Adult Development and Learning of Older Adults

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Abstract

This summary of adult development covers a wide range of authors. Adult development

is one way of understanding how the internal and external changes in our lives have an

impact on learning. Of particular importance in this work are the developmental issues of

older adults. I present various theories of adult development such as linear and integrated.

The impact of the physical dimension of one's life is discussed. Also the writings of

several authors are presented such as Erikson, Havighurst, Peck, Fisher, Baltes and

Baltes, and Kleiber. Learning is often the result of the stage of life of the person.

Adult Development and Learning with Older Adults

Introduction

"There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven. A time to give birth, and a time to die. A time to plant, and a time to uproot what is planted." (Ecclesiastes 3: 1 – 3, New American Standard Bible). From Solomon's description of a person's time in the book of Ecclesiastes, to Shakespeare's reference to the stages of life in "As you like it", people have been attempting to make sense of the different periods of one's life. "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts, his acts being seven ages." (As You Like It, Act II, Scene 7, 139) (as cited in Erikson, 1997).

Development of the person is a lifelong process from cradle to grave with each period or time equally important, yet inherently different. This process traces the complex dynamics of change throughout the human life. Developmental tasks are links between the demands of society and one's individuals needs (Havighurst, 1972). This human metamorphous at first seems to be physical, yet beneath the surface there are complex mental and emotional changes that comprise the life of each person (Hoyer, Rybash, & Roodin, 1999). Solomon suggests each appointed time is equal, yet Shakespeare places men and women on a downward spiral. "Last scene of all, that ends this strange eventful history, is second childishness and mere oblivion, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything." (As You Like It, Act II, Scene 7, 139) (as cited in Erikson, 1997).

A more modern synopsis of these changes is seen in Merriam and Caffarella's (1999) explanation of development as sequential, life event, and integrative. Sequential

models of development are a linear perspective, focusing on how development occurs within the individual during their lifetime. Erikson's ego development (1950), Havighurt's teachable moment (1972), Levinsons's self development, Loevinger's integration, Neugarten's social clock, Perry's ethics, Kohlberg's moral development, and Fowler's faith development offer insight to the changing nature of the internal self as one develops and changes (as cited in Merriam & Caffarella). These stages are a series of sequential changes within the individual across the lifetime, and these important findings have wide spread influence and popularity (Hoyer et al. 1999). These sequential or stage theories help to order the daily chaos in one's life, yet life event and integrative models may be more diverse and inclusive.

Life event and transition theories have received greater attention in the last few years. Schlossberg, Sugarman, and McClusky suggest these life events with its accompanying transitions are significant times or benchmarks in the person's life (as cited in Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Likewise, Gould (as cited in Schulz & Salthouse, 1999) states that major changes in one's life include specific events such as marriage or burying one's parents and give shape and direction to the unique aspects of one's life. Schlossberg (as cited in Merriam & Caffarella) has labeled these as anticipated, unanticipated, non-eventful, or sleeper events that seem to spring from one's internal clock. These life events also provide opportunities within the life cycle for learning (Lamdin, 1997).

The integrative perspective on adult development acknowledges the intersection of biological, psychological, and socio-cultural perspectives. This view especially recognizes the complex and integrated role of the various dimensions on one's

development. Looking beyond the individual to the context of one's life is considered essential, this life-wide view of adult development is interactive and multi-causal (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). This contextualization leads to plasticity, historical embeddedness, and a multidirectional approach. This contextual paradigm ties the current situation of the adult to the many layers of one's life. This somewhat dialectical view allows for chaos and contradiction within the various dimensions of one persons' life (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Hoyer et al. 1999).

Physical dimension of adult development

The psychological aspects of adult development can be better understood with a perspective on the physical dimension. Many of the changes and adaptations within the person are the result of physical changes in the body (Peck, 1956). Piaget's work with children attests to the normal physical development of the body and its implications, especially cognitive response to the changing physical dimensions of the body (as cited in Feldman, 2000). Continuing these thoughts, the European oriented "Fourth Stage" of development is dedicated to the stage in life when the demands of the body become pre-eminent (Lamdin, 1997). Also, Jarvis (2001) sets the theme of his research on redirecting one's biography against the background of personal physical changes and one's ensuing adaptations.

