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# A Conception of Adult Development

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**ABSTRACT:** *Adult development is becoming an important field of study for psychology and other disciplines. Little has been done, however, to conceptualize the nature of adult development and to define the major issues in this field. The author summarizes his own formulations of life course, life cycle, life structure, and the adult development of the life structure in early and middle adulthood. He then discusses six major issues that must be dealt with by every structural approach to adult development: What are the alternative ways of defining a structural stage or period? What relative emphasis is given to the structures as compared to the transitional periods? How can we make best use of the distinction between hierarchical levels and seasons of development? Are there age-linked developmental periods in adulthood? What are the relative merits and limitations of various research methods? How can we bring together the developmental perspective and the socialization perspective?*

The study of adult development is, one might say, in its infancy. It has been taken seriously in the human sciences for only the past 30 years or so, largely under the impact of Erikson's (1950, 1958, 1969) germinal writings. Erikson's most obvious contribution was his theory of stages in ego development. What is less obvious is that his view of development is deeply grounded in his conceptions of the life cycle and the life course. Each ego stage has its primacy at a particular age level or segment of the life cycle, from infancy to old age. The sequence of age segments and ego stages thus provides a representation of the life cycle as a whole; the meaning of a stage is defined in part by its place in the total sequence. In addition, his developmental concepts arose out of his primary concern with the individual life course: the process of living, the idea of life history rather than case history, the use of biography rather than therapy or testing as his chief research method. Without abandoning the distinction between self (psyche, personality, inner world) and external world (society, culture, institutions, history), he gave first consideration to the life course—the engagement of self with world.

Although a good deal has been learned since the 1950s about specific features of adult life, very little has been done to advance the general theory of adult development. At the same time, various fields of psychology (such as child development, gerontology, personality, social, clinical, and counseling psychology), as well as the social sciences and humanities, are becoming more aware that they need—and lack—an adult development perspective. Adult development is, in short, a significant

problem for psychology as a discipline and an important link between psychology and other disciplines, including sociology, biology, and history.

I have two primary aims here. First, I will present my conception of adulthood and of a developmental process within it. My intention is to explicate a theoretical position, not to prove it nor to argue for its superiority over others. The theory originated in my initial study of men's lives (Levinson, 1977, 1978). It has evolved over the last few years, particularly through my current research on women's lives (Levinson, in press). It is supported by a number of other studies (e.g., Gooden, 1980; Holt, 1980; Kellerman, 1975; Levinson, 1984; Stewart, 1976), but a great deal must yet be done to test and modify it. The theory includes the following elements: (a) The concepts of *life course* and *life cycle*, which provide an essential framework for the field of adult development; within this framework, studies of one process or age level can be connected to others, but without it, we have a miscellany of findings and no integrated domain of inquiry; (b) the concept of the *individual life structure*, which includes many aspects of personality and of the external world but is not identical with any of these and evolves in its own distinctive way; and (c) a *conception of adult development*—the evolution of the life structure in early and middle adulthood. Life structure development is different from, and should not be confused with, the development of personality, social roles, or other commonly studied processes.

Second, I will discuss adult development as a field of study. I will consider six major issues that help to define what the field is about and what work must be done to establish it more securely. The list is not complete, but it provides a useful starting point. Reference will be made to the work of others, but the main goal is to clarify my own position. Let it be clear that my aim is not to give a comprehensive review of the work in this field nor to seek consensus among the disparate approaches. I hope that others will be stimulated to present contrasting views.

## The Life Course

*Life course* is one of the most important yet least examined terms in the human sciences. It is a descriptive term, not a high-level abstraction, and it refers to the concrete character of a life in its evolution from beginning to end. Both words in this term require careful attention.

The word *course* indicates sequence, temporal flow, the need to study a life as it unfolds over the years. To study the course of a life, one must take account of stability and change, continuity and discontinuity, orderly progression as well as stasis and chaotic fluctuation. It is

not enough to focus solely on a single moment; nor is it enough to study a series of three or four moments widely separated in time, as is ordinarily done in longitudinal research. It is necessary, in Robert White's (1952) felicitous phrase, to examine "lives in progress" and to follow the temporal sequence in detail over a span of years.

The word *life* is also of crucial importance. Research on the life course must include all aspects of living: inner wishes and fantasies; love relationships; participation in family, work, and other social systems; bodily changes; good times and bad—everything that has significance in a life. To study the life course, it is necessary first to look at a life in all its complexity at a given time, to include all its components and their interweaving into a partially integrated pattern. Second, one must delineate the evolution of this pattern over time.

The study of the life course has presented almost insuperable problems to the human sciences as they are now constituted. Each discipline has claimed as its special domain one aspect of life, such as personality, social role, or biological functioning, and has neglected the others. Every discipline has split the life course into disparate segments, such as childhood or old age. Research has been done from such diverse theoretical perspectives as biological aging, moral development, career development, adult socialization, enculturation, and adaptation to loss or stress, with minimal recognition of their interconnections. The resulting fragmentation is so great that no discipline or viewpoint conveys the sense of an individual life and its temporal course.

The recognition is slowly dawning that the many specialties and theoretical approaches are not isolated entities but aspects of a single field: the study of the individual life course. During the next decade, this study will emerge as a new multidisciplinary field in the human sciences, linking the various disciplines. With the formation of a more comprehensive, systematic conception of the life course, the parts will become less isolated and each part will enrich the others.

## The Life Cycle

The idea of the life cycle goes beyond that of the life course. In its origin this idea is metaphorical, not descriptive or conceptual. It is useful to keep the primary imagery while moving toward more precise conceptualization and study. The imagery of "cycle" suggests that there is an underlying order in the human life course; although each individual life is unique, everyone goes through the same basic sequence. The course of a life is not a simple, continuous process. There are qualitatively different phases or seasons. The metaphor of seasons appears in many contexts. There are seasons in the year. Spring is a time of blossoming, and poets allude to youth

as the springtime of the life cycle. Summer is the season of greatest passion and ripeness. An elderly ruler is "the lion in winter." There are seasons within a single day—dawn, noon, twilight, the full dark of night—each having its counterpart in the life cycle. There are seasons in love, war, politics, artistic creation, and illness.

