Counseling
Adults in Transition

*Linking Schlossberg’s Theory With Practice in a Diverse World*

Fourth Edition
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Fourth Edition

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SPRINGER PUBLISHING COMPANY
NEW YORK
Since the last edition, each of us has experienced a number of transitions in our lives. The tapestry is rich with love, loss, joy, and meaning.

To all who have enriched our lives, and especially to our partners, children, and grandchildren, we dedicate this book.
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The 20th century was termed *the century of the refugee*, due to the vast numbers of people uprooted by war and politics from their homes and accustomed lives (Bateson, 1990). This rings more true today than ever before in recent history, with adults across all nationalities, economic statuses, and cultures experiencing the dramatic impact of change on their lives. Since the publication of the third edition of this volume, we have witnessed social, political, and economic upheavals that could not have been predicted. These events continue to shake people to their core, and the need for coping and adaptation has become increasingly evident. Technology, as well, continues to impact lives, with information now instantaneous with tweeting, blogging, and social networking. Many cell phones now have e-mail and video capabilities, and world events are shared as they take place across the globe.

Adults need coping strategies to face the challenges of this complicated world. It is imperative for counselors and other helping professionals to continue to increase our focus on the many aspects of cultural diversity and continue to take seriously the need for advocacy on behalf of our clients along with teaching coping and self-advocacy skills.

These key areas of change and adaptation, diversity, and advocacy provide the focus for this new edition. Much of the book has been reorganized to increase practical applications, with new case studies reflecting work with diverse clients. This edition has also been expanded to include strategies and exercises that relate to the concepts discussed within each chapter. Also, the previous special appendix on nonevents has been integrated into the body of the text to increase the usefulness of related strategies and interventions.

Nancy K. Schlossberg presented her transition theory in the first edition of this book, placing it in the context of other theoretical work on adult development. The second edition, with Elinor Waters and Jane Goodman, added more focus on what counselors hear and included practical
suggestions for what to do with what they hear. The third edition, with Jane Goodman, Nancy K. Schlossberg, and Mary L. Anderson, affirmed our belief that the model is still an excellent basis for conceptualizing what we do to help adults cope with transitions. This fourth edition, by Mary L. Anderson, Jane Goodman, and Nancy K. Schlossberg, is updated with new, evolving theories and provides an increased focus on specific practical applications for meeting our clients’ needs in an increasingly diverse and ever-changing sociocultural landscape. The dramatic and unprecedented changes in our environment challenge us to adapt our theoretical conceptualizations, methods, and strategies for working with clients. The goal of this new edition is to provide a new vision for working with transitions, with the integration of new theories along with Schlossberg’s timeless model.

Mary L. Anderson
Jane Goodman
Nancy K. Schlossberg
Acknowledgments

We thank the graduate students who helped us with research and feedback along with their questions and life stories. We would like to make special mention of two doctoral graduate assistants—Angela Kent and Rommel Johnson—who showed extraordinary dedication to researching and performing tasks related to the book. We also thank Sheri W. Sussman, our editor at Springer Publishing Company, for encouraging us to write this fourth edition and for her suggestions and assistance along the way.
What Do We Need to Know?

To set the stage for what counselors need to know, the reader is introduced to an overview of adult development theories. These illustrate the different ways adult behavior can be explained. Some believe adults can change at will; others believe that they can change only if the environment changes. Some theorists assume that changes are inevitable and part of the developmental process, whereas still others theorize that the transitions one initiates and weathers make the difference in adult behavior.

When the larger landscape showing these different perspectives is in place, the reader is introduced to the transition perspective in great detail. This includes examining the transition process itself and the factors that make a difference as clients go through this process.

This first part provides the conceptual framework for practitioners so that they can understand adults in a more comprehensive manner. The knowledge about adult development and transitions provides counselors and other helpers with the necessary background to allow them to assist clients in managing transitions in a more effective and creative manner.
Adults face times that are increasingly challenging. A central theme in our current social context is change, reflecting the dynamic impact of forces across demographic, social, cultural, technological, political, and historical domains. Many adults today are finding themselves charting unfamiliar and unexpected waters while striving to cope with the impact of living with uncertainty for themselves and their families. Discontinuities are created by a number of factors, including the shifting and globalization of business environments, the increasing multiculturalism of many nations, and other geographical and political events. As escalating and sweeping changes have become the norm, life can feel increasingly complex and unsettling. The fact that people today are living in rapidly changing times has been increasingly accepted, and the world is often experienced as complex, changing, and inherently unpredictable (Bright & Pryor, 2008). The assumptions about adulthood that have been accepted throughout history are increasingly challenged by a landscape in constant flux. Indeed, today continuity is the exception, and adjusting to discontinuity has become the norm of our era. Whether people accept the changes around them or not, they may find that their old strategies no longer work in today’s social context.

As counselors, we hear clients struggling with their feelings of grief and anger regarding their often unexpected losses and their anxieties about an uncertain future. Our goal is to help adults explore, understand, and cope with what is happening in their lives. We help them increase, or at least maintain, their capacity for love, work, and play—goals often conceptualized in terms of increased competency, maturity, and mental health. Theorists, whose work we will discuss later in this chapter, talk about adults’ capacity to continually invest in life; that is, the ability to respond, cope, and adapt to the challenges of life. Indeed, Smelser and Erikson (1980) organized a book around the themes of work and love in adulthood, based on Freud’s (1961) definition of maturity as the “capacity to love and...
work.” As we assist clients in recreating their lives, we often ask, “How can we, as counselors, most effectively assist adults as they strive to cope with the transitions—or the meaning of the transitions—that they encounter in their lives? How can we find the best way to support them in handling the stresses that accompany the changes confronting them?” It is our hope that, as counselors, we will be helping with exploration of the issues, expanding options, and facilitating movement into positive, hopeful directions. As we work with our clients to cope with the transitions of their lives, we want to uncover their own sources of strength and adaptation as well as increase their ability for coping across the many roles they play in their lives and careers.

One of the best ways of achieving these goals is to connect knowledge of adult developmental perspectives to our already acquired helping skills. The more we as practitioners know about adult development, the more effective we can make our responses and programs. Connecting a theoretical knowledge base to our practical counseling skills helps us to be more creative and more connected to the adults we try to help. It is imperative that counselors keep current with newer, emerging theories, especially as our world continues to be enriched and challenged by ever-increasing complexity and diversity. A follow-up survey of attendees at a recent international symposium found that 60% believed that “Give theory a chance. Make theory more prominent” should be a high priority for counselors and counseling associations (Anderson & Goodman, in press).

Before we focus on a framework for using adult development knowledge (see Chapters 2 and 3), we present an overview of four major theoretical perspectives: developmental, contextual, lifespan, and transition. Although these conceptual perspectives are discussed separately here, in actuality they overlap, interact, and build upon one another. This chapter serves as the foundation upon which the transition framework is based.

THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING ADULTHOOD

All of us are theorists. We are continually making assumptions about ourselves, our partners, our children, our parents, or our friends. The assumptions we make reflect our theories about adult behavior. In this chapter, we will compare the way different theorists explain adult behavior. Although we believe that transition theories offer the most useful framework for understanding adults coping with change, it is important to recognize the value of established theories along with newer, evolving theories.

A theory is a set of abstract principles that can be used to predict facts and to organize them within a particular body of knowledge. A theory
of adult development would thus suggest how cognition, personality, and other characteristics might evolve over an adult’s life course. Ideally, theory should go beyond predicting the different aspects of adult development by offering new ideas that relate to things already understood. A current challenge for counselors is meeting the needs of increasingly diverse clients, conceptualizing their issues, and strategizing treatment plans that are culturally sensitive, which requires an intentional approach that is theoretically grounded. This type of approach often necessitates a thoughtful integration of both existing and emerging theoretical orientations.

Human development may appear to go in fits and starts, with unpredictable and random patterns; however, many theorists have charted an orderly aspect to human development as a necessary, predictable process (Clarken, 2004). The study of adulthood, however, has not yet produced rigorous or ideal theories; current theories offer interesting but essentially untested predictions about the course of adult life. In our review of theoretical approaches, we place the four “perspectives” of adult development on a continuum according to the degree to which they encompass predictability or variability in the life course.

**The Developmental Perspective**

The first perspective, the developmental perspective, emphasizes the sequential nature of adult development and is the one most familiar to both counselors and the lay public. Stage theories of development can be categorized into three types: *normative-crisis* models based on the resolution of specific, crucial issues; *life-span* models based on individuality and change over the course of life; and *domain-specific* theories that are related to the unfolding of ethical and moral, cognitive, ego, or various kinds of identity development. Again, it should be noted that overlap exists among these domains of development, although they are presented here separately.

