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# **From Adolescence to Adulthood in the Vietnam Era**

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 Springer

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To my lovely wife of nearly 25 years and our three terrific children  
Caitlin (21), Peter (19), and Sam (15)

and to the late James V. Mudge, Jr. (Jamey), 1951–2004, who left this  
world far too early

# Preface

This book is about the boys from the high school class of 1969 and their transition to adulthood during the Vietnam-era. I am especially interested in how three prominent pathways from adolescence to adulthood affected the boys' self-concepts. Although there are many avenues to adulthood, and people often combine pathways, I am particularly interested in comparing the context effects that full-time military service (especially in wartime), full-time labor force participation, or full-time college had on a diverse, nationally representative group of American high school boys. The boys in this study grew up and entered adulthood during times unique in American history. From the relative peace and prosperity of post-World War II America, to the dawn of the modern civil rights movement and the escalation of hostilities in Vietnam, to the chaos and bitterness of a nation divided in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and to America's withdrawal from Vietnam and the "stagflation" of the 1970s, these young men experienced more good and bad national and world events in their first two decades of life than most generations in American history.

Make no mistake, their childhood, teenage, and young adult years also afforded plenty of opportunity for fun and hopefulness. They were the first generation brought up on television and drive-in movies. They cruised with friends on Friday and Saturday nights, saw the birth of the Space Age, and were an integral part of the heyday of rock-and-roll. All these pointed to an exciting time brimming with optimism and the smug self-assurance many young people of the day felt toward America's moral, economic, political, and military supremacy. This of course changed in the 1970s as the country seemed to be pulling apart due to such events as Vietnam War,

Watergate and President Nixon's resignation, the advent of forced bussing in pursuit of school desegregation and the ensuing white flight, and the seemingly ever-present domestic terrorists hell-bent on bringing America and its economy to its knees. Groups like the Weather Underground, Black Panthers, and Symbionese Liberation Army dominated many headlines in the early and mid-1970s. In one decade, the country went from a prideful and sometimes ethnocentric nation to one touching on xenocentrism and malaise. The boys in this study were all part of that shift. Just as the young men and women of the post-World War I years are sometimes called The Lost Generation, the boys in my study might aptly be called The Jaded Generation.

The constant threat of World War III and nuclear annihilation hung over everyone's head, creating a constant source of stress and anxiety pervasive in American culture as the boys grew toward adulthood. No schoolchild from the 1950s could easily forget the duck-and-cover drills at school, the fallout shelter signs and rooms filled with water and rations, and the shrill whine of monthly civil defense sirens echoing through the neighborhood. Today they warn of tornadoes, then enemy missiles. When the kids started listening to Top 40 radio, they heard the high pitch signal of the Emergency Broadcast System and the announcement: "This is a test of the Emergency Broadcast System. In the event of an actual emergency . . ."

Still, for many, the 1950s and 1960s, especially, were idyllic. Children generally felt safe outside the home and starting in kindergarten or first grade, many walked to and from school everyday (and sometimes home for lunch, too). Playing tag or "Statue" or "Pompompullaway" after dark on warm summer nights with all the kids in the neighborhood was a favorite pastime for many. Sonic booms, the invisible though unmistakable sign of the marvels of supersonic flight, thundered across many of the country's cities and farms. When some new milestone in space travel was occurring or a space capsule splashed down somewhere at sea, the nation tuned en masse to live television coverage.

How, you may be asking yourself, do I know all this? Some of my knowledge of American culture and society from the 1950s to the 1970s comes from researching the subject. But in reality, most comes from first-hand experience because I too am part of the birth cohort of 1951. I experienced firsthand many of the events the boys in my study experienced. I joined the Army in the summer after high school, was trained as a paratrooper and served stateside and overseas as a scout in the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division. Like millions of other young men, I came home confused and

bitter, sheepish about wearing my uniform in public, and reluctant to reveal my veteran status. Many close friends were vehemently opposed to the war (and some the warriors). I was not a fan of the war, but I could not in good conscience stay out of the military while my brothers were fighting and dying. In fact, Vietnam is probably the main reason I went to college on the G.I. Bill and eventually became a sociologist. Still, boys in my Minneapolis city high school (Patrick Henry) entered the United States military in droves, either as volunteers right out of high school or as draftees (usually the year following graduation). Some went to college, but most went to work and waited for their draft notice or joined up to forestall the inevitable and have some choice in their branch and assignment. Some were killed, including a cousin, and others wounded. One high school friend lost an eye and another cousin lost a leg to a landmine. Occasionally the principal would announce over the P.A. system that one of our alumni had been killed and you could hear the wails of stunned and grief-stricken teenagers echo down the halls.