The imagery of the life cycle thus suggests that the life course evolves through a sequence of definable forms. A season is a major segment of the total cycle. Change goes on within each season, and a transition is required for the shift from one to the next. Every season has its own time, although it is part of and colored by the whole. No season is better or more important than any other. Each has its necessary place and contributes its special character to the whole.

What are the major seasons in the life cycle? Neither popular culture nor the human sciences provide a clear answer to this question. The modern world has no established conception—scientific, philosophical, religious, or literary—of the life cycle as a whole and of its component phases. There is no standard language that demarcates and identifies several gross segments of the life cycle. The predominant view, rarely stated explicitly, divides it into three parts: (a) an initial segment of about 20 years, including childhood and adolescence (preadulthood); (b) a final segment starting at around 65 (old age); and (c) between these segments, an amorphous time vaguely known as adulthood.

A good deal is known about the preadult years, which for a century have been the main province of the field of human development. The developmental perspective has been of crucial importance here. The idea is now accepted that in the first 20 years or so all human beings go through an underlying sequence of periods—prenatal, infancy, early childhood, middle childhood, pubescence, and adolescence. Although all children go through common developmental periods, they grow in infinitely varied ways as a result of differences in biological, psychological, and social conditions. In its concrete form, each individual life course is unique. The study of preadult development seeks to determine the universal order and the general developmental principles that govern the process by which human lives become increasingly individualized.

Historically, the great figures in the study of child development, such as Freud and Piaget, have assumed that development is largely completed at the end of adolescence. Given these assumptions, they had no basis for concerning themselves with the possibilities of adult development or with the nature of the life cycle as a whole. An impetus to change came in the 1950s when geriatrics and gerontology were established as fields of human service and research. Unfortunately, gerontology has not gone far in developing a conception of the life cycle. One reason, perhaps, is that it skipped from childhood to old age without examining the intervening adult years. Present understanding of old age will be enhanced when more is known about adulthood; thus, old age can be connected more organically to the earlier seasons.

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There is now very little theory, research, or cultural wisdom about adulthood as a season (or seasons) of the life cycle. We have no popular language to describe a series of age levels after adolescence. Words such as *youth*, *maturity*, and *middle age* are ambiguous in their age linkages and meanings. The ambiguity of language stems from the lack of any cultural definition of adulthood and how people's lives evolve within it. In the human sciences, too, we have no adequate conception of the nature of adulthood. We have a detailed picture of many trees but no view of the forest and no map to guide our journey through it.

I turn now to my own view of the life cycle. It derives from my research and draws upon the work of earlier investigators such as Erikson (1950, 1969), Jung, von Franz, Henderson, Jacobi, and Jaffe (1964), Neugarten (1968), Ortega y Gasset (1958), and van Gennep (1960). (For a fuller review, see Levinson & Gooden, 1985.)

### **Eras: The Macrostructure of the Life Cycle**

I conceive of the life cycle as a sequence of *eras*. Each era has its own biopsychosocial character, and each makes its distinctive contribution to the whole. There are major changes in the nature of our lives from one era to the next, and lesser, though still crucially important, changes within eras. They are partially overlapping: A new era begins as the previous one is approaching its end. A *cross-era transition*, which generally lasts about five years, terminates the outgoing era and initiates the next. The eras and the cross-era transitional periods form the macrostructure of the life cycle, providing an underlying order in the flow of all human lives yet permitting exquisite variations in the individual life course.

Each era and developmental period begins and ends at a well-defined modal age, with a range of about two years above and below this average. The idea of age-linked phases in adult life goes against conventional wisdom. Nevertheless, these age findings have been consistently obtained in the initial research and in subsequent studies. The idea of age-linked eras and periods now has the status of an empirically grounded hypothesis that needs further testing in various cultures.

The first era, *Preadulthood*, extends from conception to roughly age 22. During these "formative years" the individual grows from highly dependent, undifferentiated infancy through childhood and adolescence to the beginnings of a more independent, responsible adult life. It is the era of most rapid biopsychosocial growth. The first few years of life provide a transition into childhood. During this time, the neonate becomes biologically and psychologically separate from the mother and establishes the initial distinction between the "me" and the "not me"—the first step in a continuing process of individuation.

The years from about 17 to 22 constitute the *Early Adult Transition*, a developmental period in which preadulthood draws to a close and the era of early adulthood gets underway. It is thus part of both eras, and not fully a part of either. A new step in individuation is taken as the budding adult modifies her or his relationships

with family and other components of the preadult world and begins to form a place as an adult in the adult world. From a childhood-centered perspective, one can say that development is now largely completed and the child has gained maturity as an adult. The field of developmental (i.e., child) psychology has traditionally taken this view. Taking the perspective of the life cycle as a whole, however, we recognize that the developmental attainments of the first era provide only a base, a starting point from which to begin the next. The Early Adult Transition represents, so to speak, both the full maturity of preadulthood and the infancy of a new era. One is at best off to a shaky start, and new kinds of development are required in the next era.

The second era, *early adulthood*, lasts from about age 17 to 45 and begins with the Early Adult Transition. It is the adult era of greatest energy and abundance and of greatest contradiction and stress. Biologically, the 20s and 30s are the peak years of the life cycle. In social and psychological terms, early adulthood is the season for forming and pursuing youthful aspirations, establishing a niche in society, raising a family, and as the era ends, reaching a more "senior" position in the adult world. This can be a time of rich satisfaction in terms of love, sexuality, family life, occupational advancement, creativity, and realization of major life goals. But there can also be crushing stresses. Most of us simultaneously undertake the burdens of parenthood and of forming an occupation. We incur heavy financial obligations when our earning power is still relatively low. We must make crucially important choices regarding marriage, family, work, and life-style before we have the maturity or life experience to choose wisely. Early adulthood is the era in which we are most buffeted by our own passions and ambitions from within and by the demands of family, community, and society from without. Under reasonably favorable conditions, the rewards of living in this era are enormous, but the costs often equal or even exceed the benefits.

