Psychological development refers to growth and progress on the full gamut of human dimensions across the lifespan. The study of psychological development has been concerned with questions such as: What develops?; In what sequence?; Are there identifiable stages and phases of development?; What processes underlie developmental change?; Are there general principles of development and change that apply across all ages?; What factors enhance or retard development?; What explains inter-individual differences?; and To what extent is development socially and culturally determined? An engagement with the literature reveals a range of very different theoretical and empirical approaches to the above questions. Furthermore, the questions that are posed are typically framed within a particular theoretical position and/or contain basic theoretical assumptions about development.

In the developmental literature there are two broad fields of enquiry: one concerned with the development of cognitive and intellectual capabilities across the lifespan; the other concerned with social and emotional development or one’s sense of self or identity. The early research in both these fields of enquiry focused on child development – arguably because of the need to understand children’s learning given the growth of education in the latter part of the nineteenth century and also because of a commonly held belief that adult maturity was the end-point of development.

Nowadays a great deal of research has been undertaken on adult development. Once again this may be connected with the need for adults to engage in lifelong learning in the context of continuing technological, social and organisational change and the subsequent increasing educational provision for adults in formal and informal settings throughout life. A common thread in the developmental literature, then, has been the application of developmental theories across the entire lifespan. In many ways the application of developmental theories to adults has raised new questions and issues that have helped shape thinking in relation to the development of children. For example, in adult developmental research there has been a general move away from identifying common sequences of predictable stages and phases, which characterised earlier attempts to document development. Instead the emphasis is now placed on the impact of social and historical factors in accounting for multidirectional change and variability in life trajectories (see for example, Smith and Baltes, 1999; Elder, 1998). Research into child development has followed suit, paying greater attention to the social and historical factors that influence the direction and timing of development. Of course this trend is also a response to the increasing need to recognise cultural diversity among those attending educational institutions. I am not suggesting that the pragmatic needs of educators alone drive the theory construction of developmental psychologists in a direct and explicit way, however,
it is clear that broad social concerns, including those of educators, provide a context in which it is possible for developmental theorists to raise new questions and issues in their research. It is also worth noting that the education sector is a major user of the research on developmental psychology and this is understandable given that both education and developmental psychology have a common focus on learning.

**Cognitive and intellectual development**

As noted above, much of the early work on cognitive and intellectual development focused on child development, either documenting age norms and changes in IQ or the cognitive capabilities at different ages and stages. The construction and use of standardised tests for a range of capacities that can be measured, such as IQ and aptitude, is referred to as the psychometric approach. This approach has served to establish age-graded norms across the population. The psychometric approach provides a descriptive account of ‘normal’ development and has been used as a diagnostic tool and as a means of identifying and grouping cohorts of children in the school system. Indeed, this was the motivation behind the first IQ tests developed by Binet – to provide a means of identifying the capabilities of children in order to stream them in the education system. It should be noted here that the advent of universal education meant easy access to large cohorts of students of similar age in the education system – this provided both an opportunity to develop standardised tests and a reason to do so. Over the years there has been much debate concerning the determinants of IQ. IQ has featured prominently in the nature–nurture debates, the issue being the extent to which IQ is inherited or capable of being nurtured. These debates were informed by studies of identical twins raised apart, which was seen as a ‘natural’ experiment whereby ‘nature’ (ie. one’s genetic make-up) is controlled and ‘nurture’ (ie one’s environment) is varied. The higher correlation in IQ among identical twins raised apart as compared with siblings raised apart was offered as evidence of the inheritance of IQ. And this is good evidence. However, there is plenty of evidence showing that educational opportunity and other social factors, such as the educational level of parents, also has an impact on IQ. And so IQ is influenced by both inherited capacities and social factors, and this is pretty much where the debate stands today.

An interest in adult intellectual development did not really occur until the middle of the twentieth century. Basically, there appear to be three models of intellectual development after maturity. One model, the ‘stability’ model, assumes that adult intelligence remains essentially stable after maturity. The result of intellectual progress during childhood is the attainment of mature forms of reasoning and thinking, which are then applied throughout the adult years. By contrast, the decrement model postulates that there is a gradual decrease in the ageing individual’s capacity to utilise and organise information, presumably the result of some kind of biological deterioration. Finally, the decrement with compensation model accepts the notion of biological deterioration, but also emphasises the compensatory effects of accumulated experience during adult life (Labouvie-Vief, 1985; Baltes et al., 1999).

