The Social Construction of Ages and the Ideology of Stages

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ABSTRACT

It is the thesis of this paper that the images and beliefs about
any age group in a society indicate the kind of social order
prevailing in a particular time and place. This paper critically
analyses the developmental life cycle model from a sociology of
knowledge perspective. It is argued that life's major activities and
individuals' basic needs have increasingly become compartmentalized
according to chronological age in modern Western society. This
separation of basic activities and needs into specialized age roles
is explained and legitimated by a popular belief in a model of
inherent progressive life "stages", a model largely created by social
scientists. I argue that this model has gained widespread popular
acceptance and serves to blind us to similarities of needs among
human beings of all ages, and also to each person's unique develop-
mental process. Social science in creating a model that rationalizes
age differences and age constraints as normal and healthy has
intensified the problems created by rigid age grading, and an
alternative model of the life course is offered in its place.

The concepts of the life course that increasingly prevail in our culture, particularly among the middle class, are those of developmental psychology. Social scientists and clinicians in the fields of psychology and psychiatry are conventionally considered to be the experts in the field; most research in human development is carried out by psychologists.

The developmental model of the life course reflects prevailing western cultural attitudes as well as the intellectual traditions of psychology. From this perspective characteristics typical of particular age groups are not traced to the social conditions in which these groups find themselves. Rather, the developmental effort is to "discover" those typical characteristics as "normal" or "natural" qualities inherent in the life cycle. Thus, the focus in much of developmental theory is not on the social construction of different age characteristics, but on the stage characteristics themselves. In the models of Erik Erikson, Daniel Levinson and Gail Sheehy explicit or implicit assumptions are made that there exist natural, healthy and progressive stages of life that are generated internally. Other models of developmental stages exist in the work of Jung, Freud, Piaget, Kohlberg, Loevinger, Lifton and Gould.[1]

COMPARTMENTALIZATION OF LIFE ACTIVITIES AND BASIC NEEDS

I am not arguing that these developmental models are incorrect in describing the life experiences of large numbers of people in Western industrialized societies. I suggest only that these stages are largely socially constructed by recent industrialized trends towards compartmentalization of basic life activities according to age. From early childhood, the life of the modern American is programmed. First comes a block of education continuing at least into late adolescence and increasingly into the twenties, offering an extended but basically "one chance" compulsory education. One then faces a massive block of family responsibilities and work for forty years, followed by compulsory retirement and "leisure".[2]

This fixed design is created through age role expectations. Age has become a master status, determining what major life activities one will be allowed or forced to participate in. They also

define which needs will be considered valid and deserving of fulfillment, and how these needs may be met. In our culture, people labeled as "children" are expected to play and to fulfill the impulsive needs of human beings. "Adolescents" are to explore different roles and to continue playing. The "adult" usually has the chance to work and meet the productive and nurturing needs of human beings. And the "old" are supposed to rest, and are given more opportunity to fulfill the contemplative human need. On the other hand, children and adolescents are constrained from contributing to their community, caring for others, or actively meeting sexual needs. The adult rarely finds time or release from worry enough to play and contemplate, and the older American finds few opportunities to develop intimacy, enhance generativity, or ensure economic security.

Thus, childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age are shaped by our economic, political, religious, educational and family lives. American children are largely dependent, irresponsible, playful, sexually inactive and obedient to authority because we expect them to be. American teenagers are rebellious, confused about their selves and their world, and still dependent and irresponsible as responses to the conditions in which they find themselves. Middle aged Americans are serious, responsible and dominant because their age roles require it. Older Americans are often "cranky" or garrulous in their efforts to handle their new age status.

Similiarly, developmental crises are socially constructed. One way in which societies construct predictable crises is by requiring certain age groups to give up their customary means for meeting certain needs and find new means considered more acceptable to their changing age role. For example, Erikson's premise that a crisis of intimacy unfolds in the young adult is greatly influenced by earlier taboos on sexual activity for children and the tremendous social pressures to be accepted by the opposite sex and to choose a lifelong mate to begin one's own nuclear family. On the one hand, intimacy is tremendously limited for this age group. Youth are expected to cut affectional and emotional ties with their parents, and tremendous taboos exist to meeting sexual and affectional needs from one's friends, especially of the same sex. Thus we create an age in which intimacy is on the one hand scarce, and on the other, the major expectation for movement to acceptable adulthood.

Another source of crisis is discontinuity between the expec-
tations of one age role and another.[3] The experience of crisis is
exacerbated when age segregation limits the sharing between age
groups so that little anticipatory socialization occurs. Over-
specialization in age roles also creates anxiety, tension and
eventual crisis. In gaining the opportunity to be a productive
adult, for example, which involves full time responsibilities of
worker, homeowner, parent, spouse, responsible community citizen,
and sometimes, caretaker of aging parents, one often must give up
time to oneself, the chance to lean on others occasionally, oppor-
tunity to play, express oneself, learn new skills unrelated to work,
tinker, meditate or be silly.