It is natural for the older adult to experience physical changes, yet perhaps the word degenerative is too negative. Some of the stereotypes and misunderstandings of older people are the result of confusing normal aging with actual disease (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; DiGiovanna, 1994; Quadagno, 1999). Many of the physical changes of older adults involve changes in the nervous system, such as sleep patterns, dulling of

senses, lessening of secondary memory, and less problem solving ability. Yet unless one has dementia, such as Alzheimer's, or a chronic health condition, the adult can negotiate these problems. Research has indicated the value of training, physical exercise, mental exercise, and social support in adjusting to these normal physical changes (Bee, 1998; Dunn, Anderson, & Jakicic, 1998; Haskell, 1994; Haskell & Phillips, 1995).

Older adults

Gerontologists display staggering statistics that reflect an aging population across the globe. For example, currently there are 61,000 adults that are centenarians in the USA, yet by 2020 the predication is that there will be 214,000 (Feldman, 2000). In order to be prepared to adapt to this graying demographic, there is a need to learn more about the changes in older adults. Erikson (1950, 1986, 1997), Havighurst (1952), Peck (1956), Fisher (1993), Baltes and Baltes (1990), and Kleiber (1999) will be discussed as appropriate for understanding older adults.

Erikson.

Adult development theory acknowledges the pervasive influence of Erikson's (1950, 1986, 1997) ideas. Erikson attempted to add to the ideas of his teacher, Anna Freud, by showing development goes beyond psychoanalysis to include one's society and culture (Schultz & Salthouse, 1999). The eight stages of human development summarize a series of conflicts during the life cycle. Of particular importance to this research are the last two stages delineated by the conflict of stagnation versus generativity and despair versus ego integrity. The task of the former is to resolve the dilemma of concern for the next generation, going beyond love for one's own children or grandchildren to a humble and caring desire to generate the next generation, resulting in a goal of care. The latter

task is to resolve the accompanying dilemmas surrounding a perspective on one's life. Similar to writing an epilogue or journal, the individual hopefully can resolve the difficult issues and topics of one's life and unify these into a theme of acceptance, purpose, and integrity, resulting in wisdom. Writers warn readers this has a lack of research (Bee, 1998) and there is the inability to quantify (Schulz & Salthouse); yet this sequential perspective of development continues to hold the attention of writers, researchers, and psychologists (Lamdin, 1997). In essence, Erikson's model is an attempt to widen Freud's psychoanalytic perspective from the pervasive influence of the unconscious and the id, stating that vital involvement in old age through generativity and ego integrity leads to a successful completion of the life cycle (Erikson, 1950; Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Schulz & Salthouse, 1999).

Continuing these ideas is the latest book by Joan Erikson (1997) who adds a ninth stage to the conventional eight. Writing and speaking posthumously for her husband, she felt the eighth stage did not incorporate many of the frustrations of the adult that is 80 or 90 years old. Erikson stated this ninth stage incorporates issues of ageism, despair, and loss of physical ability. However, in the tradition of the Erikson positive attitude (1950, 1986), she concludes this book with a perspective on gerotranscendence. Borrowing eastern ideas, she states gerotranscendence is a shift in personal ideology from materialistic rationale to a cosmic transcendence resulting in life satisfaction. She encourages communities to embrace the older citizen, and for the aging person to confront death and to become more in touch with their soul.

Peck.

      Peck (1956) amplified Erikson's 8th stage (1950) by adding additional aspects to the older adult's life. Similar to Erikson's conflicts, Peck also outlines conflicts in middle and old age. Peck stresses that resolving these conflicts helps one to understand how to successfully arrive at the end of one's life.

      Peck (1956) begins with the middle age conflict as valuing wisdom over one's physical body and socializing over sexualizing. These two conflicts enable the older adult to accept the limits of their physical body, and to creatively use the mind to negate these losses. He discusses the emotional aspects of the aging adult by discussing the conflict of cathectic flexibility over cathectic impoverishment, and mental flexibility over rigidity. These two conflicts reflect the importance of emotional flexibility as one becomes older, by shifting emotional investment from one person to another, and by controlling one's emotions.

      Peck (1956) does not use age as a marker; he stresses that the individual life of the older adult will place each person in a different situation. Old Age is a time when self-image surfaces in ego differentiation over work role pre-occupation. For example, this is when the older adult becomes secure outside the context of employment. Peck stresses the importance of one's attitude toward pain and sickness in the conflict of body transcendence over body pre-occupation. This is evident by the older adult who can accept a failing body and live with pain and change. The last stage focuses on the final journey of death with the conflict of ego transcendence over ego pre-occupation. Peck emphasizes the importance of the older adult to accept death and move beyond its finality by focusing on others.

Havighurst.

