Life-Span Development

Frameworks, Accounts and Strategies

PSYCHOLOGY PRESS
Taylor & Francis Group

Léonie Sugarman

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This thorough revision of the highly successful first edition of *Life-Span Development*, offers the reader a wide-ranging and thought provoking account of human development throughout the life-span. The life-span perspective emphasises that development does not stop when we cease to be adolescents but goes on throughout adulthood and into old age.

In initial chapters Léonie Sugarman outlines the issues surrounding the notion of development and how it can be studied, including reviews of the work of key theorists Erikson, Levinson and Gould. She goes on to consider the different ways in which the life course can be construed; as a series of age-related stages; as a cumulative sequence; as a series of developmental tasks; as a series of key life events and transitions or as a narrative construction which creates a sense of dynamic continuity. A final chapter looks at how people cope, the resources that are available and the theoretical and practical issues regarding interventions to assist them in the process.

New to the book is increased coverage of the topical issue of successful ageing and a new chapter on the increasingly popular narrative approach to life-span development. This edition is also more student-friendly with exercises in self-reflection that encourage the reader to look at the development of their own lives or those of their current or future clients. Boxed material highlighting major theories and clarifying concepts is also included. This book will be invaluable for students of developmental and occupational psychology and professionals in the fields of health management, education and social work.

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Second edition

Léonie Sugarman

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Preface to second edition

Since publication of the first edition of this book in 1986, the topic of life-span development has become incorporated not only into the main stream of psychology courses but also into the training for a range of human services professions, including nursing, counselling, social work, and occupational therapy. A plethora of textbooks has appeared – primarily emanating from North America – some of which have already reached their sixth edition. These tend to adopt a chronological structure, devoting one or more chapters to some or all of the following life stages: infancy and childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age. Adulthood is often subdivided into early, middle, and late substages, and several texts distinguish between different aspects of each stage, for example, the cognitive, personal, and social dimensions. How then to revise *Life-span development: Theories, concepts and interventions* so that it was reasonably comprehensive and yet did not merely replicate what was becoming increasingly available in other texts?

As with the first edition, the book opens with a chapter outlining the broad-based, inclusive stance that characterises the life-span perspective. Recognising that life-span developmental psychology is an empirical as well as a theoretical discipline. This is followed by a chapter on data collection and allied research issues. I succumb to the conventional organisation of material in Chapter 3 by organising discussion of the life course, first, around different life stages and, second, around developmental threads that run through a number of stages. The emphasis of the next four chapters, however, is on meta-models, that is, largely metaphorical images of the life course that convey its overall shape and rhythm rather than the specifics of particular life stages or domains. In recognition of the applied nature of the topic, the final chapter focuses on issues of intervention and the facilitation of life-span development. The result is a book that gives relatively scant attention to some of the traditional bastions of developmental psychology – Freud and Piaget, for example – and that brings into the foreground some of the less ubiquitously mentioned work of others. Thus, whilst Erikson's concept of the adolescent identity crisis is well known, the present text gives equal emphasis to the other stages in his schema. Similarly, the account of Levinson's work goes beyond the frequently

reproduced diagram outlining the approximate age bands of different "seasons" in the evolution of a person's life structure.

The result is, I hope, a book whose ideas can contribute to a "working knowledge" of life-span development that readers can call on in both their professional and personal lives. I have also altered the subtitle of the book. Being somewhat tautological, "theories and concepts" are now subsumed under the heading of "frameworks". "Accounts" has been added to signpost an increasing emphasis on participant-led approaches to the study of psychological development, and "interventions" has been replaced by "strategies" to incorporate better the informal and self-generated efforts to promote what can be termed successful ageing.

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February 2001

1 Life-span developmental psychology

> It is interesting to note how rarely the term *development* is used to describe changes in the later years. Despite current emphasis on a lifespan perspective, change in later years is still typically described as *aging*. In the same way, although the word *day* can refer to the twenty-four-hour span, we normally use it to refer to only the brighter hours. *Aging* has come to refer to the darker side of growing old. To make changes in later life one must fight against all sorts of popular mindsets.
>
> (Langer, 1989)

Life-span development is about every one of us. In keeping with this, the text of the present book is interspersed with activities that encourage you to reflect on both the ideas introduced in the text and their place in your own life and the lives of others. You are invited to complete these exercises as you read through the book, working alone or using them as the basis of class discussions. Beginning as you mean to go on, can I ask you first of all to turn your attention to Activity 1.1.

Activity 1.1 Lifeline

Take a blank sheet of paper and, allowing the left and right hand edges of the page to represent the beginning and end of your life respectively, draw a line across the page (in the manner of a temperature chart) to depict the peaks and troughs experienced in your life so far, and those you would predict for the future.

When finished, sit back and ask yourself some questions about this graph – your "lifeline":

- What is its general shape? Does it continue to rise throughout life? Does it depict peaks and troughs around some arbitrary mean? Alternatively, is there a plateau and subsequent fall in the

> level of the curve? Is it punctuated with major or only relatively minor peaks and troughs?
> - The horizontal axis represents time; but how about the vertical axis – what dimension does that reflect?
> - What (or who) triggered the peaks and troughs in the graph? Why did they occur at the time that they did?
> - What might have been done (or was done) to make the peaks higher and the troughs shallower? How might the incidence and height of the peaks be increased in the future? And the incidence and depth of the troughs decreased?
> - What positive results emerged from the troughs and what were the negative consequences of the peaks?

Consideration of questions such as those in Activity 1.1 form the subject matter of life-span developmental psychology. It is to questions such as these that the present book is directed. Whilst life-span developmental psychology is an area that has, as it were, come of age during the last two decades, it is founded on the work of theorists such as Jung (Staude, 1981), Bühler (Bühler & Massarik, 1968), Havighurst (1972), and Erikson (1980). None the less, it was not until 1980 that the *Annual Review of Psychology* included its first review of life-span developmental psychology, defining it as a discipline concerned with the description, explanation, and modification (optimisation) of within-individual change and stability from birth (or possibly from conception) to death and of between-individual differences and similarities in within-individual change (Baltes, Reese, & Lipsitt, 1980). Since the publication of this review the area has been accepted into the mainstream of psychology and its aims have remained largely unchanged.

Change and continuity

To live is to change. This truism is implicit in the notion of life-span development. We are each palpably different from the person we were 10 years ago and the person we will be in 10, 20, or 30 years' time. Life-span developmental psychology is concerned with documenting, explaining, and influencing these changes. In Activity 1.2 you are asked to think about your own life in a different way to the Lifeline exercise – a way that will probably direct attention to how different we all are at different ages.

However, despite the changes that beset all of us as we grow up and grow older, we do not become totally different people. The life course is characterised by continuity as well as change, and we operate on the assumption that past behaviour and temperament are reliable guides to the future. Thus,

Activity 1.2 Changes or consistencies?

- Think of yourself as you are, were, or imagine you will be, at the ages of 7, 17, 27, 37, 47, 57, 67, 77, and 87 years.
- Now think of your priorities, your skills, your worries, your relationships, your enjoyments:
  - what changes?
  - what remains the same?

we might talk about someone acting "out of character" and in writing a job reference might strive to predict future performance on the basis of past and present achievements. The tension between change and continuity is taken up in more detail elsewhere – through an overview of change, consistency and chaos as concepts for organising life-span data (in Chapter 3), and through discussion of the concepts of dynamic continuity and narrative construction (in Chapter 7).

Development

This book is not merely about change. It is about development. Not all change across the life course would necessarily be described as developmental. "Development" is not an empirical term (Reese & Overton, 1970), although on occasions it is used as though it were (Kaplan, 1983). No matter how much data we were able to collect about the course of an individual's life this, of itself, would not enable us to define what is meant by the term "development", unless, that is, we were to say that whatever happens across the life span is what constitutes development. This, however, would reduce developmental psychology to a largely atheoretical data-collection exercise. Furthermore, because such a perspective makes no judgements as to what is better or preferable, it negates the notion of development-enhancing interventions. As, from this viewpoint, any life course is as good (or as developed) as any other, there are no grounds for attempting to influence it.