The lack of fit between biological changes and age role expec-
tations is a further source of crisis. For example, our society
prolongs sexual inactivity and dependence in youth who have long
been physiologically, adults.[4] Similarly, compulsory retirement
arbitrarily removes people from the work force who increasingly
are healthy productive adults.[5]

Crises are also generated when people do not fulfill the expec-
tations they held about a certain age. Some of the disillusion-
ment, ennui and sense of betrayal that Sheehy captures, I would
argue are not "internal developments" but reactions to such myths
as adolescent fun, marital bliss and the middle age peak of
success.[6] Gould charts crises in which people begin to confront
the general internalized beliefs and expectations which contradict
their experience at certain ages, such as the belief that life is
simple and uncomplicated or that there is no real death or evil in
the world.[7] Such beliefs, again, I would suggest are socially
constructed when we remove children from adult activities and deny
them access to certain aspects of reality.

Even though "developmental crises" are socially constructed,
we cannot assume that we also provide the means for their success-
ful resolution. As Robert Butler suggests in his Pulitzer prize
work on the social conditions of the aged, all too many Americans
are burned out, bored or angry before old age, stuck in a forced
identity that may no longer fit, living out their lives in noisy or
quiet desperation marked by disillusionment in their family rela-
tionships and absolescence of their work and educational skills.[8]
Is all this really "natural" or necessary?

THE IDEOLOGY OF DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES

Max Weber skillfully described the way that ideas and "world images" are created out of social structure and material interests; yet once created, they may in turn influence the course of further action.[9] One of the recurring themes of the sociology of knowledge is how ideas about groups of people taken for granted in one era come to be regarded as false by the next. For example, ideas about children vary according to time and place. Philippe Aries studied the changing conception of childhood from medieval times in Europe, when children were seen as miniature adults to the demonic child of Calvinism transformed later into the innocent child of the romantic era and the cute plaything of the Victorian upper class. At the end of the nineteenth century Freud's theories of infantile sexuality attacked the image of childhood innocence and ushered in the first of the developmental stage theories. Since this time, the leading images of the child have been supplied by scientific professionals-psychologists, psychiatrists, and other social scientists rather than by religious clergy, poets or upper class society. More recently social scientists have extended the developmental model to adulthood: The individual is increasingly defined by his/her place in a staircase of developmental stages.

It is useful to summarize the essential premises and assumptions of developmental models. Although each theory selects a different aspect as the key to understanding human development, they all agree on several points. First, there is the premise that development is self-propelled and teleological. The "push" to change comes from within the organism and the endpoint of development is implicit at the beginning. Secondly, it is assumed that the child is qualitatively different than the adult.[10] In other words, each "stage" of life is considered qualitatively different from the other, thus, implying different activities, needs, processes and institutions being particularly suited to specific age groups. Other assumptions involve progress toward increasing competence, with the individual accumulating abilities and capacities rather than replacing some skills with others. Stages are seen as sequential, that is each preceding stage necessarily building the foundation for the next. These models assume universality, with different manifestations of the same thing in different times and places. The theories allow for varying outcomes depending on how the developmental issues or crises are met, but the process is held as universal.

For example, Erik Erikson postulates a set of eight psycho-
social stages of human development which are inherent, predeter-
mined, sequential and by which society "in principle, tends to be
so constituted as to meet and invite this succession of poten-
tialities for interaction and attempts to safeguard and to en-
courage the proper rate and the proper sequence of their unfold-
ing."[11] The eight ages of human beings are the following: Basic
trust vs. Mistrust; Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt: Initiative vs.
Isolation; Generativity vs. Stagnation; Ego Integrity vs. Despair.
These states, like other developmental models, are proposed as
applicable to everyone. Erikson suggests that all of these
qualities are dealt with in some form at each stage of the life
course. However, under normal conditions, it is at the designated
stage that one experiences the critical opposition of forces upon
one, and is ready for a decisive encounter with one's environment
over the critical choices to be made.[12]

If these stages are taken as the independent variable and
the social structure taken as constituted to meet this progressive
developmental scheme, we can readily understand why different age
groups are treated so differently. This model justifies differ-
ent life activities, special age graded institutions, and differ-
ential age privileges to fulfill particular basic needs. Using
this or other similar models of the life course, we would want
to protect young people from responsible commitments and adult
choices, since they need time to explore before developing their
identity. Middle aged people need a work situation that is suffi-
ciently intense that they may distill the best of what they have
learned and offer this to future generations. Old people, accord-
ing to this model need to be relieved of heavy obligations so that
they can pull their lives together and prepare to die.

