Adulthood

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Adulthood

Adulthood is usually defined as the period of human development in which the physical development, cognitive development, and psychosocial development of women and men slow and reach their highest level. Although scholars strive to build consistent theories, the description of the developmentally highest level differs between countries and cultures due to economic factors and sociocultural factors. After presenting some basic concepts of adulthood from different cultures, this entry continues with a psychological definition of adulthood, a discussion of characteristics of maturity, and brief descriptions of various theories about what constitutes adulthood. It ends with suggestions for the direction of future discussions on adulthood.

Basic Concepts

A biological or physical approach to adulthood defines an adult as a person who is fully grown. Of course, different people grow at different rates; thus, physical maturity may be attained at a chronological age of 15, 20, or 25 years, for example. Moreover, bodily organs or organ systems usually age and mature at different rates. For instance, the reproductive system ages more rapidly than the nervous system.

In countries that are technologically least developed, adulthood tends to be considered as coinciding with sexual maturity, with the conception and birth of a child, or with the completion of a series of initiation rituals that demonstrate the child's readiness for adulthood. Western and non-Western societies and cultures differ in their designations of life stages or the age grading of development. For example, the St. Lawrence Eskimos use a two-stage system consisting of boys and men or girls and women. The Arusha people of East Africa group males according to age—for example, youths, junior warriors, senior warriors, junior elders, senior elders, and retired elders.

In technologically advanced countries, adulthood is identified with events or rites of passage, such as graduation from school, starting a job, having a family, or reaching the legal adult age. The latter varies but now usually is 18 years (historically, it was 21 years), with exceptions—for example, Scotland (16 years), Nebraska and Alabama in the United States and South Korea (19 years), and Indonesia and Japan (20 years).

The legal meaning of adulthood also varies and includes factors such as being capable of assuming responsibility for one's own affairs; engaging in an employment contract; assuming financial responsibility for oneself; and being eligible to marry, vote in elections, possess a firearm, obtain a driving license, travel abroad independently, and use legal drugs such as

nicotine or alcohol.

Psychological Definition

In psychology, adulthood is usually defined as a stage of human development that occurs after the stage of adolescence and puberty (approximately 13-19 years of age). Adulthood lasts until the end of life and is divided into young or early adulthood (20-39 years), middle adulthood (40-59 years), and late adulthood or old age (60 years and older). Old age is usually divided into young-old (60-80 years) and old-old (80 and older).

Successfully entering adulthood constitutes a constructive solution by a young person to the conflict over separation from parents. Adults are characterized by postformal thinking—that is, thinking that takes into account the contradictory elements of intellectual life or social interactions in a meaningful whole, while establishing the relative stability of emotional expression as well as a system of values as the basis for life decisions.

Developmental changes during this period are the result of biological maturity and psychosocial maturity, which allow adults to take effective actions related to building relationships, educating children, and maintaining occupational employment. Adulthood is also characterized by a commitment to a multiplicity of social roles that sometimes conflict with each other.

Among the criteria for demarcating adulthood are independent living, economic independence, participation in public life, concern for the persons closest to oneself, being married, being a parent, or serving in the armed forces. Personality traits are also attributed to adulthood in most cultures, although there is not always a close correspondence between such traits and the legal adult age. The traits include self-control, social stability, responsibility, tact, self-reliance, seriousness, strength, experience, objectivity, and independent decision making.

Other psychological characteristics of an adult are being able to formulate answers to questions about oneself as a person and as a member of society; being able to make choices about personal values and one's place in the world; gaining experience through participation in different types of situations, contacts with other people, and internal experiences that affect the formation of identity and self-esteem; and the ability to improve one's personal and professional qualifications.

Maturity

In terms of personality, psychologists distinguish between full maturity and partial maturity, for example, in the following categories: biological maturity (of individual organs), academic

maturity (completing a minimum number of school grades), emotional and intellectual maturity, spiritual maturity, moral maturity, and social maturity (the ability to perform different social roles). There are also recognized maturational delays (such as infantilism) and accelerations (such as premature sexual interest, child labor, or taking care of younger siblings or a parent).

