HANDBOOK OF RESEARCH ON ADULT LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

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Chapter 3

Models of Adult Development in Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Theory and Erikson’s Biopsychosocial Life Stage Theory

Moving to a More Complete Three-Model View

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In a discussion that occurred more than 20 years ago, Urie Bronfenbrenner expressed concern about the increasing trend of fragmentation in the field of human development:

I am reminded in this connection of a well-known fable by the Russian fabulist Krilov, in which a man is speaking of his visit to the zoo and all the creatures that he saw there: ‘The tiny flies and beetles, the ladybirds, jewel-like butterflies, and insects with a head no bigger than a pin. What marvels!’ ‘And did you see the elephant?’ asked his friend. ‘Oh, do they have one there? I guess I must have missed the elephant.’ (Bronfenbrenner, quoted in Bronfenbrenner, Kessel, Kessen, & White, 1986, p. 1219)

Having reviewed theory and research for the prior 100 years, Bronfenbrenner’s point was that progress in the discipline of human development throughout the years could be charted by its increasing tendency to look “more and more at less and less” (p. 1219). Grand theories and models had been set aside, the idea of goals or end points toward which development preferentially moves had been abandoned, and tendencies to examine relationships between the broader sociocultural environment and individual development had been jettisoned. Scholars seemed to be “losing their nerve,” becoming mere “riders” on a “deconstructionist, postpositivistic, radically relativistic train” (Kessen, in Bronfenbrenner et al., p. 1218).

Now, into the 21st century, partially due to political pressures identified by Bronfenbrenner and colleagues, we study ever narrower and more minute aspects of human qualities to the extent that the entire, highly complex human who advances in developmental space and time seems a mere shadow. This applies to the human attributes we consider in isolation one from another and to the overarching models we use to guide our theory, research, and practice. The end result is a reduction of the entire organism to a partial, lopsided view, a view that varies depending on the lens in use.

Looking to the overarching theoretical models that guide developmental theory and research, we have tended to reduce our models of the complex human “elephant” to either the genetic, biological level (the genome model), the contextual level (the cultural, environmental niche model), or the psychodynamic level (the life stage model). These models vary in view, scope, and level of analysis, but in describing the human each view is only one-third complete. All three models contain data that are necessarily integrated within each person’s unique developmental self, one that is historically cumulative and uniquely individual.

In this chapter we take up Krilov’s elephant as applied to models of human development. Since a single chapter must be content limited, I consider two of the three models that, given today’s knowledge, comprehensively define the adult. These are the
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contextual and the life stage models. I explore these from the perspectives of Urie Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological framework and Erik Erikson’s biopsychosocial framework. But first, we explore the reductionistic tendency, one that with respect to examining adults in their lives has a long history of viewing adults as static, non-developmental organisms.

This chapter includes four sections. These are, first, discussion of the tendency in human development to see from within one or another model’s lens and the necessity of forging a more comprehensive viewpoint. In this I explore the lessons we might learn from the human tendency to engage in reductionistic, single view thinking. The second section considers contemporary definitions of adult learning and development in their reciprocal associations and their place within models of development. The third section focuses on the contextual and life stage models on the basis of premises established by Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological and Erikson’s biopsychosocial theories. I note here that both of these theorists focused on the essential role of environmental contexts in shaping, fostering, and thwarting individuals’ development, even though Erikson has become known primarily for his life stage concepts. Thus, in this section, considerations of Erikson’s thought shifts, first showing his place as a sociocultural contextualist, then elaborating his contextual and stage concepts, and finally focusing on the importance of life stages as essential fuel for current and ongoing development. The concluding section addresses the need to integrate data from all three models of human development—contextual, life stage, and biogenetic—into one metamodel. This is the most comprehensive way forward in our theoretical and research initiatives.

Models as Ways of Seeing in Human Development

As the human cognitive apparatus arranges material in its mental file system, certain content or views predominate while others are moved to the background. The background content then becomes invisible or inconsequential when compared to the predominant view. Examples of this are found in ambiguous figures in which the viewer sees one form (e.g., a vase) as the darkly inked foreground, and other forms (e.g., two persons) when focusing on the pale background. In the psychological realm, in focusing on the contemporary foreground with its influential perspective and data, we frequently fail to consider or discard older views or findings. We often do this not because such perspectives are now incorrect but because the data on which they were based have not been brought up to contemporary times or because such understandings have become so incorporated into our knowledge base that we seem to think we do not need to focus specifically on them. Seeing the persuasive foreground we miss the background, even though both are essential to the complete picture.

In human development today, we focus largely on the more obvious foreground, the contexts that shape development. Adult contexts are the personal, highly influential environments (e.g., family milieu, work colleagues and culture, civic commitments and associations), that are nested within the larger macro contexts of life (e.g., the sociocultural, political, ideological environments). Together these contexts form one essential part of our human model, a part that appears discrete and objective, and thus comparatively easy to study. However, if we focus rather differently, we see the background image. This background image represents psychosocial, evolving, life span adults who, while living in various development-shaping prior and current contexts, cannot be extracted from their unique structural, interconnected lives. They are composite humans in the inextricable flow of their complete existence, life-narrative-integrated adults, with their own
highly personal, subjective and shifting, content that is difficult to study. This content, expressed through variable contexts, occurs in the stages of adult life; the resolutions of all prior developmental stages exist within each later stage.

Some might claim that the apparently more objective, contextual model represents that which is external to the adult, while the subjective, biopsychosocial life stage model holds content that is internal to the individual. Yet, it has become increasingly clear that the seemingly objective, external context also lives inside and informs our subject, the adult, and his or her sense of the past, present, and future. Thus, for example, a brilliant youth who has the innate talent and interests to become a physician, experiences the ramifications of poverty and lack of acquaintance with professional roles and available resources. As such, access to education leading to a medical degree is denied. The social context, both consciously and unconsciously, is internal to his psyche and sense of possibility. Only 20 to 40 years later, might this person learn of the educational and professional resources that had earlier been available.

We know that development is engineered by genetics in interaction with the environment and a volitional human, by the prenatal and intrauterine environment, by parents or caretakers who have experienced their own developmental positives and negatives, and by resource rich, mediocre, or poor contexts and role models for growth and development in infancy, childhood, and throughout all of the remainder of the life span. Development is also shaped by self-identified and planned futures. Thus as we conceptualize and investigate the adult developmental script, we cannot do other than understand that if we are to appreciate an adult in her or his development, we must understand the forces that have shaped and continue to shape that chronologically mature person, the genetic equipment that was in place from the beginning and which is expressed or dampened over time, the nurturing others and contexts in one unique life, and the way our adult sees the self in the past, present, and future.

Lessons to Learn from Reductionistic Thinking

World Views and Lens-Constricted Models

Sometimes we see things differently because new methods and fresh data undermine prior understandings. Sometimes we look at data differently or are led to see differently because of thinkers who have focused our attention, placing new ways of seeing phenomena on center stage. At other times we see differently because the way we live in the world changes, perhaps suddenly. For example, few U.S. residents see their place in the world today the same as they did prior to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Adults’ thoughts are always related to their perception of history (their own and global history), to the “main currents” of the era, to the experience of one life and period, to the existing “moral climate,” and to the “lineage” of thought and discoveries that have occurred up to that point in time (Erikson, 1975, p. 81, 255, 145 respectively). Thus our world view, in our societally nested lives and in the way we see phenomena in our disciplines, is a distorted rendition of reality. We construct reality and in so doing, ours is not an “immaculate perception” (Nietzsche, 1885/1967). Our mind’s eye captures and filters for us, and in the final analysis the Talmud is correct: We see things as we are, not as they are (see Taylor, 2006).

In part, humans absorb only a limited portion of reality because the complete, vast, external environment cannot be assimilated by tiny human minds. As Lippmann (1922) said, the mind takes in material from the larger environment and “reconstructs” it on a smaller, simpler scale in order to work with it. Although we must function in the
environment as it presents itself to us and as we are able to experience and perceive it, each and every adult brings in a far reduced version of that which is available. We then reorder and remake such personally assimilated reality as a visual, mental construction. This mental reconstruction is made to fit with preferred ideological views and values, with sometimes redrawn understandings of the past, and with projections of visions and a hoped-for future (Erikson, 1977).

The adult tendency to create theories and “schematic” models is evidence of representative, internal “pseudoenvironments” that exemplify thought (Lippmann, 1922, p. 27). The models we use to depict the scientific and social world represent a sometimes sophisticated world view, but this view too is an organization of perceived experience, images, and values. If worldview is indeed a lens through which we appropriate, screen, and understand the environment and our existence in it, this view also exemplifies a “set of interrelated assumptions about the nature of the world” (Overton, 1991, p. 269; see also Koltko-Rivera, 2004; Miller & West, 1993; Pepper, 1942/1970). In our everyday lives and in our discipline-specific models, as Einstein (1945) said, “ideas...are as little independent of the nature of our experiences as clothes are of the form of the human body” (p. 2).

Furthermore, the English language leads those who think and speak in its tongue to function in deductive categories, to diminish content downward toward reduction, simplicity, and conceptual dilution. For example, in unabridged English dictionaries, there are more than twice as many words containing the prefix *sub-*—meaning “below,” “reduce,” or “under,” as there are words employing the prefix *super-*—meaning “above” or “of a higher order” (Hoare, 2002, p. 27). English language users are thus led to think as we speak, in subordinate instead of superordinate categories. We abandon expanse and complexity in favor of simplicity and narrowness. Thus, both conceptually and numerically, not only do we diminish the complexity of the external world because of limited minds and experience that help us to “grow” preferential lenses and biases, but thought is further narrowed by the English lexicon.

**Stasis and Reductionism in Definitions of Adults: A Brief History**

We have come some distance since 184 B.C. when T. Maccius Platus first used the term “adultus” to describe something or someone whose physical form was complete. Having “adulted” meant that one had reached maturity or “ripeness.” This ripeness included the peak of seasons, the “sun’s full strength,” “firmly established states of affairs,” and the “distention” or “enlargement” of “fully grown animals, birds, crops, and persons” (Glare, 1982, p. 59). The human adult was amalgamated with all other events, creatures, and planetary occurrences. Physical fullness meant developmental completion. Then, and for nearly all subsequent centuries, the concept of developmental progression in, for example, cognition, identity, insight, intelligence, personality, interpersonal competence, mental maturity, and adaptiveness, were largely absent from concepts about the adult.