Again, not all was bad. I, like thousands of other young people, hitchhiked across the country with a mere \$20 in my pocket. In the spirit of the time, truckers, families, and miscellaneous people on the road treated me to meals, stories, and the pleasure of their company with no thought of reimbursement, save doing the same for someone else if the opportunity arose. I was secure in my large extended family, had tons of cousins to play with, and went to the same high school my parents did. It was quite common for people to live close to where they grew up and for kids to know only one house. For me, however, the reminder of war was everywhere. Most of my friends' fathers, including mine, served in World War II. On Saturday nights during high school my friends and I made a point of getting a case of beer and watching *The Sands of Iwo Jima*, *Guadalcanal Diary*, *Wake Island*, or *The Flying Leathernecks* whenever they or other war movies appeared on television, which was often. Walking to school and meeting my friends along the way was a welcome routine. And my older sister had lots of cute girlfriends for me to admire from a distance.

North Minneapolis, my neighborhood, was ringed by Victory Memorial Drive on its north and west borders. Every huge elm tree along the expansive parkway of about five miles was planted in memory of a serviceman from Hennepin County, Minnesota, who died during World War I. There were hundreds of trees and at the base of each, a small cross or Star of David was inscribed with his name, rank, and branch of service (many



died of diseases, including the influenza pandemic of 1918–1919). Like many of the other boys in my neighborhood, I spent countless hours playing touch football among the trees and faux tombstones or jogging down its well-kept grass. And like most of my friends, I worked during high school. My first job was at a Baskin-Robbins ice cream parlor down the block from my house. Later I worked as a busboy at a locally renowned dinner theater. My best paying job was at a stinky asphalt plant a few miles away from my house, across a massive railroad yard.

The upshot of all this is that I know these data far more intimately than most researchers know theirs. Although I wasn't in the study, I feel like I'm one of the boys in it. I also believe my mostly lower middle class Irish Catholic upbringing was pretty typical of the years the boys in my study were being raised and were entering early adulthood.

## Research Goals

The book has four primary research goals, most examined in chapter-length treatments. The goals are listed in their order of appearance.

1. To correct the sample for selection bias due to attrition over the eight year span of the study, through probit modeling (chapter 2)
2. To develop a context choice schema which predicts entrance into one of the post-high school social contexts, through multinomial logistic regression (chapter 3)
3. To contextualize the early life course experiences of the subjects by constructing a demographic and cultural profile of the high school class of 1969 or birth cohort of 1951 (chapter 3)
4. To examine the role that post-high school social contexts play in adult self-concept development during the transition to adulthood, through the use of structural equation modeling (chapter 4)

## Outline of the Book

Chapter 1 reviews the relevant literature and lays the theoretical and empirical foundations for the book. It sets the stage for the structural equation models appearing in chapter 4. Three broad literatures are reviewed: (1) life course and human development, especially concerning self and attitude change in different phases of life; (2) socialization to role-identities, and (3) occupational choice.

Chapter 2 has three important tasks. First, it describes the Youth in Transition (YIT) data set used in my study of the influence of social context on the self. Briefly, YIT is a five-wave longitudinal study of 2,213 10th-grade boys enrolled in over 80 American public schools in the fall of 1966. The fifth and last wave of data were collected eight years later in the spring of 1974, five years after most had graduated from high school. The study was conducted at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan. The data were obtained through the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR). Second, the chapter presents extensive confirmatory factor analyses of the dimensionality of the self-esteem construct, an important task in establishing the reliability and validity of my key outcome measure. In addition, the self-esteem construct's structural invariance is analyzed and tested. This test is crucial in longitudinal research, although too frequently overlooked. Establishing structural invariance is necessary when change over time is being assessed. Without it, change estimates are fraught with error since one cannot differentiate real change in scores from change due to the nature of the construct itself. Finally, sample selection bias is assessed via probit modeling, per research Objective 1. Accounting for possible differences between those who remained in the study versus those who dropped out along the way is crucial to estimating valid parameter estimates in the structural equation models appearing in chapter 4.