Problems related to biological aging have an impact on the individual's adaptation to new conditions and allow a distinction between middle adulthood and late adulthood. The former is related to "midlife balance"—that is, the feeling of being halfway through life, which introduces destabilization and may reveal a "midlife crisis." The crisis may be influenced by changes due to andropause or menopause or events such as the death of parents, unemployment, a disappointing career, or children leaving home (the empty nest syndrome).

By contrast, adapting to old age takes different forms depending on the lifestyle and activities undertaken by people during middle adulthood. Reaching the stage of late adulthood is accompanied not only by the end of one's professional career and ensuing retirement but sometimes by relocation to assisted-living facilities or retirement communities. Such transitions may be difficult and may be related to depression, anxiety, and the increased rate of suicide among older adults.

Late adulthood is also characterized by "transcendent wisdom," which is defined as a philosophical or moral approach to a life characterized by no longer evaluating one's attitudes toward the course of events, other people, or oneself. It is characterized by serenity, understanding, humility, the ability to self-limit, the ability to resolve dilemmas, accuracy in predicting events, and strength of will and strength to endure adversity while maintaining mental balance. Transcendent wisdom also may contribute to reconciliation with one's impending death.

There are age-normative and nonnormative developmental challenges in adulthood. The former include, for example, physical and cognitive functioning. Nonnormative challenges are unpredictable and include cancer. Adult development is characterized by the possibility of illness associated with aging, such as cancer, arthritis, cardiovascular disease, and a weakened immune system.

Dementia is another frequent challenge to "successful aging," which may be defined as maintaining a good state of health (functional independence), maintaining family and social ties, continuing one's education and self-realization, and maintaining financial independence and independent living. Dementia may be defined in terms of cognitive deficits in memory, language, and visuospatial skills. Although the progression of nondegenerative forms of

dementia (such as head trauma and brain infections) may be slowed, there is no cure for most degenerative forms of dementia (such as Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease, and Huntington's disease).

Theories of Adulthood in Developmental Psychology

The initial theories in developmental psychology focused on childhood and adolescence. With the rise of the life span perspective in the 20th century, promoted, for example, by Paul B. Baltes, attention to old age and to young and midlife adulthood increased. Sigmund Freud described human development as a series of psychosexual stages completed by adolescence. The resolution of these stages in interaction with the social environment, especially with one's mother, influenced the personality of adults.

The theory of adult personality development introduced by Charlotte Buhler included a phase of relative stability, followed by the phase of menopause or andropause. Relative stability is characterized by directing one's will and one's participation in life events. Menopause and andropause are characterized by the predominance of regressive changes that detract from the quality of life. What is experienced during this phase depends on previous experiences of life fulfillment, resignation, or failure.

In Gordon Allport's theory, adulthood is related to the achievement of seven objectives:

1. An extension of "I" (as one is involved in more meaningful interpersonal relationships and in sharing feelings and experiences with others)
2. Good contacts with others (intimacy and sensitivity to the needs of others)Emotional security (self-acceptance, acceptance of one's own emotions, resistance to frustration, free expression)
3. Realistic perception (effecting an objective perception of reality)
4. The enhancement of qualifications and competencies (in particular activities)
5. Knowledge of oneself (what one can do, cannot do, should do)
6. A stable and coherent philosophy of life (the ability to determine balanced life goals and to cope with failures)

In Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, adulthood is characterized by three developmental crises. Early adulthood (l9-40 years of age), characterized by intimacy versus isolation, refers to love relationships and the development of intimate relationships or feelings of isolation. Middle adulthood (40-65 years) is characterized by generativity versus stagnation in terms of supporting the next generation.

The individual must decide whether to take action in the interest of those who are younger

or to focus only on his or her own interests and to defend already-acquired status against younger, stronger competitors. Late adulthood (65 years-death) is characterized by integrity versus despair as one reflects on one's life. If one accepts it, this may result in a sense of oneself as one is and a feeling of fulfillment.