In that and many later eras, information about creatures and the world, its topography and other physical characteristics, was the basis for conclusions about the human. Such tendencies evince reasoning by analogy, one of the weakest forms of thinking. In early times, a rudimentary, largely incorrect, knowledge of physics was combined with mythology and magical thinking. These were conveyed through an oral tradition and religious practices. Fears and anxieties inspired much of that tradition, with devils and ill humors warded off by superstition and its various rituals and ministrations.
Even when one considers more recent centuries, static notions about adults continued, then largely inspired by representations of the universe. In the 19th century, for example, the scientific world view held that the planet and humans were central in a non-evolving, static, absolute universe. The predominant world view was Newtonian absolutism. Space was believed immovable and time unalterable. Frames of reference were of one person (or body) relative only to its location and conveyance (e.g., ship or train) alone, not relative to mass or spatial transformation or relative to interaction with other interactive bodies in different frames of reference (Einstein, 1945). Newton’s thought was based on notions of Euclidean space and Cartesian coordinates (see Sinnott, 1981), leading to representations of an absolute, uniform, static, and reassuring world. All planets, animals, and particles were believed governed by identical, uniformly applicable, mathematical laws.

Freud’s Views About Adults

As the most influential psychologist of the era, Sigmund Freud’s voice was prominent. Freud is important to this chapter for he is the progenitor of the idea of psychosexual stages of development, the precursor to Erikson’s psychosocial stages. Although Erikson altered Freudian thought substantially, as a student in the Freud School he was informed by Freud’s presence, writings, and ways of seeing phenomena.

Writing during the years of 1893 to 1938, owing to his work in neurology and to premises established by the Newtonian-based Hermann Helmholtz school of physiology, Freud held that complex matter, the human included, was reducible to elementary particles and forces. Such forces could be traced back to their geological origins in infancy. Development was not seen as contextually relative, nor did it continue past genital maturity into and through the adult years. Freud depicted the psyche as a Newtonian analogue, a closed, constant system of excitation and discharge, one governed by inertia and Newtonian principles of energy conservation.

Using Newton’s very vocabulary, Freud transferred physical principles to the psyche. Freud described “quota” and “quanta” of energy (Freud 1894/1962, p. 60), “mechanical forces” (Freud, 1915/1989b, p. 567), “attraction and repulsion” (Freud, 1940/1969, p. 19), and psychological functions that were specific, localized, quantifiable elements. These elements were “neurones,” and neurones were said to retain balance in a state of excitation and discharge (Freud, 1895/1989d, p. 87). Freud’s world view expressed the Newtonian “principle of inertia” (Freud, 1895/1989d, p. 88), the “motor force of instincts” (Freud, 1915/1989b, p. 566), “resistance” (Freud, 1940/1965, p. 344), and “discharge” (Freud, 1940/1965, p. 640). As Erikson (1963) said, Freud necessarily saw from within the “thermodynamic” language and views of his day; however, the primacy Freud gave to then-current physical and “histological concepts” led to premises that the adult is a non-developing, static, “neuronic golem” (Erikson, 1975, p. 62). In this Newtonian representation, genital maturity defined adult completion. Freud believed that the adult years were but a barren terrain for development, one in which adults played out their already formed capacities for love and work. Guided by concepts of instincts and neuroses, Freud further claimed that the adult might gain some control over instinctual and neurotic forces, but such control could never be complete.

Furthermore, conceiving of the psychological apparatus as a nearly impermeable, closed system, Freud dissociated the person from important others in the life sphere. Although some Freudians validated the significance of the social world, Sigmund Freud maintained that social groups were completely external to the self and largely of erratic
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influence. That is, the social “outerworld” surrounded the person but was not internal to the psyche. To Freud, external contexts failed the test of inclusion in individual, analytical depth psychology (see Hoare, 2005). It was inconceivable to Freud that there might be relative spaces in which different persons might know their world and others in that world differently, and in which healthy, positive adult development is not only possible but varies situationally.

As Freud’s various case examples show, in patients’ relations with other human “objects” he rarely portrayed the context of a social sphere beyond the immediate family, and the family that he occasionally included was the nuclear family of the patient’s childhood; the contemporary, postnuclear adult family was largely excluded (e.g., Yankelovich & Barrett, 1970). Intraindividual forces and conflicts governed, and adults were those who were influenced only minimally by others in what we today know of as a shaping, intersubjective, social world.

Freud led thinking along a pathway of stasis and developmental negatives, holding that adulthood was a reenactment of prior life. In this, all one might expect of healthy adults was a comparative absence of the overriding id drives of infancy and of the guilt, fixations, and repressions of childhood. Freud’s view was that of a psychological apparatus organized in strata of ever deeper, more primitive layers. One must dig through those layers, searching backward to infantile origins, in order to determine core disturbances (see Erikson, 1958). In fact, although Freud is known to have altered a number of his tenets over time, one of the principal viewpoints he did not change was that of the psyche of origin as a long-buried, archeological artifact.

Freud (1905/1953) saw his work as that of “a conscientious archeologist” who searched through the “mutilated relics of antiquity” (p. 12). Archeological ruins and their unearth- ing were both the content and the “excavation” technique of psychoanalysis (Freud, 1937/1964, p. 259). He held that “Pompeii,” “the tomb of Tut’ankhamum,” and repressed material yielded equally “to the work of spades” (p. 260). Expectations for adults were largely expressed in developmental negatives, in terms of what adults should not be and do. By expressing development in terms of absence, most psychologists who came along immediately after Freud failed to examine what adults are in their positive development and in their ongoing developmental potentials. A view “backward” to the infancy of personal life, “downward” into the depths of the unconscious, and “inward” to the self, to instincts and pathology, dominated Freud’s thought and approach (Erikson, 1987b, p. 598). The world view of Newtonian mechanical forces and pre-Einstein absolutism were among the premises that kept Freud from exploring forward (through developmental life), upward (in consciousness), and outward (toward others). Adulthood was not in focus as a realm in which mental health and normalcy were considered, a period in which development occurs as persons live inter-subjectively with others and in changing environments through time. Far afield were concepts of adults who live in relative social spaces and structures that not only surround, but infuse and govern, great aspects of the psychological system.

By 1920, Freud’s ideas of adult developmental stasis informed thought throughout much of the Western hemisphere. Thus, a quarter of the way into the 20th century in the United States little had changed with respect to a product notion of adults. In 1927, the newly begun Psychological Abstracts held only five citations using the descriptor adult. Those few addressed adult education and the child’s views about the adult. One year later, a popular dictionary defined adult as one who is “grown up to full age, size and strength: n. a full-grown person, animal or plant” (Devlin, 1928, p. 22). Thus, in mainstream psychoanalysis, in the influential psychological theories of the
day, and in everyday thought, the idea of adult developmental progression remained non-existent.

At the time in the United States, with World War I barely resolved and a dramatic influx of immigrants still underway, it was likely thought of as silly to consider what it meant to function as an adult or to change developmentally. It is not that our ancestors had few ideas about what adulthood meant. Everyone knew what an adult was: A mature person who behaves according to standards of sound judgment, maturity, able reasoning, and deferral of gratification. Adult attributes were those of “sanity, normality, rationality, continuity, sobriety, responsibility, wisdom, conduct as opposed to mere behavior, the good of the family or group or species as distinct from the desires of the individual” (Stegner, 1978, p. 227; see also Jordan, 1978). Other than in applications to standards of conduct and mature thought, the middle of the 20th century would have to arrive before influential thinkers began to consider the grown person as one who also changed considerably, frequently positively, during the young, middle, older, and aged years of life.

By mid-century, post-Newtonian scientific premises had found their way into psychological thought. Upsetting the conceptual apple cart, the combined discoveries of Copernicus, Darwin, and Einstein had led to realizations that humans are non-central, and, perhaps, even irrelevant, in a relative, evolving universe. Psychologists began to seriously consider the implications to their field of Einstein’s discoveries of general and special relativity (respectively, in 1905 and 1926), and, pressed by Darwin’s work in evolution, philosophical thought had moved away from belief in a great “chain of being,” a hierarchical system in which all creatures are seen as ordered in one, absolute, uniform structure, arranged from lowest to highest (Lovejoy, 1936; see also Lovejoy, 1902, 1930; Wilson, 1980, 1983). Psychological thought began to entertain variable developmental forces and Lewinian fields of forces (Lewin, 1936, 1951).

The mechanistic, behavioral world view, with the static, closed, observable, and controllable machine as its metaphor eventually made space for an organismic world view of humans. The organismic view has as its metaphor the living, breathing organism, one who is seen in many forms, is open to the external world, evolves over time, and organically constructs experience (see Reese & Overton, 1970). The era of psychosocial relativity had begun.

Beginning in the mid-1970s, developmental psychologists began to apply relativistic thought to their work. Among others, Riegel’s (e.g., 1975a, b; Wertheimer et al., 1978) work on the dialectics of development, Datan’s (1977) applications of dialectical concepts to developmental research, and Gergen’s (1977) concepts about change and chance in human development, paved the way (see Sinnott, 1981). Studying Hitler’s Germany, the Native American Sioux and Yurok cultures, and the American experience, Erikson’s (e.g., 1939, 1942, 1943) concepts about the relativity of cultural understandings, views, and child rearing patterns shaped some of this thought.

**Contemporary Definitions: The Developing and Learning Adult**

Contemporary concepts now define adult development and learning in new and integrated ways. Adult development means:

- systematic, qualitative changes in human abilities and behaviors as a result of interactions between internal and external environments. Interactions and qualitative changes are influenced by genetics, by endogenous and exogenous influences, and by adaptive powers and personal interests. Many abilities are multidimensional.
For example, adult intelligence is comprised of multiple abilities and is intrinsically influenced by personality, motivation, adaptive abilities, and physical and mental health. (Hoare, 2006a, p. 8)

Development means growth and change, those changes that are “orderly, sequential, and lawful” (Endler, Boulter, & Osser, 1976, p. 1). In adulthood, development is bi-directional for there are advances (e.g., introspective ability) and declines (e.g., processing speed). Some declines occur as early as one’s late twenties in functions such as psychomotor reflexes (Lu et al., 2004).

With respect to transformations, qualitative change means alterations in human functioning and in ways of perceiving and interpreting oneself in the world and in one life narrative. Such changes typically move toward greater expanse and complexity. In this, development is not solely determined quantitatively, for complexity is frequently discounted when human attributes are merely seen in the aggregate. As well, we know that there is great variance among adults. There are significant inter-individual and cohort differences, just as there are differences among adults in genetics, environments, resources, experiences, motivations, and ongoing learning involvement. Inherited tendencies and the sequential contexts of each person’s life are equally important. Heated disputes about the comparable weight of nature versus nurture continue on. However, asking whether heredity or environment is more essential to the development of a particular set of attributes is like “asking whether the length or the width is more important in determining the area of a rectangle” (Endler et al., 1976, p. 13). The correct perspective focuses on the key contributions of, and the principal interactions between and among, inherited givens, epigenetics (life stage changes), environmental contexts (both endogenous and exogenous), experiences, intentional choices, and inclinations.