One of the most influential pioneering theories in adult intelligence was proposed by Horn and Cattell (1968). They separated intellectual ability into two general factors labelled ‘fluid’ and ‘crystallised’ intelligence. Fluid intelligence is measured by tests of complex reasoning, memory and figural relations – tests which are said to be ‘culturally’ neutral and thereby linked with universal, biological development. Crystallised intelligence is measured by tests on information storage, verbal comprehension and numerical reasoning, abilities that are normally associated with experience, education and acculturation. Horn and Cattell’s research reveals that, from the teenage years onwards, there is a decrement in fluid intelligence and an increment in crystallised intelligence. The net result is that intellectual functioning remains relatively stable with age – there is simply a shift in the balance between fluid and crystallised intelligence.

Much of the debate about adult intellectual capacity has centred on how to measure and/or interpret the consistent finding that there is decline with age in performance on ‘fluid’ type psychometric tests. In a twenty-one year study, comprising a number of independent cross sectional studies, Schaie (1983) reported that intelligence does decline with chronological age, but not until relatively later in life,
However, where decline is found, it can normally be reversed through training (Schaie and Willis, 1986). More recent findings from the Berlin Aging Study support the original dual–process model of intelligence (i.e. the fluid and crystallised model or the ‘mechanics’ and ‘pragmatics’ of intelligence respectively), but point to the overwhelming mediating factor of sensory and sensory–motor decline:

When it comes to the hardware-like mechanics and the speedy and accurate functioning of basic mechanisms of information processing, old age takes its toll. Constraints and losses associated with the mechanics of intelligence are linked closely to biological and physical indicators of functioning. Conversely, whereas the lifelong contributions of life history and cultural factors to the pragmatics of intelligence continue to provide an advantage in terms of absolute level of functioning, they do not protect against the rate of decline and loss of intellectual capacity. (Smith and Baltes, 1999: 62–63)

In this model of intellectual development, successful development is defined as ‘the conjoint maximisation of gains. … and the minimization of losses’ (Baltes et al., 1999: 482).

Such studies, although reporting a decline in old age, offer a much more optimistic view of adult intellectual capacity, largely through the recognition of the compensatory effects of the ‘pragmatics’ of intelligence, especially in middle adulthood. This is consistent with commentators such as Labouvie-Vief (1980, 1995) who have long argued that we need to reconceptualise what we mean by ‘intelligence’ in its broader sense of ‘adaptability’. It is also consistent with the work that has been carried out on ‘practical intelligence’, which emerged in the 1980s and which distinguished between our capacity to solve abstract, formally constructed problems and everyday problems (see Sternberg et al., 2000). This is important work because it repositions intelligence as adaptation to the environment, rather than the ability to solve abstract, decontextualised problems.

A separate line of enquiry into psychological development has sought to identify the development of cognitive structures that underlie our growing capacity to understand our world. It is primarily associated with the work of Jean Piaget, who documented the child’s growing understanding of abstract physical concepts such as number and volume, and abstract social concepts such as moral judgment. He did not use standardised tests that measured intellectual or cognitive functioning. Instead, he based his work on careful observation of the problem-solving strategies used by children and made inferences about the underlying cognitive structures that account for their reasoning. While working with Binet in Paris on standardised tests of intelligence, Piaget noticed that younger children provided answers that reflected a different quality to their thinking than older children. It was not that they were at the low end, and the older children at the high end, of a continuous scale, rather that they thought on a different dimension altogether. Much of his life’s work grew out of this initial insight. Piaget’s concept of intelligence was couched in terms of adaptation to the environment. We develop schemes (or structures of reasoning) to understand our environment. Early in life these schemes are simple reflexes such as sucking and grasping, but they develop into more sophisticated schemes through the biological drive towards equilibration, which is the balance between our experience of the world and our internal schemes for understanding the world. The mismatch between experience and our understanding results in disequilibrium, which can only be resolved by changing our representation of our experience of the world to fit our existing understanding (he referred to this as assimilation) or by changing our understanding to fit our experience of the world (he referred to this as accommodation). This process results in Piaget’s celebrated description of a series of stages of developmental progress during childhood: the sensori-motor, pre-operational, concrete-operational and finally the formal-operational stage (see Flavell, 1963: for a thorough account).

