Adult Developmental Stages

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While previous stages of development are in a real sense forced on individuals, adults can all too easily hide from adulthood.

Introduction

Until recently, we have thought of adults as being developmentally on a plateau. Children developed physically and became adolescents, adolescents developed into adults. Then there is presumed to be a static plateau across the life span until people become old and begin to again reveal developmental influences.

The assumption was made that during the time between adolescence and old age there were no systematic changes occurring. Since there was no obvious growth or decline, any changes were related primarily to external events, such as death of a spouse or loss of a job. People were expected to become mature, responsible citizens conducting productive lives. Problems and difficulties did occur, of course, but they were not seen as related to changes of an individual at a given time in life. It was as though people were like butterflies emerging from the cocoon of adolescence and for half a century or so becoming nice sensible butterflies.

Extreme statement? Yes, but it does point up the difference between what we consider ages and stages up until the late teens and what we consider occurring when people reach adulthood. Such a static and simplified model may have been appropriate for a society in which most efforts were spent in feeding, clothing, rearing children, and taking care of other basic family needs.

When so much time and energy was needed for basic maintenance of family and self, little thought or effort can go into meeting other needs. Under these conditions, there is little that can be done to deliberately enhance self-development of the individuals in the family. Adults today have, for the first time, opportunities for creative exploration of their own growth potentials.

Researchers have begun to look at the developmental process of adults. A look at what is meant by development is important. It is not a mere accumulation and a discarding of information and experiences. It is, rather, a moving from the simple to the complex. We construct new concepts, new ways of looking at life—not just from the passage of time but from a mix of events and experiences.

As Lillian Troll put it, “It is not being 40 or having lived 40 years that moves a man or a woman into a re-evaluation of his or her condition, but having been married 20 years, or being at the peak of a career, or seeing the youngest child move out of the home.”

Research on Adult Development

Bernice Neugarten has focused on social norms that influence a person’s perception of age. Age, she says, is not a meaningful predictor of social and psychological behavior unless the social framework is considered. She suggests there are three “times” which, interacting simultaneously, influence the development of adults.
Life time—the biological time table; the chronological passage of time indicated by greying of hair, menopause, reduced levels of strenuous activity.

Social time—age grading and expectations: the time to go to school, the time to raise a family, the time to retire.

Historic time—political, economic, social events such as war-recession-resurgence of religion.

Neugarten comments, "Many of the major shifts of the life cycle are not only orderly and sequential, but many are social, rather than biological in nature and their timing is socially regulated. These concepts point to a way of structuring the passage of time, in delineating a social time clock superimposed on the biological clock."

Whereas some researchers such as Gail Sheehy, author of Passages, saw definite stages throughout the adult years, Gould saw rather an evolutionary process. To him, there is no universally scheduled crisis. A crisis could occur at any time—or never.

Much of this evolutionary process is revealed in how adults view adulthood. Childhood delivers most people into adulthood with a view of adults that few could live up to. A child's view of an adult can become the adult's painful measure of himself.

If we don't take a good look at this unrealistic picture of adulthood we may continue to live under circumstances of dependence on others and cling to some false illusions of safety and protection. We can't really be our own person when we are defined by others. We may become frozen in childhood morality with our parents' version of good and bad. Consequently, we do not trust our own assessment of reality, and are in constant need of endorsement of someone who is bigger, smarter, older, or wiser.

These false illusions of safety, says Gould, may be discarded by outgrowing four false assumptions.

- "We belong to our parents and live in their world." Between ages 16 and 22 we need to recognize and discard this assumption.
- "We do things our parents' way and if that doesn't work they will bail us out." By age 28 we must learn that doing things our parents way won't assure us of success. If they do try to bail us out, they may be interfering with our development. We must discard this false assumption if we want to develop into adults.
- Between age 28 and 34 we learn to discard the illusion that life is simple, controllable, and there are no contradictions. We say "should" less often and seldom lament "that's not fair!"
- Finally after age 35 we accept our death as inevitable. Before, we counted the time since birth, now the time left for us becomes our focus.

Daniel Levinson, in studying men's lives, found there were alternating stable and transition periods. These periods were not defined in terms of concrete behaviors, such as the "terrible twos" or in terms of events, such as the "empty nest" but rather in terms of the development of new life structure.

Levinson has a biographical approach looking at the evolution of individual life structures. In examining the lives of individual men he found stable periods of six or seven years and transition periods of four or five years. In the stable periods, work and family choices were enriched-developed-unquestioned. In the transition period, reappraisal of work and family led to new life structures in the next stable period.

David Guttman, one of Neugarten's colleagues in a study in Kansas City compared several cultures and found interesting similarities. He developed the concept of the Parental Imperative after noting some recurring themes in Navaho, Mayan, and Galilean Jews that were like some of his observations in Kansas City. In all of the widely scattered cultures, men became more emotional and more sensitive with age and women more competitive. The young men emphasized the physical and the competitive while playing down their feelings. The young women were more emotional and nurturant. These characteristics, Guttman asserts, were appropriate for their roles in the family. As they grew old and family roles changed, men were more free to be emotional, women were more free to be assertive.

