachers in high school that I really liked that I wanted to be like."

Finally, many women described a sense of responsibility that they felt to help others, so their life plan development was built upon being able to give back to a vulnerable population or to society at large. In addition, many of these women hoped to be a positive role model to others through the achievement of their life plans. This was most commonly expressed by hoping to be a positive role model to younger siblings or cousins, as one participant put it, "So I feel like, by me being a role model and doing the right things in life is an example; therefore, she would have someone to look like up to."

### **The Ladder to the Ultimate Career**

All 13 participants also supported the next axial code that career development is an incremental process that will be pursued following graduation and will inevitably result in

obtaining an ultimate career goal, which emerged 309 times within the interviews. This included three axial codes: gaining experiences after graduation and making plans to eventually achieve long-term goals, staying motivated by focusing on ultimate career goals, and worrying about money and finding a job.

The participants had a wide range of goals following college graduation, with some planning to immediately pursue further education, while other women described their hopes of obtaining an entry-level position to get their foot in the door for their chosen career path. All of these women expressed that they knew they would start “at the bottom” and build themselves up over many years of hard work and discipline.

The one thing that was able to keep these women motivated throughout all of the hard work that they saw ahead for themselves was visualizing and focusing upon that ultimate career goal. Many women stated that they would know that they were successful when they finally landed this one job. Whenever these women felt stressed out during college or when they imagined obstacles that they would have to endure following college graduation, they thought about this ultimate career goal and it helped them to continue pushing forward. One participant stated that she wanted to

Finish my master's and like go into my PsyD in order to begin my career as a psychologist because that is like my ultimate goal like in reference to um...the career goal. This is what I want to do, this is my dream, this is what I am working towards.

Despite this long-term planning and high level of aspiration for the future, more than half of the participants expressed fears about finding a job immediately upon graduation. Many participants expressed concerns about the current state of the economy and how that has deterred many college graduates from being able to find employment upon graduation. With this fear, many also worried about financial burdens, particularly the amount of student loans that they had accumulated throughout their college careers. Many of the participants felt these obstacles were particularly difficult for them, as opposed to the ease with which graduates obtained jobs in the past. One participant said:

Back in the day was completely different, um, they would get their associates degree and almost like their generation was grandfathered in to you know, staying in that job, getting the promotion and such, where it's definitely an obstacle today; a bachelor's degree in psychology is basically the equivalent to a high school degree, which is a shame. And the jobs that I am being offered are like receptionist, secretary jobs, and you don't need any degree for that. So I would take it, just for the money, but that's not why I went to school. That's not why anyone goes to school. So, um, yeah, lack of resources would definitely be an obstacle for me.

The focused codes supporting this axial code display a combination of optimism for the future and preparation for the hardships that they could expect to encounter after leaving the security of college. While these appear to be concerns that have affected past generations, the financial burdens and lack of employment that this group of women will likely face upon graduation is a difficult stressor that has not been experienced to the same extent by recent generations. Despite potential financial burdens, all of these women remained optimistic and certain that regardless of how long it takes them to get there, they will all eventually achieve the ultimate goals that they have set out for themselves. Despite the struggles ahead, many

participants spoke about how they would work through them to achieve their goals, as this participant stated:

I'm sure that there's going to be challenges, the aspect of getting through school. Some of the courses are challenging that you need to take, but I feel like if I can get through this, like, it's just one step closer and I just need to keep pushing through.

### **Life Outside of Work**

Many participants also addressed life plans outside of their career goals in the axial code, life after college involves more than career development, and it is important to pursue and balance many different goals and plans, which emerged 187 times within the interviews. This code included wanting to get married and start a family, experiencing mixed emotions about the future, and being independent and taking personal responsibility.

