

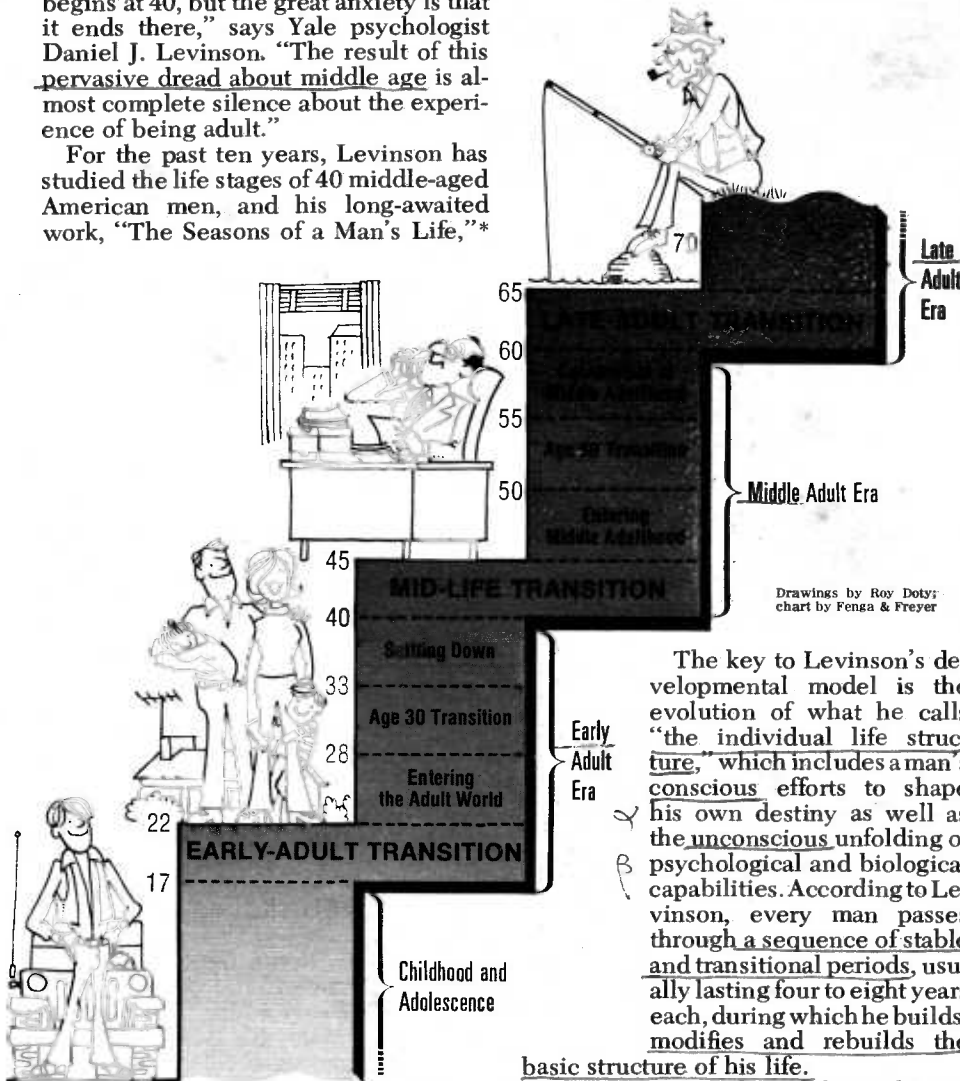
IDEAS

A Map to Middle Life

If romantic poetry celebrates youth, and tragedy is the drama proper to old age, comedy seems particularly appropriate to those middle years of life when grown men grope like adolescents among fading passions, dashed dreams and Death's snickering intimations of mortality. But for most men, the trial of middle age is no laughing matter. "Adults hope that life begins at 40, but the great anxiety is that it ends there," says Yale psychologist Daniel J. Levinson. "The result of this pervasive dread about middle age is almost complete silence about the experience of being adult."