Chapter 3 addresses research Objectives 2 and 3. The second research objective examines issues surrounding post-high school social context choice through the use of multinomial logistic regression. For example, during the five-year period after high school, 17% of the subjects had served on active military duty for at least 18 months or were still in the service, 13% were primarily full-time workers, and 31% had primarily been full-time college students. These are the boys I focus on. An additional 39% were off-and-on full-time workers and college students, or had pursued other activities after high school. The book does not focus on this diverse group of subjects. Research Objective 3 attempts to contextualize the early life course experiences of the subjects introduced in chapter 2. Here I construct a demographic and socio-cultural profile of the birth cohort of 1951 (when the vast majority of the subjects were born). The cohort of young men in my study had many noteworthy life course experiences in their childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. For example, they went to elementary school when Baby Boom children were flooding the nation's over-extended schools, resulting in typical class sizes of 30–50

pupils. They graduated from high school at the height of the Vietnam War (when over 500,000 U.S. troops were stationed in and around Vietnam); were the second-to-the-last birth cohort subject to the military draft; were the product of 1950s and 1960s American prosperity, patriotism, and Cold War fears; and were part of the nation's 1960s and 1970s youth culture.

Chapter 4 is the heart of the book. It addresses research Objective 4 by examining the impact that the three social contexts had on the subjects' young adult self-esteems, after controlling for selection bias, context choice predictors, prior self-esteem, and other background variables. Chapter 5 summarizes the study's findings, places them within the broader life course literature, and suggests directions for future research.

Now that we have seen the menu, it is time to sample the fare.

TIMOTHY J. OWENS

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# Implications of Context Choice for the Early Life Course

## Introduction

Three large and diverse areas of the literature, and their associated sections in this chapter, inform my study of how social contexts may influence self-concept change during the transition to adulthood. The first section examines individual constancy and change over the life course, including psychological, social psychological, and sociological perspectives. The psychological contributions focus on the stage theories of human development found in the works of Erikson (1963, 1982) and Levinson (1978). Attention is also paid to aspects of self-concept formation. The social psychological contributions assess the social contexts as a source of attitude, value, and belief change or stability over time as people move through their lives. Attitude formation over the life course serves as the backdrop for this discussion, with particular attention to Glenn's (1980) aging-stability hypothesis. The sociological contribution to life course research is expressed chiefly through Dannefer's (1984) sociogenic thesis, although the aging-stability hypothesis also has a strong sociological component.

The second section reviews contemporary perspectives on socialization. The sociogenic thesis, aging-stability hypothesis, and House's (1981) model of social structure and personality all emphasize the need to incorporate micro- and macro-social processes in our understanding of human development. In terms of the micro-social processes, attention centers on



the contexts and contents of socialization to roles, particularly during adolescence and adulthood.

The final section of the chapter examines issues related to occupational choice. Although the choice of work, military, or college after high school involves a somewhat different set of issues than the choice of a specific occupation, the choice literature is examined because it provides useful theoretical insights that can be applied to my assessment of the movement into social contexts. The occupational choice literature review is divided into three areas: (1) the psychological contributions as expressed by the vocational interest theories of Super (1957, 1984) and Holland (1997); (2) Blau, Gustad, Jessor, Parnes, and Wilcock's (1956) landmark social psychological conceptualization of occupational choice; and (3) the structural contribution illustrated by Granovetter's (1983, 1974) emphasis on weak tie contacts in occupational choice. The occupational choice literature guides the formulation of the context choice scheme presented in chapter 3.

## **Perspectives on the Life Course and Human Development**

### ***Life Stage Viewpoints***

Interest in the stages of life has been a long-standing concern in the history of Western ideas, going back at least to Shakespeare's depiction of the seven stages of the life cycle in *As You Like It*. Briefly, the stage theories of human development tend to hold two central positions. First, it is assumed that one's core identity crystallizes in adolescence and early adulthood. Second, stage theorists assume that human development progresses through well-defined age-specific stages involving core tasks or crises. It is generally accepted that stage progression cannot proceed if earlier tasks or crises have not been completed or have not been successfully resolved. Failure to meet the tasks or crises associated with a particular stage typically results in negative personality outcomes and either regression into earlier stages or stagnation in one's current stage. The three main life cycle stages in the West are childhood (including infancy), adolescence, and adulthood, with various substages within each. Although the temporal ordering of the various tasks or crises characterizing a particular stage are often varied and dependent upon one's culture, a core assumption of stage theorists is that the sequencing of the stages is predetermined (Erikson, 1982, pp. 66–67).