Career development was the most frequently discussed aspect of life plan development; however, there were other aspects of life planning that were also of great importance to many of the participants. Eleven of the 13 participants expressed that they wanted to get married and start a family; however, the importance placed upon this life plan varied greatly among the participants. Participants ranged from women who expressed that they would let go of other aspects of their life plans for the opportunity to be stay-at-home moms to women who expressed that they would only consider marriage and a family if they had already accomplished the rest of their life plans, particularly their career goals. It was most common for participants to express that marriage and family was a secondary life plan after establishing a career, but that both could be achieved simultaneously with a supportive partner. The discrepancies among the participants can be viewed, as one participant said:

I love to think about getting married, having a family. When I think about the one thing if I was to do anything in my life, it's to be a mother. Get married and be a mother. That's what I really want to do. So I mean, if I never went back to school, never became a curator just because I have to take care of my children, that's okay with me in the end. If I think about my ideal situation, my ideal thing, I would love to do that.

Whereas, another participant stated:

If I don't get married? Ehh. . . whatever. But if I don't land this job, I would probably be instituted in a trauma center cuz I would be so depressed, like you have no idea. There's no other job that I would rather want than that. If that changes, I would have a panic attack, like, I can't. It's kinda like, that's what makes me scared and happy, scared and happy, because I shouldn't be so attached to this one thing, but that's all I see myself doing.

Furthermore, when women looked at their life plans overall after college, the majority of them expressed many mixed emotions. These women stated that they could feel simultaneously excited and scared about the future, and both sad and happy about leaving college for new life plans. This ambivalence about moving forward took the form of becoming independent and responsible for the first time for a small group of women figuring out how to balance many different responsibilities instead of just focusing on school as they had in the past for some women, or having such high expectations for oneself but fearing that one might

not accomplish everything or may face difficulties while trying to accomplish it all. One participant expressed the back-and-forth of her emotions:

It's like nerve racking and exciting. I feel like, um, even thinking about graduating college is kind of like a bittersweet moment? It's like I'm excited to move on then it's just like, oh man, I really don't wanna leave college, like, it's kind of like you're more scared. And I get scared sometimes, and then I'll be really excited.

This axial code regarding other plans aside from career goals after college was the most variant among the participants. Participant responses ranged from wanting to “run a marathon” to deciding where to live to wanting to be able to afford material things, such as “a house, with a pool, and nice cars. . .go on vacations once a year, or twice a year.” Individual personality was extremely evident in terms of the values that were placed on various life plans, and which plans these women were willing to sacrifice at the expense of other plans. Although nearly every participant expressed plans for career, marriage, and family, the way in which these plans were imagined to be pursued was astronomically different for each of the participants interviewed.

### **Importance of College**

The next axial code, which was represented 186 times, was life plan development is a complex process that unfolds during the college years. This included the focused codes gaining experiences throughout college to better prepare her for a career, feeling unsure of which educational path to follow, being able to identify things about one's major that make it appealing, and valuing higher education.

Twelve of the 13 participants described transformational experiences they had during college, including internships, relevant coursework, jobs, and volunteer opportunities. These women stated that the hands-on experiences that they gained in each of these experiences were the most valuable influences in ensuring that they actually wanted to pursue the goals that they thought they wanted to pursue. One participant described her experiences inside and outside of the classroom:

I did my senior paper on couples counseling and theories. And it's just something I've always liked and I felt that I was just a natural at, um. . .then I kinda, switched it up a little bit because I saw that there wasn't too many, uh, couples counseling anywhere, except for the place I did intern at, but she basically created and established that on her own, it took her so much money, so much time, and I don't want to do that so I was thinking about going to school for my LCSW because it gives more opportunity, it's more broad, and then if I wanted to do couples counseling, I could still do it with an LCSW.

During the focus group, all of the women expressed how difficult it can be to choose a career path because classes in college only involve learning from a book, which can be significantly different from what one would actually do within a career.

