

Theory of early and or middle adulthood with reference to research studies essay ...



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Early and middle adulthood is the longest era during the lifecycle (assuming that we enjoy a normal lifespan). Due to the lack of research this area of psychology has received Levinson said that adulthood is “ one of the best kept secrets in our society and probably in human history generally”. Erikson and Levinson devised theories on adulthood with the latter’s being the ‘ Seasons of a Mans Life’.

Levinson’s theory argues that there is a life cycle consisting of periods spanning across adult life. This suggestion of a cycle promotes the notion that there is an underlying order in the life course. There are 4 basic stages and these consist of:

- 1) Pre-adulthood (0 - 22)
- 2) Early-adulthood (17 - 45)
- 3) Middle-adulthood (40 -65)
- 4) Late-adulthood (60+)

These periods can alternate between those, which are stable or structure building, and those, which are transitional or structure changing. When observing the main components in the life structure Levinson found that:

‘ only one or two components (rarely as many as three) occupy a place in the structure. Most often, marriage, family and occupation are the central components of a person’s life, although wide variations can occur in their relative weight and in the importance of other components.’

With Levinson's life cycle theory each era has its own psychological and social characteristics:

1) Pre-adulthood - This is the era of the most rapid development, as it spans infancy, childhood, and adolescence: the years between 17 and 22 form the early adulthood transition, in which there is the start of early adulthood as the individual begins to behave as an in an adulthood as the individual begins to behave as an adult in the adult world.

2) Era of early adulthood - According to Levinson (1986), this is " the era of greatest energy and abundance and of greatest contradiction and stress". This era starts with the early adult transition (17 - 22), during which the individual forms a dream, which compromises his or her major life goals. According to Levinson (1978), " If the dream remains unconnected to his life it may simply die...". The individual then tries to construct an adult lifestyle then later reconsiders and modifies this. Towards the end of this era the person is trying to realise their key aspirations and enters the midlife transition. Individuals often feel that they have not achieved their dream by this stage and think that they never will which culminates in a midlife crisis.

3) Era of middle adulthood - When entering the middle adulthood stage the individual will develop a lifestyle for middle age which once again is assessed and modified a number of years later. This is followed by the late adult transition.

4) Era of late adulthood - This era is basically periods concerned with adjustments due to retirement, health, etc...

Levinson originally gained evidence for the above theory by interviewing 40 men in their 30's and 40's. These consisted 10 novelist, biologists, factory workers and business executives. They were interviewed several times over 10-20 hours and then again 2 years later. The topic of questioning was the participants developing life structures through adulthood. This method has various drawbacks, one being that the interviewees may not have clearly remembered what happened to them 20 years ago and even if they had they may have deliberately distorted the answer. The results may have also been distorted due to the fact that if the interviewer has a particular theory in mind it can influence the questions asked.

Levinson never actually interviewed anyone over 47 in his study of men. This means that what he says about men in their 50's and 60's may not be that useful.

Critics of this theory have said that there is no real evidence for a midlife crisis during the early 40's. Vaillant (1977) collected longitudinal data over many years from Harvard graduates. This research found that some men did divorce, change jobs or suffer depression at midlife. However, the frequency of these major events was about the same throughout adulthood and showed that the early 40's were not a particularly difficult or stressful time.

When considering Levinson's theory it is obvious that cross-cultural differences have been overlooked and research into this would dramatically alter the theory. In some societies life expectancy is only 40 years which means that Levinson's statement of early adulthood being 17-45 is irrelevant.