



Early and Middle Adulthood

Before You Read

Main Idea

Men and women progress through adult development in different ways.

Reading Focus

1. What are the main eras in Daniel Levinson's theory of adult male development?
2. How does adult female development differ from adult male development?

Vocabulary

life structure
early adulthood
middle adulthood
late adulthood
novice phase
mentor

TAKING NOTES Use a graphic organizer like this one to take notes on adult male and adult female development.

Adult Development	
Male	Female

Quarter-Life Crisis

SOCIOLOGY CLOSE UP

What if being an adult doesn't answer all of life's questions? Imagine the not-too-distant future: you are a twenty-something.

You are college educated, independent, and living on your own. In fact, you have accomplished everything you set your mind to. Perhaps you have even landed your dream job and found your ideal mate. You should be having the time of your life, but you're not. You are totally confused. You are in the throes of a quarter-life crisis, and you are not alone.




Tales of teen angst and midlife crises are common in American culture, but until recently few people have talked about the difficulties associated with the period of adulthood in between. The term *quarter-life-crisis* was coined to describe a pattern of frustration, self-doubt, and identity crisis experienced by people in their twenties. Rather than breezing through the best years of their lives, many twenty-somethings find being in the "real world" isn't easy. They must decide where to live, how to best manage finances, what career to pursue, and how to establish new relationships. In facing these overwhelming choices and responsibilities, some feel helpless and indecisive. Others panic.

One truth that the quarter-life crisis illustrates is that socialization does not end in childhood. Rather, the quest for self-knowledge and the learning of new roles continues throughout life and into the final stages of adulthood. ■



LEVINSON'S DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF ADULTHOOD

Daniel Levinson developed a theory of adult development to describe a general pattern in the life experiences of men.

17	Early Adult Transition	The Novice Phase	
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23	Entering the Adult World		
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27	Age 30 Transition		
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30	Settling Down Period	Early Adulthood Era	
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40	Midlife Transition		
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46	Entering Middle Adulthood		
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50	Age 50 Transition		
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55	Culmination of Middle Adulthood		
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59	Late Adult Transition		
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65	Late Adulthood	Late Adulthood Era	
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Skills Focus INTERPRETING CHARTS According to Levinson, at what age do men begin a midlife transition?

Adult Male Development

The life courses of adult males and females in American society are somewhat different. Many women enter the labor force, take time out to have children, and then go back to work. Men, on the other hand, generally remain continuously in the labor force for most of their adult lives. The split employment pattern of women may be changing as more women choose to combine full-time careers with parenting. Nevertheless, the traditional pattern is still prevalent enough to merit looking at male and female adult development as two separate processes.

Psychologist Daniel Levinson and his colleagues at Yale University undertook an intensive long-term study to determine the adult male developmental stages. A research team of psychologists, sociologists, and psychiatrists conducted in-depth interviews with 40 men who were between the ages of 35 and 45 at the beginning of the study. Levinson and his colleagues selected study participants from four broad occupational categories.

The researchers interviewed each man for 10 to 20 hours over a two to three month period to determine how each had experienced personal development as an adult. The interviews focused on such issues as education, work, leisure, politics, and personal relationships. From these interviews, Levinson and his colleagues determined each man's life structure. A **life structure** is the combination of statuses, roles, activities, goals, values, beliefs, and life circumstances that characterize an individual. Through the analysis of these life structures, the research team was able to distinguish patterns that appear to be characteristic of most men.

After analyzing the patterns, Levinson and his colleagues concluded that there are three basic eras of adulthood. They named these eras **early adulthood**, **middle adulthood**, and **late adulthood**. The diagram at right shows how each era is divided into several distinct periods. Each era begins with a transitional period, which is then followed by alternating stable and transitional periods. The transitional periods last from four to five years, and the stable periods last from six to eight years. Levinson placed the greatest stress on the first five periods of adulthood.

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

apprentice

a person acquiring
a trade or skills
under supervision

The Early Adult Transition Early adulthood begins with the early adult transition period—ages 17 through 22. This period represents the bridge between adolescence and adulthood. According to Levinson, the most important task of this period is leaving home, both physically and psychologically. The process begins when young adults go away to college or take full-time employment and move out of their childhood homes. However, the break with parents is seldom abrupt or total. For example, college students often receive financial support from their parents. Other young adults achieve economic independence when they enter the work world. However, they may also continue to live at home.