As with many developmental theories, Piaget was mainly concerned with childhood development towards mature adult thought. Subsequent work in this tradition has sought to extend the stages of development beyond the formal operational period to include one or more stages of ‘post-formal’ thought.
(see for example, Commons and Richards, 1984). Generally, this work points to the limitations of pure logic in solving real world problems and as such it is consistent with both the ‘practical intelligence’ and ‘pragmatics’ of intelligence literature.

Early critiques of cognitive structuralism focused on its disregard for context. For example, Piaget’s emphasis on an invariant (and universal) sequence of stages leading to mature formal operational thought and his apparent disregard for psychological phenomena that defy structural analysis (feelings, beliefs, values, imagination, desire) attracted at the time a flood of what may be called ‘ideology’ critiques (see Broughton, 1981). Basically, he was portrayed as presenting an asocial view of development without reference to the role of historical, social and cultural factors. But, as Biddell points out, it is important to distinguish between Piaget’s stage theory and his constructivist theory of knowledge and not to portray him solely as presenting an asocial view of development. Biddell concedes that Piaget’s ‘stage theory is based on an interactionist metaphor in which the relation between the person and the social world is conceived as an individual standing apart from and interacting with a social environment’ (1992: 307). In contrast ‘Piaget’s constructivism implicitly supports a contextualist approach to knowledge development and stands in contradiction to the individualism of this stage theory’ (ibid). It is Piaget’s constructivism (especially through the twin concepts of assimilation and accommodation) that links him to Vygotsky and ultimately to contemporary post-Vygotskian theories of situated and/or distributed cognition.

It is of course Vygotsky (1978) who is seen from a contemporary standpoint as providing a more complete account of the role of historical, social and cultural factors in development. Daniels (2001) provides a detailed account of how Vygotsky emphasises the sociocultural nature of human activity and development. The concept of mediation is central to an understanding of how culture enters into psychological processes. Basically Vygotsky’s thesis is that relations between subjects and objects are mediated by both signs and tools.

A most essential difference between sign and tool … is the different ways they orient behavior. The tool’s function is to serve as the conductor of human influence on the object of activity; it is externally oriented; it must lead to changes in objects. It is a means by which human external activity is aimed at mastering, and triumphing over, nature. The sign, on the other hand, changes nothing in the object of a psychological operation. It is a means of internal activity aimed at mastering oneself; the sign is internally oriented … . The mastering of nature and the mastering of behavior are mutually linked, just as man’s alteration of nature alters man’s own nature … . One thing is already certain. Just as the first use of tools refutes the notion that development represents the mere unfolding of the child’s organically predetermined system of activity, so the first use of signs demonstrates that there cannot be a single organically predetermined internal system of activity that exists for each psychological function.

(\textit{Vygotsky, 1978: 55})

He goes on to explain how the interpersonal becomes intrapersonal in the child’s development:

Every function in the child’s development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first between people (interspsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals … . The internalisation of socially rooted and historically developed activities is the distinguishing feature of human psychology.

(\textit{Vygotsky, 1978: 57})

How the developing person is seen in relation to historical, social and cultural factors is of course a continuing source of disagreement and debate within psychology. This is likely to continue, given that psychology does not have a monopoly on the kinds of questions it posed about human beings in the society.
in which they live. Emerging sociological and philosophical analyses will invariably have an impact on how psychologists approach their work. This is very clear when it comes to the development of identity, to which I now turn.

The development of identity across the lifecourse

In philosophical, religious and literary contexts the life course is commonly described in terms of a sequence of stages through which one progresses, at least ideally. For example, Aristotle proposed a three-stage model, Solon divided life into nine seven-year stages, Confucius identified six stages, The Sayings of the Fathers (from the Talmud) contain fourteen stages, and Shakespeare, of course, has contributed his well-known seven stages.