The review of Erikson's and Levinson's stage theories serves as an important foundation from which to examine Glenn's (1980) aging-stability hypothesis and Dannefer's (1984) sociogenic thesis.

### *Erikson's Eight Ages of Life*

Erikson (1963, 1982) uses a psychological classification to mark his eight ages of life stemming from psychoanalytic thought (1963, pp. 247–274). Even though he divides the life cycle into eight developmental stages, Erikson refers to infancy, adolescence, and adulthood as the “strategic stages” where the crucial human strengths of hope, fidelity, and care emerge (1982, p. 58).

Each life cycle stage involves a psychosocial crisis involving a particular developmental task appropriate to a given age. Successful resolution of a stage crisis allows progression to higher stages. Those unable to resolve a psychosocial crisis may become stuck and unable to incorporate the exigencies of their “age” in their ego and identity. During the childhood phases of the life cycle one moves essentially with or against biological rhythms. In the later stages, beginning with adolescence and going through the adulthood stages, one is increasingly faced with adapting to roles and situational pressures associated with responsibility for others. But in every stage, the individual is repeatedly faced with a conflict between polar types representing positive development and stage progression or regression and the alternative of cynicism, isolation or despair.

The first three stages are the pre-school years of infancy, early childhood, and the play age. During these stages the child's basic social orientation is the family. In the first two stages the child is chiefly occupied with coming to terms with issues such as trust, autonomy, guilt, and inferiority. *Infancy* is the strategic stage where the child develops basic trust or mistrust of the outside world. “Mothers create a sense of trust in their children by that kind of administration which in its quality combines sensitive care of the baby's individual needs and a firm sense of trustworthiness within the trusted framework of their culture's life style” (Erikson, 1963, p. 249). Infants who do not develop a basic sense of trust tend to exhibit the core pathology of withdrawal.

In the *early childhood* stage, the toddler either begins to develop a sense of autonomy or falls victim to a sense of shame and doubt. The important task here is to develop the ability to freely pick and choose which objects and relationships to hold onto and which to let go. In this

stage the child begins to learn discrimination in his or her powers and tastes. An undeveloped sense of autonomy may result in a sense of shame and doubt manifested as compulsive manipulation of self and others in a strive for possessions and control.

In the play age, the child begins to exhibit new social and interpersonal powers (stemming from increased motor and mental abilities). The psychosocial crisis in this stage is between initiative and guilt. A sense of initiative results in “anticipatory rivalry” (Erikson, 1963, p. 256) with older siblings or others in the family environment. However, the child must reconcile the fantasy of being all powerful or being totally destroyed by those with whom he or she competes. Resolution of the antipathies of this stage helps produce a sense of initiative, while failure to do so may result in an inhibited child filled with a sense of guilt.

In the school age and adolescent stages, the young person’s social orientation is extended to school and peer groups. The pre-pubescent *school age* child’s basic psychosocial crisis is between industry and inferiority (Erikson, 1963, p. 258). Here the child learns the “technical and social rudiments of a work situation” (Erikson, 1982, p. 75) which will enable him or her to be a productive member of society. Industry is where the child “learns to love to learn as well as to play—and to learn most eagerly those techniques which are in line with the *ethos of production*” (Erikson, 1982, p. 75, emphasis in the original). This ethos engenders a sense of cooperation with others in followings plans and scheduled procedures. The antithesis of industry is a sense of inferiority in which the child may be excessively competitive. Instead of feeling competent as in industry, the child develops a sense of incompetence manifested as selfish competition or a retreat from the emerging ethos of production with a concomitant lapse into the core pathology of inertia.