Havighurst's (1972) lectures and ideas from working with children and adolescents was continually revised and eventually published. Having been influenced by Erikson (1950), Havighurst stresses the importance of the individual to successfully complete various tasks similar Erikson's conflicts. Internal and external forces comprise an individual's life from birth to death (Havighurst, 1972). These developmental tasks often arrive at a time when one is especially sensitive to learn, "when the body is ripe, and society requires, and the self is ready to achieve a sensitive task, the teachable moment has come" (p. 7).

Havighurst (1972) states old age is a time of disengaging from society and learning to reorganize. This is seen in three adjustment areas - decreasing physical health, retirement and decreased income, and the death of a spouse. The necessary solutions are seen in three developmental tasks for the older adult - new social affiliation, new social roles, and new living arrangements. Havighurst had his pulse on the older adult, naming specific tasks that were significant in the mature person's development, but even more, his timeless concept of the teachable moment helped to delineate the impact of development on willingness to learn.

Fisher.

Fisher (1993) states that Erikson (1986) wanted to expand his ideas on older adults. Erikson states that his original eight stages were written in 1950, and perhaps should be updated to allow for today's healthier and older adult (as cited in Fisher). Fisher discusses how older adults were not detailed in some research that included the life span, such as Levinson (as cited in Fisher, 1993), but were evident in Erikson (1950,

1986, 1997) and Peck (1956). In contrast, Fisher's (1993) research identified five periods of older adulthood. These are summarized by continuity with middle age until a physical change forces chaos resulting in early transition. This transition results in a revised lifestyle, later transition, and final period. Similar to other theorists, this accounts for developmental change in older adulthood and continues to follow the pattern of stability alternating with transition. The key issue of longevity is adaptation to change.

Fisher's (1993) research is based on interviews with 74 older adults ranging in age from 60 to 94. This interpretive paradigm revealed continual changes as one becomes older, rather than old age being one experience. The pursuing of one's retirement plans and an attempt to continue an earlier lifestyle reflects continuing with middle age. The early transition is the result of some involuntary transitional event, in response, the older adult realizes middle age is over and incorporates specific voluntary transitions to meet this change. The third stage is a revised lifestyle evidenced by adaptation to change, socialization with other active older adults, and a more stable life that is appropriate for older adults. The fourth stage or later transition is shown by a loss of autonomy, a need for assistance, and a loss of health. The final period is marked by dependency, mortality, and an adaptation to the final end of life. In stages one, two, and three the older adult is fairly independent, whereas the final two reflect a loss of control and dependency on others.

Baltes and Baltes.

Baltes and Baltes (1990) incorporate their integrative paradigm of selection, optimization, and compensation to explain how older adults have blended the physical, social, and mental dynamics of one's life. This choosing to cut back (selection), choosing

something positive (optimization), and choosing something to help (compensation) seems to be the repeated theme of development and successful aging. This acknowledges the influence of one's health, the timing of events, and relations with others (Hoyer et al. 1999; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). This dialectical view on development includes a continual state of flux between gains and losses. This process is an active dynamic of making choices among limited options.

Their strategy based on medical and biological research, sets forth an integrated solution for successful aging. Incorporating a healthy lifestyle with a variety of personal solutions leads to the increase of one's reserve capacities. Education helps the individual to understand how to overcome one's limited reserves and to compensate for losses through knowledge and technology. These continual adaptations can help create more gains than losses resulting in a more resilient self (Baltes & Baltes, 1990). In summary, selective optimization with compensation is a general process of adaptation that occurs throughout one's life, but is especially important in older adults because of the loss of biological, mental, and social reserves. Successful aging, based on selective optimization with compensation, becomes an "individualized coalition between one's mind and society to outwit personal biological constraints" (p. 27).

Kleiber.

Continuing this perspective on successful aging, Kleiber (1999) incorporates a triage for successful aging based on three theories of aging - disengagement, activity, and continuation. Cumming and Henry's disengagement theory is based on the premise that as adults become older they will disengage voluntarily from meaningful activities, and society in turn disengages from them (as cited in Kleiber, 1999). Hooyman and Kiyak's

(as cited in Kleiber, 1999) activity theory states that successful aging occurs in proportion to the amount of activity the individual is able to maintain. Atchley's (1993) well-documented continuity theory is the attempt to "preserve and maintain existing psychological and social patterns by applying familiar knowledge, skills, and strategies" (p. 5). This perspective mirrors Erikson's (1986) admonition of vital involvement in old age by stressing continual activity.