Despite these positive opportunities that were awarded to most of the participants during college, most participants had also questioned whether they were really pursuing the right major, whether they should change majors, or whether they should go to graduate school in a different field than the one that they had originally intended to pursue. The majority of these women positively resolved their doubts by recommitting themselves to the major that

they had originally intended for themselves or deciding upon a major that was a better fit for them than the one that they were originally pursuing, such as this participant:

It was more recently, probably over the summer because I had been second guessing and, “oh maybe I’ll just go to grad school for psychology,” and still work with children’s oncology, but a different aspect not you know. Now I’m like, over the summer, once I got through chemistry and saw that I could do it, I just need to push myself and this is what I really want to do so I’m not going to give up.

However, two of these women stated that they were only moving forward with their current majors because they felt like they had invested too much into them already and it was too late to change their plans at this point. These stark contrasts in reaching one’s decision can be seen in one participant’s experiences with nursing school:

To be honest, like, over my few years here at ---, I definitely wasn’t sure about becoming a nurse when I first got into the program. I kinda just applied for it; I thought it was an interesting job. The reason why I stuck with it is because I’m so far into the program.

Finally, some women stated their parents had very high expectations of them and had always pushed them to be successful in school. This had influenced their achievements during college and their plans to pursue further education after obtaining their bachelor’s degrees. On the other hand, many women expressed that they would be the first person in their families to obtain a college degree. These women often expressed the same drive to continue to pursue further education by not only being the first person in their families to obtain a bachelor’s degree, but to also be the first person to obtain a master’s degree and doctoral degree. One participant captured the sentiments of many when she said,

Education has always been something that’s been umm, put into my brains since I was a little girl, like family’s like, I don’t care what you do, forget working, forget everything, school comes first. So I feel like my parents really like put that, you know, and I like it and I enjoy it, I love learning and stuff.

College was certainly not the place where motivation and life plan development began for these participants, but it was perhaps the most influential period of life in terms of developing and strengthening these plans. Despite experiencing some uncertainties and doubts throughout college, the majority of participants could identify specific experiences from college, along with outside experiences during the college years that had helped to solidify their life plans. Having positive college experiences to mesh with the familial influences these women had experienced throughout their lives appeared to help most of these women become certain that they had made the right decisions for themselves for their futures.

### **Ubiquitous Influence of Gender**

The final axial code, gender, was one of the most important parts of identity, influencing the development of life plans, both negatively and positively, emerged 120 times within the interviews. It included being challenged and viewed negatively because of being a woman, thinking positively about women’s potentials, and using gender and culture to empower oneself and make a positive impact upon others.

Gender appeared to be extremely important for many of the women; however, it had both positive and negative impacts on the women who were interviewed. Many of these women expressed that being put down for their gender only made them work harder to achieve their goals, so that they could prove people wrong. These women were exposed to comments from teachers and other influential adults, who had told them that they would never amount to anything because they were women and provided both implicit and explicit messages regarding outdated gender stereotypes. One participant offered a disturbing example, which was echoed by many of the participants within the focus group:

There was a teacher that I had when I was like in 7th grade, who said something that like, always stuck to me and, and still to this day. She said that like “you know, girls from this town, they don’t really do much but like, get pregnant and like, are stay-at-home moms. And don’t work, and don’t do anything. It’s usually the guys around here that go to school.” And that like, made me so mad that made me want to prove her wrong, and I cannot wait till the day that I could go back to my grammar school and be like, “You said something that at the time I thought it was the worst thing that you could’ve said to me, but it was actually the best thing that anyone could’ve said to me because that, I always had that in the back of my mind and it made me work 10 times harder because how dare you say that women don’t go to college and are just stay at home moms? Like what day are you living in? It’s not 1930. That is so not true anymore.” So I feel like it played a really big role. I just felt like, my whole life being a woman, I just had to prove everyone wrong...Don’t you doubt me because I’m female.