In Daniel Levinson's theory, adulthood includes psychosocial "seasons." The transition to early adulthood (16-24 years of age) has as its aim separation from family and initiation and entry into life in the world of adults. The ensuing season (24-28 years) entails forming a life structure—that is, creating a bridge between personal values and the values recognized by society. Settling down (29-34 years) and becoming one's own person (35-40 years) are characterized by the formation of a satisfactory structure of personality, by the breach of temporariness, finding one's surer place in society, and successfully striving. This stage is also characterized by the peak of physical fitness and the sometimes dramatic necessity of setting goals in life and other major decision making. Finally, midlife transition (the early 40s) and restabilization into late adulthood (45+) is a period of social productivity, with a tendency to integration and synthesis.

According to Robert J. Havighurst's theory, young adulthood (ages 18-35 years) is characterized by developmental tasks, such as the choice of spouse and learning to live with him or her, the enlargement of one's family and raising children, directing one's own home, undertaking a professional career, engaging in civic responsibilities, and finding a corresponding social group.

In middle adulthood (35-65 years), the most important developmental tasks are these: making one's own changes and challenges, overcoming a midlife crisis, spiritual development, supporting the development of others, taking on more tasks and social responsibilities than in one's youth, taking up work with an eye to benefiting future generations, giving greater meaning to one's life and assisting one's spouse to do so, further professional development and managing one's own career, achieving one's intended standard of living, supporting the development and growth of one's children, caring for aging parents, and reconciling the signs of aging and old age. The creative fulfillment of these tasks allows people to continue their self-development in transitioning to the developmental period of late adulthood.

Carl G. Jung showed that middle adulthood is the age period of midlife crisis. The emergence of crisis depends on the individual's need to respond to oppositions—such as youth or old age, creation or destruction, masculinity or femininity, and attachment or isolation. This theory emphasizes the importance during middle adulthood of reorientation and focusing on the further improvement of the spiritual personality. Otherwise, the person is threatened by

fixations, wrongly chosen defense mechanisms, stagnation in development, or premature aging.

According to Robert F. Peck, the transition from middle adulthood to late adulthood is characterized by the excessive involvement of the individual in his or her professional work or by a preoccupation with oneself. The transition from middle adulthood to late adulthood is also part of Robert C. Atchley's continuity theory, which describes the process of retirement. Individuals either want to retire (and are satisfied with that condition) or are forced to retire (to be initially unhappy and then satisfied) or retire due to a health condition (such a person often is initially unhappy, but his or her health often improves in a short time).

Contemporary adulthood theory also includes influential studies of scholars such as George E. Vaillant, Nancy Chodorow, Jean Baker Miller, Carol Gilligan, Mary Belenky, Jane Loevinger, Roger Gould, Bernice Neugarten, Irene M. Burnside, Elaine Cumming, and William E. Henry.

Future Directions

Contemporary societal changes such as aging populations, longevity, extending one's working life, gender equality, diversification of family types, and later parenting require modification of adulthood theories. There is a need to develop theoretical frameworks that include the multidimensionality of the contemporary transition to adulthood as well as transition from young adulthood to middle adulthood to late adulthood.

New theories need to (a) address individual differences, cross-cultural variations of adulthood, and gender issues; (b) avoid the androcentric bias—that is, the male-focused interpretations of personal development; and (c) avoid the assumption that Western and industrialized culture is a model for all people. Future theoretical frameworks need to take into account the diversity of gender, age, sexual orientation, race, socioeconomic status, physical and emotional disabilities, and cultural backgrounds. Among the challenges for adulthood, theory are to link psychosocial functioning with biomedical factors (such as the immune system, health behaviors, the development of preventive behaviors focused on the problems that emerge in the later stages of development) as well as to link life span development with emotion and cognition theories.

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See Also: Behavioral Development; Cognitive Development; Culture and Development;

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Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development; Freud's Psychosexual Stage Theory of Personality; Gender Development; Hermeneutics and Developmental Psychology; Language and Development; Language Development; Moral Development; Motor Development; Perceptual Development; Personality Development

Further Readings

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