Entering the Adult World The next stage in early adulthood is called entering the adult world—ages 23 through 27. The chief tasks of this period involve two slightly contradictory objectives. On one hand, the individual is expected to explore a variety of relationships and career opportunities. This expectation means that he must avoid strong commitments. On the other hand, the young adult is expected to become a responsible member of society and to form a stable life structure.

This period is also characterized by the development of a dream of adult accomplishment. The dream is almost always phrased in terms of occupational goals. For many, the dreams are very specific, such as becoming a Nobel Prize winner or a great athlete. Although these dreams often prove to be unrealistic, they provide a sense of purpose.

The Age 30 Transition For many people, the age 30 transition—ages 28 through 32—is a difficult period. It is a time to look back on one's choices. Divorces are common during this period as individuals examine their commitments. Levinson considered the age 30 transition to be crucial because it often involves shifts in direction. Sound choices provide a firm foundation for future development. Bad choices can have far-reaching consequences.

Levinson referred to the first three periods of the early adulthood era as the **novice phase**. It is the time when men prepare for entry into full adulthood. Their major task during this phase is to make a place for themselves in the adult world and to construct a life structure that fits them and works in the adult world.

The Settling Down Period The last stage of early adulthood is the settling down period—ages 33 through 39. The major task of this period is what Levinson called “making it” in the adult world. Individuals try to establish themselves in society, usually by advancing in their occupations. During this period, individuals commit to things that are important to them, such as work, family, leisure, friendship, or community. They also work to fulfill the dreams they established previously.

Near the end of the settling down period, men come to realize how much they are relying on others for guidance. Feeling constrained by these influences, they begin a conscious effort to form their own identities. The first step in this process often involves separating oneself from a mentor. A **mentor** fosters a person's development by believing in the person and helping the person achieve his or her dreams. The break with a mentor is important because it allows individuals to see themselves as more than “apprentice adults.”

The Midlife Transition The first stage in the middle adulthood era is the midlife transition—ages 40 through 44. This period serves as a bridge between early and middle adulthood. During the midlife transition, as in the age 30 transition, individuals question their life structures. In most instances, they come to realize that the dreams they formed in early adulthood are beyond fulfillment. Escaping the pressure of unattainable dreams is one of the major tasks of the midlife transition.

For about 80 percent of the men in Levinson's study, the midlife transition was a period of moderate to severe crisis. These men experienced both internal conflict and conflict with those around them. One way that many of the men worked through the crisis was by becoming a mentor. For those who successfully completed the transition, middle adulthood was a fulfilling period.

Support for Levinson's theory can be found in the fact that all the study participants went through the various periods in the same order and at about the same age. The research also indicates that the degree of difficulty that an individual experiences in a period depends on his success in mastering the previous period.

Reading Check Compare How are the age 30 transition and the midlife transition similar?

Becoming an Adult

Sociologists develop models to understand and explain broad patterns of behavior and experiences in society. How well do real lives fit sociological models for adult development?

PROCEDURE

- 1 Choose one of the models of adult development discussed in this section. Then select a man or a woman to interview.
- 2 Develop a list of five interview questions. For example, you may wish to ask: How did you prepare for adult roles and responsibilities? When did you first feel like an adult? If you could pick the five most significant events of your adult life, what would they be? The five biggest challenges?
- 3 Conduct your interview. Be sure to take detailed notes and ask follow up questions, such as "How old were you when that happened?," that will help you compare your adult's responses to the sociological model that you chose.



Quick Lab

- 4 Create a three-column chart to record your results. In the first column, list the stages of the model you chose, creating a row for each stage. In the second column, list the major characteristics of each stage. In the third column, record details from your interview that correspond with each stage.

ANALYSIS

1. Discuss with your classmates how well your adult's life pattern matched the sociological model you chose. Did your interview results support the model? Could the model be used to help explain your adult's life pattern?
2. How can one person's story help sociologists understand broader patterns?

Quick Lab

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Adult Female Development

Levinson suggested that his findings were equally valid for women. Later, he repeated his life-structure study using women to test his thesis. Employing the same interview method, he studied 45 women drawn from three broad categories—homemakers, college professors, and corporate executives. Comparing his findings to those of his earlier study, he concluded that men and women go through basically the same stages of adult development. Levinson did, however, find that men and women differed greatly in terms of their social roles and identities. Therefore, Levinson concluded that men and women also dealt differently with the developmental tasks associated with each stage of adult development.