The psychological literature, too, contains propositions about the stages, tasks or phases of life. What are the major influences on identity formation? To what extent and how does identity change in the adult years? Can we say anything general about the way identity changes and develops as a part of the human condition irrespective of gender, history, culture, and race? Part of the answer to these questions depends on what is meant by the term, ‘identity’. Rather than provide a definition of identity at the outset, this section proceeds towards such a definition. In the first part, some well-known attempts in psychology to delineate the stages and phases of development are described and analysed. The second part outlines some ways in which our particular society and culture shapes our identity. The third describes a way of thinking about identity formation and change as both a psychological and social construction.

The stage, phase and task models of adult development that are most frequently cited are those of Maslow (1968); Havighurst (1972); Erikson (1959); Levinson (1978, 1996); Gould (1978); Loevinger (1976); and Labouvie-Vief (1995). Each of these models presents a descriptive account of development, an explanation of the fundamental processes underlying developmental progress, and a clear view of the end point of development: the mature, fully developed, psychologically healthy person. All these approaches attempt to chart the life course in terms of a sequence of phases or stages: periods of stability, equilibrium and balance alternate, in a largely predictable way, with periods of instability and transition (see Table 20.1 for an illustration from Erikson, 1978).

Accepting for the moment that the life course is indeed quite predictable and stable: what is the source of this predictability and stability? Is it the result of a natural psychological unfolding or maturation? Or is it the result of the living out of a set of largely social expectations that vary from one society to another and from one historical period to another? If the latter, to what extent do social and cultural groupings construct and then prescribe the life course patterns of their members? The early models of identity development did not, according to various detractors, sufficiently address the historical and social structuring of identity. However, even the most casual observation reveals that age-graded norms, statuses and roles are a

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Source: Based on Erikson (1978).
feature of social organisation. In different cultures and historical periods there are different conceptions of the stages of life, their boundaries, dimensions and divisions. There are different conceptions of what it means to be a fully developed person, the processes through which development occurs, and the significant tasks and marker events in life. As a basic social institution, the life course may either impose external constraints on individual action (for example, sanctions for not behaving in an age-appropriate way), or, more importantly, shape the expectations that we have about the proper progression of events and roles during the life course, and ultimately the way in which we experience ourselves and our relations with others.

It is worth noting some features and propositions about age structuring and how it relates to the life course of individuals. First, age structuring is influenced by history and culture. The life course is structured in different ways in different historical periods and in different cultures. While the fact of age structuring may be universal, it takes particular forms in different cultures and historical periods. In this sense the way in which age is structured is arbitrary, rather than ‘natural’. Second, age structures, like other social structures such as gender and class, become embedded in the psychology of individuals. Therefore an understanding of the life course requires an understanding of how individuals engage, and struggle with, socially prescribed age categories. Third, socially constructed age categories change over time, as do the patterns of individual lives. But although individual and social change interrelate, they are not necessarily synchronised, which means there can be disjunctions between individual and social change (for example, an individual becoming more concerned with moral and ethical issues in a society that is becoming increasingly materialist and competitive).

In Western societies there is a history of state intervention and regulation that serves to maintain common life trajectories. The state legalises, standardises and provides institutional support for entry into and exit from formal education, employment, marriage, and even life itself (through birth and death certificates). There is a range of supporting mechanisms that distribute resources and opportunities to ensure an orderly progression through the various age categories and divisions within them. For example, there are regulations concerning the commencement, progression and termination of schooling; funds are provided to assist with the immediate transition from secondary schooling to post-secondary education; scholarships, apprenticeships and job search schemes are often targeted towards a particular age category; mandatory retirement is combined with superannuation and other retirement schemes; and there are a host of welfare services targeted towards particular age groups. Non-state-controlled institutions also spread opportunities and resources to enhance an individual’s progression through a socially approved, age-based timetable of ‘successful’ career, family or personal development. This institutionalisation of age, and the co-option of society at large, makes it highly unlikely that individuals can chart alternative life courses, at least without considerable financial or personal cost.

There are of course forces that are moving against the continued institutionalisation of the life course, such as demographic and technological change, changes in male/female relations, together with changes in the way in which work is organised. Thus, the extent to which society continues to be age-graded in post-modern times is certainly open to question. However, the essential point is that the state clearly has an interest in demarcating the roles, responsibilities and demands made upon different age categories.