Kleiber (1999) cites research indicating people are most fulfilled in direct proportion to the amount of their activity, that voluntary disengagement is part of the older person's life, and that continuing with one's established ways of thinking and living allows the individual to use existing psychological social patterns. Kleiber states rather than disengagement, older adults should be involved in engagement and selective disengagement. Engagement is the perpetuation of current interests and especially enjoyable leisure activity; selective disengagement involves redirecting one's time and energy to that which is meaningful. Perhaps the final stage in adult development is learning how to disengage from activities no longer fulfilling, staying engaged with activities that are personally fulfilling, and willing to come to the end of one's life (Kleiber).

Summary.

The following list, though not exhaustive, summarizes the developmental issues of older adults as presented by these authors. Each situation has its own set of positive and negative elements, with an overarching theme of change and adaptation. The developmental issues for older adults include the following. 1). The influence and power of generativity, as well as the internal drive to leave a legacy (Erikson, 1950). 2). The

internal struggle to feel positive about one's life and the choices that one has made (Erikson, 1950). 3). The impact of the changes in one's body (Baltes and Baltes, 1990; Havighurst, 1972; Kleiber, 1999; Peck, 1956). 4). The impact of continual loss – loss of social respect, loss of one's mate or friends, loss of health (Baltes and Baltes, 1990; Fisher, 1993; Havighurst, 1972; Peck 1956).

Critique

Fisher (1993), Erikson (1950, 1986, 1997), Havighurst (1972), and Peck (1956) are based on psychological models of development. Peck, Havighurst, and Fisher are extensions of Erikson's ideas, especially detailing the 8th stage. These models reflect the continuation of development in the older adult; yet base this development on the interaction of one's psychological and mental faculties in one's particular situation. In contrast, Kleiber (1999) and Baltes and Baltes (1990) are representative of the social-cultural literature on successful aging. This integrative perspective seems to have returned with the advent of older adults who are staying healthy and living longer.

Each of these perspectives was chosen for this study because they specifically address the older adult. Rather than explaining maturity as one long experience, these authors recognize the variability, diversity, and different paths of older adults. Peck's (1956) Middle Age and Old Age are divided among seven stages, Havighurst (1972) presents three stages with three developmental tasks, Fisher (1993) delineates five stages, and Joan Erikson (1997) added another stage to incorporate the uniqueness of oldest-old. Rather than stages, Baltes and Baltes (1990) as well as Kleiber (1999) discuss aging as an individual process of adaptation. Each of these authors presents a positive perspective of aging, and they are forthright about pain, loss, despair, and dependence. Each author is

careful to state that his or her categories are not based on a certain age, rather at a certain life function of the adult, which is the result of some event in the person's life.

Although Erikson (1950) briefly introduces the eighth stage in his first book, the 1986 book is completely focused on the older adult based around a theme of involvement. His wife takes the liberty after his death to add another stage based on 80 and 90 year old adults (1997). However, at times this appears to be a personal venting of frustration of ageism and loss of respect.

Peck (1956) wrote after Erikson's first book with the insight to divide Erikson's eighth stage into three more. He begins with seven conflicts that usually begin in one's middle age. He is not clear where his ideas are based; the article is actually a presentation at the National Institute of Health on Older Adult in 1955. Peck includes many of Erikson's ideas especially that of wisdom and death. However, Peck adds the importance of the emotional aspect of the older person and the strong impact of one's personal self-image. Havighurst introduced the theme of the developmental task and states each stage presents a lesson to be learned. His perspective on older adults is very specific from learning to garden to handling social exclusion.

Fisher (1993), similar to Erikson (1997), is even more honest about the plight of the older person and discusses loss, difficulty, despair, and loneliness. Similar to Erikson (1950), Havighurst (1972), and Levinson (as cited in Merriam & Caffarella, 1999), he describes the continual pattern of development and stability. Also similar to Kleiber (1999), he discusses involuntary loss in older adults. The disappointing aspect of Fisher is the lack of inclusion of other races and groups. Although he focused on senior centers and attempted to include a diverse sample, yet 95% of the sample was white. Fisher's

insight helps to explain the young older adult's continuation with middle age and how the advent of pain and loss explains the transition and loss of middle age.

Baltes and Baltes (1990) as well as Kleiber (1999) summarize a large amount of research in a variety of fields. Baltes and Baltes' seven propositions on human aging succinctly address the vast quantity of research in the field of physical aging. Basing each proposition on biological and physical research, their eventual formula for successful aging is based on negating these seven propositions. This multidisciplined approach melds the insight of sociology, physical aging, and psychology. They stress this approach is not based on age, or a development, rather a psychological function of the older adult to select, optimize, and compensate. Similarly, Kleiber's perspective reads like a devotional inspiration for the older adult who is attempting to find solutions. Kleiber adds a perspective of leisure and the dynamics of wellness by summarizing the popular theories of activity, continuity, and disengagement. He offers his own ideas of engagement, or the integrative perspective by combining the three as a triage. This well-documented book is a summary of developmental issues and offers hope for the older adult.