Traditional normative-crisis models of adulthood view development as relatively universal across the lifespan, with each stage related to a specific crisis that must be resolved. These theories have been generally accepted as a comprehensive mapping of the stages of adulthood. However, important questions regarding adulthood remain open for further research, especially regarding the timing of the stages of adulthood and how much of adulthood remains to be mapped (Fadjukoff, Kokko, & Pulkkinen, 2007; Raskin, 2002). Much research has been focused on the transformation of timing and sequencing of the traditional markers of adulthood (Donoghue & Stein, 2007). Additionally, criticisms
of these models have emerged in our current social context. Critics have proposed that normative-crisis models may be outmoded, especially in that they emerged at a time when men and women had fairly rigid roles, with men expected to work and women expected to stay home to care for the home and raise children (Feldman, 2006). Furthermore, the timing of certain developmental stages, for example leaving home or developing a commitment to another person or to career have been called into question as young people today do not seem to be “following the old rules” (Henig, 2010).

This view of adult development is based on the assumption that human beings pass through an invariable sequence of developmental stages that are not necessarily linked exactly with chronological age. Erikson (1950) postulated a well-known broad view of development, involving eight stages of progression in psychosocial development. Each of these stages is characterized by a crucial issue that must be successfully resolved before an individual can move on. Some people move through the stages faster than others do, and some people may become arrested at one stage and never successfully move on. The adult stages involve the issues of identity (vs. confusion), intimacy (vs. isolation), generativity (vs. stagnation), and ego integrity (vs. despair).

Erikson (1968) conceptualized identity as a sense of self-sameness that continues over time, and he described three interacting elements that shape one’s sense of identity: biological characteristics, psychological factors (needs, interests, and defenses), and cultural contexts that serve to shape identity. Marcia (1966, 1980) proposed that identity relates to four distinct stages: diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement. These stages were termed identity statuses and can be understood with the concepts of exploration and commitment. According to Marcia, when a person’s identity is diffused, no active exploration or commitments are made. In foreclosure, individuals make commitments without exploration, usually by identifying with authorities and/or parents. Those in moratorium continue to explore alternative identities without making any commitments. Those who achieve identity make commitments after a period of exploration.

Based on his research, Josselson (1987) asserted that women’s development is tied to relationship connections (p. 169) and that women’s identity achievement depends on a process of differentiation within attachment—a process Josselson termed anchoring. Whether in work, family, or social areas, the central aspect of identity for women appears to be the self-in-relation rather than the self standing alone. This remains a common theme that research continues to support, that a women’s sense of self and identity is related to networks of relationships and connectedness to others.
Chapter 1. Adult Development Theories

(Chin, 2009; Gilligan, 1982; Peck, 1986). In other words, women with this connected self identity tend to place a high value on the relational aspect of life, which is primarily oriented to interdependence and egalitarianism rather than to dependence/independence and hierarchy (Rees, Luzzo, Gridley, & Doyle, 2007).

Gender-specific identity models have been applied in a broad way to women (Downing & Roush, 1985). These conceptualizations describe women’s identity development as a process, moving from passive acceptance of patriarchal, external definitions of womanhood to a more personalized, internally organized definition. These models have come under criticism because they do not capture the diversity and the complexity of women’s self-concepts or address the experiences of racial/ethnic minority women. Moradi (2005) proposed a womanist identity development model that aims to move beyond the focus on a specific aspect of identity (gender), to capture women’s multiple personal and group identities (e.g., race/ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation) that shape their identities. According to Moradi (2005), the term statuses seems warranted as a replacement for stages to bring attention to the fact that women may exhibit multiple identity development attitudes at the same time; these attitudes could well vary across time or contexts, especially relative to the level of work-family conflicts experienced.

The issues of career choice, identity, and transition experienced by women are strongly affected by family influence along with social gender role expectations. Relational models of women’s development have focused on the central importance of relationships to women’s identities and values and emphasized that these values regarding identity should be accepted as much as men’s orientation toward a separate self (Gilligan, 1982; Rees et al., 2007). In a recent qualitative study by Chin (2009), nine international women on visa status were interviewed regarding the decision to accompany their student husbands to the United States. Three themes emerged from these non-American career women’s voices: (1) the relationship dominated their decisions to accompany their husbands; (2) repressing/enduring and transferring focus were the most common identity negotiation strategies; and (3) while native culture played a part, other factors, such as personality and life stage, were just as important and in fact transcended the cultural norm in the process of these women’s identity negotiation. This study provides an opportunity to reconsider aspects of women’s identity negotiation and theories of women’s development. According to Chin (2009), in the many societies represented in this study, women do pause their career aspirations because of family members’ needs, and this requires a negotiation of identity to find a balanced sense of self, which is a necessary process.
While strides have been made to explore the development of women in general, very few studies have been conducted on lesbian adult development. Wheeler-Scruggs (2008) conducted a qualitative study to analyze how self-identified lesbians fit into Levinson’s developmental model. Overall, women in this study were similar to heterosexual women in other studies regarding developmental tasks. However, the primary difference was the issue of coming out (identifying as a lesbian to self and others). For the women in this study, coming out during the Early Adult Transition added a new dimension to their life structures. According to the results of this study, coming out resulted in feelings of confidence, assurance, and a sense of self and helped define who they were as adults. Those who did not come out seemed to have a lack of identity as adults and also lacked the confidence and assurance expressed by those who had come out. Some participants experienced a “giving up of self” during the “Entering the Adult World Phase.” This involved going against personal thoughts, feelings, and ideas and, for some, involved dishonesty about their lesbianism. This was difficult, especially if honesty was a closely held value. Some advantages of coming out were also described by participants in this study, including individuation, increased intimacy, moving away from family of origin, a recognition of “faulty thinking,” understanding one’s anger, self-acceptance of one’s lesbianism and femaleness, and seeking a spiritual life.

Identity issues are considered key elements of the theories discussed in this section, and it is important to note that these dominant theories have been criticized for defining identities in terms of the individual rather than a collectivist orientation (Blume, 2010). Blume (2002) proposed an alternative identity theory, termed Identity Renegotiation, that is applicable to a variety of cultural contexts. His theory incorporates ideas from current, emerging theories, such as narrative, social construction, dialogical self theory, and liberation psychology. In essence, this theory views behavioral and emotional problems as having narrative social understandings, which are multiple, temporary, and situational. Blume (2010) proposed that identity is, in fact, the answer to the question “Who can I be in this relationship?” In other words, significant others are considered to be co-creators of identities, through shared identity stories. At a larger, system level, Blume (2010) stated that identities are “less a result of direct interaction and more a result of membership in a group or category” (p. 9). The implications of this, according to Blume, are that group identities, when negative, can make it difficult to achieve validation for identity change, and positive group identities can be restrictive in order to remain a socially useful identity. When working from this theoretical orientation, counselors help clients in their awareness of the fluid and changing nature of self in
relationships, along with recognizing the social influences regarding their experiences. In this way, identity renegotiation can take place when clients are able to focus on the relevant discourses, related behaviors, and strategies for desired change (Blume, 2010).

**Development Based on Age**

Levinson (1978, 1986) focused on relatively universal, age-linked developmental periods of adulthood that unfurl in an orderly sequence. Stable (structure-building) periods alternate with transitional (structure-changing) periods. In 1969 Levinson began a longitudinal study with a group of 40 men, aged 35 to 45, who represented a wide variety of occupational and social characteristics. Levinson and his associates interviewed the men when they reached midlife with a focus on their recollections of their career development. They explored in depth six distinct periods, each closely linked to age. Extended and subsequent research has refined these six stages as follows:

1. Early Adult Transition on Leaving the Family (ages 16–20)
2. Entering the Adult World (ages 21–29)
3. Settling Down (ages 30–34)
4. Becoming One’s Own Person (ages 35–39)
5. Midlife Transition (ages 40–42)
6. Restabilization (ages 43–50)

Each period is characterized by its own developmental tasks. For instance, during the Settling Down period, an individual is concerned with establishing a place in society—that is, affirming one’s own integrity and becoming a full-fledged adult—and with advancing toward one’s goals.

Levinson’s formulations, referred to as *seasons of life*, allowed for individual variation yet emphasized an underlying sequential order and similarity. His findings showed “relatively low variability in the age at which every period begins and ends,” and his later research (Levinson, 1989, 1996) suggested that the hypothesized patterns operate in women’s lives as well. Levinson determined that women categorized their dreams as either “traditional” (with a focus on marriage and family) or “anti-traditional” (with a focus on family and career), and his findings indicated that women were more likely to include family themes in their dreams. A review of four dissertation studies investigating the applicability of Levinson’s theory to women’s lives (Roberts & Newton, 1987), however, indicated limited support for the theory. In these studies, women were
found to progress through the same developmental periods at roughly the same ages as had men in Levinson’s work. However, despite similarity in the timing of the periods and the nature of the developmental tasks, both the strategies for addressing the tasks and the outcomes were different for the women in these samples. The authors discussed the “split dreams” reported by these women, involving a generalized image of work and family rather than a specific image of self-in-occupational-role, as lending a tentative, provisional, and conflicted quality to women’s lives throughout much of early adulthood and into middle age.