Individuals follow different developmental trajectories in the constancy, development, and deterioration of important attributes and behaviors over time. Each human is a universe of one; thus, as a group, adults necessarily become more heterogeneous over time. Some of adult uniqueness emanates from different roles, experiences, educational backgrounds, family and environmental resources, and motivations. For example, some adults will advance in intellectual acumen, others will deteriorate intellectually, and some will show few or no obvious changes (Ditmann-Kohli & Baltes, 1990; Fillet et al., 2002). Some adults will develop more mature ego defenses during adulthood, while others will fail to develop or regress to immature defenses and coping styles (e.g., Vaillant, 1995, 2000). Some adults will move to the ethical level of principled behavior, while others will remain moral, moralistic, and judgmental. Various life contexts—work, civic, and personal environments—and the important persons in those environments, will catalyze movement in positive or negative directions. Humans are always permeable to their world, to their position in one life narrative, to sociocultural factors, and to key others in their lives. Adult development will vary depending on these factors and because of a unique genetic endowment that interacts with environmental engagement, tasks, opportunities, and interests.

As recent literature (e.g., Hoare, 2006a, b; Smith & Pourchot, 1998) shows, adult learning is itself a developmental quality and process. As is true among youth, adult learning is “a change in behavior, a gain in knowledge or skills, and an alteration or re-structuring of prior knowledge; such learning can also mean a positive change in self-understanding or in the development of personal qualities such as coping mechanisms” (Hoare, 2006a, p. 11). Thus, learning is not just an accumulation of information, nor is it merely a change in behavior. Learning includes acquiring or applying information, or changing
or re-ordering content in one’s cognitive file cabinet. This can mean deleting antiquated content when new knowledge requires this change, as well as subsuming newly acquired information beneath, or super-ordinating it above, prior content. This understanding blurs a prior distinction. Some learning theorists have previously distinguished between knowledge acquisition (learning) and re-structuring knowledge (development) (e.g., Endler et al., 1976). This is an artificial distinction in the absence of studies that show cognitive development during knowledge re-structuring but not during knowledge acquisition. Thus both the acquisition of knowledge and its revision and re-ordering require learning, and cognitive development cannot be separated from such learning.

A number of adult developmental attributes (e.g., intellectual, emotional, insight, self-efficacy) are contingent on learning. And learning during the adult years frequently leads to one or another form of development. As development and learning interact, a scaffolding effect occurs such that learning and development each lead to increments in its essential counterplayer. Both are transformed in the process. Two examples follow.

Living and learning in intricate, complex environments, and learning that goes beyond a person’s occupation, predict advances in cognitive development (Pirttila-Backman & Kajanne, 2001). In elders, affluence and interest in cultural and educational activities are associated with cognitive flexibility (Hood & Deopere, 2002; Schaie, 1990, 1993). Cognitive flexibility is also associated with increased learning engagement. In, for example, the prospective, longitudinal Einstein Aging Study, subjects over the age of 75 who engaged in cognitive activities (playing musical instruments or board games, reading) experienced a lower risk for dementia (Verghese et al., 2003).

Insight development has been implicated in additional learning and in the transformation of knowledge into action (e.g., Miller, 2006). “Elaboration” and extended “detailed investigation” (learning) are essential extensions to the developments in awareness that we call insight (Pollock, 1981, p. 286). Adults who understand that knowledge is complex, evolving, tenuous, and sometimes contradictory tend to take multiple perspectives, alter their views over time, and avoid early closure in reaching decisions (Pascual-Leone & Irwin, 1998).

**Contextual and Life Stage Models**

**The Contextual Model**

In recent decades, psychologists have increasingly moved toward what I have described as the contextual foreground (presented in the first section of this chapter). This foreground is now developmentalists’ dominant world view and model. Ongoing dissension persists in the literature with respect to the preeminence that should be attributed to person or environmental attributes; however, the contextual model has eclipsed the life span model (see Cervone, 2004; Cervone, Artistico, & Berry, 2006; Haney, 2002; Mischel, 1990). There are a number of reasons for this dominance in viewpoint, three of which are important to this chapter. These reasons are, first, the way we visually see persons and their related, compelling problems in our world, particularly among youth and elders; second, the movement toward ecologically valid research; and third, our enhanced understanding, recently, about variance in personal outlooks and ways of being in the world, and the way structural social conditions and events shape those perspectives.

Taking these in turn, first, developmental issues are born of what we literally see in the persons around us and what we see from within the vantage point of our social, institutional, problem-oriented structures. In our homes, schools, and communities, we see, literally, children grow and change, becoming more (or less) proficient at language
use, mathematical competence, and physical abilities. Among other issues, our recent focus on children and older youth in the elementary and secondary public schooling systems, for example, addresses concerns about declines in student achievement and an alleged deterioration in the competence of public educational systems (e.g., Levine, 2006). Based on such deficit views, anxieties exist about the future ability of the United States to compete in the global economy.

As well, school violence, Internet exploitation of children, and youth substance abuse rivet our attention (see, e.g., Friedman, 2006). Replacing the previous perspective that such problems are preventable, research and practice now tend toward a resilience and compensatory viewpoint relative to children and older youth. That is, experts focus primarily on how we might make up for existing educational deficits, and how, given the tacit belief that social perils and youth disturbances are not fully preventable, we must determine which children are resilient and the circumstances and contexts in which such resilience is expressed (e.g., Haggerty, Sherrod, Garmezy, & Rutter, 1996).

For example, recent data indicate that nearly 50% of high school completers have used one or more drugs illicitly during their secondary school years (Friedman, 2006). In this population, the illicit use of prescription drugs has increased markedly and the use of illicit street drugs continues. Whether obtained through the Internet, from their parents or friends, or on the street, non-medical use of such medications has risen. Sedative use was 7.2% among high school seniors in 2005 (up from 2.89% in 1992); Oxycodone use was 5.5% in 2005, compared with 4.0% in 2002. Interpreting large scale national surveys and follow-up interviews with teens about such drug use, Friedman (2006) found that many such youth used street drugs (e.g., ecstasy, cocaine) for “recreation” and prescription medications for their “practical” needs. “Practical” needs are met with stimulants (to heighten school performance), hypnotics (for sleep), and tranquilizers (for stress reduction). Across the board, experts imply a contemporary impotence in prevention. Substitute agendas include efforts to understand why some youngsters are more resilient in stressful and peer pressure circumstances, why and how some deploy various abnormal coping and adaptation mechanisms (e.g., drug use), and the extent to which professionals can inculcate normal mechanisms in less resilient youth.

Observing, we see visual changes in the elderly as well and, given the growing numbers of aged seniors in our midst, middle-agers, those in various command positions, cannot help but notice the physical deterioration that waits silently to sabotage their lives. In 2005 (the most recent year for which data are available), in the fastest-growing age group, nearly four million Americans were 85 years of age or older, an age group that is projected to number 28 million by 2050 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2005). As is true of youth in their early developmental years, changes at the far end of life are so striking that one cannot avoid noticing, paying sustained attention, and posing remedies. Social policy implications (e.g., for Social Security, Medicare) loom large and expensive. That which costs dollars and human resources compels interest, speculation, and remedial approaches.

Adding to our tendency to study those at both ends of life’s spectrum is the fact that most studies investigate persons who are readily available in confined settings (e.g., schools, community agencies, college courses, elder care environments). Although there are some stunning exceptions (e.g., Baltes & Mayer, 1999; Roberts & Helson, 1997), time- and context-limited research predominates. Short-term convenience studies are fruitful in a rush-to-publish world and cost far less than longer term cross- or cohort-sequential studies. Such factors have pressed forward the shift to contextual views, to sectioned windows into the lives and problems of people who are contained in various sites.

The second reason for the dominance of the contextual model is that it has become
increasingly clear that the laboratory is an artificial milieu in which persons-as-subjects behave artificially, or at least far differently, compared to their performance in the outside, “real” world. For example, an elder adult who in the laboratory fails the test of selecting the correct grocery items based on unit pricing is then observed during actual grocery shopping in the senior residence community. On questioning our senior, the observer learns that the subject has a sophisticated understanding of unit pricing but nonetheless selects the “incorrect” items, doing so because she cannot physically manage to carry the heavier, more cost effective items to her apartment. With such recognitions, a number of investigators have moved in the direction of ecologically valid investigations in which subjects are studied in the actual contexts in which they typically function (see, e.g., Haney, 2002; Neisser & Hyman, 1999).

Third, we have come to realize that “when people live in the world differently,” they truly “live in different worlds” (Schweder, 1991, p. 23). Among other factors, recent decades in the United States have been those of rapid fire increases in numbers of “cultural others” and in a growing multiplicity of social, cultural, and racial backgrounds and outlooks (Hoare, 1991). Awareness has also grown that all humans live in a highly permeable, rather small, global environment. Pollutants do not restrict themselves to national boundaries; insulation from nearly immediate information about natural and human-made disasters around the world is almost non-existent in a media-pervasive, information world. Peering down from outer space, satellites have shown us connected world space in stark relief. Our global contextual view is thus need based: An awareness that all share in the potential for destruction has enhanced recognition of our need to understand deeply embedded socio-cultural characteristics, beliefs, differences, and biases. The shared context of one small planet has concentrated our attention. In the United States, this seems to be particularly true since terrorism arrived on home soil.

Understanding how it is that persons live differently in the world also relates to understandings about societal structural differences and access to resources. Belatedly in the United States, we came to understand the relationship between health, including mental health, and socioeconomic status. For example, in the bleak economic conditions of the Great Depression, illness was higher in the 17% of families whose breadwinners were unemployed and in families on relief, in which one in 20 heads of household was disabled. In 1939, the maternal mortality rate for African American women was double that for White women, a ramification of class separation and social deprivation (Hoare, 2002).

Dramatic social events can thwart access to opportunity, intellectual development, and learning, particularly when social class enters the equation. For example, those in the lower socioeconomic, working class, who were forming their identities during World War II and the Great Depression, suffered adverse effects in their learning engagement and emotional functioning. However, among those with adequate personal and emotional resources, social involvement, and middle-class status, the position was reversed. Subsequent learning engagement, identity development, and emotional stability resulted (Caspi & Elder, 1986; Duncan & Agronick, 1995). More recent epic struggles (e.g., the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights movement) have had similar effects, sustaining development for some and undermining it for others (Elder, Rudkin, & Conger, 1994). After the peak years of the Civil Rights era, we became increasingly sensitive to the ways in which structural conditions in society operate to favor some persons in their development and oppress others. We see this in other realms as well. In specific content areas, for example in science and mathematics career options, the person’s inclination to transform interests into educational choices and the development of self-efficacy are dramatically
affected by barriers and supports in the educational context (Lent, Brown, Brenner, Chopra, Davis, & Talleyrand, 2001).