The *Midlife Transition*, from roughly age 40 to 45, brings about the termination of early adulthood and the start of middle adulthood. The distinction between these two eras, and the concept of Midlife Transition as a developmental period that separates and connects them, are among the most controversial aspects of this schema. The research indicates, however, that the character of living always changes appreciably between early and middle adulthood (Holt, 1980; Gooden, 1980; Levinson, 1978, 1984, in press). Similar observations, based on different methods and evidence, are given in the work of Jung, Ortega, Erikson and others, noted earlier. The process of change begins in the Midlife Transition (though the forms and degree of change vary enormously) and continues throughout the era. One developmental task of this transition is to begin a new step in individuation. To the extent that this occurs, we can become more compassionate, more reflective and judicious, less tyrannized by inner conflicts and external demands, and more genuinely loving of ourselves and others. Without it, our lives become increasingly trivial or stagnant.

The third era, *middle adulthood*, lasts from about age 40 to 65. During this era our biological capacities are below those of early adulthood but are normally still sufficient for an energetic, personally satisfying and socially valuable life. Unless our lives are hampered in some special way, most of us during our 40s and 50s become "senior members" in our own particular worlds, however grand or modest they may be. We are responsible not only for our own work and perhaps the work of others, but also for the development of the current generation of young adults who will soon enter the dominant generation.

The next era, *late adulthood*, starts at about age 60. The *Late Adult Transition*, from 60 to 65, links middle and late adulthood and is part of both. I will not discuss late adulthood here. My speculations regarding this era (and a subsequent one, late late adulthood) are given in Levinson (1978).

### The Life Structure and Its Development in Adulthood

My approach to adult development grows out of, and is shaped by, the foregoing views regarding the life course and the life cycle. I am primarily interested in apprehending the nature of a person's life at a particular time and the course of that life over the years. Personality attributes, social roles, and biological characteristics are aspects of a life; they should be regarded as aspects and placed within the context of the life.

The key concept to emerge from my research is the *life structure*: the underlying pattern or design of a person's life at a given time. It is the pillar of my conception of adult development. When I speak of periods in adult development, I am referring to periods in the evolution of the life structure. I will first introduce the concept of life structure and then describe my theory and findings about its evolution in adulthood.

The meaning of this term can be clarified by a comparison of life structure and personality structure. A theory of personality structure is a way of conceptualizing answers to a concrete question: "What kind of person am I?" Different theories offer numerous ways of thinking about this question and of characterizing oneself or others; for example, in terms of traits, skills, wishes, conflicts, defenses, or values.

A theory of life structure is a way of conceptualizing answers to a different question: "What is my life like now?" As we begin reflecting on this question, many others come to mind. What are the most important parts of my life, and how are they interrelated? Where do I invest most of my time and energy? Are there some relationships—to spouse, lover, family, occupation, religion, leisure, or whatever—that I would like to make more satisfying or meaningful? Are there some things not in my life that I would like to include? Are there interests and relationships, which now occupy a minor place, that I would like to make more central?

In pondering these questions, we begin to identify those aspects of the external world that have the greatest

significance to us. We characterize our relationship with each of them and examine the interweaving of the various relationships. We find that our relationships are imperfectly integrated within a single pattern or structure.

The primary components of a life structure are the person's *relationships* with various others in the external world. The other may be a person, a group, institution or culture, or a particular object or place. A significant relationship involves an investment of self (desires, values, commitment, energy, skill), a reciprocal investment by the other person or entity, and one or more social contexts that contain the relationship, shaping it and becoming part of it. Every relationship shows both stability and change as it evolves over time, and it has different functions in the person's life as the life structure itself changes.

An individual may have significant relationships with many kinds of others. A significant other might be an actual person in the individual's current life. We need to study interpersonal relationships between friends, lovers, and spouses; between parents and their adult offspring at different ages; between bosses and subordinates, teachers and students, and mentors and protégés. A significant other might be a person from the past (e.g., Ezra Pound's vital relationship with the figure of Dante) or a symbolic or imagined figure from religion, myth, fiction, or private fantasy. The other might not be an individual but might be a collective entity such as a group, institution, or social movement; nature as a whole, or a part of nature such as the ocean, mountains, wildlife, whales in general, or *Moby Dick* in particular; or an object or place such as a farm, a city or country, "a room of one's own," or a book or painting.

The concept of life structure requires us to examine the nature and patterning of an adult's relationships with all significant others and the evolution of these relationships over the years. These relationships are the stuff our lives are made of. They give shape and substance to the life course. They are the vehicle by which we live out—or bury—various aspects of our selves and by which we participate, for better or worse, in the world around us. Students of the life course seek to determine the character of each relationship, its place within the person's evolving life, and the meaning of this life for the person and his or her world.

At any given time, a life structure may have many and diverse components. We found, however, that only one or two components—rarely as many as three—occupy a central place in the structure. Most often, marriage—family and occupation are the central components of a person's life, although wide variations occur in their relative weight and in the importance of other components. The central components are those that have the greatest significance for the self and the evolving life course. They receive the largest share of the individual's time and energy, and they strongly influence the character of the other components. The peripheral components are easier to change or detach; they involve less investment of self and can be modified with less effect on the fabric of the person's life.