As an alternative, we might try to define development empirically by reference to norms – saying that development is what happens to the majority of people across the life course. This, however, would also be flawed. It represents a conflation of the "is" and the "ought", seeing them as synonymous. The intervention implications would be that people should be encouraged to be like the average, discouraging both individuality and the exceptional.

Rather than emerging in some self-evident way from empirical data, the concept of development requires the initial postulation of assumptions,

Activity 1.3 How would you define development?

- How would you define development? How would you distinguish it from mere change?
- Jot down some ideas of your own and, if possible, discuss them with a group of colleagues.
- Think about the extent to which your ideas concur with those of the authors quoted below.

underlying premises or value judgements as to its defining characteristics. The concept of development centres on a value-based notion of improvement. These standards of comparison precede empirical observation. Changes in amount and in quality are evaluated against some implicit or explicit standard as to what constitutes the "good" or the "ideal". In other words, we begin with a definition of development and then examine data to see whether they meet our criteria. For example, whether or not it is viewed as development when adolescents challenge the received wisdom of their elders depends on what we mean by the term. Opinions on such matters can vary. Value judgements are involved. Use Activity 1.3 to help you decide what *you* think of when you think of development. Box 1.1 provides some suggestions on how to structure your ideas.

The definitions in Box 1.1 paint a picture of a person learning and benefiting from experience; accomplishing tasks characterising different stages

Box 1.1 Defining development

Thomas (1990, p. 50) emphasises the value-laden basis of concepts of development when he writes:

People are developing normally (properly, desirably, satisfactorily, acceptably) when:

- they feel that they are fulfilling their own needs at least moderately well,
- their behavior does not unduly encroach upon other people's rights and opportunities,
- they fulfil the responsibilities typically held as reasonable for people of their ability (physical and mental) and social environment, and
- their personal characteristics do not cause others to treat them in ways which harm them physically, psychologically, or socially or which deny them opportunities [equal to those of their peers of the same age, gender, and physical, intellectual, and/or social behaviour] to pursue their ambitions.

Chaplin (1988, p. 45) focuses on the process of development, rejecting the idea of directional movement toward an explicit, coherent "end-state":

> We grow and change in more of a spiral than in a straight line. We go backwards as well as forwards. Perhaps we can only go forwards if we go backwards and regress into childlike feelings first. Growth is working with the rhythms, not proceeding from some depressing reality to a perfect harmonious self in the future.

Rogers (1980, p. 80), in contemplating his own life, sees development as the personal expansion that comes from learning, itself the outcome of risk taking:

> Perhaps the major reason I am willing to take chances is that I have found that in doing so, whether I succeed or fail, I *learn*. Learning, especially learning from experience, has been a prime element in making my life worthwhile. Such learning helps me to expand. So I continue to take risks.

In an otherwise fairly abstract and technical discussion, Ford and Lerner (1992, p. 42) use the metaphor of a sea journey to capture the adaptive nature of human development. Although maps and charts can help us on our travels, there is always the chance that we will meet the unexpected, the unforeseeable and the unfamiliar. They see development as:

> ... a continuous and sometimes unpredictable voyage throughout life, sailing from seas that have become familiar into oceans as yet uncharted toward destinations to be imagined, defined, and redefined as the voyage proceeds, with occasional, often unpredictable transformations of one's vessel and sailing skills and the oceans upon which one sails resulting from unforeseen circumstances.

of the life course and on which later development, at least to some extent, rests; and working through the implications of significant life events to emerge a stronger, more mature, more "developed" person (Sugarman, 1996).

In the past, developmental psychology was, with a few exceptions, synonymous with child development. The term development was applied only to physical, cognitive, personal, or social changes that met a number of criteria, such as being sequential, unidirectional, universal, irreversible, and end-state or goal-directed. Because these criteria are met by few of the life changes of the adult years, if adulthood is not to be construed as a period largely devoid of development, then this restrictive definition must be challenged.

How, though, should we proceed with the task of defining development? First, a good place to begin is by following Kaplan's (1983) advice to

distinguish between development as an ideal process and the realities of what actually happens during the course of a life. Development, "pertains to a rarely, if ever, attained ideal, not the actual" (Kaplan, 1983, p. 188). With this in mind, empirical studies can then furnish data concerning the extent to which individuals do or do not develop and may provide information concerning factors that facilitate or impede development.

Second, development is better thought of as a process than as a state. Thus, we ask not whether a person has reached some ideal end-state or *telos*, but rather (assuming such an end-state exists, even in theory) the extent to which he or she is moving in its direction. In this vein, Kaplan (1983) defines development as movement in the direction of perfection, although he acknowledges that what we mean by perfection is neither transparent nor easy to articulate. None the less, from a variety of theoretical perspectives come common themes if not of perfection, then at least of successful ageing (Ryff, 1989). Thus, accounts of personal growth and ways of being that "surpass the average" (Jourard, 1974) include descriptions of self-actualisation (Maslow, 1970), the healthy personality (Jourard, 1974), and the mature personality (Allport, 1964). Rogers' (1961) concept of the fully functioning person – summarised in Box 1.2 – serves to illustrate the notion of development as a process towards a theoretical ideal.

Box 1.2 The fully functioning person (Kirschenbaum & Henderson, 1989; Rogers, 1961)

It is somewhat misleading to talk of "the" fully functioning person because Rogers does not see it as an achievable, "developed" state. Rather, development is denoted by the process of moving in the direction of becoming more fully functioning. It is a process with some discernible, universal qualities: an increasing openness to experience, increasingly existential living, and an increasing trust in one's own organism.

1. *An increasing openness to experience*. To become more open to experience involves becoming less defensive – the polar opposite of openness. Defensiveness is where experiences are distorted in awareness or are denied awareness because they are perceived as threatening. In this way they are temporarily rendered harmless. Movement from the pole of defensiveness towards the pole of openness to experience allows people to become more able to listen to themselves and to experience what is going on within them. It is movement towards greater emotional self-awareness and acceptance. Feelings – be they positive or negative – are experienced more fully.

2. *Increasingly existential living*. As a person becomes more open to experience he or she tends to live less in the past or the future and more in the present moment. This is what Rogers means by increasingly existential living. To live fully in the moment, "means an absence of

rigidity, of tight organization, of the imposition of structure on experience. It means instead a maximum of adaptability, a discovery of structure *in* experience, a flowing, changing organization of self and personality." (Rogers, 1961, p. 189).

3. *An increasing trust in one's own organism*. Rather than depending on abstract principles, codes of action or previous experience for guidance, people who are open to their own experience and are living fully in the present are able to trust and be guided by their "total organismic reaction" to situations. They are confident that their own experience provides a sufficient and satisfactory basis for deciding how to respond to a particular situation.

The process of becoming a fully functioning person is rarely smooth. Rather, it tends to occur unevenly, by what Rogers (1961) refers to as "moments of movement" occurring in situations where people (who are often, but not always, in therapy) feel themselves to be fully accepted and "received". The good life that results from this movement is not a fixed state of virtue, contentment, or happiness in which the person is adjusted, fulfilled or actualised. Indeed, it is not a state at all. It is a movement from fixity towards changingness, from rigid structure towards flow, and from stasis to process. It is a continuing process of being in which people discover that, if they are open to their experiences, then doing what "feels right" is "a competent and trustworthy guide to behavior which is truly satisfying" (Rogers, 1961, p. 189).

Age

The question "What is your age?" might seem to have a simple, unambiguous answer – you are 18 years and 6 months, 30 years and 2 months, 89 years and 11 months, or whatever. However, our chronological age is an incomplete statement of "how old we are" (see Activity 1.4), as is indicated when we describe someone as being "young for their age", as "old before their time", or as "having aged 10 years in the last 3 weeks". At any one time we are both old and young – the 15-year-old is "too young" to vote and "too old" for primary school.

Non-chronological concepts of age, that is, our psychological, social, functional, and biological ages (see Box 1.3), all contribute to the question of how old we are. None the less, it is chronological age that is almost universally used in developmental psychology as either a main or subsidiary criterion in anchoring accounts of change over the life course. Such categorisation of people and processes according to age serves to facilitate the organisation of knowledge, individuals, and society, and provides a framework in relation to which we can order much of our daily lives. However, age norms are inevitably averages, with many, if not most,

Activity 1.4 How old are you?