The Stages

Despite exceptions and numerous qualifications, scholars have identified some commonly accepted stages in the development of the adult. The origin of the periods lies both in the nature of man and in the nature of society. The periods do not represent simply an unfolding of the maturational possibilities from within a person; they are thus different from the stages of childhood development, which are seen largely as an internal unfolding. Neither are the periods simply a function of adult socializing systems, they do not simply represent stages in a career sequence shaped by job, education, or family.

Young Adult—18-28—This is a period of exploration, leaving home, trying out new possibilities for a career. It is a period of escaping from parental domination, of substituting friends for family, and of defining oneself as an adult and in Levinson's terms fashioning an initial life structure.

The Thirties—It's a time to assess gains, possibly asking if the gains are worth the price. "So I have a house in the suburbs, a boat at the lake, and an influential position. Does it give me the personal satisfaction I thought it would? Maybe I should look at some previously ignored alternatives. What about a simple more self-sufficient lifestyle in the country? What about not trying to be a top executive?"

The late thirties are a period of consolidation, a time to build a timetable for the future. It is a time for feeling a sense of mastery and of competence. It may be a time for self-reflection, a pause to look at deeper strivings that had been put aside during the twenties when building a workable life structure was most important.

Middle Age—40-55—This period begins with the Middle Transition. Exact year identification becomes increasingly difficult. The transition may come as early as the late 30s or even as late as the early 50s. It is a period when perceptions become more important than chronology. How a person feels about his or her life experiences are more significant than a chronological timetable indicating years of life.
It is a period marked by stress for some, by constraints for others, and by freedom for still others. For men, health and job concerns may dominate. While near the peak of their careers, they may see the encroachment of youth and change.

At the same time, for women it may be seen as a time for freedom from childbearing responsibilities and a time for the opening up of opportunities to pursue interests in personal development or career explorations.

This transition period may be seen as a crisis if there is failure in the expected timetable one has set for oneself—no promotion as anticipated, marriage in trouble, or sudden death of a loved one. It is a time when the difference between gaining and losing what has been dreamed seems to be less important than the difference between the dream itself and reality. One asks, Is this all?

To put it another way, it is not a matter of how many rewards one has obtained; it is a matter of the goodness of fit between the life structure and the stirring of powerful forces within that lead to modification or a drastically changed life structure. "I'm never going to be famous, after all." The die is now cast.

People in this stage have come to term with life as stable personalities. They may or may not have dealt with the four illusions of Roger Gould mentioned earlier. But if they haven't, they are not likely to in the future.

Mid-life is called a time when you don't know whether to blame your problems on your parents or on your children.

It's a time to value wisdom over physical prowess.

It's a time to place greater emphasis on socializing, or interaction with other people as persons and less emphasis on seeing a sexual opportunity in every encounter with a person of the opposite sex.

It's a time for mental flexibility rather than rigidity.

It's a time for emotional flexibility rather than emotional poverty. This is often crucial at the point of losing a loved one. Emotional flexibility can be strained at the point of the death of a loved one, husband or wife on whom a strong dependence has developed.

Late Adulthood—55-75—The lower boundary of late adulthood is early retirement. No longer considered "old age" those in these years are considered by Neugarten as the "young old." They are not biologically, sociologically, or mentally like the stereotype of decrepit, senile old. Rather, they are healthy, often well-educated, and the major consumers of leisure in our society. No longer in the labor force they may become politically active and community oriented. They may just be the first to reach the society of the future, a society that values personal development, community involvement, and political activity over a task-oriented work ethic.

There may be the re-emergence of the excluded. Getting situated twenty years earlier may have forced one to establish some part of one's total being as "me", as "my identity" and exclude other parts. With the end of the dream the excluded parts may emerge. Like the retiring corporate executive who decided to take up the piano with the comment "This is something I have always wanted to do, but never had the time." If we look at the reference to Guttman's research we see also the tendency of men to develop attributes our society labels as feminine (Nurturing behavior) after mid-life.

Old Age—Beyond 75—Marked by declining physical powers, health, and loss of loved ones this can be a period of waiting for death. However, many are very active and make significant contributions to society. Garson Kanin has written a wonderful book, "It Takes So Long To Become Young," in which he illustrates many examples of people in their 80s and 90s who are very much alive and doing exciting things.

Conclusion

"To be young is to be fresh, lively, eager, quick to learn; to be mature is to be done, complete, sedate, tired. But what if we consider a different perspective? To be young is to be unripe, unfinished, raw, awkward, unskilled, inept; to be mature is to be ready, whole, adept, wise." Which is for you?

Footnotes

1Troll, Lillian, Early and Middle Adulthood, Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1975, p. 3.
3Neugarten, Bernice, ibid., p. 62.
9Troll, op. cit., p. 143.

For Further Reading

Sheehy, Gail, "Crisis Couples Face at Forty", Readers Digest, 1977, pp. 73-76.
"Learning How To Relax", Stress, Blue Cross Association, Chicago, 1974.