In fact, these beliefs about the life course are remarkably
salient in our everyday construction of reality. They are a major
source of images by which we selectively perceive and organize our
responses to human beings of different chronological age. Devel-
opmental psychology is popularized in how-to-parent manuals, paper
backs on self-improvement and coping with special problems such
as widowhood, job disillusionment or marriage. Stage models
dominate current texts in nursing, social work and the teaching
profession, to name a few. Life stage beliefs have also been held
by those influencing social policy.

In "expert" testimony on retirement issues before the Senate
Special Committee on Aging, I heard references to Erikson's
construct of ego integrity in old age as well as Elaine Cumming
and William Henry's construct of a stage of "disengagement" as
natural to the aging process.[13] In the Special Report of the
National Committee for Manpower Policy, youth unemployment, the
failure of youth employment training programs, and the significant
movement of youth from job to job is partly attributed to Erikson's
understanding of the movement from childhood to adulthood. It is
hypothesized in the report that young men (and the study is only of
men) between the ages of 15-17 "are not yet seriously interested in
career jobs. They are interested in money sufficient to play
a role among peers."[14] The policy implication is to create non-
career "bridge jobs" for youth and direct training programs to
older youth at around the age of 25, when the identity crisis is
over. The premise is that a lack of significant work is in a way
natural. "The most remarkable thing in the relationship between
maturing youth and education job market institutions is how badly
they fit together. Maximum concern for career education is being
devoted to students not yet ready for career decisions . . . We
must conform to the realities that cannot be changed, especially
realities like the stages of youth development as they impact on
the labor market."[15]

THE DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE MODEL IN SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE

History, Anthropology, Sociology and even medical findings
challenge the assumption that our current definitions of life
stages are natural and universal. The concept of different ages
experiencing a separate stage in life, with its own psychology and
requiring age segregated institutions, is a social creation of
modern industrial society. In pre-industrialized societies in
Europe and America, people of different chronological age did not
live in separate worlds. Play, work, love, learning and rest were
largely integrated into family and community life that consisted of
all ages. After infancy, each age had a productive role in the
family economy. Schools during Medievial Europe were for anyone
who wanted and could afford to learn latin. There was no sequence
of courses and no notion that a person could be too young or old to
study a subject.[16] The polarity of major life activities was as
lacking as age distinctions.

Over several centuries, definitions of school, family, work
and leisure changed and with it definitions of the life course. A
concept of childhood first emerged as a separate stage of life, as
Aries relates. Later an extended childhood was distinguished as
adolescence.[17] It was in the 20th century that we constructed still
another separate stage of life, that of old age. Now a new con-
sciousness is developing about stages in adulthood and middle age.
Parallel to these changes, schools became training in a prepara-
tory stage of life of those not fully socialized. Adults aban-
doned the toys, games and stories they created for themselves and
became more serious. The work ethic replaced the old sociability.
Large numbers of people moved out of the labor force and into roles
of non-producers, largely on the basis of age. The consequence,
as Giele points out, has been a division in our consciousness
between the themes of work and love, work and play, autonomy and
caring.[18] These divisions have become institutionalized in diff-
erentiated sex, social class and age roles.

Crucial to these changes was the industrial revolution. It
led to transformed attitudes toward children and the old and the
nature of work, because it changed the nature of that work. Before
the rise of factories and other large scale institutions, there was
little separation of workplace and residence, every family member
was needed to help produce, and no special spiritual meaning was
attached to work itself.[19] In early years of English industriali-
zation whole families went to work together in factories.[20] In
early American industrialization, children were considered a
"natural" part of the work force. In Massachusetts, in 1820, 43%
of all textile workers were children. In Rhode Island, the per-
centage was 55.[21] Youth employment changed rapidly in this country
after 1900, when children were no longer needed and could profit-
ably be replaced by machines. It was at this point, that child
labor in factories was prohibited and attendence in school became
compulsory. With the development of technology and automation,
came trends to limit the labor force, which this country largely
accomplished through the lengthening of schooling and legislating
compulsory retirement, creating two large groups of non-producers -
children and the old.

Aside from historical research that supplies a temporal
perspective, anthropologists have long shown us that the life
course varies tremendously across cultures. Margaret Mead's

classic study of "adolescence" in Samoa should make us question the universality of a teen-age identity crisis, for example.[22] Ruth Benedict's classic examination of continuities and discontinuities in the life course from a comparative perspective revealed the extreme lengths our culture goes to in emphasizing contrasts between the child and the adult.[23]