How old are you? I am _____ years old. But are you?

- I *look* as if I am _____ years old.
- I *feel* as if I am _____ years old
- I *behave* as if I am _____ years old.

Complete the following sentences:

- The best thing about my current age is . . .
- At my age I should . . .
- At my age I should not . . .
- I will be old when . . .
- In ten years' time I will . . .
- In ten years' time I won't be able to . . .
- I feel I'm already too old to . . .
- The best age to be is . . .

If possible, compare your answers with those of other people of different ages. You might find that notions of "old" and "young" bear very little relation to chronological age. I once overheard my 3-year-old daughter describing her babysitter to a friend as being "Really, really old – at least twelve". In fact the babysitter was fifteen, and my concern was that she might be "too young".

individuals deviating from them to some degree. An "age-irrelevant" concept of development (Baer, 1970) focuses not on the age at which particular experiences occurred, but at their point in a sequence of experiences.

Ageism

Because the topic of age is almost inevitably implicated in discussions of life-span development, it is important constantly to be on the alert for evidence of ageism in our own or others' thinking. However, in the same way as we asked what is meant by the concept of age, so, too, we need to ask what we mean by ageism. Perhaps you could spend a few moments reflecting on and jotting down what you understand by the term.

Over a quarter of a century ago the term ageism was invoked to express concern about the condition and treatment of older people during the 1960s

Box 1.3 Non-chronological age variables

Key "non-chronological" age variables (Barak & Schiffman, 1981; Birren & Renner, 1977) include:

- *Subjective (or psychological) age* – people's sense of their own age as, for example, "young", "middle-aged" or "grown up", irrespective of their chronological age. Subjective age is reflected in the adage, "You're as old as you feel".
- *Social age* – the extent to which a person's social roles, lifestyle, and attitudes conform to the norms and the social expectations for someone of their chronological age. Are they "acting their age", or perhaps behaving as "mutton dressed up as lamb"?
- *Functional age* – a person's capacities or abilities relative to others of similar age. Functional age can be applied to the condition of an individual's organ and body systems (such as heart and lung capacity) and to his or her intellectual and practical skills.
- *Biological age* – an estimate of the individual's present position in relation to his or her potential life span. The biological age of, say, a fit 70-year-old may be less than that of an unfit 50-year-old.

and 1970s. Thus Butler (1987; Butler & Lewis, 1973) defined ageism as, "a process of systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this for skin colour and gender" (Butler, 1987, p. 22). This remains the most widely assumed meaning of the term, although it does have certain weaknesses and limitations. Seeing ageism as something that applies only to older people fosters a "them" and "us" view of "the elderly" as a minority group, different and separate from the rest of society (Bytheway, 1995; Johnson & Bytheway, 1993). In this sense, the concept of ageism can itself be seen as ageist. This is perhaps understandable given the prevalence of the view of old age as a period of decline and marginalisation. If old age is seen as inevitably accompanied by decrement and decline then it is not surprising if fear or, at best, ambivalence about ageing leads young and middle-aged people to distance themselves from those who are older. The result is that so-called "enlightened" views of ageing may incorporate a Victorian sense of *noblesse oblige* accompanied by images of a gracious but patronising Lady Bountiful. Kalish (1979, p. 398) expressed this perspective thus:

You are poor, lonely, weak, incompetent, ineffectual, and no longer terribly bright. You are sick, in need of better housing and transportation and nutrition, and we – the nonelderly and those elderly who align themselves with us – are finally going to turn our attention to you, the deserving elderly, and relieve you from ageism.

However, even if we reject this patronising view of older people, it is also the case that ageing is associated with some decrements that it is not unreasonable to regret. Schonfield (1982) suggested that guilt about our fear or dislike of some aspects of ageing leads us to define as ageist feelings, such as the expression of greater regret for the death of an 18-year-old than on the death of a 75-year-old, that are in fact reasonable and understandable. Fear of our own ageing is not the same as, although it may contribute to, negative attitudes towards older people in general.

Rather than seeing ageism as something applying only to older people (which could, suggests Johnson and Bytheway (1993), be called "old-ageism"), it can be seen as a process affecting all individuals from birth onwards, "at every stage putting limits and constraints on experience, expectations, relationships and opportunities" (Itzin, 1986, p. 114). From this perspective, ageism is prejudice based on age, not specifically old age (Johnson & Bytheway, 1993). Setting a lower minimum wage for workers less than 25 years old can, from this perspective, be defined as ageist practice. Whilst our experiences of racism and sexism will generally have a degree of continuity throughout our life, the nature of any ageism we experience will vary, depending on our chronological age at the time (Bytheway, 1995). The analogy between ageism and these other forms of prejudice is therefore imperfect.

Although prejudice based on age can affect us at any point in life, this does not mean it is distributed evenly across the life course. Age-based limits and restrictions do tend to be greatest for "the young" and "the old", a reflection of the (perhaps implicit) adoption of the growth–maintenance–decline model of the life course – whereby the middle years are seen to represent the peak of maturity (with the young being "too young" and the old being "too old"). It also reflects a power structure within society where the reins of power are typically held by those in midlife (Pilgrim, 1997).

Ageism is not only manifested in explicit age-based restrictions. Of at least equal importance as institutionalised ageism is internalised ageism – the frequently implicit or internalised notions of age-appropriate behaviour that comprise a society's age-grade system. It is reflected in inappropriate attitudes and behaviour towards one age group or generation by another. It encompasses both overtly offensive standpoints (for example calling someone an "old bag") and also the kindly but patronising exercising of benevolent patronage (for example, "keeping an eye on the old dears") that is described by Johnson and Bytheway (1993) as perhaps the most pervasive form of ageism.

It is also important to realise that we can apply ageist attitudes towards ourselves as well as others. Whilst societal constraints to life course timing and sequencing might be more relaxed than previously – career change in our 30s, becoming a grandparent at 35 or 75 – and the variability of individual life-course patterns has increased (Neugarten, 1979; Rindfuss, Swicegood, & Rosenfeld, 1987), internalised conceptions of

age-appropriate behaviours and achievements still influence our aspirations and sense of success and failure. Such normative assumptions provide us with a degree of security – helping to confer a sense of order and pre-dictability on our lives. However, they can also be a major constraint to our life-course development (Heckhausen, 1999). Langer (1989, pp. 94–5) eloquently makes this point with regard to old age:

> When we are young and answer questions about old age, we do so with the feeling that we will never grow old. In the meantime, we form mindsets about the relationship between debilitated performance and old age. Once we awaken to an old self, those relationships become threatening and the fears begin. Such fears are inhibiting and likely to discourage older people from trying to extend themselves in new ways.

A significant role for life-span developmental interventions lies in the iden-tification and countering of ageism, including the raising of consciousness about internalised age-related norms. When age-normative conceptions about the life course are shared by members of a given society they can be experienced as "natural" and, therefore, as largely inevitable and unchangeable. It is important always to look past the age variable to the individual beyond and to strive, in the words of one commentator, "to develop a society that encourages people to stop acting their age and start being themselves" (Ponzo, 1978, pp. 143–4).

Different views of the life course

Accounts of people's lives are not told merely as lists of incidents. They are woven together into a story (Cohler, 1982). Your lifeline can be thought of as a graphical representation of your life story, with the number of "ups and downs" indicating eventfulness, and the degree of slope repre-senting the amount of dramatic tension (Gergen, 1988). The "plot" of this story can be represented in a number of ways, for example, as a series of turning points or transitions (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995), as a sequential pattern or series of stages (Erikson, 1980; Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978), or as the occupancy of an age-based series of culturally determined roles (Neugarten & Datan, 1973; Neugarten, Moore, & Lowe, 1965). The range of forms your lifeline could have taken represents alternative models of the life course.

