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Adult Development: Capturing New Ways of Thinking About the Life Course

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Abstract: *We outline first a brief overview of a four-fold typology of developmental theory (biological, psychological, sociocultural and integrative models). We then discuss work that illustrates two of these frames: the sociocultural, which includes racial and ethnic, and relational aspects of development; and the integrative, focusing on time, development as narrative, and spiritual development. We close with a commentary on the current developmental literature and how this literature challenges our practice as adult educators.*

Introduction and Overview

The whole point of theory—any theory—is to help us understand something better. This symposium examines the theories that have been constructed about adult development, and the “something” that all these theories are trying to help us understand better is the life course—how it unfolds, and the meaning that can be given to various aspects and dimensions of that unfolding. A particular theory or family of theories serves as a kind of lens through which we view the life course; that lens illuminates certain elements and tells a particular story about adult life. Multiple lenses give us many different ways of illuminating different aspects of that life course. The purpose of this symposium is three-fold. First, we provide a brief overview of a four-fold framework, offered by Merriam and Caffarella (1999), for categorizing theories of adult development. Second, we discuss work illustrating two specific dimensions of that framework, the sociocultural and the integrated. And finally, we provide a commentary on the current developmental literature and how this literature challenges our practice as adult educators.

Building on the work of Perlmutter and Hall (1985), Bee (1996), and others, Merriam and Caffarella (1999) have developed a schema consisting of four dimensions: biological, psychological, so-

ciocultural, and integrative models. We focus here on the sociocultural and the integrative frames because they capture some of the most innovative work being done in developmental theory today. We address the work on racial and ethnic development, a body of literature that is of increasing importance as we struggle to embrace diversity in our society. The notions of separation and connection, pointing to the work of theorists who argue for a complex and changing balance between these fundamental drives, is examined. We discuss how the various conceptualizations of time provide a new way of understanding change and development. We look at development as narrative, an approach which derives from the storied nature of our lives and which places the adults themselves in the role of interpreter. Finally, we describe spiritual development, suggesting that the ultimate meaning adults give to their lives provides yet another way to understand the developmental process.

The typology offered by Merriam and Caffarella (1999) is useful in several ways. When we consider the latest work in this area, across all four categories of this framework, we noticed that we seem to be beyond the crafting of grand theories of development, like those offered by Erikson or Levinson. In addition, there has been a shift in

the literature on adult development towards thinking about development in a more integrative way, and it is in this frame that we believe the most significant and promising work is being done today. This trend toward integration and multiplicity of thought is two-dimensional. First, many scholars, even within the biological and psychological frames, are acknowledging the importance of taking into account elements from at least one other frame and often more than one, therefore arguing for a more holistic view of development. The second dimension relates to alternative ways of thinking about how development unfolds in adulthood, such as those offered by different concepts of time and by the notion of development as narrative.

As adult educators we are prodded to hear what was formerly unspoken. We can no longer ignore or take for granted issues of Otherness—gender, race and ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, spiritual commitment, social status... the list has no end. We also are being asked to think more creatively about the impact of development on learners and how we design programs.

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Racial and Ethnic Identity and Development

Florence Guido-DiBrito

Racial and ethnic identities are critical components of the overall framework of individual and collective identity. For some, especially visible legally defined United States minority populations, racial and ethnic identity is manifested in very conscious positive and negative ways. Others, especially U.S. white/European populations, manifest ethnic and racial identity in mostly unconscious ways through their behaviors, values, beliefs, and assumptions often viewed as “standard American culture.” However, all individuals,

regardless of race or identity, benefit from the development of a conscious ethnic identity.

Racial and ethnic identity have been misunderstood and, although some believe them to be biologically based (Spickard, 1992), are considered to be socially constructed (Waters, 1990). Several racial identity models (e.g., Cross, 1991), including white identity (e.g., Helms, 1995), discussed what could be described as an intersection between racial perceptions of others (i.e., racism) and racial perceptions of self (i.e., racial development). Although our perceptions of others are important and can act as triggers for development and consciousness, there is great value in the consideration of racial/ethnic identity for oneself and groups of individuals. A related concept, ethnic identity is developed from shared culture, religion, geography and language of individuals who are often connected by strong loyalty and kinship as well as proximity (Torres, 1999). Many models of identity appear in the literature for different ethnic groups (e.g., Garrett & Walking Stick Garrett, 1994; Padilla, 1995). These models typically outline commonalities likely within a particular ethnic group.