The life structures of these women appeared less stable than those of their male counterparts in Levinson’s studies because of the greater complexity in the dreams they attempted to integrate into their lives and the obstacles they encountered in doing so. This leads to a greater variety in the “seasons” of women’s lives in which the timing of family events plays a far more critical role than age-related changes. Findings such as these reflect a pattern of moving away from age-based determinants of behavior stemming from the greater diversity of roles held by women relative to men and the increased complexity in living out those roles. Today, women struggle to combine multiple family and work commitments, which are vulnerable to conflict and interruption. Also, the physical rhythms of women’s reproductive cycles create sharp discontinuities and shifts as women experience puberty, menopause, pregnancy, birth, and lactation. The ability to adapt and improvise becomes central to the reality of women’s lives as they put together a mosaic of activities and deal with the conflicting demands on their time and attention (Bateson, 1990). Another thread of research relates to how ethnic background interacts with Levinson’s theory. The dreams of individuals hold meaning and can serve as a motivating force, yet the nature of these dreams are indeed influenced by many factors, including age, sex, culture, socioeconomic status, and race/ethnicity (Kinnier, Fisher, Darcy, & Skinner, 2001).

Ross (1984) found in a study of Mexican immigrants that subjects followed the general sequence hypothesized by Levinson but differed dramatically in attained education (which influenced occupational choices), mentoring (with family members filling this role), occupational goals (with focus on providing security and independence), family (with strong ties to extended family), and transition (with transition to a new culture overshadowing later life transitions).

In studies of Levinson’s model as applied to African Americans, Ruffin (1989) and Gooden (1989) found mixed support. Ruffin’s study of African American professional women found that racial identity strongly influenced the developmental phases, with the formation of intimacy especially salient during early adulthood, support for occupational goals
sought in family and friendship networks rather than “mentors,” and achievement aspirations related to becoming successful in a White world. As noted above, further research on multiple identities is needed to address the complexity of people’s development.

In his research on professional and working class African American men, Gooden (1989) found limitations in Levinson’s theory with regard to both race and socioeconomic status. The school teachers in his study, for example, fit Levinson’s theory better than did the “street men.” Gooden also discussed the impact of victimization in the early lives of African American men in terms of difficulties in finding mentors, developing the capacity for intimate, long-term relationships, and forming and sustaining “the dream” in a context of limited opportunity and numerous obstacles. Gooden noted that African American adult development must be viewed in a context of “how individuals encounter and respond to social opportunities and restrictions in their efforts at forming a viable life” (p. 88)—a reminder of the strong impact of race and class in the life course. It would seem that theories of racial identity should be incorporated into age-related conceptualizations such as Levinson’s if we are to understand the lives of racially diverse groups of adults. In this respect contextual and stage theories clearly interact.

A new, distinct stage of development “emerging adulthood,” has been recently coined to describe a period with common themes and characteristics spanning the ages between 18 and the late 20s. This period has been conceptualized as a stage distinct from adolescence and young adulthood, in which the young person prepares for adulthood through exploration and experimentation. While this stage offers excellent opportunities for self-exploration, it is also demanding regarding identity development due to the cultural changes (Arnett, 2000, 2004). In their study of the experience of emerging adult immigrants, Walsh, Shulman, Feldman, and Maurer (2005) found that participants attempted to navigate this developmental period of exploration and experimentation while simultaneously working through the need for reorganization of the self following immigration. They stated that, similar to emerging adulthood, immigration demands a need for the reorganization of the self, and attempts at coping while adapting to the transition to a new culture. These young immigrants encounter stresses that challenge them in regards to future aspirations and establishing intimate relationships. These authors concluded that, while emerging adult immigrants may have a more disorganized sense of self, the participants involved in more mature relationships with parents and in romantic relationships tended to move through the transition to adulthood at a faster pace than nonimmigrant emerging adults. According to the authors, these findings corroborate with Arnett’s
view (2000) that emerging adulthood is dependent on the cultural and sociohistorical context. It is interesting that in the case of nonimmigrants, the goal of healthy development is to move is toward *autonomy*, whereas for the immigrant emerging adults the move is toward *closeness*. Healthy, adaptive development for immigrant emerging adults seems to be negotiated within a context of close relationships, with less emphasis on independence from parents (Walsh et al., 2005).

The transition to adulthood for both women and men has been researched through five external markers of adulthood: (a) leaving the parental household, (b) onset of marriage or cohabitation with a chosen romantic partner, (c) onset of childbearing and parenting, (d) completion of schooling, and (e) entering the labor force in a full-time job (Arnett, 2004; Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2005; Kokko, Mesiainen, & Pulkkinen, 2009; Shanahan, Porfeli, Mortimer, & Erikson, 2005). The trend of young adults to postpone these transitions has risen in recent years across all five traditional markers of adulthood in industrialized societies (Arnett, 2006; Fadjukoff et al., 2007; Fussell & Gauthier, 2005). The timing of the transitions into adult roles has been studied regarding the implications for adult psychological and social functioning (Pulkkinen, 2006). In addition to these objective markers of adulthood, people hold their own subjective self-perceptions of their own movement toward adulthood, such as in accepting responsibility for oneself, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent (Arnett, 2004). In a study conducted by Fadjukoff et al. (2007), the markers of adulthood were analyzed, along with self-perceived adulthood, for a heterogeneous sample of Finnish men and women. The only marker of adulthood with no reported gender difference was entering full-time employment. In the family domain, women reached the markers significantly earlier than men, who tended to move away from home more than 1 year later, enter marriage 2 years later, and have a child 3 years later than the women in the study. It was an interesting finding that self-perceived adulthood was not related to the age of external markers of adulthood. However, reaching adult family roles at an earlier age was associated in both genders with higher identity achievement at age 27 and subsequently at ages 36 and 42. This research in the areas of entering family life and working life supports that delaying these transitions into adult roles may relate to lower identity achievement. The findings also support the possible disadvantages of overly early transitions related to family life, which was related to a foreclosed identity. Earlier studies, as cited by Fadjukoff et al. (2007), have associated early motherhood with a lower level of education, lower occupational status, low work involvement, and other problems in social functioning (Kokko et al., 2009; Ronka & Pulkkinen, 1998).
Domain-Specific Development: Qualitative Differences

Another group of stage theorists views individuals as moving through domain-specific sequences of stages. Each domain is characterized by a qualitative difference in the way people view the world within that particular domain. While transitioning through the stages applies to broad groups of people, individuals’ lived experiences and cultural context are key influences.

Based on extensive interviews with women, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1999) proposed a developmental progression by which women view the world:

1. Silence, a voiceless position in which all knowledge is subject to external authority.
2. Received knowledge, in which the individual can receive and reproduce but not create knowledge.
3. Subjective knowledge, in which knowledge is personal and private, subjectively known or intuited.
4. Procedural knowledge, in which there is investment in objective procedures for obtaining and communicating knowledge.
5. Constructed knowledge, in which knowledge is seen as contextual, objective and subjective strategies are valued, and the individual can see herself as a creator of knowledge.

Loevinger (1993) described a sequence of ego development in several stages. At the earliest self-protective stage, individuals conform, follow rules, and think in stereotypes; at a higher stage, individuals develop increasing self-awareness and the capacity to think in terms of alternatives, exception, and multiple possibilities; most mature is the autonomous stage, in which adults make commitments, tolerate ambiguities, and incorporate opposites. Because people are at different stages of development, adults facing similar transition problems will process those experiences differently—one in a simplistic way and others in a more complex, autonomous manner.

Kohlberg (1984) developed a theory of moral development that evolved out of the thinking of Piaget (1952), Dewey (1933), and Baldwin (1948). These theorists proposed that people develop philosophically and psychologically in a progressive fashion. Through his research, Kohlberg developed a sequence of six stages of moral development, which progress through three levels. The first level, termed preconventional, includes judgments that are based on reward and punishment (stage one) moving to judgments based on the consequences for self or loved ones (stage two). The
second level, termed conventional, includes judgments based on whether authorities approve or disapprove (stage 3) to judgments based on obeying the laws of society (stage 4). Level three, termed post-conventional, suggests judgments based on social contracts or collaboration (stage 5), moving to judgments based on ethical principles that apply across time and cultures (stage 6). Kohlberg’s stages of moral development describe a continuum from being motivated to obeying rules by fear of punishment to conforming to society to being internally principled and autonomous. These stages of moral development are similar to Loevinger’s ego progression.

Gilligan (1988) asserted that there are qualitative differences in the way men and women process and interpret the world and challenged Kohlberg’s moral development theory on two grounds: procedural and substantive. Procedurally, Kohlberg’s studies focused on men, but the results were applied to both men and women. Substantively, Gilligan (1982) argued that different issues are central to women’s moral development: the issues of attachment, responsibility, caring, and interdependence. A woman’s moral development proceeds from concern for survival to concern for responsibility and not hurting others to seeing herself as meriting care equally with others. Gilligan asserted that the view of adulthood needs remapping to show that caring and interdependence are central to human experience.

Somewhat related to moral development are stages of spiritual faith development, one of which was proposed by Fowler (1991). Fowler’s seven stages embrace the formal structural–developmental models proposed by Kohlberg and Piaget but differ in their emphasis on emotions, feelings, and imagination. Fowler’s stages move from the symbolic images of childhood to the critical reflection, personal responsibility, awareness of paradox and polarity, and selfless devotion that aware adults are capable of experiencing.