A more formal definition of the life course would be, "the sequence of events and experiences in a life from birth until death, and the chain of personal states and encountered situations which influence, and are influ-enced by this sequence of events" (Runyan, 1978, p. 570). The danger of such an umbrella definition is that it can seem to be all things to all people. Indeed, life-span developmental psychology has been described as just

that – as a, "motley and monolithic movement" in which, "everyone is invited to contribute his/her voice to the songfest without any restrictions on melody, lyrics and arrangements" (Kaplan, 1983, p. 193).

Box 1.4 Tenets of a life-span perspective (Baltes, 1987)

Development is:

- *A lifelong process*. Development is not restricted to childhood. Both quantitative and qualitative development can occur at all stages of the life course.
- *Multidimensional and multidirectional*. Development occurs in a number of different domains, at different rates, and in a number of directions.
- A process that *shows plasticity*. An individual's developmental course can, at least to some degree, be modified through life conditions and experience.
- A process *involving both gains and losses*. As well as involving growth and gain, development also involves coming to terms with decline and loss.
- An *interactive process*. Development is the outcome of interactions between individual and environment, both of which can influence its course.
- *Culturally and historically embedded*. Developmental rates and courses vary across different cultures and historical periods.
- A *multidisciplinary field of study*. Life-span development is not concerned merely with psychological factors. Biological, sociological, anthropological, and environmental factors can all interact with and influence individual development.

Adherents of a life-span perspective have risen to the challenge of such a barb by distinguishing different types of theoretical orientations to the life course. Key dimensions (several of them overlapping) on which theories vary include:

- the degree to which stages can be identified
- the origin of these stages within either the individual or the environment
- the extent to which stages are universal, or at least shared by people of a particular time and place
- a concern with the continuities and consistencies that characterise particular lives across time
- the extent to which life-span development is directed at a universal end-point
- the balance of emphasis between a concern with the process of development and the content of the life course

`• a focus on the life course as a whole, on particular points or stages, or on the nature of the process of change.

The theories of life-span development discussed in this book can be located at different points on the above dimensions. Few theorists, however, are totally dismissive of opposing viewpoints – disagreements tend to focus on the *relative* importance of different factors, nature versus nurture, predetermined versus variable, continuity versus change, for example. Life-span developmental psychology is an inclusive discipline, characterised by a set of gradually emerging tenets (Baltes, 1987; Magnusson, 1989; Rutter, 1989) as summarised in Box 1.4 and discussed in the following section.

Tenets of a life-span perspective

In their 1980 landmark paper, Baltes et al. (1980) described the life-span approach as a general orientation to development rather than a particular theory. As such, it is characterised by a number of propositions. Although the number and emphasis of these assumptions is not fixed, Baltes et al. did identify four that had received what they described as "some primacy":

1. Development is a lifelong process.
2. Development is an expression of biological, socialisation, historical, and cultural processes.
3. Restricted and monolithic definitions of the nature of development are inappropriate.
4. Life-span developmental psychology offers a potentially integrative umbrella under which different aspects of development can be explored and understood.

These assumptions were later refined into seven tenets (Baltes, 1987), which are used as the framework for the following overview of what might be termed the life-span philosophy.

1. Development is a lifelong process

As should already be apparent, the life-span perspective assumes that the potential for development extends throughout life. It rejects the traditional assumption that childhood is the main, or only, period of growth and development. There is no assumption that the lifeline must reach a plateau and/or decline during adulthood and old age. Instead, it is assumed that there is, throughout the life course, the potential both for continuous growth (which is gradual, incremental, cumulative, and quantitative) and discontinuous development (which is rapid, innovative, substantial, and qualitative).

Life-span developmental psychology challenges the frequently implicit assumption of a growth–maintenance–decline model of development. To what extent did your own lifeline (see Activity 1.1) follow this pattern? Such a pattern, whilst generally applicable to biological and physical functioning, may not, it is suggested, be an appropriate model for the psychological, social, and spiritual realms. Development through change and adaptation continues throughout life (Datan, Rodeaver, & Hughes, 1987).

2. Development is multidimensional and multidirectional

To be concerned with the "whole person" is to attempt to grapple with, "something round, large, undifferentiated and thus difficult to manipulate, analyse, study or write about" (McCandless & Evans, 1973, p. 3). Distinguishing between different dimensions of development imposes some form and order (Loevinger, 1976) on what might otherwise appear an amorphous mass, and acknowledges that development does not necessarily advance simultaneously or in the same form on all fronts. In other words, development is both multidimensional and multidirectional.

   Typically, distinction is made within developmental psychology between the physical, cognitive, personal, and social domains (Box 1.5), although other dimensions could be included, for example, spiritual development (Assagioli, 1986; Fowler, 1981; Wilber, 1979) or career development (Dalton, Thompson, & Price, 1977; Super, 1984, 1990). It is recognised, however, that these domains do not operate in isolation from each other. Thus, for example, "baby walkers", designed to promote independent mobility (physical development) in infants, can also, by giving the child some choice over where he or she goes, can encourage the development of a sense of control over one's environment (personal development). By the same token, concentration of efforts in one domain may restrict developments in another, as, for example, when the development of musical or athletic talent is at the expense of a broad range of social activities.

Box 1.5 Dimensions of human development (adapted from Rice, 1995)

- *Physical development.* Includes the physical growth of all components of the body and changes in motor development, the senses, and in bodily systems.
- *Cognitive development.* Includes all changes in the intellectual processes of thinking, learning, remembering, judging, problem solving, and communicating.
- *Personal development.* Includes the development of the concept of self; the development of attachment, trust, security, love, and affection; and the development a variety of emotions, feelings, and personality traits.
- *Social development.* Includes the development of interpersonal relationships with family members, peers, and other members of the community.

Other bases for distinguishing different developmental domains could be used. Thus, Schlossberg et al. (1995) distinguish between transitions experienced in three different areas of life: (1) internally; (2) in close interpersonal relationships; and (3) in relation to work or other areas of endeavour. Recurring issues in internal or intrapsychic transitions are those of identity, autonomy, and making meaning. For interpersonal transitions, recurring themes centre around intimacy, mattering, and belonging. With regard to the work arena, questions of work saliency (the centrality of work in people's lives), resilience (career adaptability), mastery (self-efficacy), and balance tend to predominate. Again, it must be accepted that such classifications are somewhat arbitrary and, also, that there is considerable overlap among the categories. Transitions in one area can have an impact both on other areas of the person's life and on the lives of those with whom he or she comes into contact.

Another possible approach centres on the different roles assumed by an individual across the life course. Thus, Super (1980, 1990) employs the notion of a "life-career rainbow" (Box 1.6) to represent a "total life space, total life span" view of the person. He distinguishes nine roles that together describe, "most of the life space of most people during the course of a lifetime" (Super, 1980, p. 283). At first the life space contains only one role, that of child; but it may later contain seven or eight, as when a person is pursuing an occupation; maintaining a home; being a spouse, a parent and the supporting child of ageing parents; engaging in civic activities; and following hobbies or further education. Everyone's life-career rainbow contains some universal, some unique, and some shared but not universal features. Other roles could be identified. Not everyone necessarily occupies all roles depicted in Box 1.6 and, furthermore, the sequencing of roles may vary.

Box 1.6 The life-career rainbow (Super, 1980)

Super's depiction of the life course is not unusual in invoking an image from the natural world – a rainbow (Figure 1.1). The arc reflects the life stages identified by Super – initially in relation to career choice and development – namely: growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and decline. It should be noted that this represents the traditional, but now challenged, growth–maintenance–decline model of the life course. Also note how Super places the life course in the context of situational and personal influences – in keeping with the interactional perspective on development and change.