In terms of open systems theory, life structure forms a boundary between personality structure and social structure and governs the transactions between them. A boundary structure is part of the two adjacent systems it connects, yet is partially separate or autonomous. It can be understood only if we see it as a link between them. The life structure mediates the relationship between the individual and the environment. It is in part the cause, the vehicle, and the effect of that relationship. The life structure grows out of the engagement of the self and the world. Its intrinsic ingredients are aspects of the self and aspects of the world, and its evolution is shaped by factors in the self and in the world. It requires us to think conjointly about the self and the world rather than making one primary and the other secondary or derivative. A theory of life structure must draw equally upon psychology and the social sciences.

### ***Developmental Periods in Early and Middle Adulthood***

In tracing the evolution of the life structure in the lives of men and women, I have found an invariant basic pattern (with infinite manifest variations): The life structure develops through a relatively orderly sequence of age-linked periods during the adult years. I want to emphasize that this is a finding, not an a priori hypothesis. It was as surprising to me as to others that the life structure should show such regularity in its adult development, given the absence of similar regularity in ego development, moral development, career development, and other specific aspects of the life.

The sequence consists of an alternating series of *structure-building* and *structure-changing* (transitional) periods. Our primary task in a structure-building period is to form a life structure and enhance our life within it: We must make certain key choices, form a structure around them, and pursue our values and goals within this structure. Even when we succeed in creating a structure, life is not necessarily tranquil. The task of building a structure is often stressful indeed, and we may discover that it is not as satisfactory as we had hoped. A structure-building period ordinarily lasts 5 to 7 years, 10 at the most. Then the life structure that has formed the basis for stability comes into question and must be modified.

A *transitional* period terminates the existing life structure and creates the possibility for a new one. The primary tasks of every transitional period are to reappraise the existing structure, to explore possibilities for change in the self and the world, and to move toward commitment to the crucial choices that form the basis for a new life structure in the ensuing period. Transitional periods ordinarily last about five years. Almost half our adult lives is spent in developmental transitions. No life structure is permanent—periodic change is given in the nature of our existence.

As a transition comes to an end, one starts making crucial choices, giving them meaning and commitment, and building a life structure around them. The choices are, in a sense, the major product of the transition. When all the efforts of the transition are done—the struggles to

improve work or marriage, to explore alternative possibilities of living, to come more to terms with the self—choices must be made and bets must be placed. One must decide “This I will settle for,” and start creating a life structure that will serve as a vehicle for the next step in the journey.

Within early and middle adulthood, the developmental periods unfold as follows (see Figure 1). We have found that each period begins and ends at a well-defined average age; there is a variation of plus or minus two years around the mean. (For a discussion of the age-linkages, see Issue 4 below.)

1. The *Early Adult Transition*, from age 17 to 22, is a developmental bridge between preadulthood and early adulthood.

2. The *Entry Life Structure for Early Adulthood* (22 to 28) is the time for building and maintaining an initial mode of adult living.

3. The *Age 30 Transition* (28 to 33) is an opportunity to reappraise and modify the entry structure and to create the basis for the next life structure.

4. The *Culminating Life Structure for Early Adulthood* (33 to 40) is the vehicle for completing this era and realizing our youthful aspirations.

5. The *Midlife Transition* (40 to 45) is another of the great cross-era shifts, serving both to terminate early adulthood and to initiate middle adulthood.

6. The *Entry Life Structure for Middle Adulthood* (45 to 50), like its counterpart above, provides an initial basis for life in a new era.

7. The *Age 50 Transition* (50 to 55) offers a mid-era opportunity for modifying and perhaps improving the entry life structure.

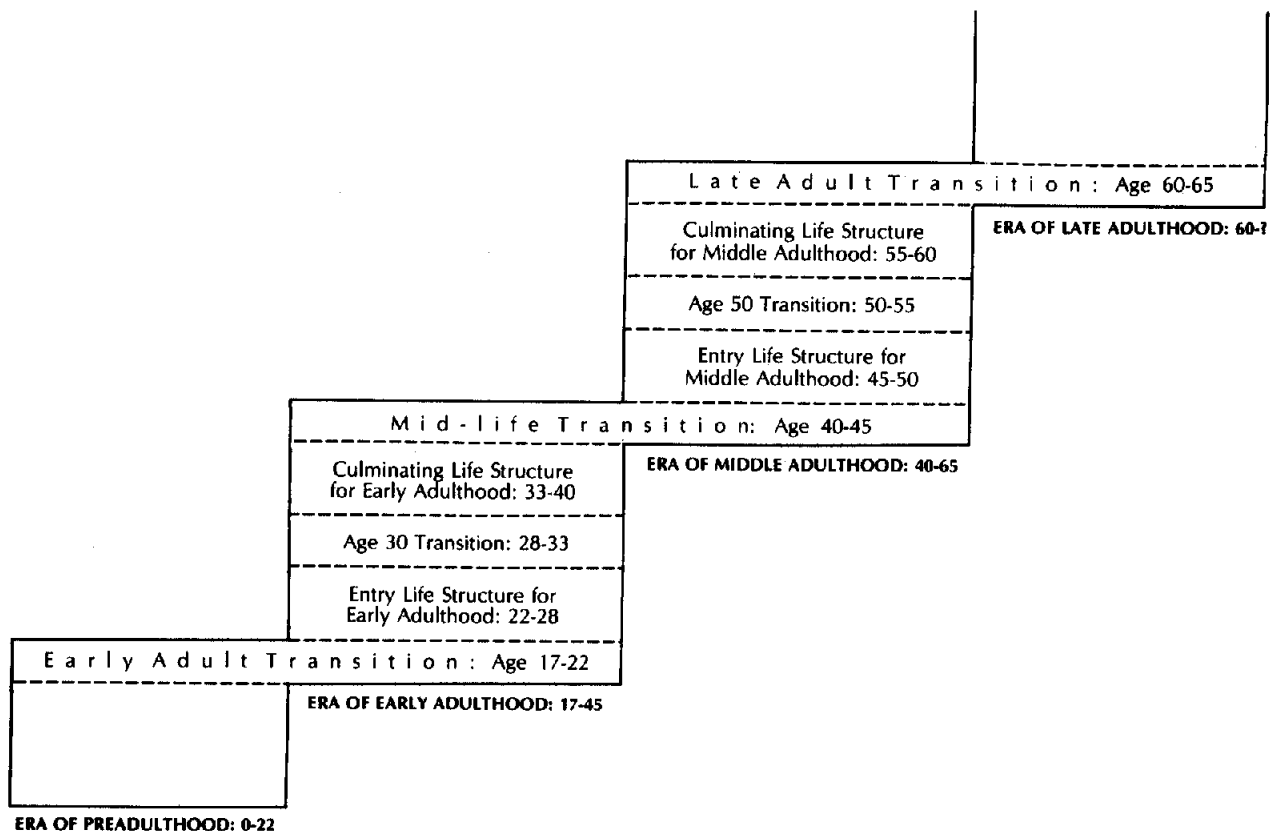
8. The *Culminating Life Structure for Middle Adulthood* (55 to 60) is the framework in which we conclude this era.