Similar challenges to stage models are raised by observers who have made life course comparisons of different social groups within our society. Leonard Pearlin, for example, finds that developmental issues vary immensely according to a person's socio-economic location. Likewise Margorie Fiske, in research on lower middle and middle class Americans finds no evidence to support stage theory.[24] In a review of aging in different social classes, Bengston, Kasshau and Ragan show that the major decrements normally associated with aging are uniformly experienced later on in much more attenuated fashion by the higher socio-economic groups than by the lower ones.[25] As Giele points out, the better circumstances of the higher socio-economic groups will probably help them come closer to achieving the life goals they hoped for. "Thus a notion of positive developmental stages will probably fit better the people who both symbolically and materially are able to experience aging as a process of learning and self-integration. But such stages will seem less appropriate to those, who through lack of education and material resources, will experience aging as specific and arbitrary decrements and disengagements."[26] Even medical research, such as Birren et al., suggest that many of the beliefs that we have of aging, for example, are more appropriately disease-related than age-dependent.[27]

AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL OF THE LIFE COURSE

Given the profound changes occurring in our own culture's theories of age, given the tremendous variety of age definitions across cultures, and the different experience of aging depending on such things as socio-economic status and health within our culture, we can hardly rest assured that we have at last discovered the life course as it "truly" is. Yet we pay a tremendous social and personal price for our rigid age grading and our belief that it is natural and healthy. Many children are kept in a system that denies them access to the very reality they must prepare for.[28] Adolescents may continue schooling that does not fit their needs.

Barely 50% of college entrants actually complete college, according to a 1971 study of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education.[29] At the other end of the life cycle are the old. By retirement they may be too exhausted to enjoy their leisure or they may need or want to keep working. Even if they can afford to and do wish to relax and enjoy themselves, their forty years of consecutive work have given them little preparation for creative use of leisure. And in the middle is the adult. Both ends of the life cycle press upon the middle generation. It is they who must support the education and care of the young and the retirement of the old. They have the heaviest responsibilities and expenses. Some are very angry at the old and young (as well as those in better financial condition or those "on welfare") because they see these groups reaping the benefits while they, hard pressed, are held responsible for the status quo which they did not create and for which they are asked to pay the bills. They also fear, with good reason, technological obsolescence and their own loss of employability. Many attempt escape—drinking or dropping out. But the majority continue in their jobs, in their marriages and in their familiar life styles, living much less productively and with less satisfaction than they might.[31]

Given these tremendous costs to our social and personal lives, what can we do to free ourselves of the inflexibility that extreme age grading creates? And what kind of model of human life would adequately replace the belief in standardized age crises and specialization of need fulfillment? I propose that we stop seeing people who happen to be born in a different year as significantly different than ourselves. All human beings have a very similar set of basic needs. Human beings of all ages need touching, intimacy, security, the chance to contribute, to belong, to create and play, to be reflective and quiet. We need to stop distinguishing between human beings as if their age difference were more meaningful than their human similarities, as if they were different kinds of human beings by nature, needing different things entirely. We are transforming institutions that restrict people because of sex or race. We are dmystifying cultural beliefs that blacks and women are not capable or do not want the same fulfillments in their lives as white men. Now it is time to examine the ways that our beliefs about age constrain and limit human beings in each age group from fulfilling their potentials. In sum, the developmental stage models function to justify and explain the treatment of people of different

chronological age very differently and thus, rationalize tremendous
inequalities of opportunities to learn, to play, to love, to work,
and to rest.

On an individual level, our beliefs that people of different
ages are different help us to distance ourselves from one another's
pain. As new parents in a modern hospital setting, we laugh when
we see our newborn scream in anguish and rage when slapped and held
upside down, because we have come to believe that the baby does not
feel things as we do. We consider it cute when a young child stumbles
over her words or her feet. We dismiss the refusal to conform, the
signs of protest or love among adolescents as simply teenagers "going
through a stage." And we have come to believe that old people are
naturally rigid, garrulous, senile and paranoid rather than feeling
isolated angry, sick or depressed as we all feel from time to time.
In all these ways we pretend there are great differences among us so
that we feel less powerless when we do so little to help.

At the same time that we could perceive human beings as
essentially the same, we might also note that each human being is
unique, unprecedented, unpredictable as Rene DuBos suggests. This
is true for biological, psychological and sociological reasons. The
world is perceived and interpreted through each individual's unique
physiology.[33] Each individual experiences a different rhythm and
sequence of life events, interpretations, and the combination and
integration of these. And modern society is so differentiated that no
coherent synchronized set of transitions occurs for all people of a
given age. Individuals will therefore encounter quite different ex-
periences, and similar experiences as different times, and will be un-
likely to negotiate the developmental process in some standard way.[34]
Thus, we need to change our lock step life career patterns and our
model for understanding human life to allow for more individual
variance, change and flexibility. We would need social policy that
decreases trends toward more compartmentalization of learning, work,
and leisure and increase the trends towards having basic life activities
to be a part of all age groups' choices, running concurrently and con-
tinuously throughout the life course. This would involve a major
overhaul of each of our major institutions. It also would involve a
new way of perceiving and valuing age and human life.

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