Super (1980) considers more than mere occupancy of roles. He elaborates two further characteristics – emotional salience (how important a role is to us) and time demands (the proportion of our life spent in that role). These two characteristics need not vary in tandem. Thus, an unmotivated student might spend a lot of time in the student role but accord it low emotional
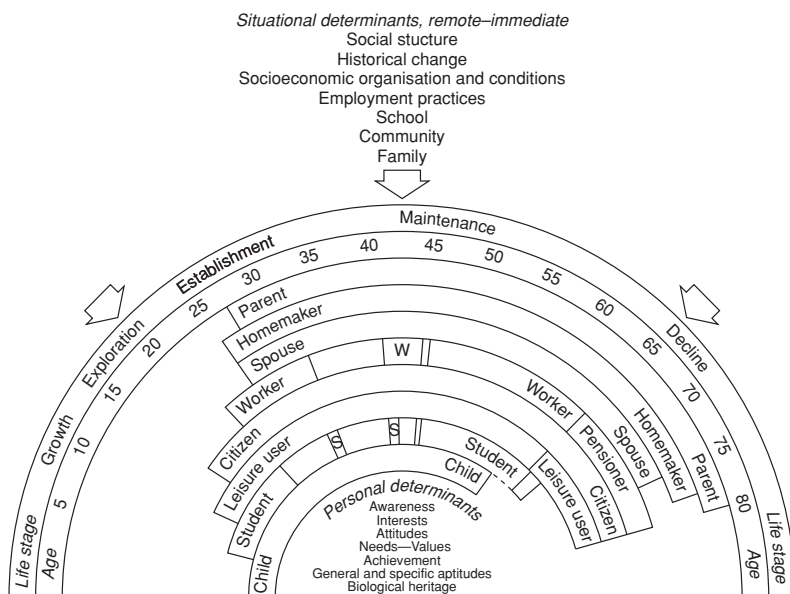
Figure 1.1 Super's life-career rainbow (reproduced with permission from Super, D.E. (1980). A life-span, life-space approach to career development. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 16*, 282–298. Copyright © 1980 by Academic Press).

salience, whilst the non-resident parent in a divorced couple might spend only short amounts of time in the parent role but this time could be of great personal significance. Emotional saliency could be represented on the life-career rainbow by varying the depth of colour of the different bands, and time demands could be represented by varying the bandwidths.

As well as being multidimensional, developmental trajectories can also be multidirectional. This is something that is not incorporated into a life-career rainbow but is reflected in lifelines of differing shapes. It contradicts the notion that development always follows an "onwards and upwards" path and also links in with another tenet of the life-span perspective – that development involves managing losses as well as gains.

One reason why you might have found the earlier lifeline exercise hard is that it requires the integration of all the different developmental domains to produce some sort of global assessment. It might be more feasible, and more meaningful, to draw several lifelines, each representing a different developmental domain. This would allow the depiction of lines of differing shapes and degrees of incline. Points of interaction between different developmental domains could be identified (see Activity 1.5 and Box 1.7).

Activity 1.5 Return to the lifeline

- Following on from Activity 1.1, now draw a series of lifelines to distinguish between the different developmental domains – perhaps physical, cognitive, personal, and social.
- To what extent do these lifelines follow different paths?
- Try to identify points where something in one domain strongly influenced or was influenced by something in another domain. The information in Box 1.7 might help you to convey this.

Box 1.7 The interaction of different development domains

Rapoport and Rapoport (1980) used the image of a triple helix (Figure 1.2) to depict the intertwined nature of different developmental trajectories. Points where the different threads cross mark occasions where two developmental paths impact on each other. Rapoport and Rapoport distinguished between occupational, family, and leisure careers – an alternative might be the distinction between physical, cognitive, personal, and social development made by (for example) Rice (1995), or that between internal, interpersonal, and work transitions advocated by Schlossberg et al. (1995).
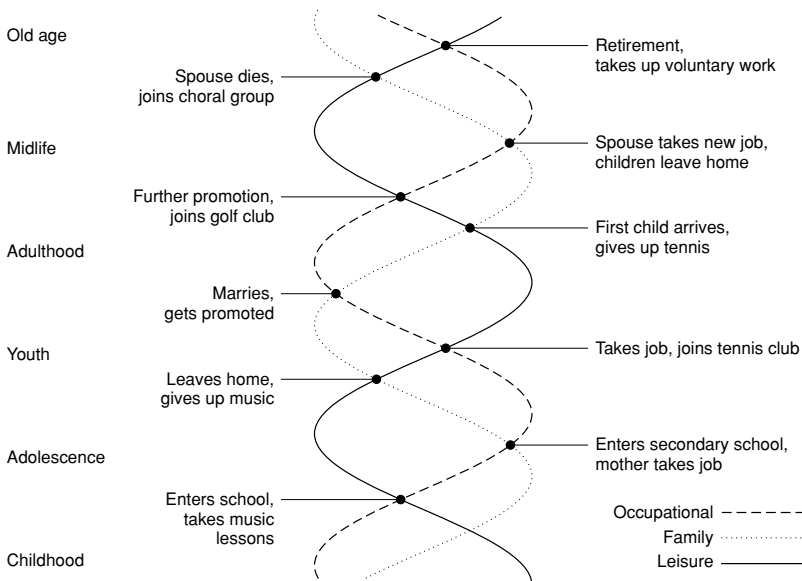
Figure 1.2 Rapoport and Rapoport's triple helix model.

3. Development shows plasticity

Plasticity refers to the modifiability of individual developmental trajectories. Not only is development multidimensional and multidirectional but its path may also, to a greater or lesser degree, be redirected by life conditions and experiences. Plasticity is distinguished from multidirectionality in that whereas the latter looks at potential individual differences, plasticity is concerned with the potential for directional change within an individual – the extent to which a developmental path can be altered once it has began. Thus, improved diet and an emotionally, intellectually and socially enriching environment can ameliorate much thwarted development in a child whose life has been characterised by multiple deprivations.

There will, however, be limits to plasticity within any particular developmental domain. Thus, some strands of development, for example, career development, will show greater potential plasticity than others, such as speech development. None the less, the emphasis on plasticity is both optimistic (we may be able to overcome or undo the effects of early problems) and cautionary (it warns against complacency because "living happily ever after" can never be assumed – we need continually to work at it).

4. Development involves both gains and losses

Development is not simply the cumulative amassing of ever more attributes and capacities. Rather, it is a joint expression of both growth (gain) and decline (loss) at all points in the life course. Thus, throughout early childhood a range of infantile reflexes and skills disappear – they have served their purpose and are replaced by other, more currently relevant faculties (Rutter & Rutter, 1993). Thus, for example, as infants grow, their body proportions change, facilitating the acquisition and refinement of walking and running skills but making it harder for them to suck their toes with ease. However, because such a skill is of doubtful long-term adaptive value, its disappearance would not usually be regretted as a loss. More generally, the process of decision making inevitably requires choosing between different options – if only between doing something and doing nothing – and, therefore, the loss of what pursuing other alternatives would have provided. Transitions – both positive and negative – almost inevitably involve severing links with aspects of our past, such that Schlossberg (1981) suggests it is generally preferable to think in terms of role exchange rather than role gain or loss. None the less, the balance between developmental gains and losses is not consistent across the life course (Baltes, 1987). Losses may become increasingly predominant relative to gains as we age because, for example, of social norms and decreases in biological and/or mental resources (Baltes & Baltes, 1990).

5. Development is the outcome of interaction between the individual and the environment

An informative metaphor of the life course is the image of a river that, whilst having a force and momentum of its own, is also shaped and modified by the terrain over and through which it flows. In turn, the river exerts its own influence on its surroundings. Indeed, it is somewhat artificial to separate the river from its habitat; a more accurate picture is obtained when they are considered as a single unit. Whilst it is similarly artificial to separate the individual from the context in which he or she is embedded, for ease and clarity of analysis they are often treated as separate entities and psychologists have traditionally focused their attention on only one or the other, that is, on either the person or their environment (Pervin & Lewis, 1978). This dichotomy between person and environment appears in a number of forms throughout developmental psychology (Lerner, 1976), underpinning, for example, debates between maturation and learning or between inherited and acquired characteristics. Whatever terms are used, the basic thrust of the issue remains the same. It is the question of nature versus nurture.

Whilst we can concentrate on either the person or the environment as the locus of the developmental imperative, we will gain a complete picture of life-span development only if we consider the interaction between the two. Psychology, with its traditional emphasis on the individual, has developed fewer tools for analysing environment contexts than for analysing the person (Kindermann & Valsiner, 1995). However, Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1979, 1992), drawing on the theories of Kurt Lewin, takes a broad and differentiated ecological view of the environment – a perspective that has also found acceptance in, for example, family process (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) and health psychology (Hancock & Perkins, 1985).