Fisher (1993) and Kleiber (1999) discuss how unexpected trauma or involuntary disengagement is often the trigger for development in the later stages of life. These traumas are often rooted in the changes of one's physical health in the later years. Each discusses how death and loss precipitate the potential for adaptation, adjustment, and learning (Havighurst, 1972; Lamdin, 1997; Schulz & Salthouse, 1999).

Other concerns are the elusive topic of death, the lack of diversity, and the omission of self-concept. The eventual issue of the cessation of life though alluded to is

not thoroughly addressed, especially from the view of the one who is dying. Diverse situations in late life are overlooked, such as older adults without children, who never marry, who are in institutions or with disabilities, as well as issues of sexual orientation. The role of self-concept though alluded to, is never fully explored, the willingness to compensate, adjust, or learn at an older age may be based on the elusive construct of self-confidence. Lastly, these authors seem to support a positive view of aging, there is an underlying assumption each person will become a wise sage embracing death. Perhaps reflecting their own struggle with ageism or western ideals, no one wants to reflect the older person as bitter, angry, depressed, or in poverty.

Conclusion

Despite its wide spread popularity and global claims, adult development literature may be somewhat ambiguous even though these psychological models provide interesting insight into one's life. This over reliance on psychological perspectives may result in a self-oriented view of development and assume growth will occur in each person, yet in reality may impede adult education programming (Courtenay, 1994). Yet, Tennant and Pogson (1995) convinced of the tie of learning and adult development suggest these theories are integral to adult education. Perhaps the perspective should change from improvement to informing, and allow for more uncertainty and ambiguity (Tennant & Pogson).

Models and ideas from Fisher (1993), Erikson (1986, 1997) and Peck (1956) add a great deal to the narrow samples and age graded theories of Erikson (1950), Gould, Levinson, Loevinger, and Havighurst (as cited in Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). These authors incorporate the important changes and continual development across the lifespan

of older adults. In fact the most common theme through all these theories is the issue of change and adaptation. Mezirow (1985, 1991, 2000) links together the role of transformation in adult development, yet is careful to distinguish between the two. However, change due to adult development and change due to transformation should not be confused, development can extend beyond its normal trajectory to include personal transformation (Tennant, 1993; Tenant & Pogson, 1995).

The most reliable perspective may be the socio-cultural view of development. This integrative view includes physical, social, mental, and spiritual dynamics and buries the person's development within a contextual lens allowing for varieties of directions and paths. Timely advice from theories of successful aging adds insight from continuity, disengagement, and activity theories (Kleiber, 1999). The most dominant idea across these theories is that of adaptation, change, and adjustment. These perspectives, especially the integrative, can expand to fit the issues and dynamics of the older adult's life.

Adult development can take many paths. Seemingly linear from birthday to birthday, this physical growth may mask the subtle and multidirectional forces of development. However, the hallmark of development consists of change, discontinuity, and perhaps chaos. On an individual scale this complex growth may appear chaotic and painful, yet on a wider scale may show great numbers experiencing similar change (Fisher, 1993). The time in history, the family, the expectations of local community, and even uncontrolled events in nature all play a vital role in the gradual process of development (Bee, 1998; Quadagno, 1999).

In order to survive, each person must learn to adjust and adapt to these changes, each person must submit to change with age (Kleiber, 1999). From a child's first tooth, to eventually pulling the same tooth, life is fraught with bloody, painful, and fleshy changes in the scenarios of daily life. Yet for the older adult, some of these changes can be monumental, pulling teeth seems inconsequential to burying one's life companion or being asked to retire.

A great deal of these changes in middle and late-life are in reality adaptations to the physical decline that accompanies the older adult. However, this failing and slowing flesh may masquerade continual development in the mental, emotional, and social aspects of the older adult. The good news is that the creative human potential to change and transform may transcend Shakespeare's "second childishness and more oblivion" and turn these harsh changes into teachable moments of wisdom, love, and acceptance (Havighurst, 1972; Peck, 1956).

One common theme across these theories is that of adaptation and adjustment. In order to survive to an older age, the individual must become a master of change, incorporating personal learning at every phase of chaos. This compensation may be seen in personal self-directed projects where the older adult is learning how to age successfully. Rather than change in a negative sense, these self-directed lessons have the potential to enable the older adult to learn what is necessary to age successfully.

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