In all of these limited-domain theories, development is viewed as a progression from the simple to the complex. The movement is projected as going from an external orientation (the individual is dependent on the authority or judgment of others) to an inner orientation (an individual takes responsibility for the consequences of his or her own actions), from absolutism and dogmatism to increasing tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty, from a tendency to perceive those outside one’s own immediate group in stereotypic terms to increasing awareness of individual differences and greater empathy with others, and from a strong posture of group conformity to a mature focus on interdependence with others.

One area of limited-domain theories gaining increasing attention involves “identity development theories” referring to one’s membership in a particular (often socially oppressed) group. In explicit recognition that
identity is a “social psychological concept” (Deaux, 1993)—that is, largely socially determined—these models are especially important in counseling. Identity theories aid both clients and professionals in understanding, predicting, and normalizing experiences as well as in identifying difficulties that may stem from developmental processes and tasks (Fassinger, 1991). In addition, they help members of oppressed groups identify and articulate their needs and responses vis-à-vis their own group as well as the larger culture, and they aid counselors in sorting out issues that arise in the therapeutic relationship.

One group of such theories is related to racial/ethnic identity development. Initial work in this area focused on the development of activism and racial identification of African Americans in the political upheaval of the 1960s. Later work (Helms, 1990, 1995) focused on extending this work to counseling situations. Models of the racial identity have also been applied to Asians and Hispanics (Sue & Sue, 2002; Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993). According to Phinney (2000), ethnic identity is a broad concept that is grounded in how people understand and interpret their own ethnicity. She stated that minority ethnic development differs from White identity development due to the power differential that exists. She proposed a model that is congruent with other models of ethnic or racial in that a crisis or awakening serves as a precursor to an evolved or achieved identity (Hoffman, 2006).

Helms (1995) pointed out that racial identity models posit five stages and propose an ongoing conflict between one’s internal views of two groups—one’s own and that of the dominant culture. These models also assume that the identity transformation process is set in motion by a social movement that makes it possible for minority group members to rebel against socialization experiences and seek new ways of being. Assumptions that underlie these models include the following (Helms, 1995):

1. The notion of biculturality: the idea that minority groups develop model personality patterns in response to White racism.
2. The belief that some styles of identity resolution are healthier than others.
3. The sense that these stages are distinguishable and can be assessed.
4. The assumption that affective, cognitive, and behavioral elements are involved.
5. The conviction that the cultural identification affects both intra- and inter-cultural interaction.

Most of these models begin with a lack of awareness of one’s racial identity, even denigrating one’s own culture and idealizing White culture.
The next stages involve confrontation with the reality of oppression, subsequent immersion in one’s racial group, and rejection of the dominant White group. The final stages involve the internalization of identity, increased self-esteem, and interpersonal relationships, which are not restricted by race or social group membership. As Helms pointed out, these theories are essentially cognitive theories, with identity transformation dependent on a combination of personal readiness, prior cultural socialization experiences, and educational experiences.

Models of racial identity have come under criticism for their one-dimensional approach, in that the emphasis on a singular aspect of identity ignores the reality of many people’s lives as members of more than one subordinated group (Reynolds & Pope, 1991). In a study of racial development among college students, White (2002) used a thematic analysis method to look at basic themes that participants expressed regarding their identity development. The themes reflected a much more holistic, fluid, and complex process that challenged the predictability of established racial identity models. Another study looked at African American women’s identity and the interaction of race and gender, and the researcher concluded that current theories of racial identity development seek to impose one-dimensional models on a multidimensional process. These participants encountered oppressive stereotypes unique to African American women, especially the stereotype of African American women as being innately incompetent in all aspects of life. They also described good relationships with other women, especially mothers and daughters, as an important part of their self-defined identities. The results suggested that the relational concept of gender identity development should be incorporated into models of African American identity development for women (Harris, 2005).

Hoffman (2006) explored the relationships among women’s gender identity constructs and their relationship to constructs of ethnic identity, and she proposed that women’s identity can be conceptualized through the concepts of gender self-concept, gender self-definition, and gender self-acceptance. In other words, she proposed conceptualizing gender identity based on the individual’s current perceptions of self as gendered, rather than as in the process of development. In her study (Hoffman, 2006), she found significant correlations of gender self-acceptance and gender self-definition with a strong ethnic identity. These findings suggested that gender and ethnic identity development may be somewhat of a parallel process, yet these results were tentative and a need for further research in this area remains. A strength of Hoffman’s study is that the participants were diverse, with fewer than half (44%) identifying as White/Caucasian/Anglo/European, and her primary concern is that future studies need to
include greater diversity in samples regarding ethnicity and demographic variables, such as age, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. According to Hoffman (2006), most studies on women’s identity development are based on findings focused on White women, which tend to perpetuate a one-dimensional view of women as gendered beings while overlooking the intersection of gender with ethnic or racial identity in a woman’s total identity.

Another area that has been overlooked is the racial development among multiracial people. These individuals are often viewed as fractionated people, with their identities composed of fractions of race, culture, and ethnicity (Sue & Sue, 2002). The complexity of these individuals’ social experiences and how their multiple realities affect their development has not been adequately researched or understood. These complex dimensions of individuals’ experience are difficult to fit into the socially, culturally, and politically constructed definitions of “Black” or “biracial” (Rockquemore, 2004).

As stated earlier, multidimensional identities are difficult to fit into one-dimensional models of development. Although racial identity development models have made important contributions to the counseling field, they do not capture this complexity. Further research is needed to move beyond the focus on one aspect of a person’s identity to better capture the diversity in the identities of the people who are being described. This approach could provide a better framework to enrich understanding of the complexities of individual’s identities (Moradi, 2005). According to Sue and Sue (2002), enhancing multicultural understanding requires a balance and sensitivity about both the importance of race that encompasses issues of prejudice, discrimination, and systematic racial oppression and the existence of other, and often complex, group identities. In the current social context, critics continue to challenge the dominant theories of development that value individualist perspectives, and there is a move toward a greater concern for social justice and the social/cultural realities of clients (Blume, 2010; Nettles & Balter, 2011).

As counselors in the field became increasingly aware of a number of oppressed groups, efforts were made to extend racial identity models to other cultural identification processes. As with models of women’s identity (Peck, 1986) and feminist identity (Downing & Rousch, 1985; Helms, 1995; Moradi, 2005), theorists developed models of gay identity development (McCarn & Fassinger, 1991) built on the earlier models of racial identification. There are significant differences, however. Racial minority identity development involves changing attitudes toward the meaning of an apparent identity and typically occurs within the context of potential family and community support. Other kinds of identity development
involve a new awareness and articulation of a personal identity that is often not supported in one’s environment.

The struggle for gay identity involves one’s internal perceptions, which may be in contrast to the external perceptions or assumptions about one’s sexual orientation (Sue & Sue, 2002). Fassinger (1991) observed that gay identity development often involves the confrontation of both external and internalized oppression. It occurs over and over in situations in which an individual’s sexual orientation is ambiguous and frequently involves a context of overt prejudice, lack of family support, and few, if any, role models. Gay persons of many racial/ethnic groups also risk potential loss of their primary racial community. Integrating the experience of people who struggle with marginality and biculturalism into our clinical work challenges us as counselors and can transform and enrich our understanding of human behavior.

In summary, developmental theories cover many domains but have in common the assumption that people’s development—whether cognitive, moral, spiritual, ethnic, or psychological—progresses through predictable stages. At this time, most writing in the areas of gender, racial/ethnic, and homosexual development is theoretical, with research findings that are inconclusive or contradictory. It can be concluded, however, that development is more complex for persons marginalized from the dominant culture in that they must confront and integrate more aspects of themselves (Phinney, 1990, 2000). Further research to capture the complexity of this process and to address multiple group identities is much needed.

**The Contextual Perspective**

In the second perspective we will discuss—the contextual perspective—adulthood is viewed primarily in relation to the context within which it occurs. People live, grow, and experience changes within the social context around them. Individuals experience career transitions, choices, and stability, as these are all incorporated into the daily contextual issues of everyday life. For example, although old, the study of bakery workers in France (Bertaux, 1982) illustrated the importance of context. According to this study, the individual life stories of bakers and their wives were a direct result of the structure and nature of the work world in which they participated. Most bakery workers worked at least six nights a week, from 3:00 a.m., or earlier, until noon, totaling at least nine hours per night. This meant that whether “they were from rural or urban backgrounds, Catholic or agnostic, fat or thin, married or single, they worked at least 54 hours a week.” As Bertaux stated, this fact
determined most of the rest of their lives . . . weekly time budget, family life . . . health (which declines after age 40 because of long hours and working in front of an oven), [and] activities outside work . . . For bakery workers there is no reading, no participation in cultural activities, no movies; for, as they say, because of the chronic lack of sleep they tend to fall asleep “as soon as the lights are off.” (p. 133)

This pattern of living, this same life story recurred over and over, “as a direct consequence of the structure of relations of production” (p. 134). Bertaux’s findings are relevant to those working with adults because they suggest ways to help people identify the social factors that may lie at the root of some of their personal concerns.