Levinson's ideas on the similarity of male and female adult development have been a subject of some debate since he first made the suggestion in the 1970s. Some people argue that the differences he noted exist because the developmental processes for men and women are different. Irene Frieze and Esther Sales have both done work that lends support to this argument. Their research led to a suggestion of three phases in adult female development. These phases include leaving the family, entering the adult world of work and starting a family, and returning to the labor force.

Leaving the Family Women's entry into the adult world begins much the same way as that of men. It involves leaving home, making a psychological break from family, and developing a life plan. Some women focus more on marriage than their careers. In these cases, the specifics of the life plan are often shaped by the marriage relationship, for example, the husband's career may take priority. This emphasis on marriage over career is one factor that distinguishes female development from male development during adulthood.

Entering the Adult World Age at first marriage in the United States has been rising since the 1960s. Today it is an average of 25.3 years for women and 27.1 years for men. However, most women still marry and become mothers in their twenties. Although many women find motherhood and a career to be a workable combination, dual roles tend to put an added strain on women. Consequently, about 79 percent of new mothers who were in the labor force return to work before their children reach one year of age.

According to Sales, remaining out of the labor force while their children are young can limit women's career advancement possibilities. This break in employment is another factor that distinguishes adult female development from adult male development.

CASE STUDY

CONNECTION

The Opt-Out Revolution In the United States, many women struggle with balancing the demands of work and family.

Statistically Speaking...

Work and Motherhood Most American women juggle work and family. The career paths of working mothers are rarely straightforward. Most American mothers alternate between working full time and part time in an attempt to balance work and family life. Many take time out—often only a few months—to have children. Meanwhile, millions of other American women have their hands full as stay-at-home moms.

55% Percentage of working mothers with children younger than age one

72% Percentage of mothers with children age one and older in the workforce

83% Percentage of new mothers who return to the workforce within twelve months after childbirth

5.5 million Total number of stay-at-home parents in the United States, including 5.4 million moms and 98,000 dads

7% Percentage of American families that have a wage-earning dad and a stay-at-home mom

Skills Focus **INTERPRETING CHARTS** Which statistic do you find most surprising? Explain.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Re-entering the World of Work Once their children reach school age, many mothers who left the labor force return to the world of work. According to Sales, these women—most of whom are in their early thirties—find themselves in a situation similar to that of men in their twenties. Fewer obligations at home make it possible for them to actively pursue their career goals. Sales describes this as “re-entering the adult world,” and notes that women often commit to their careers at a time when their husbands begin to have serious doubts about their own career choices.

American attitudes on marriage and gender roles seem to be changing. Americans are delaying marriage or choosing not to get married at all. The marriage rate has dropped by more than 44 percent since the 1960s. Couples are delaying parenting as well. The age of mothers at the birth of their first child has risen slowly but steadily since the 1970s. Furthermore, the number of women in full-time executive, administrative, and managerial positions is increasing. In nearly one-fourth of all working couples, the wife earns more than the husband does. Such changes may signal that the developmental patterns of adult men and women are merging.

Reading Check **Find the Main Idea** What factors make adult female development different from adult male development?

Online Quiz **THINK central** thinkcentral.com

SECTION 1 Assessment

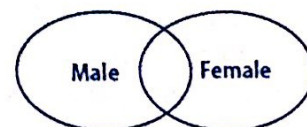
Reviewing Main Ideas and Vocabulary

- 1. Define** What is a life structure?
- 2. Identify** According to Daniel Levinson, what are the three basic eras of male adulthood?
- 3. Recall** When do adult men make a conscious effort to form their own identities and break from their mentors?
- 4. Sequence** According to Irene Frieze and Esther Sales, what pattern does adult female development typically follow?

Thinking Critically

- 5. Explain** In what ways do the developmental patterns of adult men and women appear to be merging?
- 6. Evaluate** Why might using a model developed on the experiences of men present a problem for understanding the experiences of both men and women?

- 7. Compare and Contrast** Using your notes and a graphic organizer like the one here, compare and contrast adult male development and adult female development.



FOCUS ON WRITING

- 8. Descriptive** Write a paragraph agreeing or disagreeing with the idea that there is little difference between adult female and adult male development. Consider changing attitudes toward marriage and changing views about gender roles.