We know that paid work is inseparable from the society in which that work occurs, and that the deprivation of work opportunities equates with identity deprivation. For example, investigating the influence of increasing individualism in the United States, Roberts and Helson (1997) studied women at four periods over 31 years. They found that increasing individualism, particularly between 1960 and 1985, was associated with enhanced work-based identity development and with increases in self-focus, self-assertion, individuality, and narcissism. Adherence to norms declined. In that longitudinal study, in the years between 1958 and 1989, increases in women’s individualism increased and peaked concurrently with trends in the escalation and peak of societal individualism. Work effects were seen in, for example, a growing intolerance for “glass ceilings” and expectations that salaries would be gender neutral (see Moen, Kelly, & Maginnis, chapter 13, this volume). Women’s assertiveness also emanated from the feminist movement during those years. The net effect for women, particularly among well-prepared knowledge workers, was that of identity development, personal empowerment, inclusion, and autonomy (Hoare, 2006b). Thus, the social world and changes in that world represent an important set of contexts that both surround and enter each individual’s reality.

One Contextual Model, Two Contextual Thinkers

Just as it is uniquely able to adapt to multiple environments, the human species is unique in its ability to design environments that, for better or worse, mold development. In the 20th century, two important thinkers independently studied the shaping roles of large scale and smaller, specific environments. Both worked to help scholars and practitioners understand the ways in which society and everyday contexts shape children and adults, and how positive, development-fostering environments might be designed. These thinkers were Erik Erikson and Urie Bronfenbrenner. Although their disciplines differed, their agendas and their focus on the external milieu that is internal to each person were similar.

Erikson, the psychoanalyst, was born in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, in 1902, and Bronfenbrenner, the developmental psychologist, was born in Moscow in 1917. Their European heritage is important to their work for both theorists conveyed the intellectual breadth of thought that transcended disciplinary boundaries in Europe in the first decades of the 20th century. Immigrants to the United States, both were visionaries who examined the link between individual development and the development of the group and society. Focusing their work sometimes simultaneously on the person and society, some would scorn this tendency as confusing levels of analysis, but neither thinker was deterred by such criticism (Kracke, 1978).

Both the psychoanalyst and the developmental scientist argued for healthy, strong families and supportive communities and institutions, the essence of their generative work. For both, interdisciplinary work was essential to these ends. For Erikson, developmental and societal concerns led to his social criticism and advocacy in support of the needs and rights of all persons. Bronfenbrenner focused more so on social policy, social action, and advocacy for children, concerns that led to his co-founding the national Head Start Program in 1965 (see Wertsch, 2005). He was a participant observer and researcher in the actual settings in which children lived, learned, and played. In such involvement, particularly in originating Head Start, he was indebted to Walter Dearborn who, during his protege’s graduate years at Harvard said to him, “Bronfenbrenner, if you wish to understand something, try to change it” (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, p. 606).
Although Bronfenbrenner attended primarily to the needs of children in their development, whereas Erikson’s thought considered individuals throughout the entirety of the life span, both held that the extent to which children are focal in a society’s concern expresses the extent of the maturational development of that society. Both theorists warned that the late twentieth century harbored dire destructive tendencies. In his last book, Bronfenbrenner (2005) cautioned, “The major social changes taking place recently in modern industrialized societies, especially the United States, may have altered environmental conditions conducive to human development to such a degree that the process of making human beings human is being placed in jeopardy” (p. xxvii). In his last publication, Erikson (1985) expressed concern about the potential for species’ destruction in a technological, nuclear age. He warned, as he had since 1965, about the necessity for understanding and overcoming the “pseudospecies” (prejudice) mentality, the pan human tendency to see cultural others as so different and inferior that they must be annihilated. He urged all people across the globe to find within and between them the universality of “childhood as a binding all-human phenomenon” before it was too late to do so (p. 217).

In their later years, both Bronfenbrenner and Erikson were particularly concerned about the perils of modern life with its depleted space and time for children to grow and thrive. Today, with more than 5 million stepfamily children, and their higher rates of disciplinary, drop out, and school performance problems, both theorists would likely be even more alarmed. Addressing single-parent families compared to families with two biological parents, Bronfenbrenner (2005) reported that even in single-parent families who live in positive socioeconomic circumstances, children are at risk for “hyperactivity or withdrawal, lack of attentiveness, difficulty in deferring gratification, poor academic achievement, school misbehavior, and frequent absenteeism” (p. 10). The family as a context for development had deteriorated. Citing data from 1996, he found that children (particularly boys) are at a disproportionate risk for a range of connected difficulties, a phenomenon he termed the teenage behavioral syndrome: “Dropping out of school; involvement in socially alienated or destructive peer groups; smoking; drinking; frequent sexual experience; adolescent pregnancy; a cynical attitude toward work; and—in the more extreme cases—drugs, suicide, vandalism, violence, and criminal acts” (p. 10).

In 2006, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services alerted the country about conditions detrimental to youth and adults. Based on data from 2002, their report shows the relationship among parental educational attainment, teenage sexual activity, child rearing, child support, and poverty. Focusing primarily on males, they found that: men who did not reside with both parents at 14 years of age were more likely to engage in adolescent sexual activity; 50% of men without a high school diploma fathered a child outside marriage, compared with 6% among college degree recipients; 50% of the men who married during their teen years divorced or separated within the subsequent decade, compared with 17% of men marrying at age 26 or older; one-fourth of the 28 million men who have dependent children do not live in the home with those children (Centers for Disease Control, 2006). In terms of monetary and personal resources, including developmental care, parental presence, and positive role modeling and grooming, the environments of single-parent, blended, and re-combined families provide poorer conditions, both for children and the adults in those families.

Even in traditional families, the pace of life and the fact of two working parents have created difficulties. According to the Families and Work Institute, between 1977 and 1997, the number of employees working 50 or more hours per week increased from 24% to 37%, and commuting time also escalated dramatically (Crouter & Bumpus, 2001; Galinsky,
Yet, for some parents there is little choice. In a family of four, with two children under the age of 18, both parents working full time at the federal minimum wage have combined earnings that place their family barely above the U. S. poverty threshold.

Many children have recently expressed discontent, not just about two employed parents and their ever-rising weekly work hours, but about their parents’ work-associated stress and its effects of irritability, impatience, and exhaustion when home (Galinsky, 1999). This is on direct lineage with Bronfenbrenner’s (1986, 2000, 2005) concerns about the family context as a “chaotic system,” one in which “frenetic activity, lack of structure, unpredictability in everyday activities, and high levels of ambient stimulation” are daily experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p.14).

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Framework

Although Bronfenbrenner’s and Erikson’s interests, analyses, and perspectives were similar, they were unique in their approach to the contexts of life that shape development. In this section, I explore Bronfenbrenner’s, and in the following section, Erikson’s, concepts about important contexts for development.

In his 1942 dissertation, “Social status, structure, and development in the classroom group,” we see the beginnings of Bronfenbrenner’s studied concern for children in one of their principal contexts. This concern evolved into his research agenda, later expressed as his bioecological model. But it was his childhood experience walking through the woods, swamps, and farmland with his father, a naturalist and a neuropathologist, that led him to see the “functional interdependence between living organisms and their surroundings” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. xii). Bronfenbrenner’s thought evolved over time, even past his groundbreaking 1979 volume, *The Ecology of Human Development*, in which he clarified the distinctions, and relationships among, attributes of the micro-, exo-, and macro-systems, and the interactions between those systems and individuals in the systems.

Contexts for development are ecological structures in the life space, topologically nested regions that include inner individual variables (genetic, biological, psychological) and external settings and cultural forces (e.g., economy, political climate). In writing about these variables, Bronfenbrenner (1979) acknowledged his intellectual debt to thinkers such as Lewin, Vygotsky, and Piaget. Based on Lewinian thought, Bronfenbrenner held that interaction exists among forces and regions (Lewin, 1936; Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979, 1986). In this, each person possesses a unique phenomenological field, a mental world of personal reality, fantasy, imagination, and unreality (Bronfenbrenner, 1977); this life space perceived is “more important than the actual, the unreal more valid than the real” (p. 202). With Piagetian understandings in hand, Bronfenbrenner understood that reality is relative and gave credibility to the reality in the mind of the knower. Behavior and development are “steered” by interaction between the individual, as that person perceives and constructs reality, and the environment (p. 205). Based on Vygotsky’s (e.g., 1978) thought, Bronfenbrenner interpreted the “zone of proximal development” as the family and other close environments. He then moved from that zone to others that fan outward from the person.

Nested Structures. Concerned about children, their experience and fate in a harried world, Bronfenbrenner directed his research to youth in their various environments of, for example, family constellations, school settings, and child care environments. Figure 3.1 adapts Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) framework to the experience of adults. The total environment experienced by the person is a “set of nested structures, each inside the
next, like a set of Russian dolls” (p. 3). The settings that are most proximal to the person exist in the *microsystem*, a network of settings that do not narrowly compartmentalize but interact in the person’s psychological life. Among adults, these close-to-the-person contexts (e.g., workplace, family, friendship group, church affiliations, civic settings) include individuals’ roles in such settings. Together these are the contexts that most influence ongoing development.

Moving outward, the next tier is the *exosystem* which is comprised of the larger institutions of life in which persons may not necessarily have defined, formal roles, but which nonetheless influence individuals markedly. As expressed in the figure, these are, for example, the economy, government, laws and regulations, organized religion, the educational system, and the media. Their effects are pervasive, if sometimes unconsciously experienced. The ring farthest away from the person is that of the larger culture or society which encapsulates and influences persons. This *macrosystem* is the sociocultural surround, one expressing ideology, views, mores, customs, and, in homogeneous cultures, folkways. Although seemingly less proximal to the person in his or her everyday life, each adult is deeply affected by the content, events, and alterations occurring in that societal context. Bronfenbrenner’s *mesosystem* (absent from the figure), is not a delineated structure among the nested tiers, but is that of the person’s interactive experience between...
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two or more of the nested settings. Like a bidirectional arrow, the mesosystem reflects the reciprocal influence of the various structures on the person and of the person on the structures. To account for temporal, sociohistorical factors that shape individual development differently, Bronfenbrenner used the term *chronosystem*. For example, egalitarian U.S. educational opportunities and employment possibilities for men and women today are vastly different from the sharply gender-bifurcated possibilities of the 1950s. Different eras and sociopolitical contexts have variable effects on development.

In 2005, Bronfenbrenner defined human development as “the *phenomenon of continuity and change in the biopsychological characteristics of human beings, both as individuals and as groups*” (p. xxviii, italics in the original). He saw this phenomenon as one that traverses the course of life, both within one life and across sequential cohorts throughout history. In that iteration, Bronfenbrenner seemed to give nearly equal weight to the micro-, exo-, and macro-systems, but his writing shows his continued belief that the most proximal zone, the microsystem, exerts the greatest effect on children and families.

In 2005, he wrote about his movement away from considering discrete, nested systems to a perspective of “interconnected systems” (p. 1). Presenting nine developmental propositions, the first proposition acknowledges the interaction between heredity and environment and gives credibility to each child’s (and adult’s) subjective experience. Beginning in childhood, and evolving to later reflect both change and stability, subjective feelings include, for example, “anticipations, forebodings, hopes, doubts, (and) personal beliefs” (p. 5).

There are also objective relationships, some that are proximal, “primary engines,” and some that are “remote” (p. 6). These objective attributes are his second and third propositions, some found in his earlier work and others that are based on more recent interpretations. His second proposition is that “over the life course, human development takes place through the processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment” (p. 6). These interactions are “proximal processes” in which children must experience regular, “enduring” engagement with at least one devoted, attending adult (p. 6). His third proposition is similar to the second, but adds the potential for research in which “process-person-context-time” (PPCT) are examined together (p. 7).

The next two propositions reflect the necessity of each child’s experience of strong emotional attachment to an adult and the child’s incorporation of resultant positive feelings into his or her own self-system. Each youth needs to actively and regularly experience successively more complicated activities over sustained time with at least one adult who is committed to the child and with whom the child develops a reciprocal attachment (Proposition IV). This is the basis for the child’s internalization of parental affection and his or her ability to form interests, engagement, and motivations for exploration (Proposition V).

Proposition VI holds that the ability to successfully master the developmental feats expressed in Propositions IV and V requires that the child have two adults (preferably one of each gender) who are available, loving, and deeply involved with the child. Bronfenbrenner largely referred to the two-parent family, citing data about the disturbed effects shown by children living in many single-parent families, particularly in the absence of a supportive constellation of relatives, neighbors, and concerned others. Nearly as important as its role in nurturing the child is the support such surrogate others provide to the caretaking parent. Bronfenbrenner was concerned about the trend of increased permissiveness, the contemporary family’s lack of structure and discipline, showing that
many children today are not so much raised and groomed as they are allowed to grow up nearly on their own. In particular, “neglect, abuse, (and) domination” are especially potent predictors of disturbed development and maladaptive behavior among youth (Bonfenbrenner, 2005, p. 12).

Bronfenbrenner (2005) cited evidence in support of each of his first five propositions. However, he held that his final three propositions were tentative, awaiting empirical evidence. In those latter propositions he focused on the influential effects of children on their parents’ development. Noting the role reversal that often occurs as parents age and adult children become parents to their parents, he held that when there is little reciprocal attachment during the child’s early years, “there may be no attachment at the end” when aging parents need their children’s concern, care, and ministrations (p. 13).

Indicating the importance of research designs that link genetics and environmental factors and noting their rarity, in 1986 Bronfenbrenner referenced earlier longitudinal studies by Skeels (Skeels & Dye, 1939; Skeels, Updegraff, Wellman, & Williams, 1938; Skodak & Skeels, 1949), and more contemporary research by Crowe (1974), Hutchings and Mednick (1977), Scarr and Weinberg (1976, 1983), and Schiff (Schiff, Duyame, Dumaret, & Tomkiewicz, 1981, 1982). He also recalculated certain of Bouchard’s (e.g., Bouchard & McGue, 1981) data on monozygotic and dizygotic twins, reared together and apart.

For example, Skeels (Skodak & Skeels, 1949) had compared the intellectual development of children raised from their early years in adoptive families with youth reared by their biological parents. Among other findings, advantaged (middle class) home situations and parental engagement resulted in advanced intellectual development among children in adoptive homes. When placed in such circumstances, the mean I.Q. of adoptive children became 20 points higher than that of their biological parents (Skodak & Skeels, 1949). These findings have been replicated among U.S. children (Scarr & Weinberg, 1976) and European youth (Schiff, Duyame, Dumaret, & Tomkiewicz, 1981, 1982).

Recalculating the twin study correlations of Bouchard (e.g., Bouchard & McGue (1981), Bronfenbrenner (1975, 1986) found that although adoptive twins reared apart have different home environments, some share similar community environments. For example, in two samples of 35 and 38 pairs of twins, the mean Binet I.Q. correlation for twins living in the same community and attending the same school was .83 and .87, respectively, while for those reared in different towns it was .67 and .66. When localities were compared on the basis of economics and size, the mean I.Q. correlation of separated adoptive twins residing in similar towns was .86, while for those residing in highly dissimilar communities it was .26.

By the early 1980s, Bronfenbrenner had begun to more closely examine the importance of familial and significant non-familial contexts on adults as well as children. Among others, he cited the work of Mortimer (e.g., Mortimer, Lorence, & Kumka, 1986) and Kohn (e.g., Kohn, 1969; Kohn & Schooler, 1982, 1983). For example, Mortimer found that men who had married in the first decade after college graduation experienced greater career stability, work autonomy, job satisfaction, and higher incomes than those who had remained single. Kohn (1969) showed that men whose jobs demanded subjection to authority required compliance from their children. In contrast, men whose work required autonomy and self-direction expected this of their youngsters. In longitudinal studies addressing work contexts and related job attributes, Kohn and Schooler (1973, 1978, 1982, 1983) found that job conditions requiring self-direction and the use of complex thinking skills were important predictors of intellectual and autonomy development 10 years later. In particular, absence of routinization, job autonomy, and use of
complex skills led to increased intellectual flexibility. More recent data support these findings (see Hoare, 2006b, pp. 362–369).

Erikson’s Psychodynamic Framework

The Social, Cultural World Inside the Psyche

In human development, Erik Erikson was the first developmental theorist in the United States to capture the contextual and the psychodynamic life stage frameworks as integrated entities. Pre-dating other contextualists, he showed how each person lives in the larger external context of society and culture and in the smaller environments of family, important others, and relationships, themselves reflecting the larger environment. Importantly, Erikson also showed how society and culture are internal to the psyche.

Erikson wrote about the importance of context in two primary ways. The first of these is the broader culture or society, that which infuses and shapes psychosocial attributes. Metaphorically, culture is a “tapestry weaving” (Erikson & Erikson, 1981). Culture embeds and inculcates views, behavior, and developmental grooming through, for example, parent and group imprinting and teaching of children, and among adults, through values, norms, and expectations. Erikson’s second use of contexts is that of spheres, those experiential environments that persons’ both operate within and envisage.

Society and culture were so important to Erikson’s work that late in his life he feared he would appear to have given disproportionate attention to them. But due, perhaps, to the way his identity construct and life stage thought received such inordinate attention, and because he thought in a scanning, inductive manner and wrote diffusely, the contextual aspects of his thought have largely gone by the wayside. In fact, his lifetime of work has largely been diluted to the eight-stage grid of invariant, sequential lifespan development, a fact he abhorred.

As early as 1930 in Vienna, Erikson saw the myriad ways in which the social world both surrounds and lives inside the psyche. Erikson repeatedly addressed the ways different societies, cultural and social groupings, and various external physical attributes such as landscape, topography, and continental attributes, infuse human perceptions. Such external realities are integrated into each person’s internal lens, and differences are experienced and expressed as culturally unique ways of being in the world. An ethos of social, cultural rituals and understandings, based on such attributes and on patterns of living, is transmitted to each infant, and this ethos and its norms become more durable as the child develops into an adult, incorporating such knowledge, group habits, customs, mores, and values, along the way. To Erikson, psychological understandings were incomplete to the extent that they failed to incorporate sociocultural attributes and patterns, adaptations to them, and symptoms that show aberrations.

As he began to understand youth in society en route to his later concepts about development in mentally healthy adults, Erikson incorporated three then-new psychoanalytic, developmental perspectives in his thought. The first was Einstein’s theory of relativity as it applies to the shaping role of relative familial, group, and sociocultural contexts. The second was knowledge from the border area where psychology meets anthropology. The third was Darwinian evolutionary thought in its forward, adaptational emphasis. These perspectives led him to move beyond Freudian thought. Writing autobiographically in 1975 about his early psychoanalytic training in Vienna Erikson said:

The question remained, I felt dimly, whether an image of man constructed primarily on the basis of observation in the clinical laboratory might not lack what, in man’s
total existence, leads outward from self-centeredness to the mutuality of love and communality, forward from the enslaving past to the utopian anticipation of new potentialities, and upward from the unconscious to the enigma of consciousness. (p. 39, emphasis in original)

With respect to the ways in which culture intersects with universal tendencies of developmental unfolding, infants and children are molded such that cultural differences come about. That is, culture intrudes into ontogenetic development to alter a child’s budding, natural inclinations. Through unconscious but systematic “interference” with the child’s natural inclinations and impulses, child training and educational intervention lead to the child’s regulation in such a way that sociocultural variations in humans are wrought (Erikson, 1939, p. 132). Thus, as adults, humans have been variously calibrated, psychosocially, to a particular cultural, social, or national perspective, its representations and world view. In a nation or culture, inculcated norms, values, and practices endure to the extent that they are useful, psychologically, sociopolitically, economically, and spiritually (Erikson, in Evans, 1967).

Throughout the long human childhood, habituation to and preference for, the familiarity of daily rituals, the repetitive experience of such practices becomes satisfying both in their anticipation and in their ongoing occurrence. In this way, value-honed beliefs, practices, and perspectives are encrypted, and youth are indoctrinated into them. A lens is thus built through which youth see and interpret, producing habits born of a particular view, as well as patterns of blindness. Each young person who has been brought up grows in his or her habituation to a deeply ingrained value system and to its related inner controls. Furthermore, “every conscience,” “whether in an individual or a group, has not only specific contents but also its own peculiar logic which safeguards its coherence” (Erikson, 1950, p. 114). Thus, exclusion of inimical foreign values is natural, feels appropriate, and is self-protective.