Researchers (Shoon, Martin, & Ross, 2007) analyzed data from two longitudinal studies, following the lives and careers of over 20,000 individuals born in the United Kingdom 12 years apart. Analysis of the data included examining the antecedents and outcomes of educational and occupational aspirations of both men and women, especially during the transition from dependent childhood to independent adulthood. Shoon et al. (2007) assessed the processes by which family background and the wider sociohistorical context influence both work and family related careers. Their findings demonstrated the role of gender, social origin, and individual agency as they interact with a changing sociohistorical context. While the teenage girls in the study demonstrated higher occupational aspirations than boys of the same age, they were less likely than men to achieve the same occupational level. The authors hypothesized that the earlier step into parenthood was an influential factor in the girls’ lives and that young people from socially disadvantaged family backgrounds were more likely to become a parent early in life and less likely to climb the occupational ladder. Shoon et al. (2007) concluded that adult occupational status is influenced by a number of factors: parenting histories, occupational aspirations, and academic attainment. They stated that their study confirmed the vital role of teenage aspirations and academic performance in delaying parenthood. They also noted the differences between cohorts, in that the earlier cohort, born in 1958, entered the labor market during a period of economic growth, whereas the 1970 cohort left school at the height of the economic recession. The predominant pattern of the earlier cohort was to leave school to take jobs, and as the demand for skilled workers increased, education took on a more important role, thus influencing transition patterns and adult occupational status.

Environmental factors, such as poverty and racial discrimination, have been suggested to be influential aspects relating to career development, occupational attainment, and access to work opportunities. For
Black and Latino young adults, the transition to the world of work can be influenced by a number of internal and external contexts, including educational experiences, cultural and family influences, and perceptions of barriers to educational and vocational goals (Constantine et al., 2007). Many Black and Latino students are confronted with expectations that they will not succeed and may feel anxiety around contradicting this stereotype while they also anticipate the potential impacts of racism and discrimination. Challenges for Latino adolescents may include psychosocial factors, such as acculturation stress, language barriers, incongruity between cultural values and the values of educational institutions, academic isolation, and socioeconomic inequities. Yet individual differences may also play a role. Exposure to positive racial messages and possessing high cultural self-esteem can influence perceived barriers and career-related outcomes. Contextual factors, such as formal and informal mentorships and learning experiences, have been shown to improve career-related and academic self-efficacy and may be helpful in dealing with the profound social costs that can be experienced when pursuing higher education. In other words, for some Blacks and Latinos, pursuing college could result in changing contextual factors, such as physical and emotional distance from their families and communities (Niemann, Romero, & Arbona, 2000).

Environment also has an impact on such transition problems as the popularly accepted midlife crisis. This concept emerged with Levinson’s (1978) seasons of life model in which he defined the period of the early 40s to be a time of intense psychological turmoil. Although this became a general expectation about midlife, research findings do not support this idea. Adults may not experience turmoil but rather a shifting of concerns. The term midlife continues to evolve and be redefined by popular culture, and more research is necessary to establish the specifics of these changes and whom they do and do not affect. The majority of people may find midlife to be a particularly rewarding time, with ongoing involvement with family, friends, social groups, and their careers. And those who have regrets may be motivated to change the direction of their lives, thus ending up better off psychologically (Broderick & Blewitt, 2003; Feldman, 2006; Stewart & Vandewater, 1999).

This speaks to the two contemporary and contradictory notions about midlife that are popular today. This first is the idea that midlife is the onset of decline and that the key psychological task of this period is to come to terms with one’s mortality and begin the process of disengagement with the world. The other idea, emerging out of the self-help culture, is that given enough drive and vision, we can be and do anything and that the possibilities are boundless (Cohen, 2005; Lachman, 2004;
Strenger, 2009). Strenger (2009) coined this second myth as the myth of magical transformation through vision. He criticized this idea, the absence of limitations, as a philosophical mistake. He stated that this image is fed by our cultural tendency to see youth as the only valuable period. Such thinking, in his opinion, holds serious consequences for people who confront insurmountable limitations, which can then lead to self-loathing and the failure to actualize genuine potential (Flanagan, 1999). Strenger (2009) presents a concept of midlife that fits neither stereotype and looks instead at active self-acceptance. Such self-acceptance is about accepting limitations and letting go of the misconceptions and illusions we have had about ourselves (Strenger & Ruttenberg, 2008). Strenger likens this self-acceptance to Rembrandt’s self-portraits, which clearly illustrate his aging and his expressions of the hardships of life endured. He pointed out that these paintings are not pessimistic but rather hold mesmerizing beauty. The paradox is that in actively accepting the existential call to be authentic to ourselves, we can then find the freedom to progress toward true transformation. He stated, “Active self-acceptance, like the process of painting a self-portrait, involves hard psychic work: first and foremost, the ability to look at our lives dispassionately to discern the character that is reflected in our biographies” (p. 63). Strenger’s view of midlife reflects the existential call for “response ability” in addressing “the givens” of life. And this view is in line with the existential concept of paradox, in that the more we can accept limitations and even death, the more fully we can be alive.

The term midlife has often been associated with the baby-boomer generation; however, it is a mistake to assume homogeneity to any age cohort. Rather, each generation is comprised of a group of diverse individuals who have grown up in a shared historical timeframe. According to Hudson (1991), however, each generation shares cultural reference points and historical events that influence their values throughout the lifecycle. Generation identity greatly influences how individuals view their world and how they age and develop as human beings. Although midlife adults today continue to increase their expectations for their lives and their options, increasingly they are experiencing a wide gap between their dreams and reality. Hudson (1991) stated that the challenge is one of courage, and rather than mourning the premature death of the “American Dream,” adults need to explore their new personal depths and discover their own visionary capacities. It seems that the courage that is called for is what has been termed radical acceptance (Brach, 2003). In her book by the same title, Brach (2003) described the seventh-century Zen master who taught that true freedom is being “without anxiety about imperfection,” which means accepting our human existence and all of life as it is. In this
philosophy, we can relax about imperfection, let go of being caught up in our wants and fears. She also referred to D. H. Lawrence, who described our Western culture as being like a great uprooted tree with its roots in the air, a culture so often cut off from the greatest sources of inward nourishment and renewal. He stated that our greatest needs are met in relating lovingly with each other and becoming present to both the beauty and the pain that is all around us.

An interesting influence on the views of midlife and the years beyond is that life expectancy in industrialized nations has increased by about 30 years since the beginning of the 20th century (Bateson, 2010). According to Bateson (2010), we are “living in new territory, and drawing the maps that will give it meaning” (p. 9). She discussed the implications of these extended years in terms of individual lives and society along with the process of composing a life that offers a sense of completion and fulfillment. A key aspect of attaining this, according to Bateson (2010), is to recognize that life is not a choice between dependence and independence but rather is about interdependence. Viewing life in this way increases the possibilities for giving and receiving and learning to do both with grace. She emphasized that in the concept of “standing on one’s own two feet and needing nothing from others” (p. 8) is an American concept grounded in the value of masculinity and the “mythology of pioneers, frontier scouts, and cowboys” (p. 8). In her opinion, society has a responsibility to make active participation possible for everyone through interdependence and mutuality in many different contexts. Bateson (2010) discussed these concepts in terms of a new stage of adulthood, which she defined as an age of active wisdom. According to Bateson, this stage can begin as early as 40 years old and extend as far as 80. She emphasized that considering this as “a second stage of adulthood” (p. 13) is much different from just tacking on more years at the end of a lifetime. She stated that “we have changed the shape and meaning of a lifetime in ways we do not yet fully understand” (p. 11). Rather than looking at cohorts of generations, Bateson (2010) prefers to consider the presence of coexisting generations defined by their roles and activities. She stated that in the past the older generation typically withdrew from active participation; however, today many older adults are remaining actively engaged in ways that defy stereotypes. She stated that, at this point in history, older individuals are beginning to reimagining the shape of their lives. She reflected:

I like to think of men and women as artists of their own lives, working with what comes to hand through accident or talent to compose and re-compose a pattern in time that expresses who they are and what they believe in—making meaning even as they are studying and working and
raising children, creating and re-creating themselves. Just as the use of a new room in a house depends on what is already there in the lives and relationships and possessions of the owners, the use of a new stage in the life cycle is related to what came before, ideally related in a way that is more than a sum of parts but rather an inclusive composition of grace and truth. It is often only in its final pages that a story reveals its meaning, so the choices made in later decades may reflect light back on earlier years . . . Like the faces of wise and loving elders, lives so composed may be beautiful. (pp. 23–24)

According to Bateson (2010) this relates on a larger scale to how the baby boom generation has changed the meaning of retirement, stating that our prior assumptions about retirement were grounded in a retirement system that was invented in Germany at the beginning of the 20th century. At that time, 65-year-olds were few and far between and were limited in their ability to work, and the general life expectancy was around 45. Bateson (2010) concluded that retirement was invented for people whose conditions were in some ways worse than those of 85-year-olds in the United States today. She also stated that different societies look at age groups differently and that cross-cultural studies of post-reproductive adults and elders point to the key roles that older people have played in societies throughout time (Bateson, 2010). This is interesting in considering the work of other theorists who have examined the impact of context on people’s lives. Mayer and Schoepflin (1989), for example, examined the way in which the state, through legislation, social programs, and economic regulation, provides a general framework for the individual life course. They maintained that the state set the boundaries for entry into and exit out of the educational system, marriage, occupational structure, and even illness and disability, effectively turning these personal transitions into public life events. In their view, the need for efficient administration of the legal, social, and economic order leads to more rigid age stratification, weakened social bonds, and an external rather than individually created order throughout life. They were concerned that the institutional order determining much of the social fabric of our lives may have led to the irrelevance of the person and his or her biographical contexts. This in turn may have caused people to become passive rather than active in planning the course of their lives.