A multidimensional understanding of racial and ethnic identity assists us in understanding the many possibilities inherent in working with adult learners. Attention to racial and ethnic identity is critical in the learning environment in numerous ways. For example, learning environments must be inclusive of multicultural ways of doing, different knowledge bases, and styles of teaching and learning. Additionally, the creation and maintenance of a strong learning community that honors, supports, and challenges each learner, regardless of race and ethnicity, is essential. Educators working with adults at all levels can benefit these learners by creating environments that balance different cultural norms, such as designing collaborative and individual learning activities, encouraging in class reflection and discussion, and using visual, written, kinesthetic, relational and other types of learning. Creating positive multicultural learning communities requires educators to model authenticity, relational and self-sharing ways, by supporting nonjudgmental processing of multiple perspectives and by facilitating a respectful community of learners.

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Relational Aspects of Adult Development Theory

Kathleen Taylor

Most early developmental theorists, such as Erikson and Kohlberg, who drew on the experiences of men and boys, called for individuation and separation as prerequisites to identity development. More recently, however, researchers who have explored women's experiences have described an equally compelling role for connection and relationship. On one hand, both men and women need to separate from others, constructing an identity that is clearly their own. On the other, both men and women need also to be connected to others, to see themselves in relation to them and as part of a larger whole. Several theorists explore the possibilities for balance between these two

apparently opposing drives. Peck (1986), the scholars at the Stone Center at Wellesley College (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver & Surrey, 1991; Miller & Stiver, 1997; Bergman & Surrey, 1997), and Kegan (1994), attempt to describe ways in which both separateness and meaningful connection are part of everyone's lifelong developmental process. In this view, identity derives as much from connection with others as it does from establishing one's separateness. Separation no longer precedes connection in forging a healthy sense of self, and deep concern for other's needs and feelings does not signal inappropriate dependence.

Beyond theory, however, is the lived experience of adult learners. Some learners put others' needs before their own in ways that threaten their educational success. They feel guilty about taking up too much of the family's resources (for example, of time and money). As a result, rather than continue to endure the feeling that they are being selfish, they may drop out. Others manage to differentiate between doing something for themselves and being selfish; they realize that they need not respond with feelings of guilt when others are displeased. Analyzing these experiences through a developmental lens offers educators a way to better understand some of the challenges other than academic content that adult learners face as they negotiate educational programs.

Finally, how can educational environments support adults' developmental growth toward a construction of self in which connection and separation are in balance, rather than tipped in one direction or the other? Some of the literature speaks in terms of transformative and emancipatory learning or critical thinking. Recent research (Taylor, Marienau & Fiddler, 2000) describes teaching with "developmental intentions." These support learners in engaging with the world of ideas and learning from experience, in examining and challenging assumptions (their own and others'), in arriving at thoughtfully-held commitments, and in connecting with others from a place of mutual enhancement rather than the need to feel complete.

Such approaches to teaching and learning may not only support a balance between connection and separation, but may encourage a way of perceiving and knowing that leads to a deepened understanding of oneself, one's responsibility, and one's capacity to act in the world.

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Time as the Integrative Factor

Sharan B. Merriam

A developmental perspective on the life course is about documenting change over time, or change with the passage of time. Time, therefore, is a key variable in studying development and in understanding the nature, if not the causes of change. But development is not simply a function of the ticking of the clock and the passage of years. Except for certain physiological changes such as the graying of hair or menopause, just getting older is too simple an explanation to account for changes in behavior, attitude, values, or self-perception. Intertwined with the mere passage of time is the historical context in which one lives as well as the social expectations of a particular culture at a particular point in time. Time thus has three connotations when applied to development: the passage of time marked by chronological age; historical time, or the particular period in history in which one lives; and social time, a culturally-dependent timetable outlining appropriate behavior at various stages in the life cycle. As a multidimensional concept incorporating biological, sociocultural and historical dimensions, time can indeed function as an integrative mechanism in the study of adult development. How time functions as an integrative concept will be illustrated with reference

to a developmental study of HIV positive men and women.