In order to function effectively as members of society we need to identify correctly, say, the gender and age categories to which others belong and to assist others in identifying us as belonging to a particular gender or age category. This is because our interactions with others are partly based upon presumptions about gender or age. In the instance of gender, there are (among children at least) very few observable physical differences in most public situations. The signifiers used to position a child as a boy or girl are dress, hairstyle, topics of conversation, choices of activity and such like. The physical differences associated with age categories are perhaps more obvious, but nevertheless the same types of signifiers apply. Thus, we speak of age-inappropriate dress, hairstyle and activity in much the same way that we speak of these in relation to gender.
Furthermore, as with gender, one develops a posture and attitude towards oneself as belonging to an age category. By this we mean the taking on of psychological characteristics deemed to be appropriate for a given age category (for example, in old age it may be fragility, dependence, forgetfulness) which help govern relations with other age categories. Failure to act in an age-appropriate manner is seen to be deviant by others, who at best will react with mild amusement, perplexity, or perhaps a few patronising comments, and at worst with anger, fear or moral outrage.

The concern here is not with why age categories seem to be a feature of social organisation, but rather with how we come to constitute ourselves as ‘belonging’ to a particular age category. To begin with it seems reasonable to treat ‘age category’ as a social phenomenon quite separately from age as a biological phenomenon. While it is invariably linked to chronological age, as a social phenomenon, it is historically and culturally specific. How, then, is ‘age category’ transmitted to new generations and through what processes can change occur in the way in which it is constituted? The position adopted here is that social phenomena are not transmitted genetically; they are transmitted socially and symbolically.

In the life course of any individual, social phenomena, like gender and age category, are historical givens. They are arbitrary in the sense that they are human creations, but they are nevertheless experienced as objectively real in much the same way that physical objects are experienced as real or natural. But, whereas the physical world is experienced through perceiving and acting on things, the social world is experienced through interactions with others and through exposure to social institutions. In a sense, we come to know the physical world, but we come to be the social world.

It is by interacting with others, and reacting to or participating in social institutions, most importantly through symbolic processes, that we come to constitute ourselves as social beings. Accepting this position, our argument is that there is a discourse pertinent to ‘age category’ in much the same way that there is a discourse pertinent to ‘gender’. Like ‘gender’, ‘age category’ is sustained as a seemingly natural element of one’s personal identity and subjective experience by learning the discursive practices in which all people are positioned on an age-graded continuum (see Davies, 1989). Furthermore, ‘gender’ and ‘age category’ intersect. The ‘male’ life course is constructed very differently from the ‘female’ life course and gender-based relations of dominance and power are embedded in the discourse associated with age categories. (See Gilligan, 1986).

If discourse lies at the heart of the process, how is change possible? It seems that it is only possible through adopting new and different forms of discourse. This is precisely the issue addressed by a number of contemporary psychologists seeking to understand identity change and development from a narrative perspective (Burman, 1994; Burman and Parker, 1993; Gergen, 1997; McAdams, 1996; Shotter and Gergen, 1989; White, 1989). The work of McAdams serves to illustrate the tenor of this approach.

For McAdams (1996) identity is the sense of unity, coherence and purpose in life: it is the experience of a continuous, coherent self, a self that remains essentially the same from one situation to the next and over time; and that is unique, integrated, different from, but related to, other selves. In contemporary Western society, the construction of such a self has become problematic, mainly because of the constantly changing and multiple choices that we face. It is no longer true that our identity is prescribed or conferred, rather selves are made:

one’s very identity becomes a product or project that is fashioned and sculpted, not unlike a work of art moreover … the developing self seeks a temporal coherence. If the self keeps changing over the long journey of life, then it may be incumbent on the person to find or construct some form of life coherence and continuity to make this change make sense.