Neugarten and Neugarten (1987) emphasized that to understand a particular life history, one must view it in its appropriate historical context. Clearly, as historical times change, social prescriptions for age-appropriate behavior also may change. For example, people are living longer, and the postparental period has consequently lengthened considerably. At the
same time, economic maturity for many young people is being delayed while a larger proportion of them attend college and go on to graduate or professional schools. In addition, there has developed what has been humorously called the “boomerang generation”; that is, adult children who return home for a time, or several times, while getting situated in the world. Patterns for women have also changed radically, with most women now combining work and child-rearing. In many families child-rearing practices are changing as fathers increasingly share responsibility with their working wives.

These kinds of historical trends have a definite impact on the chronological and social norms for age-appropriate behavior, norms that appear to be blurring and loosening in today’s society (Neugarten & Neugarten, 1987). In adulthood, there seems to be little biological necessity for such norms; the most dramatic biological change after puberty is menopause, which itself has become surrounded by many emotional myths. Research, however, suggests that responses to menopause are closely tied to other midlife events (such as children leaving home), which in turn are very much influenced by environmental, cultural, and historical contexts.

This blurring of age-defined roles and tasks, often referred to as the “fluid life cycle,” represents flexibility and freedom for many. Others, however, some of whom may appear in counselors’ offices, find it difficult to adjust their timetables. For example, some young men and women may feel inadequate if they have not met their achievement and family goals by the age of 35, even though they are likely to live into their 80s. When people maintain traditionally defined internal timetables that are at odds with their actual situations, they are susceptible to anxiety and conflict (Neugarten & Neugarten, 1987).

Additionally, in a pluralistic society such as ours, subgroups may have their own age-normative systems. Factors such as race, socioeconomic status, disability, sexual orientation, and geographic location may determine differences in age-defined behavior. For example, the length of the “coming out” process for gay people (Fassinger, 1991) may delay the establishment of permanent relationships and the creation of families. Similarly, occupational prejudice and discrimination may impede and delay career attainment for specific minority groups. These variations become especially obvious when we attempt to apply general normative theories to our intervention efforts.

Another source of change and challenge is history-graded changes. Researchers who propose a life-course perspective view development as an intersection of chronological age, family-related roles, and membership in a particular birth cohort experiencing historical events. This is an especially salient issue in the context of fewer or weaker social bonds combined with
expanding and heightened threats and a pervasive sense of vulnerability in what has been termed an age of anxiety (Broderick & Blewitt, 2003). We need not look far to see many examples of profound historical events and can only imagine the impact these are having for the different age cohorts experiencing them.

It is evident then that a body of literature is now accumulating in which researchers explain behavior by analyzing the social context in which it occurs. For example, a newer theoretical approach, the constructivist perspective, has emerged in response to our postmodern, multicultural age. The postmodern worldview offers an alternative to modernism, which is based on an objectivist, reductionist quest for truth and knowledge. This logical positivist worldview dominated the first half of the 20th century, with most scientific methods of study designed to explore some behavior of social patterns of current interest. A problem, however, is that because of the rapid rate of social change, the phenomena of interest are transformed before the study is complete (Gergen, 2000). Another limitation to modernism is that scientific truth is culturally dependent and value laden. Within the postmodern perspective people are actively constructing their mental realities rather than simply coping with an objective “truth.” This approach emphasizes that people develop as they construct meaning and make choices within their social/cultural context. According to White (1996), “The constructivist approaches are based on the assumption that we are constructive—that we are engaged in a process of actively building our reality or world view, instead of there being an ‘objective’ world that can be known independent of the knower” (p. 8).

The constructivist perspective has an established usefulness for understanding how people make sense of their experience. Although the modern emphasis on the objective dimension served to give recognition to the dominant culture’s voice, the constructivist approach focuses on a person’s private sense (Savickas, 2003). Yet social constructions are often developed within institutional contexts. Understanding the process of constructions is fundamental, especially when one is looking at race/ethnicity, social class, sex/gender, and sexuality. Understanding these systems involves the recognition of the inequality and domination that have an impact on people’s development (Orr, 2000). The constructivist approach is thus compatible with system-based theories while being relevant to the lives of women and non-Eurocentric worldviews (Brott, 2001; Brown, 1996). The preferred technique of constructive therapies is the exploration of personal narratives with the therapeutic goal of meaning making and personal development (White, 1996).

Regardless of the focus of investigative attention, the result is to examine individuals by also accounting for the sociological and ecological
factors that affect them and the meanings that are constructed out of this experience. As counselors, we must be aware of these perspectives of adult development. When appropriate, these theoretical lenses can help us to recommend interventions designed to change the environment of clients or to alter the way clients cope with their environment. We will discuss the important role of counselors as advocates in the last chapter of the book.

The Life-Span Perspective

The third perspective on our continuum—the life-span perspective—focuses on individuality and issues of continuity and change. Development is viewed as a process of adaptation taking place within multiple contexts that vary for individuals, thus leading to very different pathways through the lifespan. Some theorists see continuity among individuals over the course of life, whereas others see so many individual pathways that variability becomes the cornerstone of adulthood. Kagan (1980, 1998), for example, wondered why social scientists have invested so much effort in a search for stability and continuity. He questioned the premise that information about a growing child is sufficient to explain his or her life course. In examining conclusions about a Berkeley longitudinal study in which 166 people were observed from birth through adulthood, he noted: “When the subjects were seen at age 30, 12 years after their previous interviews, the researchers were shocked by the inaccuracy of their expectations. They were wrong in two-thirds of the cases, mainly because they had overestimated the damaging effects of early troubles” (1980, p. 64). Counselors who are aware of the findings of this study can caution adults against using early problems as a rationale for being “stuck” and not taking responsibility for their actions as adults.

Neugarten (1982) also emphasized variability, which she called individual fanning out. She pointed out, for example, that 10-year-olds are more similar to each other than are 60-year-olds, and stated:

Perhaps the most consistent finding to emerge from the study of aging is that people grow old in very different ways. [There are] . . . striking variations between successive groups who reach old age . . . between ethnic . . . urban and rural, and . . . socioeconomic groups. This is to say nothing of the idiosyncratic sequences that widen the divergence among individuals. The result is that 60-year-olds or 80-year-olds are extremely heterogeneous groups. (p. 6)

Pearlin (1982), in his work on strain and coping, echoed Neugarten’s emphasis on individuality and variation. He maintained that human
variety is as rich as people’s historic conditions and current circumstances and that even within the same cohort, the impact of conditions may differ because of variations in coping resources. Thus, in his view it was untenable to speak of either ages or life stages as though undifferentiated people were following a uniform life course. Pearlin and Lieberman (1979) found that the adult experience differs according to whether an individual is a man or woman, a member of a minority or a majority group, young or old, rich or poor, or healthy or ill.

A growing interest is toward considering diversity as a source of strength, and it has been suggested that adaptive cultural strengths are central in promoting resiliency and adaptive coping throughout the life span. Cultural strengths have been considered as protective forces in maintaining a sense of hope, vitality, and persistence to excel against discouraging odds. A life-span perspective is necessary when considering the unique challenges faced by African American or other individuals living in distressed urban ecologies. These may include (a) chronic role strain and resiliency challenges, (b) risky psychosocial coping strategies, and (c) protective emic cultural strengths (Bowman, 2006). Bowman (2006) stated that empowerment strategies are crucial, and three types of goals must be implemented: therapeutic, resiliency, and systemic change. Strategies in these areas are imperative, especially as marginalized people face alarming risk for chronic strain in major life roles by systemic racial, class ethnic, and/or gender role barriers. Specific empowerment strategies may helpful in facilitating adaptive coping at the personal, family, and community levels (Bowman, 2006).