On the other hand, 7 of the 13 participants described the positive thoughts that they had regarding women’s potentials. These women described how females were capable of doing absolutely anything, and some expressed that women are much better prepared to be successful, compared to men. There was some overlap between these two groups; some women had been challenged by others because of their gender but had managed to develop a positive female identity regardless, while some women had never been exposed to negative opinions regarding their gender and had always been empowered by others for being female. Furthermore, many women discussed how they hoped to be positive female role models that others could look up to and that hopefully they could eventually break down negative stereotypes regarding their gender and cultural backgrounds. One of the women who saw their gender more positively expressed herself:

I think women, it has been proven that women are generally, I don't wanna say smarter, but something along those senses. I think women are very, more well-rounded, and they have this approach. They just have different approaches than men, they're not in it just for like, money and power. I just think it works better that way cuz they have—almost like a maternal instinct, you know? And you can make the argument, yes or no, that you can run a country like a business, whether it’s true or not. I think a woman can run a lot of things a lot better. Not to be sexist.

Although not all of the participants discussed the importance of gender in their identity, those who did address it wholeheartedly embraced this concept. These women felt empowered by labeling themselves as feminists, and they not only worked towards having more equality for themselves, but they also set out to make a positive impact on the world for all women. During the focus group, all of the women discussed how they have seen progress in the ways

in which women are viewed and treated, but there is still a long way to go. Despite being acutely aware of the limitations and biases that females have to face in the world, these women were empowered and resilient and were ready to embrace their gender and make positive changes in the world.

### **The Theory of Life Plan Development**

Thirteen women were interviewed regarding the process of understanding and developing the life plans that they hoped to pursue following college graduation. From the outside, these women looked unique in every fashion. They came from different walks of life, attended different types of colleges, and shared extremely different stories with the researcher. However, even though their stories and actual life plans were vastly different, the underlying meaning behind these themes remained the same.

Life plan development for a young adult woman begins long before young adulthood. Some women recalled playing with toys that allowed them to practice the current goals that they were pursuing. Other women recalled joining significant people in their lives at their places of employment and first feeling a sense of love and passion for the field in which they had, years later, decided to dedicate their lives to. The most common recollection from early childhood was the influence and impact that had been placed upon them by significant others in their lives. These stories varied from hugely positive, in which the women had people who truly believed in their goals and supported that development throughout their lives, to hugely negative, in which the women had people tell them that they could never achieve what they had hoped for. Regardless of the positive or negative impact, these women shared their stories that changed their lives forever. Whether they had embarked upon a plan to prove to someone that they were capable of accomplishing great things, or whether they had wanted to live up to the high expectations set for them, these women basked in their social relationships and used them as fuel for great achievements in life.

Life plan development continued to emerge, perhaps at a more rapid pace, once these women had begun their college careers. Again, these women shared stories of influential people and experiences that had helped to solidify life plans that were merely abstract during earlier stages of development. Perhaps even more important than people during this stage of development, was the opportunity for experiences. Many women felt a newfound passion for their life plans, as they were able to experience them first-hand for the first time.

Despite the positive growth and development that occurred during college for many young adult women, this growth was only possible for some women at the end of great struggle and hardship. Nearly all of the women had doubted their life plans at one point and had either changed their life plans in some way or had experienced some setback before they could fully commit to the plan that they had dreamed of all along. What sets these women apart; however, is that they were all able to spin negative experiences into positive learning opportunities. These women shared tales of hardship and heartache, but the saddest stories were often the ones that led to the most positive outcomes. These women had been victims of crime, had been stuck in damaging relationships, had experienced financial hardships, and had overcome depression, but they each reported that they would never have been able to become the person that they were, with the drive for the goals that they now possessed, had they not experienced those dark hours.

The stories of what these women had already overcome were inspirational, but the plans for what they still hoped to pursue were even more phenomenal. The life plans that these women hoped to pursue following college graduation diverged here a bit, but all of the women shared the same drive and confidence that they would achieve whatever goal it was that they had set out for themselves. Many women had focused mainly upon the career goals that they

hoped to pursue following college graduation. These women hoped for entry-level jobs, graduate studies, and other experiences after college that could be used to help build them to become even better candidates for future opportunities. Nearly every woman focused upon some “ultimate goal”: a career, a degree, or a moment when they would know that they had truly achieved all they had set out to accomplish. They were willing to make whatever sacrifice necessary to achieve that goal; they were patient, determined, and ready to work for what they really wanted in life.

