
Developmental Differences in the Quality of Life: A Classroom Teaching Exercise

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In this exercise, students examine their perceptions of normative developmental patterns in a number of major life domains across the adult life span. During the exercise individuals (a) identify significant dimensions of adult development, (b) discuss at what age each life dimension reaches its peak and at what age each is at its worst, and (c) calculate the average quality of life during each decade of adulthood based on the perceived developmental trajectories for each dimension. The activity helps to debunk the myth that a single stage of life represents one's prime, cultivating instead the notion that individuals reach their prime in different life domains at different points in the life course. Students judged the exercise to be interesting and of value in helping to structure their perceptions of adult development.

The notion of developmental differences in quality of life has appeared in many different forms in literature, philosophy, adult developmental psychology, and the popular press. Perhaps the most complete writings on the quality of life during adulthood are by Levinson (1978, 1996), who argued that individuals face important developmental hurdles at each stage of the life span. Certainly, the idea of different developmental tasks at different life stages has both intuitive and popular appeal, as witnessed by the best-selling novels of Sheehy (1976, 1981, 1995). In fact, some have gone so far as to suggest that there are specific times in men's and women's lives that could be considered the prime of life (Fodor & Franks, 1990; Mitchell & Helson, 1990). However, no empirical evidence exists to support the notion that there is a single point during adulthood when the quality of life peaks. Despite this lack of evidence, the concept of a single prime of life is a widely held misconception among students. We recently surveyed individuals in a large introductory psychology course and found that 70% believed that there was one time of life that was better than all others.

In this article, we describe a teaching exercise that allows students to explore the peak quality of life concept by eliciting their perceptions of the quality of adult development across multiple life domains. The goal of the exercise is to debunk the myth of a single prime of life, replacing it with the notion that an individual's quality of life can be relatively high in certain domains, and low in others. This highly interactive exercise is designed to take between 50 and 90 min and is appropriate for use in a variety of courses for students at all levels of training. The exercise provides an ideal overview in an introductory psychology course, where there might only be one class session devoted to the topic of adult development. It is also well suited for use in developmental,

life span, or adult development and aging courses. The exercise is appropriate for classes that range from 5 to 40 individuals, and it can serve as an excellent icebreaker at the beginning of the semester, given the high level of student participation it stimulates.

A review of instructor resource manuals and psychology activity handbooks revealed that most recommended developmental exercises focus on child development and relatively few focus on adulthood. Of those activities that do examine adult development, the large majority focus on only one aspect of development (e.g., moral development) or one task that is typically encountered during the adult years (e.g., childrearing or pregnancy). One exercise we found (Garrison & Garrison, 1998) required the student to examine a broader set of issues through the creation of a personal time line, in which critical life events are plotted along a developmental continuum. The exercise reported here is different and in some ways more comprehensive than those described in that it requires the student to simultaneously consider the quality of life in multiple life domains, bearing in mind how this construct is influenced by a variety of developmental tasks and critical life events.

The Class Activity

As the goal of the exercise is to modify students' preconceived notions of a prime of life, it is most effective when conducted with individuals who have not yet covered assigned readings on adult development. Arrange the students in a semicircle seating pattern and begin by discussing the theoretical idea of a prime of life, asking students if they believe there is such a thing and at what age it usually occurs. This question typically leads to a variety of different opinions about when a person reaches the prime of life. At this point the facilitator can suggest that instead of a single prime, it might be more useful to think of adult development as involving a variety of important dimensions that each show a different normative developmental pattern. In other words, suggest that life span development is both multidimensional and multidirectional (Baltes, 1987).

Identifying Perceptions of Normative Development

Ask students which important life domains should be considered if the goal is to examine normative developmental differences in the quality of life. Students will quickly suggest