A key aspect of life-span developmental theory is the role of adaptation to the continuous influences on people’s lives. Adaptation can take different forms, including growth, maintenance/resilience, and regulation of loss. Growth involves adding new characteristics, understandings, and skills, whereas maintenance/resilience involves finding ways to continue functioning when facing challenges or suffering a loss. Regulation of loss involves adjusting expectations and accepting a lower level of functioning. All of these adaptive processes occur throughout the life span, and it is through these adaptive processes that successful development unfolds (Broderick & Blewitt, 2003). Whitbourne (1996) addressed coping and adaptation over the life span and saw adaptation as the continuous evaluation of life experiences rather than reactions to discrete events. An individual’s life-span construct is subject to change as the individual meets experiences that contradict it or are totally incongruent with it. For instance, the act of coping itself may result in an altered life story as individuals distort the meaning of events toward the maintenance of their self-esteem. Coping may also alter an individual’s aspiration levels toward
greater congruence with his or her environment when it is clear that failure to achieve aspirations does not stem from the individual's inadequacy. Thus, in this model, the adaptation process takes on different configurations, depending on whether an event is consistent or inconsistent with an individual scenario.

Effective adaptation may actually increase in midlife because of an increase in complex, integrated self-descriptions that indicate an ability to blend both strengths and weaknesses into an organized picture (Labouvie-Vief & Diehl, 2000). In fact, studies reveal that middle-aged adults who feel a sense of control over the aspects of their lives experience higher levels of psychological well-being (Bandura, 1997; Smith et al., 2000). Greater mental health and satisfaction have also been attributed to a firm commitment and involvement in reaching goals, with people involved in creative projects experiencing their lives as more satisfying (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002; Staudinger, Fleeson, & Baltes, 1999). Another factor that boosts psychological well-being is good relationships; research supports the idea that marriage brings about well-being to both genders, although women are more sensitive to the quality of the marital relationship (Marks & Lambert, 1998). Additionally, research supports the idea that success in handling multiple roles is associated with psychological well-being. This is particularly relevant to women, who are generally happier today than during former eras because of satisfaction derived from both family and vocational achievements (Christensen, Stephens, & Townsend, 1998).

As noted earlier, theories of individual development also need to be seen in the light of gender differences, an area of burgeoning research in the past several decades. Although further detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this chapter, differences in behavior and maturity that are ascribed to men and women are often the most striking differences among individuals. We return to Gilligan’s (1988) work. Based on her findings that responsibility and care were central to her subjects’ lives, she saw interdependence as a critical component of adult development. The view of the heroic individual marching up a sequence of stages and ladders is no longer adequate but must be replaced by a view of the individual renegotiating interdependence in ever-changing circles of attachment.

In a widely cited study on differences between women and men, Fiske and Chiriboga (1990) found that women in their sample generally had less positive self-images than did the men, felt less in control of their lives, and were less likely to plan for transitions. At the same time, their affective lives were richer and more complex, and they had a greater tolerance for ambiguity. Men anticipated placing more value on expressive and interpersonal goals as they grew older, whereas women expected to direct
their interests outward and to become more concerned with contributing to society and doing good in the world. The “crisscrossing trajectories” of men and women at successive stages reflect different types of developmental changes as well as different scheduling. Gutmann (1987) asserted these notions in his cross-cultural study of older men and women.

The reality of adults’ lives today is characterized by variety and diversity, influenced not only by gender and culture and the roles people have, but by the timing of the stages they move through. For example, some people marry and have children at relatively young ages, whereas others wait until their 40s to pursue family life. Others may never marry or live with a partner yet may choose to be a parent. These changes in the social context have challenged models that relate stages to age (Barnett & Hyde, 2001; Fraenkel, 2003). Newer models conceptualize development based on particular events in an adult’s life. These models, called life events models, propose that the events in adults’ lives, not age, determine the course of their development (Helson & Srivastava, 2001; Roberts, Helson, & Klohnen, 2002). In other words, rather than looking at critical periods in adults’ lives, they are looking at life events that are specific to the individual. The implication of this is that two people of very different ages may share commonalities in significant life events and thus in their personality development.

The Transition Perspective

The fourth theoretical perspective in adulthood—the transition perspective—focuses on life events entailing change. Fiske and Chiriboga (1990) conducted a longitudinal study of what they labeled as “ordinary people”—four groups of men and women in San Francisco: (a) graduating high school seniors, (b) newlyweds, (c) middle-aged parents, and (d) pre-retirement couples—with each group being obviously on the threshold of a major transition at the start of the study. These individuals were interviewed 5 times over a 12-year period. The overriding question—How do adults change over time?—was answered in a number of ways. They found that the groups differed considerably in their general outlook on life, the stresses they faced, and their attitudes toward those stresses. The researchers concluded that it is less important to know that a person is 40 years old than it is to know that a person is 40 years old, has adolescent children, is recently divorced, is about to retire, and so on. Men facing retirement, for example, encounter many of the same problems whether they retire at age 50, 60, or 70. Newly partnered individuals of any age are engaged in similar tasks of bonding, discovery, and negotiation. In short,
transitions are more important than chronological age for understanding and evaluating an individual’s behavior.

Schlossberg (e.g., 1981, 1991) presented a transitional model that incorporated both anticipated transitions—the scheduled, expected events that are likely to occur for the individual and that can be anticipated and rehearsed—and unanticipated transitions—the nonscheduled events that are not predictable. That model, described in detail in Chapters 2 and 3, is the cornerstone of this book.

Transitions are often experienced as frightening or traumatic. Hudson (1991) characterized life for adults as being “on a raft floating down a commanding river” and the transitions as “the white waters of the river” that test every skill we have as “we slide over rocks and rapids and swirl about in unforeseen directions” (p. 51). He stated that the river metaphor captures two aspects of dealing with transitions. One is a sense of chaotic power beyond our control, and the other is a sense of adventure requiring our continual readiness and vigilance.

Theorists have positioned transitions within a developmental framework, defining them as turning points or as a period between two periods of stability (Levinson, 1986). Moving through a transition requires letting go of aspects of the self, letting go of former roles, and learning new roles. People moving through transitions inevitably must take stock as they renegotiate these roles. Transitions often involve significant life events that require coping with what is perceived to be a crisis situation. Innate growth and potential may be realized through addressing and coping with these significant life events (Brown & Lent, 2008).

Within a developmental framework, the transitions themselves are viewed as occurring in stages, with each stage relating to the next for adaptation and successful adjustment. Within this perspective, a transition occurs over a period of time between life phases or life stages. Whether viewed as a time of crisis or as a developmental adjustment, transitions present a unique opportunity for growth and transformation (Bridges, 1980; Hudson, 1991; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). A symbol that captures the essence of a transition is the Chinese word for crisis, which combines the symbols for danger and opportunity. Its literal translation is “opportunity riding a dangerous wind” (Corlett & Millner, 1993).

The cognitive appraisal model lends understanding to how people evaluate and cope with changes in their lives. This model, developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), emphasizes the process by which individuals adapt to events. It assumes that an individual appraises the significance of an event for its possible negative impact on his or her well-being and then determines what personal and social resources are available for dealing with the event and what the consequences are likely to be. After action has
been taken, the individual then reassesses the situation. The coping strategies adopted can be instrumental (changing the environment) or palliative (minimizing individual distress).

Newer research about the role of positive emotions and coping with stress has been prompted by recent evidence regarding both negative and positive emotions that co-occur throughout the stress process (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). According to Folkman and Moskowitz (2004), coping is a complex, multidimensional process that is sensitive to both the environment and to personality dispositions, which influence the appraisal of stress and the resources for coping. They stated that, despite gains that have been made in understanding coping, researchers have only begun to understand the concept. They maintained that much of the problem is that coping is not a stand-alone phenomenon, as it is embedded in a process that involves the person, the environment, and the complex relationship between them.

**APPLYING THE THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES**

Table 1.1 and case studies illustrate the fact that counselors’ theoretical perspectives do, in fact, influence (a) their assessments of an individual’s behavior and (b) their plans for intervention.

Let us take a look at the following two cases: one, a White midlife man, and the other, a single woman giving birth to a baby.