(McAdams, 1996: 296–97)

In this view, identity is essentially a psychosocially constructed narrative that integrates the reconstructed past, perceived present, and anticipated future: in short it is a story of the self. In McAdams’s view, identity is
self-reflexively authored, made, explored and constructed (note the contrast with the more postmodern view of selves as residing in narratives that surround and define them – see Gergen, 1997). This view led him to examine the life course as a narrative or story. He defined the life story formally as: ‘an internalised and evolving narrative of the self that incorporates the reconstructed past, perceived present, and anticipated future’ (p. 307). It is a psychosocial construction in the sense that it is jointly authored by the person and his or her defining culture. Life stories are based on fact, but they go beyond mere facts by rendering past, present and future meaningful and coherent in sometimes imaginative ways. The basic function of a life story is integration – it binds together disparate elements of the self. Based on an analysis of over 200 accounts of life-story interviews, McAdams (1997) identified the following common features:

- **Narrative tone** – the emotional tone or attitude, e.g. pessimism, optimism, tragedy, romance, irony.
- **Imagery** – the metaphors and similes that provide the narrative with a distinctive feel.
- **Theme** – the kinds of things that are pursued in the narrative, e.g. power, love, recognition, achievement.
- **Ideological setting** – a moral stance or view of the ‘good’ from which judgements are made of one’s life and the lives of others.
- **Nuclear episodes** – scenes and events that stand out in the narrative, normally high points or low points or turning points in the narrative.
- **Imagoes** – an idealised personification of the self, drawing on archetypal characters and contemporary role models.
- **The generativity script** – the creation and nurturing of a positive self for future generations. (McAdams, 1997: 65–71)

The above features provide a way into an understanding of the life story. But of particular interest is the developmental trajectory of life stories. How do life stories change over time? McAdams sees the creation of a self-defining life story beginning in late adolescence or early adulthood and continuing through most of the adult years. As a first approach to the construction of a narrative in early adulthood, the typical move is to organise personal values into an ideological system and to select key scenes or moments from the past that explain one’s contemporary and anticipated future self. In their 20s and 30s, many contemporary adults fashion stories around various social roles (imagoes), for example caregiver, partner, worker. Midlife brings with it concerns for harmony and reconciliation in the life story and the beginning of a creation of the end of the narrative. Identity formation may turn now to issues of generativity as people begin to define themselves in terms of their legacies. The point being made by McAdams is that, for the most part of adult life, life stories are continually under construction, but that different themes and concerns emerge at different ages, and there are periods of intensive and less intensive ‘identity work’ or ‘selfing’. Moreover, there are no dominant stories, but rather stories associated with the diverse ways in which contemporary adults live their lives. He did however stipulate the qualities of the ‘good’ story, at least from a mental health perspective. The elements of such a story are:

- coherence – the extent to which the story makes sense in its own terms
- openness – tolerance for change and ambiguity
- credibility – grounded in the real world
- differentiation – complex and multifaceted
- reconciliation – harmony and resolution amongst the multiplicity of self
- generative integration – a sense of being a productive and contributing member of society.

In many ways McAdams’s approach is not too dissimilar to the life stage and phase theories mentioned earlier; after all, one of the main research tools used was the biographical interview, and so the raw data for such theories were the stories that people told about themselves. The main difference is that McAdams is not
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attempting to discover the ‘true’ story of adult identity development: there are multiple ways in which people find coherence and continuity and meaning in their lives. Also, it is not as if individuals ‘discover’ their ‘true’ inner selves through the narratives that they construct. It is not the true or authentic self which is discovered through reflection on one’s life experience, instead experience is viewed as a story that can be reinterpreted and re-assessed. Indeed, because the self remains situated in history and culture, it is continually open to re-inscription and reformulation. But this doesn’t mean that we can ascribe any meaning to our experiences or that we can create any identity we choose. We need to give a plausible reading to our experiences, one that is credible and that, ideally, contains the essential elements of the ‘good’ story described above.

On this account, identity is best understood as the self’s sense of continuity, coherence and meaning. Identity work, or ‘selfing’, is an ongoing project in the adult years and it involves the construction and continual reconstruction of narratives or stories about one’s life. Such narratives are jointly authored by the individual and his or her culture. These narratives may reveal different concerns at different stages or phases of life, but these differences are strongly linked to cultural and historical differences. Ultimately, any practices that impact or intervene in the process of identity work, such as education, counselling and various kinds of therapy, must necessarily make judgements about what constitutes the ‘good’ life story – just as they must make judgements about what constitutes intellectual and cognitive progress.

References


**Acknowledgements**

This chapter draws, in part, from the following previous publications of the author: