STAGES IN PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE SECOND HALF OF LIFE

Erikson, like Freud before him, conceived his "stages" of early life by considering the psychological problems that must be universally met and mastered at specific developmental (age) periods. Thus, his first four stages are defined as "psychic developmental tasks" which must be faced in infancy and childhood. The fifth, Identity, seems to be defined as it is because adolescence (at least, in our society) uniquely poses the problem of developing a new kind and sense of identity. That is, this problem does not ordinarily arise acutely during middle childhood; and it can not be perfectly resolved if deferred to the adult years. The sixth and seventh stages are defined and located as they are, it seems, because they describe tasks which are uniquely crucial issues in young adulthood. That is, they do not arise until adolescent problems are behind, and they probably can not be successfully deferred much beyond the age of thirty.

Erikson's eighth stage, however, Ego-Integrity vs. Despair, seems to be intended to represent in a global, nonspecific way all of the psychological crises and crisis-solutions of the last forty or fifty years of life. Clearly, his phrasing of it states a major issue of life after thirty. A closer look at the second half of life, however, suggests that it might be accurate and useful to divide it into several quite different kinds of psychological learnings and adjustments, at different stages in the latter half of life. If this is true, these stages and the tasks they present may be as worthy of distinct definition and study as Erikson has devoted to the stages of early life. For reasons which will be discussed later, the chief chronological division which seems sound is between a Middle Age period and an Old Age period. Within these periods, the stages may occur in different time sequence, for different individuals.

MIDDLE AGE

1. Valuing Wisdom vs. Valuing Physical Powers.—One of the inescapable consequences of aging, after the late twenties, is a decrease in physical strength, stamina, and attractiveness (if, as in America, "attractiveness" is usually defined as "young-looking"). On the other hand, the sheer experience which longer living brings can, if it is used, make the middle aged person able to accomplish a good deal more than younger people, though by a different means.

"Wisdom" seems to be a widely used word which may sum up this increment in judgmental powers that aging makes possible.

Wisdom is to be distinguished from intellectual capacity. It might be defined as the ability to make the most effective choices among the alternatives which in-
tlectual perception and imagination present for one’s decision. Such choice-making is affected by one’s emotional stability, and one’s unconflicted or conflicted motivation-set, as well as by intellectual ability. Sheer life experience seems to be essential in giving one a chance to encounter a wide range of emotional relationships, as a corrective to the over-generalized perceptual-attitudinal set derived from one’s necessarily limited experience in one family, and one subculture, during childhood and adolescence.

Judging from personality analysis of some thousands of business people in the middle range of life—mostly men—it is my impression that most reach a critical transition point somewhere between the late thirties and the late forties. Some people cling to physical powers, both as their chief “tool” for coping with life, and as the most important element in their value-hierarchy; especially in their self-definition. Since physical powers inevitably decline, such people tend to grow increasingly depressed, bitter, or otherwise unhappy as they grow older. Moreover, they may become increasingly ineffective in their work roles and social roles, if they try to rely on physical powers which they no longer possess. (This appears to be a major etiological element in the “middle age depression,” particularly in men.)

Conversely, it has been my impression that those people who age most “successfully” in this stage, with little psychic discomfort and with no less effectiveness, are those who calmly invert their previous value hierarchy, now putting the use of their “heads” above the use of their “hands,” both as their standard for self-evaluation and as their chief resource for solving life problems.

Thus, it might be conceived that the optimum course for people who reach this first stage of physical decline is to switch from physique-based values to wisdom-based—or mental-based—values, in their self-definition and in their behavior.

2. Socializing vs. Sexualizing in Human Relationships.—Allied to general physical decline, but partially separate from it, is the sexual climacteric. The opportunity the climacteric presents might be this: that people can take on a new kind of value for one—or to a much more dominant degree—as individual personalities, rather than primarily as sex-objects.

If a person takes positive action at this point, redefining men and women as individuals and as companions, with the sexual element decreasingly significant, it would at least be understandable that interpersonal living could take on a depth of understanding which the earlier, perhaps inevitably more egocentric, sex-drive would have tended to prevent to some degree.

3. Cathectic Flexibility vs. Cathectic Impoverishment.—The phenomenon for which this label is intended might equally well be described as “emotional flexibility”: the capacity to shift emotional investments from one person to another, and from one activity to another. In some ways, this cross-cuts any and all adjustive shifts that are made throughout life. The reason for considering it as a distinct function, perhaps more crucial in middle age than at earlier ages, rests in the fact that this is the period, for most people, when their parents die, their children grow up and leave home, and their circle of friends and relatives of similar age begins to be broken by death.

On the other hand, for many people this is the time of life when they have the greatest range of potential cathexis-objects. They have the widest circle of acquaintances in their community and vocational worlds. They have achieved informal and formal status as “mature” or “experienced” people, to whom others actively turn. In fact, this may give them contacts with people over the widest age-range, from young to old, which they will ever encounter. Further, by contrast with younger ages, it may be that experi-
ence with a greater variety of people, of roles, of relationships, can lead to a more complex set of more varied, differentiated relationships than is possible at younger ages.

Some people suffer an increasingly impoverished emotional life through the years, because as their cathexis-objects disappear they are unable to reinvest their emotions in other people, other pursuits, or other life settings. Hence this too looks like a crisis-stage where positive adaptation requires new learning—not only of specific new cathexis, but of a generalized set toward making new cathexes (or redefining existing cathetic relationships, as in the case of grown-up children).

4. Mental Flexibility vs. Mental Rigidity.—One of the major issues in human growth and living seems to be the question, which will dictate one's life—one self, or the events and experiences one undergoes? Some people learn to master their experiences, achieve a degree of detached perspective on them, and make use of them as provisional guides to the solution of new issues. There are other people who seem to become dominated by their experiences. They take the patterns of events and actions which they happen to have encountered, as a set of fixed inflexible rules which almost automatically govern their subsequent behavior.

In any case, there appears to be a widespread feeling by a great many people that “too many” tend to grow increasingly set in their ways, inflexible in their opinions and actions, and closed-minded to new ideas, as they go through the middle years. This is often said of elderly people; but it seems that the first time when it becomes a critical issue for most people may well be during middle age, when they have peak status, have worked out a set of “answers” to life, and may be tempted to forego further mental effort to envision new or different “answers.”

Like Cathetic Flexibility, this function cross-cuts all adaptive learning behavior. It is no doubt particularly related to stage one, Wisdom vs. Physique; but insofar as it may be a generalized phenomenon, including that first choice-point as a special case, it may be worthy of separate study.

OLD AGE

1. Ego Differentiation vs. Work-Role Preoccupation.—The specific issue, here, particularly for most men in our society, is created by the impact of vocational retirement, usually in the sixties. What this phrase is intended to represent is a general, crucial shift in the value system by which the retiring individual can re-appraise and redefine his worth, and can take satisfaction in a broader range of role activities than just his long-time specific work role. The chief issue might be put this way: “Am I a worthwhile person only insofar as I can do a full time job; or can I be worthwhile in other, different ways—as a performer of several other roles, and also because of the kind of person I am?”

The process of ego-differentiation into a complex, varied set of self-identifications begins in early childhood. There are reasons, however, for considering it a centrally important issue at the time of vocational retirement. For most men, the ability to find a sense of self-worth in activities beyond the “job” seems to make the most difference between a despairing loss of meaning in life, and a continued, vital interest in living. (For many women, this stage may arrive when their “vocational” role as mother is removed by the departure of the grown children. In that case, this crisis-stage might well come in middle age, for many women.)

Thus, one critical requisite for successful adaptation to old age may be the establishment of a varied set of valued activities and valued self-attributes, so that any one of several alternatives can be pursued with a sense of satisfaction and worthwhileness. This, at any rate, is what the term ego-differentiation is here intended to represent.

2. Body Transcendence vs. Body Preoccupation.—Old age brings to almost everyone a marked decline in resistance
to illness, a decline in recuperative powers, and increasing experience with bodily aches and pains. For people to whom pleasure and comfort mean predominantly physical well-being, this may be the gravest, most mortal of insults. There are many such people whose elder years seem to move in a decreasing spiral, centered around their growing preoccupation with the state of their bodies.

There are other people, however, who suffer just as painful physical unease, yet who enjoy life greatly. It may be that these are people who have learned to define “happiness” and “comfort” more in terms of satisfying human relationships, or creative activities of a mental nature, which only sheer physical destruction could seriously interfere with. In their value system, social and mental sources of pleasure and self-respect may transcend physical comfort, alone.

This is the hypothesis underlying the selection of this issue as a critical decision-point of old age. While such an orientation must almost certainly be developed in its initial form by early adulthood, if it is to be achieved at all, old age may bring the most critical test of whether this kind of value system has been achieved. In the form in which this issue occurs in late life, it may thus be viewed as one of the goals of human development. It recognizes that physical decline occurs, but it also takes account of mental and social powers which may actually increase with age, for many people.