**Case of the Disabled Teacher**

*My name is Ted, and I am 48 years old. I am having problems coping with some big challenges I have been facing lately. First of all, I love my work as a teacher. This has been a focus of my life since I graduated from college at the age of 23. I’ve worked in the same district for all those years and have earned a lot of respect from my colleagues, administration, parents, and of course, the kids. They love my stories and the individualized attention I give to them. My work is more than a job to me—it’s my way of helping kids, of caring when nobody else seems to notice. Anyway, this is all coming to an end for me, and I feel at a loss as to what I can do about it. I found out recently that I have a progressive disease, and this is taking a toll on me. It started out with some manageable symptoms but has progressed to the point that I can’t get through the day without severe pain and exhaustion. I’ve talked to the principal at my school, and he recommended that I consider taking a buyout that is being offered for people with a lot of years in the district. I had planned to work until I was 65, and now I guess I’ll have to take early retirement. My doctor says that the stress of*
<table>
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<th>Developmental</th>
<th>Contextual</th>
<th>Life Span</th>
<th>Transitional</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td>-Career mobility results from organization structure</td>
<td>-Process of adaptation</td>
<td>-Stage, not age</td>
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<td>-Invariant sequence of developmental stages</td>
<td>-Midlife crisis, a sociological phenomenon</td>
<td>-Individual variations</td>
<td>-Coping with transitions: balance of resources to deficits</td>
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<td>-Life structure, dream, mentor</td>
<td>-Individual progress determined by opportunity structure</td>
<td>-Fanning out</td>
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<td><strong>Resolution of Issues</strong></td>
<td>-Intellectual capacity dependent on substantive complexity at work</td>
<td>-Fluid lifespan</td>
<td>-Sex differences</td>
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<td>-Unfolding of life and resolving of inner issues</td>
<td>-Cultures provide age systems and age norms</td>
<td>-Differential distribution of strains by sex, age, different patterns of coping</td>
<td>-Coping, not life events, is central issue</td>
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<td>-Identified hierarchical stages</td>
<td>-Fluid life cycle today</td>
<td>-Perspective, not theory</td>
<td>-Coping is a multidimensional process</td>
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<td>-Differential issues for women, for different races and cultures</td>
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<td>-Transitions: may be anticipated or unanticipated</td>
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<td><strong>Domain Specific</strong></td>
<td>-Importance of historical period in setting norms and constraints</td>
<td>-Opposed to stages related to age</td>
<td>-Energy is used in all situations involving change</td>
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<td>-Hierarchical sequence in ego development, moral development,</td>
<td>-Sociological and ecological factors affect individuals</td>
<td>-Impact of events and mediating variables</td>
<td>-Transitions are often experienced as overwhelming or traumatic</td>
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<td>intellectual development and faith development</td>
<td>-Meanings are personally constructed out of experience</td>
<td>-Adult lives today: variety and diversity</td>
<td>-Transitions offer unique opportunities for growth and transformation</td>
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<td>-Different ways of knowing for men and women</td>
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<td>-Life events are specific to the individual</td>
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<td>-Models of racial and gender identity development</td>
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<td>-New models address complex, multiple identities</td>
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<td>-Gay identity development often involves the confrontation of</td>
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<td>both external and internalized oppression</td>
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It may seem like a good thing that I can take the buy-out, but what am I supposed to do with my time, and with my life? My wife seems annoyed with me hanging around the house all day. She still works at the bank, and I’m starting to feel useless and in the way. My kids are in college, and when they came home last week, they could see the changes in me. I couldn’t even throw the football around with them anymore. Wish I could get better, and I don’t know if I’m scared, angry, or sad about the way things are.

Each of the four theoretical perspectives, as depicted on Table 1.1, can provide us with a lens to examine Ted and the transition he is experiencing.

The developmental perspective would ascribe the crisis that Ted is facing to normal developmental unfolding. For example, according to Levinson, Ted could be conceptualized as a man at midlife who is facing the discrepancy between his goals and the realities of his life. Developmentalists may choose to normalize what Ted is experiencing. Interventions would most likely focus on the tasks of this life stage. At some point, Ted will reach the realization that he must move ahead through making proactive choices or begin to fall into stagnation. He will have to find the internal and external resources to gain a new perspective to facilitate his further growth and evolvement into generativity. Much of this may be dependent on his previous positive or negative resolutions of the crises and tasks of earlier pivotal points in his life.

The contextual focus could be on the organizational context of Ted’s current crisis. The impact of the buyout at his work environment would be a focus, along with changing either the context of Ted’s work, through some less demanding paid and/or volunteer options, or changing Ted’s responses and reactions to his job loss. The other context is his health situation, as Ted seems to feel overwhelmed with the possibility of his dependence on his wife and the pressing needs of his declining health. The historical context might involve these expectations of him to be the sole supporter of his family and to stay in the company he had been with for so many years. The constructivist perspective would emphasize working within Ted’s perspective as he shares his story. His problem-saturated story would be challenged by looking for opportunities to highlight the positive alternative stories within his story. The dominant narratives of society regarding his work and identity might be challenged to empower Ted to reconstruct his story to conclude with positive outcomes that are culturally sensitive to Ted’s situation. A key to this process would be Ted uncovering and reclaiming what is meaningful to him and taking action to construct a meaningful future.
Life-span theorists might view Ted as an individual whose life experience is unique and evaluate his circumstances accordingly. Ted has encountered some challenges for which he wasn’t prepared with the sudden loss of his job and his deteriorating health. Dealing with these situations will entail redefining and reexamining his goals and finding ways to adapt. Adaptation for Ted could take the different forms of growth, maintenance/resilience, and regulation of loss. Growth could involve adding new acceptance and understanding of his limitations and skills, whereas maintenance/resilience would involve finding ways to continue functioning when facing challenges of his health situation and the loss of his job. Counseling interventions could focus on both the job situation and his home environment and also address his personal feelings of helplessness. The approach would most likely be creative and not constricted by the parameters of formal theory; rather it would involve addressing Ted’s unique set of issues.

Transition theorists would reexamine Ted’s personal and work transitions, by assessing his resources for coping with his unanticipated job loss and health situation. Although this transition may be viewed by Alex as the most distressing and challenging of times, the unique opportunities for growth and development would be emphasized by helping him to expand his coping repertoire.

Case of the Single Expectant Mother

My name is Sandra, and I am 42 years old. I am so excited and scared at the same time—I just found out that I am pregnant. I always wanted to be a mother, but thought I was beyond hoping for that to happen. My ex-husband and I went through a series of fertility tests and concluded that it was my fault that we never had a child. He got tired of all the focus on having a baby and was frustrated by my depression following the tests. We’ve been divorced for over a year now, and I just started dating again. I met Rich at work, and although he’s married, we have the most beautiful relationship. He’s been so supportive of me through my recovery from my divorce, and I’ve been so happy with the time we can find to be together. He doesn’t even know yet, and I am scared of how he might react when he finds out. He’s very protective of his own children, children, who are 7 and 9 years old, and wouldn’t think of getting a divorce until they are older. My closest friends don’t even know about Rich. Guess I’ve been too embarrassed to tell them. That goes for my family and my parents too. I really want this baby, despite what anyone might say. And besides, I wouldn’t even consider an abortion, because it’s against my religious beliefs. I worry, though, about what it will be like for my child growing up with only a mommy. And I don’t want to lose Rich. I keep wondering what people might say at work. What if I lose my
job? I've only been there for a few months, and Rich is my supervisor. Keeping the baby could be a mistake, but I don’t see any other way to go on.

Developmental theorists would conceptualize Sandra’s case from several developmental perspectives. According to Levinson, she is in the stage of Midlife Transition, yet she is in many ways in the stages of just entering the adult world of work and settling down with a baby. Levinson’s stage formulations allowed for individual variations, yet he emphasized an underlying sequential order, which is a concern in Sandra’s case. Her situation also exemplifies the split dreams referred to earlier in this chapter, with the complex and conflictual quality to her choices that could probably result in dissatisfaction with both her family situation and her career. She also exemplifies the varied timing that women can experience regarding age-based determinants of adult behavior. Her situation could be conceptualized developmentally regarding her identity development. A central aspect of her social, family, and work identity is her isolation and lack of social support outside her relationship with Rich. This relationship and her decision to have the baby could fit into Kohlberg’s stage of moral development, with Sandra probably being in the conventional stage with fear of punishment. Using Gilligan’s lens, we might conclude that Sandra’s main concern is on survival and her responsibility to not hurt her baby. Each of these developmental conceptualizations provides insight into what Sandra might be experiencing. Developmental interventions would center on supportive strategies to facilitate Sandra progressing developmentally through this life stage.

The contextualists would view Sandra’s situation in the context of her work situation and family expectations. There could be expectations for her to somehow marry the father of her baby, or her family might provide support upon learning of her situation. The historical context could have influence in that single parent households have become more acceptable and common. Sandra’s social context could change, depending on her reactions to the whole situation. The constructivist approach would take into account the fact that Sandra’s reality is constructed through her telling of her story. Interventions would include a collaborative and supportive exploration of her story, with an optimistic orientation. The goal would be to empower her through emphasizing her strengths, leading to an expansion of her perspectives and options. The therapist would focus on what has worked in Sandra’s life and would convey confidence in her ability to come up with solutions to her problems. Any dominant expectations from the larger society would be challenged as Sandra works toward constructing her preferred story line for her future and the future of her child.
Life-span theorists would highlight the uniqueness of Sandra’s situation, and interventions would be tailored based on her specific situation. The focus could be on the impact on her resulting from the job situation, decisions regarding the baby, and her feelings of isolation. An individualized conceptualization and approach would be considered the most appropriate way to proceed to increase her ability to adapt to her circumstances and continue her development.

Transition theorists would assess Sandra’s resources for coping, and a key focus would involve identifying her sources for support and strengthening her resources as she deals with the situation at work and becoming a mother with her family around her.

CONCLUSION

Examining our theories is important because it helps us to clarify our views and assumptions of adult development. Our aim here was to provide a quick overview of different theories and to set the stage for showing how theory affects practice. As we develop the transition perspective, we will see how all the theories described so far feed into it, making it an eclectic theory that looks at context, development, life span, and the construction of meaning.