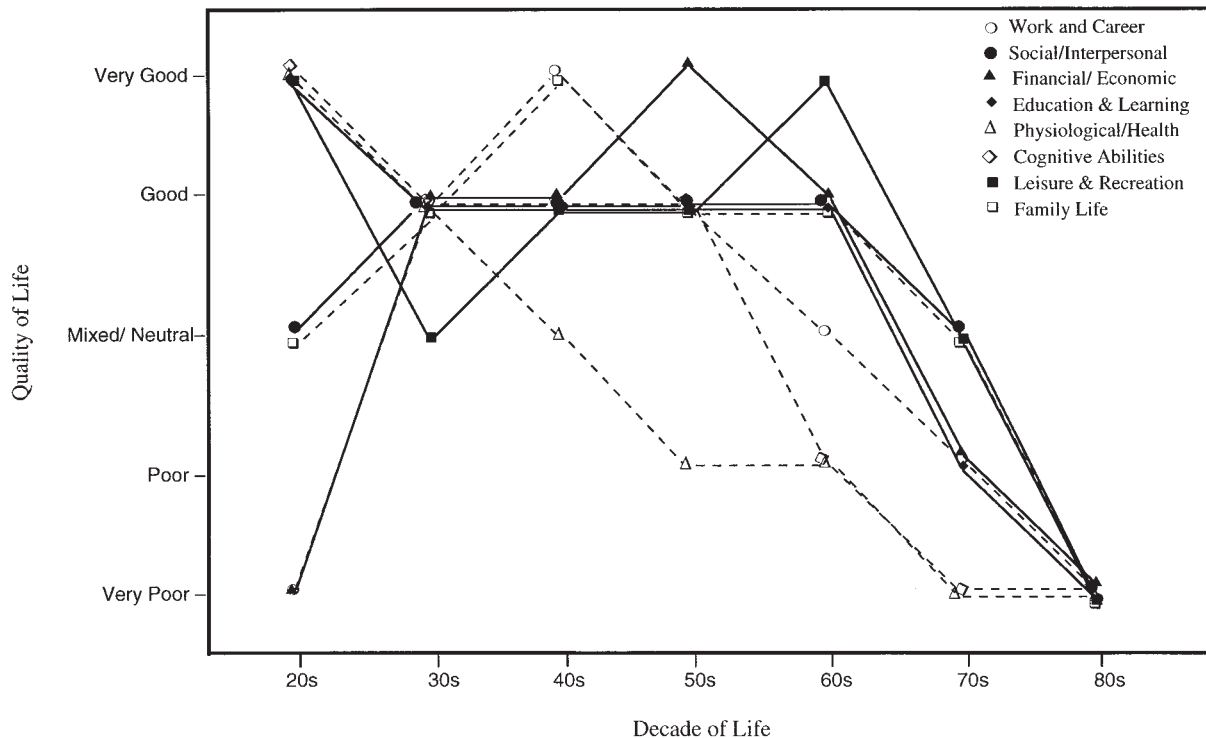


Figure 1. The variability of quality of life functions representing eight life domains generated by members of an introductory psychology class ($N = 21$).

domains such as physical health and biological fitness, work and career, financial and economic status, and family life. With some prodding they will also identify domains such as cognitive and intellectual functioning, social and interpersonal relations, leisure and recreation, and educational and learning experiences. The selection of seven to nine life dimensions has worked well in previous tests of this exercise. It is best to avoid domains that show non-normative, idiosyncratic patterns of development (e.g., spirituality). These domains, if selected, can lead to unresolved discussion and quantification difficulties in later stages of the exercise. Explain to the students that the goal of the exercise is to characterize how the average individual is likely to develop over the course of his or her life.

Draw a large grid on the chalkboard in which seven decades of adulthood (20s–80s) form the columns and the important life domains form the rows. At this point, tell the students that the goal is to identify the best and worst decades of adulthood in terms of each different life domain. The typical age of a number of significant life events such as independence from parents (early 20s), marriage (mid- to late 20s), retirement (mid-60s), and death (mid-80s) should be written in along the bottom of the grid to provide a frame of reference for students as they examine their perceptions of quality of life. Distribute photocopies of an empty grid so that each student can track scores for each dimension.

Next, choose an easy-to-visualize domain, such as financial or economic status or physical health, and have students identify the decade of life that most individuals experience as their peak. Place two plus signs (+ +) in the box for that decade. This process can generate lengthy debate; therefore, in the interest of time the facilitator should work to move the discussion toward a consensus viewpoint. Often, when there is a lack

of agreement, the majority opinion can be identified through a quick show of hands. Then, identify the decade that is the opposite of the peak, and place two minus signs (--) in that box.

Once the two “anchor” decades are selected for a particular dimension, identify the relative perceived quality of life for each of the remaining decades and place a single plus or minus sign in each box for good and poor decades, respectively. A combination plus–minus is used for decades that are relatively neutral, or where there is a significant difference in one’s roles or quality of life within a decade (e.g., the quality of one’s work and career or leisure and recreation roles in the 60s may be mixed due to retirement). If students have trouble predicting the quality of life for a particular age range and domain, suggest that they think about what several people they have known experienced at that point in their lives. However, after making this suggestion the instructor might point out that the impressions drawn by any one student’s experiences with family, friends, and acquaintances will not necessarily be representative of the normative developmental profiles of the population.