These women also talked about other life plans that they hoped to achieve after graduation outside of their career endeavors. These women dreamed of getting married and starting families; however, many would only work towards these goals if they felt they had accomplished their career and educational goals first. The women had so many different plans among them: to run a marathon, to move to a warmer climate, to buy a house, to be able to afford nice vacations, but the underlying theme that existed among each of these women was their dedication. They were confident in themselves, they were willing to work hard, and they were ready to achieve their goals at some point in the future.

Finally, the one thing that was constant throughout each of these steps in the developmental process was the influence of gender. The women in this study viewed themselves as women first, and that meant that they had individual experiences that made them unique with a union to a larger collective or sisterhood. These women felt empowered by their genders; they believed that women were capable of achieving anything they set their minds to, but these women also felt limited and held back by their genders; they had experienced prejudice and biases throughout all stages of their lives. However, gender was simply another aspect of the greater identities of these women; they used any setbacks to empower themselves and make themselves stronger.

A focus group participant shared how life plans become stronger when there are more reasons behind your desire to pursue them. These 13 women captured this sentiment. They were able to identify so many people, things, and experiences that helped push them in the direction of their life plans, but they were also able to tap into a powerful inner strength that could turn both positive and negative situations into that extra push they sometimes needed to achieve their goals. These women were strong. These women overcame adversity. These women were sure of their life plans. It is evident that they have what it takes to achieve every one of their life plans once they graduate from college. After all, these women have found ways to achieve every one of their life plans leading up to and during their college years.

## Discussion

As previously discussed, the purpose of this research study was to answer the research question, *how do young women describe the process of understanding their life plans after college?* This research question was answered using Charmaz’s (2006) application of grounded theory. Before this study was conducted, there was no previous research that directly explored the development and understanding of life plans in young adult women. Previous research studies have explored life plan development during college (Piotrowski & Hemasinha, 2001; Rognstad & Aasland, 2007; Stiwne & Jungert, 2010); however, these researchers have failed to explore the role of gender within this developmental process, despite the evidence suggesting that gender is critical in many aspects of one’s life and identity (Farner & Brown, 2008; Park, Young, Troisi, & Pinkus, 2011; Reid, 2002). Thus, the current study was developed to explore this important developmental stage in life, with special consideration given to whether the young adult women considered their gender to be an influential factor in that life plan development.

During the interviews, I found myself surprised by the different reflections that the women had in regards to their gender. Women ranged from acknowledging how strongly they were influenced by their gender, through stereotypes, biases, and hardships that they had to overcome, to women who rejected the idea that their gender identities had any influence on them whatsoever, despite describing gender stereotypical goals for their future lives. I would be interested in exploring what factors are important to developing one's awareness of stereotypes and biases; for example, whether attending a single-sex versus coeducational environment has any impact on one's view of his/her own gender and its influences.

What stood out the most in each of the interviews was how so many women described negative, not positive, experiences which had impacted their lives and their goals for the future. The majority of the women here identified some of the worst hardships imaginable, from sexual assault to parental conflict, as being the most important factors in helping them to set ambitious goals for themselves and to have developed the confidence in themselves to be able to work towards achieving those goals. I am extremely interested and surprised by this finding, since when I set out to conduct this research, I reflected upon my own positive life experiences and encouraging role models as being the most salient factors in helping to support my dreams of working towards my own personal goals. Sarkar, Flecher, and Brown (2015) support the experiences of my participants, when they found that Olympic athletes became most motivated following some type of hardship or adversity. I would love to conduct future research studies that begin to explore negative versus positive motivators, as well as the differences between the life plan development process of high-achieving, ambitious students, compared to those who are struggling with their life plan development or feel unsure or even reject the idea of working towards future life plans. Even though I worked towards gathering a diverse sample, the level of achievement and ambition that was observed in these participants turned out to be rather homogenous, and I suspect that asking for a volunteer sample in a research study that explicitly advertised that it was studying life plan development may have encouraged a higher achieving group of students than average.

