ABSTRACT: Because of cultural, historical and other social structural factors, men and women with the same chronological age have had quite different career trajectories. This paper examines how the different career-paths of men and women academics create differences in their images of aging, self and work. In-depth interviews (N = 47) were conducted with a sample of male and female professors, currently between fifty and sixty years of age. Male respondents nearly uniformly followed continuous, linear careers while the women’s careers were, with equal uniformity, discontinuous. Data suggest that this difference in career routes fashions different “gender timeclocks,” i.e., different experiences of aging.

Career is both a conceptual tool used by social scientists as well as a concept we all use to interpret where we are in the life course and how the things happening to us make or do not make sense. In his voluminous and influential writings on work, Everett Hughes (1958:63) showed the value of conceptualizing career as “the moving perspective in which the person sees his life as a whole and interprets the meanings of his various attitudes, actions, and the things which happen to him.” Hughes’ definition directs attention to the subjective aspects of the career process. Based on communications with others, persons attach subjective and evaluative meaning to the typical sequence of movements constituting the career patterns which they pursue.

This analysis of careers proceeds from the symbolic interactionist premise that chronological age has no intrinsic meaning (Karp and Yoels, 1982; Neugarten, 1968; Hochschild, 1976). In concert with others, we assign meanings, often quite arbitrary, to age. Such a view implies that there are many aging processes. To comprehend the complexities of growing older, we must appreciate the subjective responses persons make to their own aging. Persons occupying different locations in society define and interpret their chronological age differently. In this paper, I will show how the structural circumstances of
their respective career paths and current work worlds lead men and women to have different interpretations of what it means to be in the age fifties decade.

Women academics now in their fifties hold special interest because they are pioneers. Currently, women comprise only seventeen percent of academics in the United States (U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, 1979) and female professors in their fifties represent a small portion of these academic women. When they entered graduate school, typically in the mid 1960s, they were the oldest of their student colleagues. Unlike the vast majority of women their age, they had decided to become professionals even though this meant a foreshortened career, a career that sometimes did not begin until they were in their early fifties.

To be a pioneer often means to be deviant. Such is the case with these women academics. First, they are women in a predominantly male world. They share this marginal status with all women who are minorities within professional occupations. Second, many are "age deviant." Careers are things normally begun at an early age. Troll and Turner (1978:16) put it this way:

Mid-life women are limited by what is perceived to be appropriate behavior for their age and sex: they are expected to be in step with their "social clocks." To be off time is to be "age deviant." For a forty-five year old woman to start working on a graduate degree is considered to be "age deviant."

Sample and Method

Between March 1982 and September 1983, the author conducted forty-seven in-depth interviews with male (n=23) and female (n=24) academics from a number of Boston-area colleges. Although this paper focuses on the lives and careers of the women respondents, the logic of the "constant comparative method" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) requires that we draw on the experiences of the men in order to place the women's lives in proper perspective. The sample is not a statistically representative one, but is a "theoretical" sample, the result of a "snowball" process. After each interview, the respondent was asked for additional names of persons "of whom it would be useful for me to interview". The process generated a list of more than one hundred names. For these names, I chose a compilation of individuals which would reflect variation by gender, academic discipline, and, to a lesser degree, type of institution. Table I illustrates this variation in interviewees. Only three requests for interviews have been turned down. My interviewees explained their willingness to cooperate in