9. The *Late Adult Transition* (60 to 65) is a boundary period between middle and late adulthood, separating and linking the two eras.

The first three periods of early adulthood, from roughly 17 to 33, constitute its “novice phase.” They provide an opportunity to move beyond adolescence, to build a provisional but necessarily flawed entry life structure, and to learn the limitations of that structure. The two final periods, from 33 to 45, form the “culminating phase,” which brings to fruition the efforts of this era.

A similar sequence exists in middle adulthood. It, too, begins with a novice phase of three periods, from 40 to 55. The Midlife Transition is both an ending and a beginning. In our early 40s we are in the full maturity of early adulthood and are completing its final chapter; we are also in the infancy of middle adulthood, just beginning to learn about its promise and its dangers. We remain novices in every era until we have had a chance to try out an entry life structure and then to question and modify it in the mid-era transition. Only in the period of the Culminating Life Structure, and the cross-era transition that follows, do we reach the conclusion of that season and begin the shift to the next. During the novice phase

**Figure 1**  
**Developmental Periods in the Eras of Early and Middle Adulthood**



Note. This is an expanded adaptation of an earlier version that appeared in *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (p. 57) by D. J. Levinson with C. N. Darrow, E. B. Klein, M. H. Levinson, and B. McKee, 1978, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. Copyright 1978 by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. Adapted by permission.

we are, to varying degrees, both excited and terrified by the prospects for living in that era. To varying degrees, likewise, we experience the culminating phase as a time of rich satisfactions and of bitter disappointments, discovering as we so often do that the era ultimately gives us much more and much less than we had envisioned.

This sequence of eras and periods holds for men and women of different cultures, classes, and historical epochs. There are, of course, wide variations in the kinds of life structures people build, the developmental work they do in transitional periods, and the concrete sequence of social roles, events, and personality change. The theory thus provides a general framework of human development within which we can study the profound differences that often exist between classes, genders, and cultures.

### **The Field of Adult Development: Six Major Issues**

Like Pirandello's (1964) play, "Six Characters in Search of an Author," the study of adult development might be titled *Dozens of Fragments in Search of an Animating Source and a Unifying Plot*. The fragments have to do with personality change and development (cognitive,

moral, ego, and the like), occupational career development, marriage and family development, adult socialization, biological development, adaptation to stress, and more. Diverse studies deal with one or another of these topics, but they have no evident connection with each other and no clear place in a larger scheme of things.

It is time we asked more seriously, What do we mean by "adult development"? What are the main tasks confronting us as we attempt to define and establish it as a field of study? I have attempted to pursue these questions by identifying six fundamental issues. These issues are important to anyone entering this field, whatever the approach. In dealing with the issues, one is taking a position, explicit or implicit, regarding the nature of the field. No position, my own included, has as yet been more than minimally conceptualized and subjected to empirical test.

I will discuss each issue primarily from the vantage point of my own theory and research. To exemplify the diversity of approaches, comparisons will be drawn between life structure theory and other, more or less structural theories of development. These include the structural stage theories of Kegan (1982), Kohlberg (1969, 1973), Loewinger (1976), Piaget (1970) and Werner (1940). Also

relevant are personality theories in which the idea of structure is important but is less fully articulated, such as Freud's theory of psychosexual stages, Jung's (Jung, von Franz, Henderson, Jacobi, & Jaffe, 1964) theory of adult individuation, and Erikson's (1950) theory of ego stages.

I will not deal here with other, nonstructural approaches. The most common of these is to look for age-linked changes in specific variables. A set of "age curves" showing regular increase or decrease in certain variables with age may be interpreted as evidence for an underlying developmental sequence. This approach tends to be quantitative and variable centered and to portray development as a continuous, incremental process. The structuralists, in contrast, emphasize patterns rather than single variables, and they look for a series of qualitatively (structurally) different stages rather than continuous, quantitative change. The two approaches are not mutually exclusive but are rarely held conjointly. Coming to a more balanced view of their relative merits is one of the important issues in the field, but it is beyond the scope of this article.

The basic structural model, most clearly articulated by Piaget (1970) and held with variations by many developmental theorists, is that development in any domain involves the evolution of a structure (cognitive, moral, ego, or whatever). The structure develops through a series of stages or periods. Structural theorists generally use the term *stage*. I use the term *period*, partly to avoid the connotation of hierarchical progression so common in the other theories. When I need a very general term referring to a segment (stage, period, era, or whatever) within a developmental sequence, I speak of *phase*. In every structural theory, a phase of building and maintaining a structure is followed by a phase of transformation or transition, which leads to the formation of a qualitatively different structure. One research problem is to identify a sequence of structures. Another is to understand what happens in a transition: the process by which one structure is transformed into another and the factors that shape this process.