There is some fascinating research that has already explored this topic a bit from a peripheral standpoint. One research study found that teaching students methods for self-affirmation can lead to higher achievement (Sherman et al., 2013), while Xiaodong, Ahn, Jondou, Fu-Fen Anny, and Luna-Lucero (2016) have found that teaching students about the adversity that famous scientists have had to endure can encourage the students to remain motivated during their own science education. I would be extremely interested in looking at how hardships can transform into motivators and what factors are important in serving as a buffer when those hardships do inevitably exist. One research study was able to identify personality factors, environmental factors, and familial social support to explain why a sample of below-average Latino students eventually began performing at above-average levels (Hassinger & Plourde, 2005). Furthermore, Affleck and Tennen (1996) identified optimism and hope as being factors that could help individuals interpret their personal struggles as fuel for motivation. These are all very important factors that need to be explored in more depth, but especially in regards to female life plan development, growth, and resilience.

## **Limitations**

A major limitation within this research study was that it only studied 13 young adult women from one Northeast state, in hopes of drawing conclusions about life plan development in general among young adult women. The women who participated in the study volunteered and sought out to meet with someone to discuss their life plan development. It is likely that the type of person who would volunteer for such a research study would have spent some time thinking about life plan development and would potentially be a more proactive and

accomplished student than average. Furthermore, the results may have been different in a different part of the country and almost certainly would have been different in a different part of the world.

The researcher decided to study life plan development in women who were approaching college graduation; however, the results suggest that this is a lifelong process. It is possible that different results would have been found if this process was studied at any other period of one's life. The women in this study had already experienced some level of their life plan exploration, in that they had already chosen a college, picked which classes to take, and engaged in the internship and work experiences described. This research study did not attempt to look at young girls before they had begun to seek out any of their life plans nor did it look at women who had already pursued the majority of their life plans and ask them to look back upon that developmental process.

## **Implications**

Several recommendations can be made for future research. Nearly all of the participants discussed things that had happened early in their lives, which helped them to initially develop the life plans that they were currently in the process of pursuing. Future research should explore people and events that are said to be influential, as they are actually occurring during childhood.

In addition, the results of this study indicated that career development occurs incrementally, with most participants focusing upon some ultimate career goal that they would eventually pursue, while simultaneously thinking about balancing many different plans within one's life. However, these results were limited in that they rely upon imagining the future, rather than studying what is actually occurring for the participants. Future research should either follow these women longitudinally to see how the life plans eventually play out, or should at least look at people who are in the actual process of pursuing and living out their life plans, to explore what this experience is like for women.

Finally, future research should examine life plan development in both men and women to compare the role of gender within each of these groups. The participants in the current study indicated that gender was influential in helping them to develop their life plans; however, to better understand the way in which gender plays out within life plan development, it is necessary to compare this developmental process for both genders.

The results of the current study provided implications to utilize in helping young adult women to develop and pursue their life plans. Many participants discussed the importance of various people and experiences during college that helped them to develop their life plans, most often being helped by internships and other hands-on experiences related to their life plans. Despite the importance of this, the participants stated that there were simply not enough opportunities available to them, particularly during the early years of college. As such, it is recommended that an increasing number of internship opportunities be made available for young adult women in college. It is believed that making internships available to students during the beginning of college would allow them to try out more life plans and be sure that they are pursuing plans that will truly make them happy in the future. In addition, it is important to embrace the idea that many participants discussed important role models, especially females, whom they were able to look up to for motivation in pursuing their life plans. It is necessary for more mentors to be made available to college students as they are embarking on this important transitory period of life, and it is likely that additional mentors would be made available through increased internship opportunities. Additionally, it would be extremely useful for colleges to develop mentoring programs, in which young adult women could be matched with women in their desired career paths to learn more about their future careers and

explore any other information that could provide guidance in the development of one's life plans.

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