The preexercise discussion and the selection of the major life domains typically take 10 min to complete, and completion of the prime of life grid usually takes 25 to 30 min. Devote the remainder of the class session to additional discussion or extension tasks described subsequently.

Postexercise Discussion

One of the more striking features of this exercise is that the scoring grid clearly shows that different life domains peak and decline at different points during adulthood. In viewing the completed grid it is worth discussing again whether there ap-

pears to be a single prime of life or a single low point developmentally. As a part of this discussion, plot values for each row of the grid individually on a graph, such as the one shown in Figure 1, to provide a convincing visual illustration of how developmental trajectories differ across the various life domains.

The instructor might mention that developmental theories that dominated near the turn of the 20th century focused mainly on the nature of the declines that occurred over the life course (for a review, see Birren & Birren, 1990). In contrast, contemporary models of adult development stress the importance of recognizing multidimensional aspects of change and the multidirectional form that change may take (Baltes, 1987; Baltes & Baltes, 1990).

Another extension of this exercise is to provide students with a second empty grid at the end of the class session. Have them complete a grid of their future development for their remaining decades of life. As a part of this variation, instruct students to discuss life span development with older individuals such as their parents or grandparents and identify the likely timing of significant future life events in their lives (e.g., marriage or the completion of college). You can have students write a short essay on the life dimensions that appear to be headed in a suboptimal direction and identify lifestyle changes they can make to cultivate a normal or optimal pattern of development.

Another point worth raising before concluding the exercise is that the grid represents the group's perceptions of quality of life during adulthood, not actual developmental differences in life quality. Fortunately, students' perceptions typically mirror actual patterns of adult development. Nonetheless, it may be worth taking a few minutes to make the following points about what researchers have learned about adult development:

1. Biological fitness and physical abilities peak in the early 20s, and then decline slowly throughout adulthood (Schaie & Willis, 1991).
2. There is little change in basic cognitive abilities such as working memory, attention, and speed of processing throughout young adulthood and middle age; however, there are significant declines between the ages of 65 and 75 and substantial declines thereafter (Charness & Bosman, 1992).
3. Crystallized cognitive abilities tend to increase throughout young adulthood, slow somewhat in middle age, and then plateau or show small declines into old age (Horn & Hofer, 1992).
4. Older workers generally report being more satisfied with their jobs than younger workers. However, after the age of 60, job satisfaction begins to decline (Smolak, 1993).
5. Personal income tends to peak between the ages of 45 and 54, and it is at its lowest after the age of 65 (Gitman & Joehnke, 1996).
6. There are not large changes in the size of social support networks across the life span; however, in old age, casual friendships become less common and existing friendships take on added importance (Schultz & Ewen, 1988).
7. During middle age leisure activities tend to change from active types of activities (e.g., bowling, bike riding)

to passive activities (e.g., reading, television viewing; Hayslip & Panek, 1993).

8. The task of establishing independence from the family during young adulthood shifts to caregiving tasks for children and aging parents in middle age. In late life, friendships tend to replace the warmth and compassion that was once received from family members (Santrock, 1992).

Evaluation and Conclusion

Students in an introductory psychology class ($N = 21$) completed a series of 5-point Likert scale questions to assess the value of the exercise. Labels on the scale ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Results suggest that students found the exercise to be informative, interesting, and of value, as indicated by the magnitude of mean scores associated with the following questions: (a) "The exercise helped me to organize my understanding of psychological development in adulthood" ($M = 3.91, SD = 0.30$), (b) "The quality of life exercise was interesting" ($M = 4.29, SD = 0.72$), (c) "I believe that I could explain major trends in adult development to another person using the prime of life scoring grid I created during the activity" ($M = 4.00, SD = 0.71$), (d) "Knowing about normative patterns of adult development helps me to place my own development in perspective" ($M = 4.19, SD = 0.68$), and (e) "This exercise showed me that the notion of a single prime of life is flawed" ($M = 4.19, SD = 0.93$).

The quality of life exercise provides a strong conceptual framework around which students can organize their knowledge of adult development and aging. It is a particularly valuable exercise when conducted near the beginning of a section on adult development because many of the quality of life issues that are raised when developing the grid dovetail nicely with points addressed in the text. Also, the task serves as an excellent icebreaker that stimulates extensive conversation and promotes open channels of communication in the classroom.

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Note

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