Defining the environment (Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983, p. 359) as, "any event or condition outside the organism that is presumed to influence, or be influenced by, the person's development", Bronfenbrenner (1977, p. 514) depicts the environment hierarchically as, "a nested arrangement of structures, each contained within the next". At the broadest and most encompassing level of influence are the general cultural carriers of the values and priorities of a particular society (the macrosystem). The next system comprises the major institutions of a society (the exosystem), followed by the network of interacting personal systems of which the individual is a part (the mesosystem). At the most specific level of cultural or social influence are the interactions between individuals and their immediate physical and social environment (the microsystems). These relationships are shown diagrammatically and summarised more fully in Box 1.8. Activity 1.6 suggests you create a diagram of the environmental influences in your own life.

Rather than being seen as a static framework, Bronfenbrenner's model should be seen as a dynamic model in which the various elements vary

Box 1.8 Bronfenbrenner's nested model of the environment

Bronfenbrenner's model of the environment goes beyond the immediate situation or situations that contains the individual. It considers the relations within and between the different settings in which the individual operates, and also the larger social contexts, both formal and informal, in which such settings are embedded. The model can be presented diagrammatically, as shown in Figure 1.3.
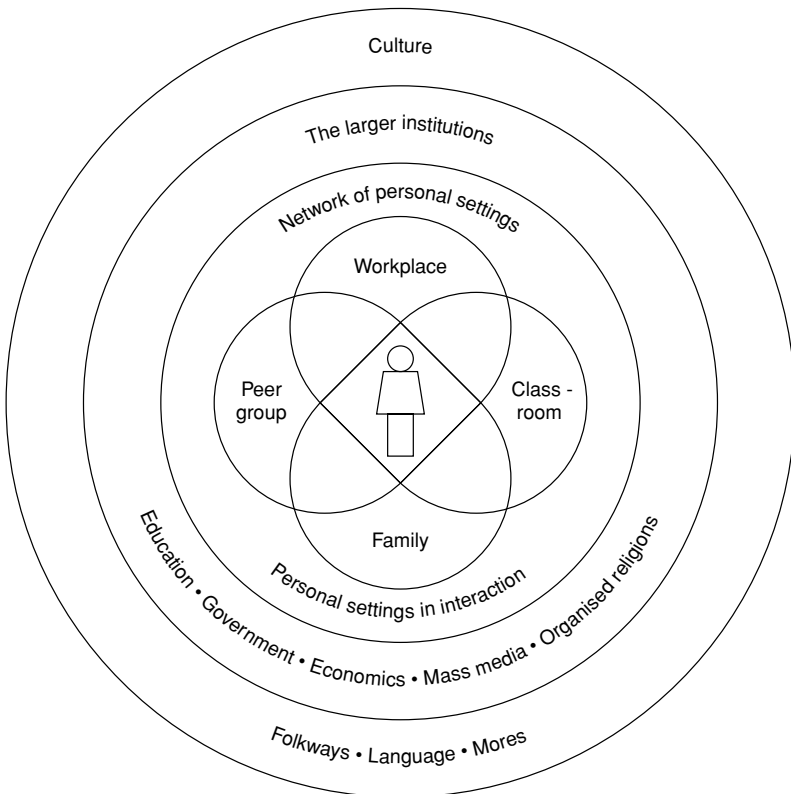
Figure 1.3 Diagrammatic representation of Bronfenbrenner's nested model of the environment (reproduced with permission from Egan, G.E., & Cowan, M.A. (1979). *People in systems: A model for development in the human service professions and education.* Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole).

Employing terminology derived from Brim (1975), Bronfenbrenner distinguishes between four environmental systems located at different levels: microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems:

- A microsystem is "the complex of relations between the developing person and environment in an immediate setting containing the person" (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 514). The setting can be defined by a number of physical and personal elements: place (e.g. home, college, office), time, physical features, activities, participants, and roles. A primary setting for most of us is our family but, through the course of life, we move into and out of a range of different settings – peer group, classroom, and workplace are singled out in Egan and Cowan's diagram above.
- A mesosystem is the relationships within a collection of interacting microsystems, "the interrelations among major settings containing the person at a particular point in his or her life" (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 514). Thus, home life and work life interact when a particular career (such as in the armed forces) results in a particular style of social life, or when considerations concerning a child's education influence whether or not a job offer in a new location is accepted or rejected.
- An exosystem is an influence system that contains microsystems, mesosystems and also specific social structures, both formal and informal, which impinge on or encompass the settings in which the person is found. "These structures include the major institutions of the society, both deliberately structured and spontaneously evolving, as they operate at the concrete level" (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515). Thus, we are not a part of the local public transport system (unless, let us say, we work for the district bus company), but the nature of that system influences the mesosystems and microsystems of which we are a part. Other exosystems include the labour market, government agencies, medical services, and the mass media.
- Macrosystems are the blueprints of micro-, meso-, and exosystems. They are "the overarching institutional patterns of the culture or subculture" (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515). Carriers of information and ideology, macrosystems are generally informal and implicit, but are made explicit through a society's recorded laws, regulations, and rules. A reflection of the values and priorities of a society, they include the principles of a society's economic, social, educational, legal, and political systems. Such manifestations of a society's culture are transmitted as norms and values through exo-, meso-, and microsystems to individuals, thereby influencing their thoughts, behaviours and opportunities.

Activity 1.6 Environmental forces

Read Box 1.8 and then draw a diagram similar to Figure 1.3 to map the environmental forces influencing your own life-span development.

in nature and significance across time and culture, and also in the course of an individual's life. Not only this, but the individual is also changing in ways that alter the meaning of the environment to him or her (Vygotsky, 1994). Environmental factors that had one meaning and played a certain role at a given age, can, over a period of time, begin to have a different meaning and to play a different role because the person has changed. Furthermore, the influence is reciprocal – the individual influences the environment as well as the environment influencing the individual. This awareness has facilitated a developing interest in exploring person–environment relations rather than exploring the person or the environment as separate entities (Lerner, 1995).

6. Development is culturally and historically embedded

The tenet that development is culturally and historically embedded follows from the proposition that development is the outcome of individual–environment interaction. This interaction can actuate changes in the individual, the environment, and the nature of their relationship. Social and cultural environments change over time, both as a result of specific events such as wars, geographic disasters, or economic recessions, which will be experienced by some generations but not by others, and also as a result of more incremental changes associated with industrialisation and postindustrialisation, such as technological developments and changing social trends. Baltes et al. (1980) refer to these as normative history-graded influences on development in that they have a strong relationship with historical time rather than chronological age. They give rise to the dubbing of eras as "the roaring 20s", "the swinging 60s" or "the caring 90s"; the "renaissance", "industrial", or "technological" age. They make the past an uncertain guide to the future.

Stewart and Healy (1989) suggest a model of how historical events might affect differentially those at different stages of individual development, thereby creating psychologically distinct cohorts. They propose that social historical events occurring during a person's childhood will influence the individual's background assumptions about life and the world, whilst those occurring during late adolescence will have an impact on conscious identity. Social historical events occurring during a person's adult years, it is suggested, will have less effect on a person's values or identity but will influence the opportunities available to them.

A focus on how influences on development change across cohorts or generations represents a longitudinal perspective on patterns of influence. Taking more of a cross-sectional stance leads to the recognition that human development varies across cultures, social class, racial, and ethnic groups. All societies rationalise the passage of life time by dividing it into socially relevant units that are expressed in normative age grade systems whereby particular duties, rights and rewards are distributed according

to chronological age or life stage (Neugarten & Datan, 1973). Despite the increasing fluidity of life cycles (Hirschhorn, 1977) and age grade systems in developed Western societies, some roles, responsibilities, and obligations remain tied to chronological age, either legally (for example, eligibility to vote, drive a car, or serve on a jury) or through social convention and expectation.

Much knowledge of life-span psychological development is limited historically and culturally to studies of adults and children in twentieth century, Western societies. Within these societies it is the middle class, white males who were first examined most thoroughly and taken as the norm against which other groups were compared. Acceptance of the historical and cultural embeddedness of much development implies caution when transferring concepts of development from one cultural group to another.