Historical time is defined as “long-term processes, such as industrialization and urbanization,” and “economic, political, and social events that directly influence the life course of the individuals who experience those events” (Neugarten & Datan, 1973, p. 58). The impact of particular historical processes or events on development depends on the age or life stage of the individual at the time of the occurrence. Witness the relative comfort children have with computers compared to older adults.

The AIDS epidemic is an example of a historical event that has impacted not only the lives of those infected, but the whole of society as well. Further, recent advances in the treatment of AIDS in the form of protease inhibitors – also a function of historical time – has had a dramatic impact on the lives of HIV-positive men and women. Participants in our study spoke of having to prepare to live, rather than die, as a result of new treatments (Courtenay, Merriam, Reeves & Baumgartner, in press).

Life time is simply the number of years one has lived since birth, the passage of time measured in days, months, and years. Life time or chronological age is probably most useful when used in reference to biological changes, especially for earlier stages in the life cycle. In research on adult development, chronological age serves as a proxy for other biological or psychosocial factors. Age in and of itself does not cause changes to take place; rather, human behavior is affected by experiences that occur with the passage of time, not by time itself. The HIV-positive adults in our study whose health had dramatically improved with protease inhibitors, were cautiously optimistic about living a normal life span. Life time, or chronological age and its links to the physical body was again a meaningful concept in their lives and their development.

Social time is the transformation of calendar time into periods of the life cycle during which certain behaviors are expected and certain rights, responsibilities and statuses characterize individual behavior in that stage of life. As Neugarten (1976, p. 16) explains, social time is “a socially prescribed timetable for the ordering of major life events.” This timetable reflects the social norms and expectations of a culture at a particular time

in history. One can be “on-time” or “off-time” with regard to this social clock. For our participants, once life time was no longer suspended, social time began to play a role. Participants struggled with how to fit back into a context of socially prescribed norms and values—a context that had seemed irrelevant when faced with death.

In summary, the construct of time becomes a window through which we can better understand the changes people go through in terms of their behaviors, attitudes, values and meaning-making. While the parcelling out of historical time, life time and social time give us an even clearer picture of how time impacts development, in reality of course, it is the interaction of these three dimensions of time that affect development.

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Understanding Adult Development as Narrative Marsha Rossiter

To understand development as narrative is to consider the storied nature of the life course. This orientation is based on the assumption that narrative is a central structure through which humans organize and make meaning of their experience (e.g., Polkinghorne, 1988). Meaning is constructed, expressed, and understood in story form. If we reflect for a moment on our everyday communication with colleagues, students, and family, we hear ourselves in the act of telling the stories of our experience. Although our conversational stories may be fragmentary, the centrality of narrative in our meaning making is clear.

When we understand that the process of

meaning making takes a narrative form—that people understand the changes over the course of their own lives narratively – we can appreciate the value of the narrative orientation to understanding human development. It is an approach that attempts to describe development from the “inside” as it is lived, rather than from the outside as it is observed. The focus is on subjective meaning – how people make sense of the events of their lives through the life course. Developmental change is experienced through a constructed personal narrative that is revised and enlarged over time to accommodate new insights, unanticipated events, and transformed perspectives.

A view of adult development as narrative is:

1. *Contextual*. Development as narrative is shaped by context – both internal and external. Coherence and plot define the internal context. Just as any character’s action in a story can only be understood in reference to the plot of the story in which the character is acting, so it is with human development—events of one’s life mean something in relation to other events and in relation to the valued ends toward which one is striving. Externally, the narrative orientation is sensitive to the larger cultural narratives within which the individual life narrative is constructed. Every person’s life narrative is in important ways shaped – constrained, enriched, influenced – by the larger sociocultural meaning systems within which it is situated.

2. *Interpretive*. A story is not a collection of facts, a logical argument, or a scientific proposition; it is, rather, an account of events emplotted according to human values, intentions, and purposes. As such it calls for interpretation. In understanding development as narrative, the interpretation that is privileged is that of the person whose development is in question. This self-interpretation is ever evolving – meanings are re-interpreted through the course of one’s life. The life narrative at any given time is that subjective interpretation of experiences that represents the most satisfactory account (Cohler, 1982).