Learning positives and negatives, what one can and cannot be and do, imprinting positive and negative notions for a variety of values, by adulthood these become the psyche’s protective mainstay. That is, cherished ways of being in the world are not abandoned but are built into adult preferences and habits, daily patterns, and biases. Among others, family and group differences in values that express the meaning of clean, correct, good, industrious, trustworthy, ways of showing deference to others, initiative, efficiency, listening and speaking, and a sense of the Almighty encode the child’s psyche. “Self-idealization” is thus developed, family and cultural traditions are transmitted, and symbols representing group values and mores, some linguistically represented, are preserved (Erikson, 1985, p. 214). Erikson repeatedly described the prolonged human childhood in which children are ritually “speciated” by their experience of a particular family and group. In this, they incorporate and identify with familiar, satisfying routines and views within a unique form of family existence to develop “a distinct sense of corporate identity,” one that builds and accumulates to preferences and prejudices of various forms (Erikson, 1977, p. 79). “To have steady values at all,” Erikson (1968) wrote, humans “must absolutize them” (p. 241). Absolute values for the self are thus projected as absolute value requirements for others.

Erikson showed how each person is enmeshed in the fabric of family and in the larger culture, society, and nation. For some citizens in certain areas and times, this fabric is integrated and homogeneous, whereas, for others in different places, times, and historical periods, the fabric is loose and heterogeneous. Culture lives inside the person’s ideational, linguistic, psychological system and is thus inseparable from the way individuals construe and perceive reality as they move about and pursue their daily lives. Culture is external
as well, reverberating in shared ideas, symbols, values, modes of thought, and norms. As such, a person’s life in a particular nation enters and fuels the psychological apparatus. Words, ideas, and metaphors, some expressing notions of wide ranging opportunity, freedom, and access, and others expressing notions of restriction, exclusion, and danger, frame thought and the wellspring of security and anxiety that informs its citizens.

Each person’s internalization of reality, especially as it represents a group ethos, is powerful. One’s fit within the ethos of the group, and the group’s fit within the broader society are crucial. Ethos is a living code conveying the “interdependence of persons” and the way humans are organized in their relationships with one another (Erikson, 1982, p. 26). It’s “inner logic” of shared ideas, values, mores, linguistically expressed symbols, and customs provides a unified way of seeing and interpreting phenomena (p. 36). However strange it might appear to outsiders, each ethos is a nested set of wombs—of family, cultural group, and society—that transport principles of living to infants and children in order to direct, channel, and sublimate behavior. Its modes and values wrap together desires, needs, and traditions to infuse the person’s conscious and unconscious. Its consistency, however historically temporary, makes the self and the society of that self seem permanent, even though both are context- and time-limited.

Society nests the person in, for example, ethnicity, religious belonging, family, unique groupings, and distinctive environments. Each person is born into one nuclear family and ethos, only later to live out her or his life traversing variable and changing environmental, temporal, and group-specific contexts. However, conscious and partially unconscious recollections from early life remain ingrained within the psyche.

Unusual for the era, as early as 1939, in his respective writings about the Sioux and Yurok Natives, Germany’s World War II era, and the spirit of the U.S. democratic enterprise, Erikson showed the many ways in which the social-political, value driven world exists inside the human mental apparatus. He found “subverbal” ideas to “dominate” and constrict the thought of every nation and cultural group he studied (1942, p. 483). The “Maginot Line” and the “Limes Wall” had suffused the fears and internal divisions of the German people in the 1940s, a citizenry and country that were circled and felt trapped by imposing borders and potential encroachment by others. In technologically advanced societies, geography and space are important as well. In the United States of Erikson’s immigration, for example, a land mass protected by vast oceans had created a sense of insular protection, feelings of freedom from the risk of invasion, and isolationist thinking when this was politically expedient. Exploration and expansion, “ranger” imagery, and the equation of a new, separate, independent, nation with a self-made, protean human who can make many things (including the self, over and over) exist in its ideation and its citizens’ psychologically grounded sense of self. To our theorist, sensate newness became an “invigorating,” “obsessive” replacement for absent national ideas about tradition and permanence (Erikson, 1974, p. 79). The nation’s independence, its outgoing nature, and its genial, optimistic attitudes reflected an expansive, open country in which even the exploration of outer space was possible. The American imagination could thus become as vast as its continent and as expansive as its spirit, success, and, sometimes, messianic zeal.

Erikson found that in all such ideas, irrespective of the country, a nation’s landscape, its geopolitical existence, and its experience of violation or sense of protection exist in its collective imagery, in anthems and expressions, and in the people’s psychologically grounded sense of self. As well, he found a modification of this tendency in all smaller ethnic enclaves, clans, and groups. The society or group’s values, norms, freedoms, and fears reside within, and preside, over the individual’s psyche.
With respect to the ways in which the unconscious and conscious demonstrate themselves in individual development, Erikson examined how genetically programmed absolutes play out differently. For example, he found cultural differences in trait emphasis, stage length, and the ways in which children's developmental readiness and needs for group incorporation were met. As a psychoanalyst, his focus was on conscious and unconscious expression and subverted needs. Thus, he found, for example, that some cultural, societal groups emphasize oral tendencies, while others emphasize the development of autonomous, aggressive characteristics. Still others, whether for the benefit of the group, the family, or the individual, emphasize the accumulation of wealth. Some societies focus on shaming and shunning as preferred methods of norming, while others inculcate guilt. Such variable emphases are seen in child-rearing, and in training functions and learning systems; they are later manifest in adults who were brought up with such methods. Importantly, the variable anxieties and obsessions of adults that emanate from group- or socioculturally-specific attributes are then mirrored in the anxieties and obsessions of that group's or society's children.

Thus, we must continually attend to the ways in which each culture's and nation's values and ideals are encouraged in its children, and the role of that larger social sphere in emphasizing tendencies that are held dear, while deterring those that are considered onerous. Values, tendencies, and idealized traits learned during childhood persist into, and frequently throughout, the adult years. However, trait causation is not the point:

We are not saying here that their treatment in babyhood causes a group of adults to have certain traits—as if you turned a few knobs in your child-training system and you fabricated this or that kind of tribal or national character. In fact, we are not discussing traits in the sense of irreversible aspects of character. We are speaking of goals and values and of the energy put at their disposal by child-training systems. (Erikson, 1963, pp. 137–138; emphasis in original)

Unique cultural methods and styles, however internally consistent they are for the group, frequently seemed aberrant, even deviant to outsiders. The stronger a culture, race, or society, and the greater its coherence, the more difficult it is for outsiders to understand it. As though one knows “only the nouns of a foreign language,” but not its verbs, adjectives, or clauses, outsiders might only glean some sense of a culture’s important meanings and values (Erikson, 1939, p. 145). They will not, however, understand what the traits, habits, routines, and rituals are actually saying, preferring, emphasizing, and omitting, or why this is the case. Important in this are a nation’s or culture’s concepts of space and time, of past and future. Such notions unify ideas and beliefs, thereby creating some of the greatest differences between one group and another. Each society, Erikson (1975) discovered, adroitly organizes and expresses its unique values and beliefs, and just as “cleverly conceals its irrationalities” (p. 108). Beliefs and irrationalities are the nucleus of rituals, traits, child-rearing methods, ceremonies, and pageantry, all that is found beautiful and endearing, and all that is repugnant.

Although some beliefs are magical, this does not make them any less real or powerful (see Erikson, 1969, pp. 38–39). Outsiders must know that denying the validity of such beliefs does not diminish either their reality or their potency. All humans have their special version of magic and superstitions. These serve as a “collective mastery of the unknown,” permitting us to say almost aloud: “I see you! I recognize you!” (Erikson, 1958, p. 60).

Sometimes consciously, but primarily unconsciously, human adults are remarkable in
accepting their own forms of logic and illogic, and just as remarkable in countering and resisting the existence and importance of these in nations, societies, cultures, religions, and other important human groupings. For the psyche and in human language, those who are “outside” too readily become “nameless,” then “unmeaningful,” then “strange,” and finally, “wrong” (Erikson, 1966, p. 342).

Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter, Erikson’s most powerful identity image is that of the “pseudospecies” inclination, that is, the prejudiced adult (see Hoare, 2002, pp. 41–69). He held that any number of groups act as though they are central in the mind’s eye of the divinity who created them. He saw group-based anxieties and prejudices in every culture and group he studied. This, to him, was the basis for judgmental moralism among adults. Showing how easily group-based values and biases turn into prejudice, he examined hostilities between races. Noting animosities between Native and White Americans, for example, he reflected on their blaming tendencies: “The whites teach their children to cry,’ and ‘the Indians teach their children to masturbate,’ contains a differentiation which creates or rationalizes hate between groups: It implies that foreign customs are based on bad intentions” (Erikson, 1939, p. 131).

Microspheres and Macrospheres. As did Bronfenbrenner, Erikson conceptualized spaces of involvement. In this, he used the term sphere, largely to denote the area in which one functions. Sometimes spheres also meant zones into which ideas and images are visually projected from within the mind’s eye.

The earliest developmental sphere is the autocosm. This is the infant’s first play space, the body of self and of mother, the initial, immediate human “geography” (Erikson, 1963, p. 220). It is one in which the infant first explores the mother with touch, taste, and sight, and later plays within the zone of her or his own infant body. The mother’s facial topography is especially important for, to the baby in the first months of life, it is an extension of its own being. In seeing and touching the mysterious protrusions, openings, and flat surfaces of that loved face babies learn all there is to know about their universe at that point in time. Mother is universe. Touch, taste, smells, and sounds unite with vision as an organizer of what is seen and experienced to create a fully sensory cosmos. In that first sphere, babies try out behaviors, in effect finding ways to attract and habituate others to their needs.

For children, play configurations are constructed in a microsphere. By “configurations,” Erikson meant the arrangements that children make with toys and blocks in three-dimensional space and the forms that such constructions take. The term microsphere (sometimes microcosm) delineates the actual physical space children use to create their toy constructions. This microsphere can be the flat surface of a table or floor on which toys are displayed, a circumscribed area with physical boundaries. The child’s use of space and toy forms, and the way toys are symbolically used, paint a picture of that child’s ideas, psychological inventions, and conflicts. This micro arena is a suspended reality, a world for imagining, for developing and showing competence, for expressing an “ego ideal,” and for refreshing the ego when the big world of people and things is overwhelming. With Huizinga (1950), Erikson saw the microsphere as representing a time-limited, time-out-of-mind space in which the child is free to give reign to the unconscious and to perform his or her own choice of actions. In this temporary habitat, the child tries out fresh identity components, learns and dramatizes what is within and out of bounds, models others, defends against encroachment, and learns how to use toy objects (miniature cars and trucks, toy animals, blocks, tiny wooden dolls) to represent persons, conflicts, and fantasies.
Each micro reality is the young child’s work area and escape zone, a safe harbor to which he or she can flee adults’ weighty surveillance. In this zone, the child loses the self in creativity and is temporarily free to act out desires unhampered. After his discussions with Piaget in 1955, Erikson saw psychological and cognitive development as one (Erikson, 1987a). Interpreting from the vantage point of the projective medium of child’s play, he variously wrote that play serves ego development, aids the child’s unmitigated curiosity for learning and for experiencing surprise, serves as a vehicle for deploying the developing cognitive apparatus, permits symbolic improvisations, and permits the child to try on his or her sense of the unique adult roles that each society’s rendition of reality presents.