*Adolescence* is the second strategic stage in the life cycle when the post-pubescent child struggles with defining his or her identity. According to Erikson, the “reliability of young adult commitments largely depends on the outcome of the adolescent struggle for identity” (1982, p. 72). The adolescent’s important psychosocial task is to selectively affirm or repudiate earlier childhood identifications. Here one seeks a new identity by experimenting with various roles and rebellions, while concern with the perceptions of others increases. The core strength of adolescence is a maturing faith in mentors and leaders, which Erikson calls fidelity (Erikson, 1982, p. 73). The antithesis of identity is identity confusion. If the adolescent’s changing self-image and childhood experiences are not reconciled in this

stage, identity confusion and the loss of a lasting sense of self may result. An uncrystallized sense of self may have serious ramifications for the life course because it will not only block progression to the next developmental stage, it may also hinder the adolescent from acquiring age-appropriate roles. The acquisition of age-appropriate roles contributes to identity and value formation.

Adulthood is divided into young adulthood and mature adulthood (or simply adulthood). In the *young adult stage*, the post-adolescent faces the psychosocial crisis of intimacy versus isolation. During this stage, one must learn to accommodate oneself to people from different backgrounds and habits and to new milieus, especially upon marriage (Erikson, 1982, pp. 71–72). Central to this important task is the ability to be intimate. Erikson writes (1982, p. 70):

Young adults emerging from the adolescent search for a sense of identity can be eager and willing to fuse their identities in mutual intimacy and to share them with individuals who, in work, sexuality, and friendship promise to prove complementary. One can often be “in love” or engage in intimacies, but the intimacy now at stake is the capacity to commit oneself to concrete affiliations which may call for significant sacrifices and compromises.

The psychosocial antithesis of intimacy is isolation, or a fear of remaining separate and unrecognized (Erikson, 1982, p. 70). The most serious drawback of isolation is a “regressive and hostile reliving of the identity conflict” of adolescence or a fixation on the crisis of trust versus mistrust engendered in one’s relationship with the “maternal person” in stage one (Erikson, 1982, p. 71). Failure to resolve the intimacy versus isolation crisis may result in self-limiting behavior manifested as elitism. Another negative consequence of isolation is the inability to reject or exclude anything, which may have the dire consequence of self-rejection or self-exclusion.

In the *mature adult stage*, one faces the new crisis of generativity versus stagnation. Generativity means being a fully productive and contributing member of society and one’s communal group. The generative adult builds and cares for a family, and creates and nurtures new ideas and new products (Erikson, 1982, p. 67). In the process of this productivity and care, a self-generation occurs which helps to further crystallize and define the adult’s identity. The antithesis of generativity is stagnation, which is an extension of the isolation and exclusivity described in reference to young adulthood. Stagnation engenders self-absorption and results in the

core pathology of rejectivity, or the inability or lack of interest in extending oneself to others or in putting self-interest aside in an attempt to work cooperatively (Erikson, 1982, p. 67).

Finally, in *old age* the culmination of previous stage crises reaches its apex or nadir as the old person faces the psychosocial crisis of integrity versus despair (Erikson, 1982, pp. 64–64). Integrity builds on the successful completion of earlier stages and provides a sense of coherence and wholeness even in the presence of a loss of physical, mental or social powers. Integrity, in short, involves coming to terms with one's past without bitterness or remorse.

Despair, and its behavioral counterpart, disdain, connotes a sense of a life misspent, of time being too short to put oneself on the road to integrity (1963, p. 269). Despair is a loss of hope for a meaningful old age (1982, p. 62).

### *Levinson's "Life-Cycle Eras"*

Levinson's (1978) model of the male life-cycle owes much to Erikson's pioneering work but departs sharply from the purely psychological view of the life cycle by incorporating social psychological principles. (Levinson, 1996, shows that his model is appropriate to women as well.) Levinson's model is social psychological because it addresses how the roles and responsibilities of particular life-cycle phases influence one's adaptation to, and movement through, subsequent life stages. Levinson argues that the life cycle is not marked by a "continuous process of development" but is marked instead by "qualitatively different periods in development" (Levinson, 1978, p. 40). He says that from the end of adolescence to the middle forties there is a sequence of periods through which all men must pass. In order to understand the adult life cycle, one must look at the general character of a man's living, not solitary aspects of his life.

Levinson and associates (1978) divide the male life-cycle into four eras with accompanying transition phases. Their "life-cycle eras" and the developmental periods (designated by a "•") are (p. 57):

1. Childhood and adolescence, ages 0–22
2. Early adulthood, ages 17–45
  - Entering the adult world
  - Age 30 transition
  - Settling down