It is not my goal here to examine and evaluate the various theories. All of them have been useful, and all reflect the rather primitive stage of psychology as a discipline. All of us are groping our way in the dark, working with imperfect concepts, methods, and evidence. Our chief task at this time is not to make exaggerated claims but to further the growth of an infantile discipline. My intent in identifying the following issues is to provide an analytic basis on which we can compare various approaches, clarify the similarities and differences among them, and consider the state of this field as a whole.

In question form, the six issues may be stated as follows:

1. What are the alternative ways of defining a structural stage or period?
2. What relative emphasis is given to the structures and structure-building periods or stages, as compared to the transitional, structure-changing periods?

3. How can we make best use of the distinction between hierarchical levels and seasons of development?

4. Are there age-linked developmental periods in adulthood?

5. What are the relative merits and limitations of various research methods?

6. How can we bring together the developmental perspective and the socialization perspective?

*Issue 1.* What are the alternative ways of defining a structural stage or period? In the Piagetian tradition, development is a sequence of stages. Each stage is defined in terms of the *structure* that characterizes it. A stage, in this view, *is* a structure; or to put it another way, a stage is a time of building and maintaining a structure. Other developmental theorists, such as Erikson and Freud, defined a stage in terms of its *developmental tasks*. Thus, Erikson identified each ego stage in terms of a polarity (trust vs. mistrust, generativity vs. stagnation or exclusivity). A person is in a stage when that polarity is of central importance in experiencing the self and relating to the world. The primary developmental tasks of a stage are to come to terms with both of its polar opposites and to arrive at some balance or integration of the poles, so that they are no longer entirely antithetical. One positive outcome of the developmental work is the formation of a stage-specific virtue; such as fidelity or caring. However, Erikson did not posit a single optimal ego *structure* as the defining characteristic of an ego stage. Rather, he described various kinds of developmental work on the tasks and various kinds of developmental achievement or impairment that may be the products of the stage.

Like Erikson and Freud, I define each period primarily in terms of its developmental tasks. I am also concerned with the kinds of life structures that are formed in every structure-building period, and in that sense I am perhaps more of a "structuralist" than they. Unlike Piaget, however, I do not identify a particular structure as the predominant or optimal one for a given period; the life structures generated in any period are infinitely varied.

*Issue 2.* What relative emphasis is given to the structures and structure-building periods or stages as compared to the transitional, structure-changing periods? Piaget tended to focus mainly on the sequence of structures. When he spoke of a stage, he meant a structure. His successive stages in cognitive development form a hierarchical series of cognitive levels or structures. Although recognizing that transitions are required for the shift from one structure to another, he did not study the transitional process. He treated the transitions as lacunae or zones of ambiguity between the structures, rather than as stages in their own right, possessing a distinctive character of their own. By and large, Piaget studied the structures rather than the course of development as a continuing evolution.

In contrast, there is now a growing body of research on transitions; for example, periods of change and readjustment following a major life event such as marriage, divorce, the birth of a child, retirement, or the loss of a loved one (Hareven & Adams, 1982; Lowenthal, Thurn-

her, & Chiriboga, 1975). In this work, the focus on the process of change is often so strong that little attention is given to the states (structures) that precede and follow it. A transition is a shift from state A to state B; it is as important to study A and B as it is to study the intervening process of change. Much of the recent theory and research on transitions is centered narrowly on adaptation and change stemming from a single event. This work contributes to our knowledge of events and adaptations, but it is generally not based on a theory of adult development, and it cannot, in itself, generate a theory of adult development (Levinson, 1980).

In studying the development of the life structure, I give equal weight to the structure-building periods and the structure-changing periods. Adults spend almost as much time in the latter as in the former, and both play a crucial part in adult development. To those who focus chiefly on structures, I would emphasize the importance of the transitional, structure-changing periods. And to those who deal primarily with transitions, I would emphasize that a crucially important feature of any transition is the new structure emerging from it. I am equally concerned with the life structures people form at different ages and with the transitions that lead from one life structure to another. I study the sequence by which individuals build, live within, modify, and rebuild the life structure over a span of many years. The standard methods of cross-sectional and longitudinal research are not adequate for this task. We must develop biographical methods that more fully capture the flow of the life course (see Issue 5, below).

*Issue 3.* How can we make best use of the distinction between hierarchical levels and seasons of development? In the Piagetian approach, the successive stages form a hierarchical progression from lower to higher on a developmental scale. Stage 3 is developmentally more advanced than stage 2, and less advanced than stage 4. In other theories, such as Freud's, Erikson's, and mine, the phases have more of the character of seasons. Phase 3 comes after phase 2 and to some extent builds upon it, but phase 3 is not necessarily more "advanced." Each phase has its own intrinsic value, appropriate to its place in the life cycle. The sequence of phases is seen within the framework of the life cycle rather than as a temporal order governed solely by its own internal logic.

This issue is of fundamental importance in the study of adult development. The imagery of a hierarchy of developmental stages is prevalent in the study of childhood, where development takes primarily the form of positive growth. There are generally agreed-upon criteria for judging that one stage represents a "higher level" than another in preadulthood, where we make such dramatic advances in body shape and size, cognitive complexity, adaptive capability, and character formation. The variables that show such rapid growth until age 20 or so tend to stabilize in early adulthood and then gradually decline over the course of middle and late adulthood. At the same time, other psychosocial qualities may develop to greater maturity in middle and late adulthood.

It is essential to keep in mind that development is not synonymous with growth. Rather, it has the twin aspects of "growing up" and "growing down." Perhaps the best term for the former is *adolescing*, which means moving toward adulthood, and for the latter, *senescing*, which means moving toward old age and dissolution. The balance of the two varies from era to era.

In preadulthood we are mostly, though not only, *adolescing*. In late adulthood we are mostly *senescing*, though there is some vitally important *adolescing* to be done as we come to the culmination of the entire life cycle and attempt to give fuller meaning to our own lives, to life and death as ultimate states, and to the condition of being human. At the end of the life cycle, as we engage in the final process of biological *senescing*, we are also engaged in the final work of psychosocial *adolescing*, of growing up to our full adulthood. It is a costly oversimplification to equate childhood with growth and old age with decline.