Play is an outlet for imagination and for the release of tensions. Play is serious, a work of the ego. Similar to the time-diffused commitment moratorium of adolescence, the fantasy of play suspends time, permitting a halted arena from which the child can step forward developmentally. In this singular realm, the child takes pleasure in his or her enactments and learns what will be repetitively enjoyable. In the earliest stage a sense of the numinous had been built by the infant’s growth in trust colored by mistrust, and in the second stage a sense of the judicious and lawful emanated from rule-learning in the period of autonomy which incorporates shame and doubt. Now a sense of the dramatic develops as a result of time-out-of-mind play initiative, a drama that holds its portion of conscience and guilt.

Expanding upward developmentally and outward spatially, Erikson’s term *macrosphere* means the school environment and other large contexts. For the older child, it is the space in which he or she expands the cognitive-psychological equipment by gaining competence in working with things, learning to share, and understanding new freedoms and limits in the larger physical structure and space to which ideas are attached. In the school age proper, the child learns the skills and methods of society. Play is then transformed into concrete work and formal skills, and in this macrosphere of personal industry development, imagination is eventually surrendered to duty.

For adolescents and adults, Erikson’s *microsphere* describes ways in which adolescents in their ideological thinking, and adults in their ideational work, project a field of vision as well as the ideas, plans, and models that fit within that field. Adolescent microspheres are projected values and utopian ideas against the prevailing *macrosphere* of the social and political arena that encases the problems of the day. But another uniquely adolescent *macro* environment also exists for such youth. This is the sports field, an engaged zone for competitive action which youth carry along with them into adult life. In those later, larger, adult arenas, youth turn the comparatively benign sportsmanship of their earlier years into political prowess, gaming, and, for some, tactical war maneuvers. All games reflect psychological, social, physical, and cognitive abilities; games also reflect prototypes of power and aggression, both in process and in outcome.

To the adult, *microsphere* is theory and theatre, the eye and visual field projected. Included are the “polis” of the political sphere, as well as the representational drama of theatre, of play acting in the work roles of life, and of entertaining a *microcosm* of ideas. Erikson’s take on ideas was that they are each rational adult’s mental playing field, the abstract world that cognitively developed adults themselves construct.

An important concept in Erikson’s approach to play is vision. The sphere is essential; it is the mind’s eye, and a created, projected psychological-visual field. Erikson meant two things by this, first that the infant’s vision and, with it, the ability to assimilate impressions, is the earliest organizing element in life, that humans retain early visual pictures from their prelinguistic years, and that such images are transported into later ideas such as worldviews and notions of the Absolute Other, *God* to some. Second, Erikson saw adult
visual ideas as the individual’s construction of reality, a partial, future-projecting, reality. Individual reality is only partial since humans must reduce the more complex, complete external reality such that their limited human minds can assimilate and handle it. In this, he borrowed Lippmann’s (1922) rendition of the way humans reduce the external world, and “reconstruct” it on a smaller, simpler scale in order to work with it.

Stages of Development

One of Erikson’s most important contributions was his conception of the human in its developmental, life span completeness at a time when theorists, researchers, and clinicians had begun to study human parts (see Erikson, 1982). His life stage model is an ego developmental theory, one that shows conscious and unconscious forces and attributes in an integrated, cumulative, life narrative. Persons move through sequential stages as they traverse their life cycle. In this, just as society and culture, one’s family, and one’s school or work environments are contexts, each stage of life is itself a context for development.

Each of the eight Eriksonian stages depicts the contextual, ontogenetic origin of a phase-specific crisis and its psychosocial demands and needs, the resolutions of which are recapitulated in all later developmental stages. In this, “a stage is a new configuration of past and future, a new combination of drive and defense, a new set of capacities fit for a new setting of tasks and opportunities, a new and wider radius of significant encounters” (Erikson, 1962, p. 457)

Prior to 1950 when Erikson first presented his life stage theory, psychoanalysts and U.S. developmental psychologists had not seriously entertained the possibility that development continues beyond the period when physical completeness and rational maturity are typically attained. They had not conceptualized ego identity, and had largely failed to consider how it is that the social world infuses the psychosocial human, including the way that world variously offers or withholds developmental opportunities. In showing the nexus between the person and society, in posing an open systems view of development, and in conceptualizing a healthy developmental order and sequence for the entire life span, Erikson’s work is a substantial contribution to thought. Furthermore, in his sociocultural agenda, he always searched for ways that society and its institutions might best include and support the developing person, bolstering ego development and its evolution.

Erikson’s is a model of opposing polarities that compete with one another in each of the eight stages. For example, in the first stage, the polarity of trust vies with its polar opposite mistrust. Preferentially, by the end of that stage, the infant will have resolved the conflict in such a way that the health-sponsoring syntonic pole of trust will have absorbed the detrimental dystonic pole of mistrust. A favorable ratio of both develops, in that both trust and mistrust emanate, but the most healthy resolution is one in which the balance tips toward trust. That is, the infant knows the dependability of his or her primary caretakers and environment, while harboring a budding sense that one cannot trust every human encounter and situation.

Each set of stage-specific content is termed a crisis (e.g., trust/mistrust). Crisis means the demands that arise in each specific stage, those with which one is developmentally ready to engage, capable of deploying psychological energy in the encounter. Polarity depicts stage opposites. Versus conveys the dialectics and tension of the competing, antagonistic forces, poles. Using our infant as an example, in trust versus mistrust, the best case resolution is one in which the strength of Hope emanates from the crisis and its competing polarities. Hope expresses the confidence each loved infant has that the world and his or her experience of it holds the promise of safety, security, and ongoing nurturance.
For each stage of life, Erikson thus posed strengths that hold the ego together and, at each stage and cumulatively, illustrate the attributes that show the person’s developed capacities. Just as hope, will, purpose, and competence are the principal ego strengths of infancy and childhood, fidelity in ego identity is the strength and competence of adolescence (e.g., Erikson, 1964). In the post-identity development years, ego identity is strengthened through the competencies of love, care, and eventual integration. In all such strengths, the human reaches out to the social world and moves upward in consciousness. Indeed, based on the work of theorists such as Vaillant (1995, 2000), contemporary thought holds that the mature ego defenses of sublimation, suppression, humor, anticipation, and altruism are mechanisms of heightened consciousness; they are developmental progressions from unconscious, less mature defenses such as denial, reaction formation, and projection. And, just as the higher level ego defenses represent movement forward in developmental maturity and upward in consciousness, the more mature defenses are those that are more socially-centered than self-centered, Erikson’s (1975) “outward” notion (p. 39).

In his final theoretical book, titling its second section “Ritualization in Everyday Life,” Erikson (1977) showed his departure from Freud (1960) who had titled one of his books The Psychopathology of Everyday Life. Erikson meant his changed wording to show that one must study and understand normal, healthy, whole humans and their incorporation into society as the basis for all else, mental illness included. Departing from Freud who used the fractured, archeologically examined ill mind, traced back to its origins in infancy, as the frame for portraying neuroses and normalcy, Erikson countered that health, including mental health, cannot be best understood on the basis of mental illness, just as the infantile beginnings of psychological life are not determinative. Persons continue to adapt to life as it unfolds, as the content and the meaning of mastery change with new requirements and abilities. Thus, if early origins are not inviolate, they and related difficulties cannot chart the entire life course. Later nurturance and support, or disintegration and exclusion, can alter any beginning course of events.

Adult Development. Reading his various publications, notes, and letters, it is clear that just as Einstein worked toward unification theory in physics, Erikson worked to unify the human in its developmental entirety. Early on, he focused on infant and child development and then moved onward in the life trajectory to consider the problem of ego identity. He then turned his attention to adults, considering ongoing ego identity development. This led to framing the meaning of intimacy in young adulthood, and generativity and integration, respectively, in the middle and later years. In this, Erikson used Freud’s thoughts as a springboard. Freud is often quoted as having said that being adult means “to love and to work.”

In his unpublished notes, Erikson claimed that Freud had also stipulated adulthood’s negatives, the developmental traps that each person must confront. To Erikson, these negatives must be countered if one is to move forward, in health and in competence, throughout the rest of life (see Hoare, 2002, 2005). Combining these concepts, intimacy (love) against “isolation” became Erikson’s first stage of adulthood proper while generativity (the care of progeny and one’s work) against “stagnation” became his second adult stage. He charted the final adult stage as integrity/despair, only to change integrity to integrality when, as an elder, he understood seniors as those who expend great effort just to keep body and soul together as integral, not necessarily wise and emulated, parcels. Thus, in adulthood proper, in the years of intimacy/isolation, generativity/stagnation, and integrality/despair, identity development is ongoing, presuming that the person’s...
internal and external environments provide the required contexts for such development to occur. And if, as he saw it, identity and integrality are the far distant “I” absorbed eras of adult life, intimacy (through love) and generativity (through care) are the intermediate “we” years, those of engaging deeply, productively, and caringly with others. That is, with ego identity in hand in its early “I” form by late adolescence or early adulthood, identity then becomes “I am who I love” (intimacy/isolation), and “I am who and what I care for” (generativity/stagnation).

In effect, Erikson made explicit an approach and a consciously psychosocial way of thinking about the adult, about humans’ collective history, social changes, and the era specific institutions of life. Sometimes subtly and sometimes pointedly, he also planted messages that a developed adult is one who will press the self to think in terms of cultural and historical relativity, to understand that we cannot help but think with the lens and perspective born of one person in a particular time and place, and to advantageously use that which is given in one life and its sequential unfolding. This took us to higher levels of developmental understandings.