7. Life-span development is a multidisciplinary field of study

The adoption of a life-span perspective implies recognising the contribution of many academic disciplines. Psychological development needs to be seen as resulting from the impact of a number of different influence systems, each with associated fields of study. Table 1.1 details some of the most important of these disciplines, along with their major, although not necessarily sole, focus and the kinds of questions they typically raise about human development. They can, following Bronfenbrenner's model (see Box 1.8), be ordered roughly according to their proximity to the individual and, except for biology, be seen as directed at the micro-, meso-, exo- or macrosystem level. This list is not complete, however. Thus, many journalistic or literary texts and poems address questions of human development. Many, if not most, life-span psychologists adopt a broader perspective than the traditional focus indicated in Table 1.1, venturing into the other areas listed in this table and directing analysis at different levels in Bronfenbrenner's nested arrangement of influence systems. In sum, the above tenets can be described as an inclusive philosophy of "both/and" rather than "either/or". Together, they form what Baltes (1987, p. 612) refers to as a "family of perspectives" that, "together specify a coherent metatheoretical view on the nature of development". Taken separately, none of the tenets listed in Box 1.6 is unique to the life-span orientation. Their significance lies in the overall pattern, ethos, or world view that they give rise to.

Whilst all life stages are of relevance to life-span developmental psychology, there are two topics that have been especially important in the generation of a developmental psychology that covers the total life-span – first, the study of the midlife period, and second, the framework from which the experiences of old age are viewed. Both are, therefore, considered in more detail in the next two sections, although the emphasis in each section is rather different. Whilst the discussion of the midlife

Table 1.1 The contribution of different disciplines to the study of human
development (adapted from Sigelman & Shaffer, 1995)

Discipline	Major focus	Sample questions of interest
Anthropology	Macrosystem: the effects of culture on development	How much do cultural practices such as child rearing methods or care for the frail elderly differ across societies, and what are the implications? Are there aspects of development that are universal, or evident in all known cultures?
History	Exo-, meso-, or microsystem: changes in human development over the centuries	What has it been like to be a child or an elderly person in different historical periods? How is the family of today different from the family of the nineteenth century? How do major historical events affect people's lives?
Sociology	Exosystem: the nature of society and the individual's relationship to society	What does society expect of us at different ages? What roles do we play in the larger social system as we progress through life? How are we affected by social institutions and changes in these institutions?
Social psychology	Meso- or micro-system: develop-ment within its family and societal context	What is the nature of the family as an institution? How do family relationships contribute to the individual's development and adjustment?
Psychology	Microsystem: the functioning of the individual	How do mental abilities, personality traits, and social skills typically change with age? How stable or changeable are each individual's qualities, and why?
Biology	The growth and ageing of cells and organs (not included-in Bronfenbrenner's model)	How does one fertilised egg become a fully developed human being? How does the functioning of human organs change as we age?

period gives most attention to *what* happens during this phase, the discussion of old age is primarily concerned with our *interpretation* of what happens. This reflects, on the one hand, our previous ignorance about the tasks of midlife, and, on the other hand, narrow and ageist assumptions concerning the nature of old age.

Perspectives on midlife

I imagine that most of you have been asked over the years, "What are you going to be when you grow up?" I wonder if you yet know the answer. I wonder if any of us ever knows the answer. Similarly, I expect many of you have heard, or indeed made, comments about what a particular older person "used to be" or "used to do" – generally a reference to their paid occupation. Implicit in such questions and comments is the notion of adulthood as a plateau – a period of relative equilibrium and uneventfulness. It also reflects the stereotype of adulthood as the pinnacle of development, preceded by childhood – a period of preparation or apprenticeship – and followed by old age – a period of descent from this height.

Despite both this privileging of adulthood as the high point of development and the fact that adulthood is the longest phase of the life course, it has, until the last few decades, been the phase least researched by psychologists. In 1978 Levinson et al. were still able to describe adulthood as, "one of the best kept secrets in our society, and probably in history generally" (p. ix). Since that time, however, it has become the focus of academic, media, and popular attention. In retrospect it can be seen that Jaques' (1965) paper was perhaps a landmark, coining the phrase "midlife crisis" – a concept that has since found its way into an alternative stereotype of the middle years. Central to the concept of the midlife crisis is the sense of actual or impending loss – of health and vigour, of professional status, of the parental role, of life itself. However, there is evidence that it is only a minority of people who experience serious psychological problems during midlife (Chiriboga, 1989; McCrae & Costa, 1984). Change there may be, but this is often experienced as a challenge rather than a crisis. The "empty nest" stage of life – when children leave the family home – may be looked forward to with eager anticipation rather than dread (Lowenthal & Chiriboga, 1972) as a time conferring greater personal freedom and the opportunity to share more time and activities with one's partner. Far from being perceived as narrowing, a person's interests and activities in contemporary Western societies may broaden and branch out at this time (Maas, 1989), in particular allowing for an expansion of involvement in community-based and socially responsible activities. The slip in the logic of the midlife crisis concept is to equate "change" with "crisis" – a conflation that "seems to either inflate the importance of the former concept or weaken the latter" (Chiriboga, 1989, p. 117). It is better to think of midlife as a potential psychological turning point, defined by Wethington, Cooper, and Holmes (1997, p. 217) as, "a period or point in time in which a person has undergone a major transformation in views about the self, commitments to important relationships, or involvement in significant life roles".

Even the picture of the midlife as a period of challenge and change (rather than crisis) may, however, be an exaggeration. To be defined as

a turning point (Wethington et al., 1997), there needs to have been both a fundamental shift in the meaning, purpose, or direction of a person's life and also a self-reflective awareness of, or insight into, the significance of the change. Not all experiences of midlife meet these criteria and it may be that, "continuities of love, relationships, family commitments, work involvements, and personality patterns often seem more salient than any changes that occur" (Berger, 1994, p. 559). If the midlife is not to be depicted as either a plateau or a crisis, then a pivot might be a more appropriate image: the person balances, as it were, on the fulcrum of a see-saw, which may tip either way (towards decline or towards continued growth) or, alternatively, maintain its somewhat precarious equilibrium. This is the image of the midlife period that fits best within the framework of a life-span developmental psychology.

Perspectives on old age

Consistent with the view of old age as a period of descent from the peak of midlife – being "over the hill", we might say – is disengagement theory (Cumming, 1975; Cumming & Henry, 1961), in its time a very influential model. It developed out of the Kansas City Studies of Adult Life that had been launched at the University of Chicago in the mid-1950s. In the end, more that 700 subjects were studied. They were described as "stereotypical" American adults (that is, white, middle-class men and women between 40 and 90 years of age) living in a "typical" American city (Kansas, Missouri). Subjects were followed up for a period of 6 years, thus providing cross-sectional and some limited longitudinal data. Disengagement theory rests on two strands of data – one relating to changes in people's "personality" (that is, to a person's internal world) as they age, and the other to people's interaction with their environment. First, the researchers observed increasing interiority with age. As people aged they seemed to lose interest in the outside world and become more preoccupied with themselves. The second key finding prompting the development of disengagement was that by their mid-sixties the number of roles people occupied had decreased dramatically. Month by month people spent more time alone and had ever decreasing contact with other people.

From these findings Cumming and Henry (1961) concluded, first, that in old age a gradual process of disengagement occurs, and, second, that this disengagement is universal, normal and natural – the "right way" to age. A subsequent reformulation of the theory (Cumming, 1975) proposed three elements:

- shrinkage of the life space – a decrease, as we age, in both the number of roles occupied and the number of people with whom we interact
- increased individuality – a decrease in the degree to which remaining roles and relationships are governed by strict rules or expectations
- active initiation and acceptance of these changes.