3. *Retrospective*. Narrative, in a sense, is history—the telling of what has gone before. To understand development narratively is to take a backward-looking, retrospective stance. A narrative perspective does not focus on predicting a particular pattern of development in a forward movement toward some endpoint. Instead, narra-

tive attends to that which can be understood about a developmental trajectory through the review and telling of it. As Freeman (1991) puts it, "It is only after one has arrived at what is arguably or demonstrably a better psychological place than where one has been before that development can be said to have occurred" (p. 99).

4. *Temporal*. Narrative suggests movement through time. Applied to development, narrative highlights this temporal flow in its attention to formation over form, to processes over states of being, to meaning making over pre-determined checkpoints along the life course. Narrative assumes a dynamic interrelationship between time and meaning in which an understanding of the past and future is continually unfolding in the present.

For adult educators, an understanding of development as narrative calls our attention to the interconnectedness of learning with the construction of the life narrative, and the transformative potential of autobiographical learning activities.

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Spiritual Development in a Socio-Cultural Context

Elizabeth J. Tisdell

Spiritual development (as change over time) has been given relatively little attention in mainstream academic adult education. There is some very limited broader discussion of spirituality in general, that focuses on how spirituality affects teaching and learning (Dirkx, 1997), or emancipatory education efforts (Hart & Holten, 1993).

The more limited discussion specifically of spiritual development tends to rely on Fowler's (1981) study, which resulted in a stage theory (of 6 stages) of faith development, based on 97% white, Judeo-Christian sample. Not surprisingly, Fowler's theory is framed largely from a psychological perspective, with little attention to how the socio-cultural context affects spiritual development. Nevertheless, it is a landmark study in the area of faith (as opposed to spiritual) development, and contributes to our understanding of how people construct knowledge through image and symbol.

Developmental theorists have often overlooked the socio-cultural context, which inadvertently tends to propagate a view of development based on the dominant culture-white, Judeo-Christian, and middle-class. Given the roles of image and symbol (which are often culturally-bound) in the construction of knowledge, it is particularly important to consider how culture informs spiritual development. There are a number of writers from specific cultural groups who discuss how cultural image and symbol from within their culture inform spiritual knowledge construction and meaning-making, ways of living in community, and working for justice in the world (Anzaldúa, 1987; Hill Collins, 1999, Gunn Allen, 1992, hooks, 1994). While these writers cited are not writing about spiritual development (as change over time), they are considering ways members of their cultural groups draw on the spiritual symbols and traditions of their own cultures to affirm their cultural and gender identity, and to guide their moral action in the world. This may suggest a more evolved and culturally grounded spirituality

Attention to spiritual development in its socio-cultural context offers some practical application for adult educators. First, adult educators might want to note that a search for, and/or an acknowledgement of the spiritual in the lives of adult learners is connected to the forces of meaning that give their lives coherence. Second, spirituality is about how people construct knowledge through conscious and unconscious processes of the meanings attached to image and symbol, which are often both cultural and emanate from the deepest core of our being and can be manifested and/or accessed in the form of art, music, or other aspects of creative work. They often manifest our passions, inspire how we act in the world in advo-

cating for ourselves, and/or in working for justice on behalf of ourselves and others. Adult educators who encourage adult learners to work with image and symbol, and to critically reflect on the meanings and power such images hold, as Dirkx (1997) suggests, may be encouraging and facilitating spiritual development as adult learners continue to negotiate new knowledge and new meaning in the world- in their relationships, and in their acting in the world with conviction. As Walters & Manioc (1996) note, in considering the role of spirituality in social justice education, "it is a theme that is increasingly significant in popular education practice as culturally distinct groups, women recovering "womanist" traditions and ethnic collectives, draw on cultural and spiritual symbols in healing and transformative education" (p. 13). If one thinks of education and work for social justice as an aspect of spiritual development, it may be that attention to spirituality can offer new insight to the connection between individual and social transformation. It is time that adult educators pay attention to its importance.

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