Figure 3.2 shows what Erikson meant about the importance of resolving earlier and contemporary stage crises as one approaches and moves through adulthood. It also shows the importance of the adult’s own parents or caretakers as nurturers, and the way parental strengths or weaknesses can be passed along from generation to generation. In that figure, an adult moves into the intimacy stage of life. If positive childhood experiences and identifications with mentally healthy, supportive caretakers had been sown, and the ego had developed well in the first four strengths of hope, will, purpose, and competence, if identity is in hand with at least minimal firmness, and if the person’s caretakers had themselves developed a favorable ratio of the seven strengths required for the care of that youth, then the individual’s adulthood is likely to begin on a secure basis. Care, the ethical basis of the adult’s prime years, is the important link between each person’s life and prior and future generations. Culture must be supportive as well, for it supports or thwarts each youth in the early stages, as well as in identity formation and ongoing adult identity development. When society is in disarray, when it fails to nurture its young by withholding families and institutions that will ably do so, when it prejudicially closes down opportunities for youth and adults, a firm, positive identity is impossible in the stages that are critical for its development and extension. We have long recognized that in the absence of mentally healthy, nurturant families and other essential environments, ego identity and other maturational forms of development are thwarted to the extent that some persons develop only chronologically.

In his lifetime of work, Erikson made explicit a model of preferential adult development. That is, the adult is one who invests sponsorship, love, and care in the nurturance of others and in the work of the world. In so doing, he committed the naturalistic fallacy of changing an “is” to an “ought,” stating in various forums what is required of adults in service to children, to concurrent and later generations of people, and to species survival. He wrote of the various ways in which proximal generations “cogwheel” interdependently one with another, and how they move one another along in their related lives.

The tendency in recent literature is to dispute specific Eriksonian stages, particularly for the adult sequence. Many seem to view Erikson’s theory as that which was meant as a timeless system or as the achievement scale he warned against. Yet, he understood from the very beginning of his professional life that truth and facts are not immutable, whereas “a viewpoint or a manner of inquiry” are more inclined to stand the test of time (Coles, p. 162); hence the title of Erikson’s (1987b) selected papers as A Way of Looking at Things. Speaking of his stage content, Erikson cautioned that it was not a “definitive
inventory” (Evans, 1967, p. 30). “I only speak,” he said, of a “developing capacity to perceive and to abide by values established by a particular living system.” In part, the nature of Erikson’s stage concepts were, as he knew, tied to the years of its conceptualization.

The temporally ordered, invariant sequence that Erikson conceptualized fit well with what was psychodynamically afoot in mid-20th century, U.S. society, particularly among middle-class, EuroAmericans. Nearly 60 years later, we cannot judge it as invalid for its time and subjects. Instead, we would do well to use his approach in our appraisal of contemporary persons—their developmental trajectory, psychosocial requirements, and concerns—against our changing world, its societies and institutions. We should also retain much of the ground plan he captured, for it remains relevant today.

One can quibble with the adult-specific, invariant order Erikson postulated, of, for example, identity/identity confusion followed by intimacy/isolation. Exceptions to this
invariance have been found among some women who seem to have resolved intimacy prior to identity, in sociocentric (largely Eastern) cultures where identity issues are other than those of individualistic achievement, and in those settings in which the mutuality of intimacy is suborned or postponed due to arranged marriages or marriages in which males have multiple mates. Furthermore, in the United States today, any number of 40 year-old mothers of newborns are also grandmothers simultaneously, and the increase in the number and forms of single, blended, and recombined families has added variety, if not a new form of identity/identity confusion.

Thus, there are two ways of considering Erikson’s adult stages. The first is to use his approach, but to chart adult developmental stages as they mirror changes in contemporary humans. The second is to understand and apply the meaning of epigenesis and Erikson’s ethical stance about the importance of deploying the developmental fuel that is provided in each phase of adult life.

In the first case, understanding that today’s adults do not necessarily mirror Erikson’s stage invariant order, we can say that the identified unfolding he captured might not strictly apply. For example, identity development might evolve directly into generativity, a caring for one’s work and for the people and lives around one. Only then, if at all, might deep intimacy engagement follow. Thus, it depends on how one shuffles the life stage deck of cards. However, it is clear that adults do see themselves, presently and retrospectively, as living in various, sequential rooms of their adult lives. They speak of being, or of having been, young, middle aged, older, and aged, with psychosocial energies, content, and invested meaning-making that changes sequentially through time. For, at its best, adulthood is always a changing landscape in which one partially closes the door to each room of life, and uses the developed investments, capacities, and understandings of each life space as ongoing resources to the developing self. In not entirely closing the doors on any of their prior rooms, adults continue to visualize themselves in, and applying energy to, the key content of those periods of life in order to sustain (or partially undo) prior developmental issues and outcomes. The question then remains as to how current (and future) adults deploy their psychosocial energies, capacities, and variable stage-specific requirements in those critical periods of life. And, how do they use the developed capacities of childhood, adolescence, and their earlier adult stages as resources to themselves in the next life stage?

The second way of considering Erikson’s adult developmental stages is to view them as a normative, best case scenario, that is, in terms of what is most developmentally adaptive for adults and children, and for each adult’s eventual assessment of the worth of one personal life.

We might ask, as Erikson did, what it is that is given in the ground plan of human design, its unfolding, and developmental readiness. It has long been the case that biological readiness and deterioration factors, as well as facets of mental maturity, define the adult span. For example, mate-seeking characterizes the young adult years (Buss, 1994), and this is often followed by childbearing. Looking only to birth data, the stage of young adulthood, with its intimacy/isolation delineation, remains the most physically appropriate time to bear and begin raising children. Teen pregnancies pose risks for mothers and their infants, and the maternal years after age 35 are risky as well. Thus there are, perhaps, 15 years of young adulthood prime time. After age 35, for example, the risk of bearing a child with a chromosomal disorder (i.e., Down Syndrome) is 1 in 400 at age 35, 1 in 100 at age 40, and 1 in 30 at age 45; these data can be compared with the risk of 1 in 1,250 at age 25 (www.marchofdimes.com). Risks of delivering premature and low birthweight infants also increase substantially after age 35 (Tough et al., 2002), maternal health risks.
(e.g., diabetes and hypertension) are twice as common in those women (Bianco et al., 1996), and, by age 42, 50% miscarriage rates are reported (Andersen et al., 2000). These data can be combined with knowledge that, in most women sex drive peaks far prior to age 35, and maternal fertility declines in a woman’s early thirties. Thus, one might well conclude that the young adult years are indeed the best stage-specific time for bearing children, an outcome of heterosexual intimacy. When one combines biological and morbidity data with our knowledge of psychosocial readiness factors, such information supports the normative best case, if not necessarily contemporary women’s variability, of deploying the energies and resources charted by Erikson’s intimacy stage.

In the subsequent stage, that of generativity/stagnation, the recognition that one cannot merely produce and discard is explicit in Erikson’s concepts. This applies to the care of children who have been born to the adult, to all children in society, and to the care shown in one’s work, its products and ideas. Ethically, it is unthinkable to dispose of the next generation, or of other commitments that were born of the engaged work of the adult years. Generative care sows the seeds of adults’ later appraisals that their lives had worth and meaning. This is an ethics of adult development as Erikson has been accused, but the alternatives are untenable.

**The Need for a Metamodel**

**Incorporating Context, Life Stages, and Biogenetics**

Both Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological and Erikson’s biopsychosocial frameworks are important representatives of the contextual and life stage models of human development. Returning to the fable that began this chapter, these two models are large scale representations of the complex human. Each model contains substantial data that importantly speak to the principle developmental fuel and environments that frame adults. Two points are important: First, researchers can ill afford to include only one of these models as the exclusive way of framing and examining the human. Second, even when including both the contextual and the stage perspectives, these two models represent only two-thirds of the adult. A larger metamodel must express our thought, one that includes all three views and their intersecting attributes—those of context, stage, and biogenetics—if we are to avoid the reductionistic trap. The challenge to future theorists and researchers in adult development and learning is to incorporate content from within each of these models as we move forward to specify a view of the complete, human adult.

The third model, one not elaborated in this chapter, is that of biogenetics. This is the micro level which, when integrated with contextual and psychodynamic, life stage data, shows the interplay of all three sets of attributes. For example, we recall Bronfenbrenner’s (1986) synthesis of findings from, for example, Scarr and Weinberg’s (1976, 1983) and Schiff, Duyme, Dumaret, and Tomkiewicz’s (1982) studies. When placed in advantageous, middle-class home circumstances, the mean I.Q. of adoptive children became substantially higher than that of their biological parents. Genetic endowment is thus not deterministic, but is altered by family resources and parental engagement. This is in keeping with Erikson’s assessment that infantile origins do not necessarily chart the entire life course of adaptations or of aberrations. Among infants, early attachment and engagement are not just primary needs, which of course they are, but there is a complex relationship among genetics, brain plasticity, family environment, parental behavior, cognitive-emotional growth, and the healthy development of an intelligent, social being (see also Cozolino, 2006).
Among adults, recent data show that the adult brain and consequent adult functioning continue to change in important ways. In areas that are critical to development and learning, the adult brain is plastic, forming new neurons, synapses, and capillaries. In particular, neuron growth has been found in the important dentate gyrus of the hippocampus, a location related to learning and memory (Fillit et al., 2002). Such plasticity is reciprocal with learning engagement.

For example, studying London taxi drivers, Maquire and colleagues (2000) found changes in the structure and function of the brain based on learning and experience. London is a large city with an intricate web of roads and streets. For taxi drivers, an intensive two-year period of learning prepares drivers to immediately call forth from memory a visual map of locations, businesses, and routes without the help of road maps. As a result of classroom instruction combined with experience navigating myriad routes, brain neuroimaging showed that drivers’ posterior hippocampi, a brain area associated with spatial depictions of the external environment, grew significantly larger than that of control subjects. Subjects with many years of driving experience showed greater hippocampal size than drivers with less experience.

Concluding Premises

The questions we pose and the studies we design are profoundly affected by our view of the world and our models of the human. Just as we have moved beyond the notion of adult stasis, and no longer see the adult in terms of Newton’s absolutism or Freud’s related mechanics, “neurones,” and archeological premises, we must now move beyond seeing from within one or another model alone as we conceptualize adult development. It is important that we understand and incorporate the forces that have shaped and continue to shape the chronologically mature person. In this, perspectives and data are found within the biogenetic, the contextual, and the life stage models, for data from within each of these models are expressed in the adaptive human adult. As was elaborated throughout this chapter, these data necessarily include the nurturing others and important contexts in each unique life, attributes and forces of the broader sociocultural environment, the psychosocial content and resolutions of current and prior life stages, the structural and genetic equipment that was in place from the beginning and which changes its expression dynamically over time, and the way our adult sees the self in the present and into the future. Humans are permeable to their immediate and prior social world, to evolving and interactive biological material, to their position in the connected, always unfolding life span, to national and cultural attributes, and to important others in their personal and work lives. Adult development will vary depending on these facets and on the basis of each adult’s ongoing interaction with the environment, with tasks, engagements, motivations, and sense of what the future holds.

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