In early and middle adulthood, *adolescing* and *senescing* coexist in an uneasy balance. Biologically, the forces of *senescence* come to equal and then gradually to exceed those of *adolescence*. Psychosocially, there are possibilities for further growth, but they are by no means assured of realization and they are jeopardized by external constraints as well as inner vulnerabilities. We must deal with this coexistence of growth and decline in our own lives and in our research on adult development. Simple models of growth do not hold in adulthood. It is inappropriate to study adult development with childhood-centered models. Adulthood has its own distinctive character and must be studied in its own right, not merely as an extrapolation from childhood. Erikson warned us of this long ago, and Jung even earlier, but it is a hard lesson to learn.

In studying the development of the life structure, we are not yet wise enough about life to say with precision that one life structure is developmentally higher, or more advanced, than another. We still know very little about the complexities and contradictions of the human life course. When we have learned much more about the kinds of life structures people build at different ages, under different conditions, we may be more able to evaluate, conceptualize, and measure the variations in developmental level among life structures.

It is clearly unrealistic to assume that a person's culminating life structure for early adulthood (in the 30s) will necessarily be more advanced developmentally than the preceding entry life structure (in the 20s). And when we compare the culminating life structure for early adulthood with the entry life structure for middle adulthood, we have to take account of the change in eras, which presents new possibilities and new burdens. The great challenge now, as we go about establishing this field, is to observe and describe the individual life course as richly as possible and to generate concepts that represent its underlying complexity, order, and chaos.

Taking a small step toward evaluation, I have been developing the concept of the *satisfactoriness* of the life

structure (Levinson, 1978). Like many of my concepts, this one has both an external and an internal reference. Externally, it refers to the *viability* of the life structure in the external world—how well it works and what it provides in the way of advantages and disadvantages, successes and failures, rewards and deprivations. Internally, it refers to the *suitability* of the life structure for the self. The key questions here are the following: What aspects of the self can be lived out within this structure? What aspects must be neglected or suppressed? What are the benefits and costs of this structure for the self?

Satisfactoriness of the life structure is not the same as “level of adjustment,” “sense of well being,” or “life satisfaction” as these are usually assessed in questionnaire or brief interview studies. Some people feel quite satisfied with lives that are reasonably comfortable and orderly but in which they have minimal engagement or sense of purpose. Their lives have much viability in the world but little suitability for the self. When the self is so little invested in the life, the life in turn can offer little to the self—though many adults settle for this condition. Likewise, people who are passionately engaged in living, and who invest the self freely in the life structure, may experience much turmoil and suffering. They ask more of life than it can readily provide. The intense engagement in life yields more abundant fruits but exacts a different and in some ways greater toll.

Assessing the satisfactoriness of the life structure is thus a complex matter. We cannot do it by means of a few behavioral criteria or questionnaire items. Moreover, the basis for assessment must be different in different seasons of life. The range of possibilities in building an entry life structure for early adulthood is much different from that in, say, the culminating life structure for middle adulthood.

It is important also to distinguish between the development of the life structure and the development of the self during the adult years. Psychologists who have strong intellectual origins in the study of childhood tend to think of development as growth in various aspects of the self, such as cognition, morality, and ego functions. The study of adulthood, and especially of life structure development, takes us beyond the focus on the self: It requires us to examine the life course in its complexity, to take into account the external world as well as the self, to study the engagement of the self in the world, and to move beyond an encapsulated view of the self. As we learn more about the lived life and the evolution of the life structure, we will have a sounder basis for studying the adult development of the self.

*Issue 4.* Are there age-linked developmental periods in adulthood? The discovery of age-linked periods in the adult development of the life structure is one of the most controversial findings of my research. The most common response among psychologists and social scientists is incredulity. It is simply not possible, they aver, that development should unfold in so orderly a sequence during adulthood—a standard series of periods, each beginning at a well-defined modal age with a range of only four or

five years around it. They note that the available evidence goes against the hypothesis of age-linked stages in adult personality development. Moreover, social roles and careers evolve in accord with institutionally defined timetables that vary widely among institutions and cultures. Those who regard adulthood as a series of major life events (such as marriage, loss, and retirement) that may bring about changes in individual adaptation or personality, and who have no conception of adult development as a source of order in the life course, maintain that these life events occur at widely varying ages and thus make impossible the kind of temporal order I have found.

I have replied (1978, 1980, 1981) to these objections on both theoretical and empirical grounds. I agree that neither individual personality nor social roles evolve through a standard sequence of age-linked stages in adulthood. The only investigator who posited such a sequence of personality stages was Gould (1978), but his hypothesis awaits further testing. Erikson (1950) and Vaillant (1977) proposed a sequence of ego stages but were less specific about the age linkages. I agree, further, that major life events occur at varying ages. The study of events does not in itself provide a basis for a theory of adult development. It is abundantly evident that, at the level of events, roles, or personality, individual lives unfold in myriad ways. I make no claim for order in the concrete individual life course; indeed, I believe that there is much more diversity and disorder than most researchers have been able to see, through their narrow theoretical lenses and methodological constraints.

I do propose, however, that there is an *underlying* order in the human life course, an order shaped by the eras and by the periods in life structure development. Personality, social structure, culture, social roles, major life events, biology—these and other influences exert a powerful effect on the actual character of the individual life structure at a given time and on its development during adulthood. It is my hypothesis, however, that the basic nature and timing of life structure development are given in the life cycle at this time in human evolution.