However, whilst a shrinking of the life space might reflect the reality of many older people's lives, even in the original sample on which disengagement theory is based, not all older people were disengaged (Hochschild, 1975, 1976) – 22 per cent of those between the ages of 70 and 74 had "a large number of roles", over one-third had "high daily interaction with others" and nearly one-fifth had a "large lifespace". These people, however, were not described by Cumming and Henry as "engaged" but as "unsuccessful disengagers". Similarly, the finding that a number of women in their 60s had a larger lifespace than many women in their 50s was explained by the latter being "off time" (that is, early) rather than "on time" disengagers. Such interpretations have the effect of rendering disengagement theory unfalsifiable (Hochschild, 1976).

It is also possible that such social and psychological disengagement as does take place is not triggered internally but is the consequence of role loss stipulated by the rules of the institutions in which the older people participate (Crawford, 1971, 1972; Hochschild, 1975, 1976). Retirement may precipitate social and psychological disengagement (Rose & Peterson, 1965) as a result of economic loss and/or loss of employment-related associations.

Disengagement may not, therefore, be intrinsic, inevitable, or universal. What is even more controversial, however, is the value judgement that such disengagement as does occur is not only statistically normal but also desirable and "healthy". Such a stance lends the stamp of legitimacy to social policies that separate the older person from the rest of society.

In opposition to the notion of disengagement stands activity theory. The activity theory of successful ageing is associated primarily with Robert Havighurst (1963; Havighurst, Neugarten, & Tobin, 1968), but emerged almost immediately Cumming and Henry published their theory (Maddox & Eisdorfer, 1962). It proposed that maximum life satisfaction in old age is achieved when people are able to maintain into old age the activity patterns and values that typify the middle years. If relationships, activities, or roles of middle age are lost, activity theory advocates that they be replaced with new ones. This is the opposite of Cumming and Henry's (1961) position. Older people are, therefore, encouraged by activity theory to deny the onset of old age and, by disengagement theory, to embrace the restrictions of their life space that old age frequently brings.

Although activity theory encourages social policies that promote older people's involvement in society, it has been criticised as unrealistic (Bond, Briggs, & Coleman, 1993) in its implicit assumption that the maintenance of activity associated with middle age is a feasible option for all, or even the majority, given the biological changes that accompany ageing. Furthermore, the economic, political, legislative, and social structure of society excludes older people from many significant roles, again making maintenance of an activity level associated with the middle years potentially problematic.

Both disengagement theory and activity theory can be criticised for neglecting the meaning of the disengagement or activity to the person

concerned. Neugarten (1968) found that continuity of both level and type of activity was associated with high life satisfaction in old age. It could be that two individuals with identical "role counts" apply different meanings to these roles and to any disengagement from them (Hochschild, 1976). The continuity explanation of ageing argues that individuals who disengaged from active social roles and the complexities of everyday life would experience low levels of life satisfaction if they had been socially active in earlier years but not necessarily if they had, by choice, not been socially active at any point in their lives (Dreyer, 1989).

The notion of continuity can be applied to a person's internal sense of themselves as well as to their external role involvement (Atchley, 1989, 1999) – a point discussed in more detail in Chapter 7. From this perspective, optimal ageing comprises the ability to maintain at least a degree of continuity in both external roles and settings and, more importantly, in the inner sense of self and identity. The sense of self can be resilient even in the face of substantial changes in the details of everyday life. The mechanism by which this is achieved, and its role in retaining a sense of life satisfaction, is suggested in the description of successful ageing as involving selective optimisation with compensation. It is an approach that rejects the importance of disengagement or activity *per se* in favour of a focus on the meaning of such processes to the individuals concerned.

Selective optimisation with compensation describes a model of successful ageing that reflects a dynamic interplay between developmental gains and losses and between continuing developmental potential and age-related limitations (Marsiske, Lang, Baltes, & Baltes, 1995). The model, developed by Baltes and Baltes (1980, 1990; Baltes, 1993), describes a general process of adaptation that pertains throughout the life course, but which takes on particular significance during old age.

The first element, selection, refers people's decisions to concentrate their energies on life domains that are of high priority. Such selective investment of resources increases the likelihood of people achieving intended outcomes by their own activity. Environmental demands, personal skills, motivations, and biological capacity will all influence such decisions and, whilst selection implies a reduction in the number of domains in which the individual operates, it does not preclude the adoption of new or transformed domains or the formulation of new life goals. Such selection takes place at all points of decision making – to follow one path inevitably means to turn one's back on other routes.

Optimisation, the second element in the model, refers to the mechanisms and strategies – such as time, effort, and skill – that people use to enhance and enrich their potential and functioning in selected domains.

The third element, compensation, becomes operative when specific capacities are lost or become insufficient for adequate functioning. Failure and losses can be compensated for by investing more external resources in achieving the goal, or by disengaging from the goal and reinterpreting

the failure in a self-protective way (Heckhausen & Schultz, 1993, 1995). Psychological compensation might include, for example, the use of new mnemonic strategies to overcome problems of failing memory. The use of hearing aids would, by contrast, be an example of compensation by means of technology. Baltes and Baltes (1990) cite an example of selective optimisation with compensation given by the pianist, Artur Rubinstein, in a television interview. Rubinstein commented on how he conquered weaknesses of ageing in his piano playing by, first, reducing his repertoire and playing a smaller number of pieces (selection); second, practising these pieces more often (optimisation), and third, slowing down his speed of playing prior to fast movements, thereby producing a contrast that enhances the impression of speed in the fast movements (compensation).

Whilst gerontologists have long challenged the decline view of ageing, their work has frequently not been placed in the context of the total life span. The selective optimisation with compensation model is, however, applicable to all life stages. Career specialisation is an example of selection, generally during early or middle adulthood, in order to optimise the chances of career success and advancement. Selection and optimisation do, none the less, have a price. The individual will, through the selection of a particular career path, have closed off other potentially rewarding avenues – like all "developments", career specialisation involves losses as well as gains, although it may be possible to compensate for this by subsequently changing careers or by developing leisure interests in different fields. Despite its applicability to all life stages, the selective optimisation with compensation model is particularly applicable to old age. This is because, first, in old age the relative balance between losses and gains tips towards losses, and, second, because with age the absolute level of physical, psychological and/or social resources available to the individual is likely to decrease (Baltes & Baltes, 1990). For both of these reasons the need for selective optimisation with compensation is likely to increase as we become older.

With the surge of interest in adulthood as a life stage has come the recognition that development is not complete by the end of childhood or adolescence. Adding to this the view of old age as, at least potentially, a period of gain as well as loss, has led to a developmental psychology that includes the whole of the life course. Adopting a life-span perspective encourages the development of theory and research that goes beyond the psychology of particular age groups and offer instead "metamodels" and "metaconcepts" that embrace multiple life stages and events.

Organisation of the present book

The present chapter has sought to introduce readers to the life-span orientation to development and to draw attention to some of the key issues that emerge from adopting this perspective. Chapter 2 addresses some of the

issues surrounding data collection that impinge not only on studies of life-span development but on all psychological research. As will be clear from the contents page, the organisation of the present book moves away from the usual age or life stage approach. This is an attempt to avoid emphasising, perhaps unwittingly, the ordered and predictable aspects of the life course. None the less, the first part of Chapter 3 briefly reviews, as a backdrop to the remainder of the book, the main characteristics of eight age stages from infancy to late-late adulthood. The second part of Chapter 3 introduces a range of metamodels for conceptualising the life course that focus on the role of change, consistency or chaos. The central section of the book (Chapters 4 to 7) covers these metamodels in more detail. Chapter 4 deals with cumulative sequences, in particular, the work of Erikson (1980) and McAdams (1997); Chapter 5 with developmental tasks especially as identified by Havighurst (1972), Levinson et al. (1978), and Gould (1978); Chapter 6 with transitions and life events, notably the work of Hopson, Scally, and Stafford (1988), and Schlossberg et al. (1995); and Chapter 7 with dynamic continuity, as discussed by Atchley (1989) and achieved through the process of narrative construction. Undoubtedly, the material could have been organised differently but hopefully the approach adopted makes sense and will sensitise readers to key aspects of a range of theories and models of the life course. The book concludes with a chapter concerned with intervention. It seeks, first, to throw light on some of the key parameters and assumptions inherent in different approaches to life-span interventions, and, second, to raise some important issues concerning the practice and skills of intervention.

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