3. Ego Transcendence vs. Ego Preoccupation.—One of the new and crucial facts of old age is the appearance of the certain prospect of personal death. In earlier years death comes unexpectedly, as it were; but elderly people know it must come. Chinese and Hindu philosophers, as well as Western thinkers, have suggested that a positive adaptation is possible even to this most unwelcome of prospects. The constructive way of living the late years might be defined in this way: To live so generously and unselfishly that the prospect of personal death—the night of the ego, it might be called—looks and feels less important than the secure knowledge that one has built for a broader, longer future than any one ego ever could encompass. Through children, through contributions to the culture, through friendships—these are ways in which human beings can achieve enduring significance for their actions which goes beyond the limit of their own skins and their own lives. It may, indeed, be the only knowable kind of self-perpetuation after death.

Such an adaptation would not be a stage of passive resignation or of ego-denial. On the contrary, it requires deep, active effort to make life more secure, more meaningful, or happier for the people who will go on after one dies. Since death is the one absolute certainty for all people, this kind of adaptation to its prospect may well be the most crucial achievement of the elder years. Success in this respect would probably be measureable, both in terms of the individual’s inner state of contentment or stress, and in terms of his constructive or stress-inducing impact on those around him. It seems reasonable to suppose that one could find objective evidence that there are destructive effects from a narrowly ego-centered clinging to one’s private, separate identity, at the expense of contributing to others’ welfare or happiness. The “successful ager” at this final stage would be the person who is purposefully active as an ego-transcending perpetuation of that culture which, more than anything else, differentiates human living from animal living. Such a person would be experiencing a vital, gratifying absorption in the future. He would be doing all he could to make it a good world for his familial or cultural descendants. While in a sense, this might be considered a vicarious source of satisfaction, actually as long as one lives this is a direct, active, emotionally significant involvement in the...
daily life around one. It might almost be seen as the most complete kind of ego-realization, even while it is focused on people and on issues which go far beyond immediate self-gratification in the narrow sense.

**USE OF DEVELOPMENTAL CRITERIA RATHER THAN AGE CRITERIA FOR STUDYING STAGES IN LATER LIFE**

If stages in later life are to be defined, certain special problems must be faced which do not pertain, or not as much, to the study of early life. For one thing, there is far greater variability in the chronological age at which a given psychic crisis arises in later life, than is true of the crisis-points of youth. For instance, one critical test of Cathetic Vitality occurs when one's children grow up and leave home for good. In one family, this may occur in the parents' late thirties. In another family, the parents may be close to sixty before this happens. Thus, if one practical criterion of mastery of a later-life psychological task is the person's handling of certain critical experiences, then older people who are equated for the stage they are "working on" may differ very widely in chronological age.

An even more complex situation exists, moreover. In studying children who are at the pre-pubertal stage, we can almost take it for granted that they are almost all working on the same total set of developmental tasks. With adults, the pattern of developmental tasks can vary more greatly, from one individual to another. For example, the man whose children are grown when he is forty, may not yet have experienced the male climacteric; he may still be working "uphill" to master his vocational role; and he may just be entering a widened circle of social, political or other activities, and a widened circle of friends. This makes "the departure of children" a much different thing for this man, than for a man of sixty whose youngest child is just leaving home; who is nearing vocational retirement; whose family and friendship circle has been broken by several deaths; and whose interest or potency in sexual activity may be markedly less than in his earlier years.

One practical conclusion might be drawn from such reflections, with regard to the conceptualizing of stages in later life: they may have to be much more divorced from chronological age than is true of the childhood stages. There probably are still certain broadly delimitable periods, such as "middle age" and "old age" but these are apt to be statistical artifacts, describing "the average person" of 40-60, or some such span. There are bound to be some people of 65 who act, think and feel like the "middle age" group, while other 65-year-olds act, think and feel very elderly. At least, observation indicates that this is likely to be found.

This leads to one conclusion about the design of future researches on aging: it may be that the best way to get samples which are homogeneous with respect to their "stage in life," will be to use some "stage" criterion and disregard chronological age, except as it proves to be similar for the members of a sample which is defined by a nonchronological criterion. To illustrate, it may be that most can be learned about the principles of psychological development and learning in later life if samples are drawn of women who are at the climacteric, regardless of age; of men who are at the point of retiring (probably less independent of age, for reasons of social policy); of parents whose youngest child has just left home; et al.