For the past ten years, Levinson has studied the life stages of 40 middle-aged American men, and his long-awaited work, "The Seasons of a Man's Life,"*

makes about his occupation, marriage and family, friends and life goals. Moreover, he argues that each stage in adult development is linked to age (chart), so that the onset of troublesome transition periods can be reliably anticipated with in three years on either side of a man's twentieth, thirtieth, fortieth, fiftieth and sixtieth birthdays.



From "The Seasons of a Man's Life," by Daniel J. Levinson

Anatomy of the male life cycle: Assuaging fear that there's no life after 40

turns out to be the most ambitious account of the adult life cycle since the classic work of psychoanalyst Erik Erikson a quarter of a century ago. Whereas Erikson focused on unconscious processes in the development of adult identity, Levinson formulates a theory that stresses the conscious choices a man

The key to Levinson's developmental model is the evolution of what he calls "the individual life structure," which includes a man's conscious efforts to shape his own destiny as well as the unconscious unfolding of psychological and biological capabilities. According to Levinson, every man passes through a sequence of stable and transitional periods, usually lasting four to eight years each, during which he builds, modifies and rebuilds the basic structure of his life.

Upon entering the adult world, for instance, the novice must define his personal dream of adult accomplishment, find a mentor to guide him, develop a vocation that will implement that dream and open himself up to new intimate relationships. Typically, Levinson observes, a young man is torn between the desire to keep his options open for further development—in his job or in selecting a wife—and his need to make choices that will give stability to his provisional life structure. For example, if he marries too soon, before he can test out his youthful ambitions, he may come to resent his wife and eventually divorce her for forcing him to betray his dream.

In short, says Levinson, the novice adult makes choices by which he creates an inevitably flawed structure to support both his personal wishes and a manageable role in his society.

About the age of 30, Levinson reports, the young adult enters a transitional phase in which he either confirms the choices he has made or sets off in other directions. Of the men in Levinson's study, about 60 per cent experienced moderate to severe crises during Age-30 Transition. The most dissatisfied got divorced, jettisoned their favored career plans or faced the demoralizing realization that they would never climb very high in their own, or society's, eyes. Several novelists went into psychotherapy and at least one biologist abandoned his dream of a Nobel Prize for research while still in his 30s and launched a satisfying new career as an educator.

Disillusionment: After a second period of relative stability, Levinson's men crossed the meridian age of 40 and into Mid-life Transition. By this time, a majority had to face up to the disillusioning fact of life that they would never realize their youthful dreams, and even some of those who had, found that it did not bring the magical sense of completeness they had expected. Whatever the catalytic event—or even without one—every man, Levinson insists, faces a mid-life crisis that forces him to appraise his past and prepare for a seemingly uncertain future.

In addition to making external changes in his life, Levinson believes, the middle-aged male must rebuild "the internal aspects" of his life structure. Drawing heavily on the often neglected psychology of Carl Jung, Levinson argues that Mid-life Transition is a period in which a man must consciously shape his own individuality as a mature adult. Primarily, he must redefine himself in relation to youth and old age, seeking new sources of vitality and wonder while relishing the judgment and perspective that come with maturity. He must also acknowledge his own destructive tendencies so that he can find deeper founts of creativity. "To become generative, a man must know how it feels to stagnate," Levinson counsels, "—to have the sense of not growing, of being static; stuck, drying up . . . The capacity to experience, endure and fight against stagnation is an intrinsic aspect of the struggle toward generativity in middle adulthood."

Aim: Though he also describes the crises of later adulthood, Levinson's primary aim is to provide man's middle years with a sense of adventure. Unlike Gail Sheehy's best-selling "Passages," which drew heavily on Levinson's work, the Yale psychologist does not provide a guide for leaping over life's obstacle courses. Instead, he invites adults of all ages to recognize that each season of life requires the building of an appropriate structure, and he encourages middle-agers to assume their proper role as wise and compassionate mentors to the young.

—KENNETH L. WOODWARD
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(The next p. mentions our NYTS Midlife Exploration program.)