As I have emphasized from the start, I offer this viewpoint as a tentative, empirically grounded hypothesis, not as a fully demonstrated truth. I did not have it in mind when I started my research on the adult development of men. The concept of life structure emerged slowly during the first years of that research. The discovery of a sequence of alternating, age-linked structure-building and transitional periods came even more slowly. That sequence has been found in the intensive study of many lives: the accounts of the 40 men interviewed in my first study (1978) and the 45 women interviewed in my current study (Levinson, in press); the accounts of over 100 men and women, from different countries and historical periods, whose lives have been sufficiently portrayed in biographies, autobiographies, novels, and plays; a study of women's lives into their 30s by Stewart (1976); a study of Black men by Gooden (1980); biographical studies of Jung (Holt, 1980) and of Willi Brandt (Kellerman, 1975); a pilot sample of 30 to 40 men and women interviewed

for my forthcoming project on middle adulthood; and accounts of the life cycle written over 2,000 years ago by Confucius, Solon, and the authors of the Talmud (Levinson, 1978). I know of no systematic evidence disconfirming the hypothesis. As new evidence comes in, the theory will, no doubt, be modified, amplified, and made more complex.

The hypothesis of age-linked periods in life structure development is thus well grounded in empirical evidence, though not in quantitative, large-sample research. To say that it "must" be wrong, that it "doesn't make sense," is simply to say that it violates the conventional wisdom or the assumptions of other theories. We cannot confirm or disconfirm a theory of life structure by studying changes in personality, social role, moral functioning, or the like. Such a theory can be tested adequately only by intensive studies of the individual life course, through which we follow the evolution of the life structure over a span of years.

*Issue 5.* What are the relative merits and limitations of various research methods? The favored methods in developmental research have traditionally been the cross-sectional and the longitudinal. *Cross-sectional* research is the most efficient and manageable, but it has severe limitations as a means of exploring the process of development.

*Longitudinal* research has the great advantage of enabling us to study a sample over a span of years, but it has major disadvantages as well. The initial concepts and methods may become outmoded after a few years, but the method requires administration of the same measures at periodic intervals over the course of at least several adult years. The measures may have different meanings and validities at one point in history than at others. This is a particular difficulty in research on adult development. Longitudinal research ordinarily involves massive testing and interviewing at intervals of 1 to 10 or more years. The sample means are then used to plot continuous age curves, which may represent developmental sequences. This method is at its best when we have well-identified variables that stem directly from developmentally important concepts and for which we have measures of established reliability and validity. We are far from this ideal in the field of adult development. Even when interesting age curves are found, we are often uncertain about the validity of the measures, the significance of the variables, and the theory of development for which the findings are relevant. A premature emphasis on quantification often keeps us from exploring the phenomena under study and from generating powerful concepts from which appropriate measures can be derived.

The *biographical* method is an effort to reconstruct the life course by interviewing the person and by using various other sources, much as the biographer does in writing a book-length life story. Like the cross-sectional and longitudinal methods, it is not a single entity but a broad approach, with many variations in research design, techniques, and aims. It, too, has inherent limitations, especially in its reliance on memory and reconstruction.

It is not ideal for all purposes and to the exclusion of other methods. Still, it has certain advantages and ought to be recovered from the limbo to which psychology has for so long relegated it. For the study of life structure development, we have no other method of comparable value. The biographical method is the only one that enables us to obtain a complex picture of the life structure at a given time and to delineate the evolution of the life structure over a span of years. It is well suited for gaining a more concrete sense of the individual life course, for generating new concepts, and in time, for developing new variables, measures, and hypotheses that are rooted in theory and are relevant to life as it actually evolves.

*Issue 6.* How can we bring together the developmental perspective and the socialization perspective? Different theories deal with different variables or domains, yet the differences are often blurred or ignored. By and large, psychologists study the development of properties of the person—cognition, morality, ego, attitudes, interests, or psychodynamics. When we find a basic order in the evolution of these properties, the order is assumed to have its origins in the nature of the organism. External conditions influence the specific forms of individual growth and decline and serve to facilitate or hinder the process, but the basic developmental scheme is considered organismically given. Indeed, a *developmental perspective* in psychology has traditionally meant the search for a maturationally built-in, epigenetic, preprogrammed sequence.

The social sciences, on the other hand, look primarily to the sociocultural world for the sources of order in the life course. They show how culturally defined age grades, institutional timetables, and systems of acculturation and socialization shape the sequence of our lives. What we may broadly term the *socialization perspective* (Clausen, 1972; Hareven & Adams, 1982; Lowenthal et al., 1975; Neugarten, 1968) holds that the timing of life events and the evolution of adult careers in occupation, family, and other institutions is determined chiefly by forces in the external world; forces in the individual biology or psyche produce minor variance around the externally determined norms. A balanced approach to the search for order in the life course would obviously draw jointly upon the perspectives of development and socialization. Yet this integration has rarely been attempted.

What about the evolution of the life structure? Is it determined primarily from within or from without? Is it a product more of development or of socialization? As I have already indicated, the life structure constitutes a boundary—a mediating zone between personality structure and social structure. It contains aspects of both and governs the transactions between them. The life structure is a pattern of relationships between the self and the world. It has an inner-psychological aspect and an external-social aspect. The universal sequence of periods in the evolution of the life structure has its origins in the psychological properties of the human species, as well as in the general nature of human society at this phase of its evolution (Levinson, 1978, Ch. 20). Each individual life

structure progresses through the successive periods in its own unique way, influenced by a multiplicity of specific biological, psychological, and social conditions.

Because the life structure is not solely a property of the individual, its evolution cannot be understood solely from an intraorganismic, developmental perspective. Because the life structure is not simply a matter of externally imposed events and roles, its evolution cannot be understood simply from a socialization perspective. It is necessary, instead, to create a new perspective that combines development and socialization and that draws equally on biology, psychology, and social science, as well as on the humanities. Movement in this direction is not easy, violating as it does the current vested interests of each discipline involved. Fortunately, it is becoming increasingly evident that the sharp divisions among these disciplines, whatever their value in the past, are now very costly. New cross-disciplinary boundary systems must be generated if we are to progress in the study of basic individual and social phenomena—not the least of which is the human life course. The study of the life structure and its development is an effort in this direction.

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