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Historical Perspectives of Middle Age Within the Life Span

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To our knowledge, there has never been a historical treatise on the concept of middle age or middle adulthood (we will use these terms interchangeably throughout this chapter) within lifespan developmental psychology and lifespan developmental science. At most, the role of adult development in the middle of the life cycle has been touched on here and there in historical treatises such as Groffmann's essay, "Life-Span Developmental Psychology in Europe: Past and Present," which appeared in Goulet and Baltes' (1970) *Life-Span Developmental Psychology: Research and Theory*. Naturally, poets and philosophers have written much about the human life course, including middle age, over the centuries. Nonetheless, a systematic treatise on the history of middle age, how societies and cultures have interpreted the span of years that come after young adulthood and extend into later life, has never been undertaken. It seems as if the historical analysis of the concept of middle adulthood has not

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been of much interest, which contrasts with the extremes of the life span, childhood (e.g., Aries, 1981) and old age (e.g., Gruman, 1966).

Similarly, no additional "development" was expected after the completion of the adolescence and young adulthood period in traditional conceptions of developmental psychology, and efforts to counteract this tendency tended to jump to late life and old age. A famous example for this is *Senescence. The Last Half of Life*, published in 1922 by Stanley Hall (1844–1924), the best-known childhood and adolescence researcher of his time, as he approached his 80s. As expressed in the title, Hall regarded old age as "the last half of life" and reduced middle age, as the reader is informed in the preface of the book, to the adult years between 25 and 45 years of age. The remainder of the book focuses on "senescence," which begins thereafter and lasts until death. Senescence, according to Hall, thus covered part of what is now frequently considered as middle age, that is, ages 45 to 65.

Although developmental psychology and the study of the life course have long neglected middle age, there are promising signs of a sea change (e.g., Brim, Ryff, Kessler, 2004; Lachman, 2004; Willis & Reid, 1999). The systematic "colonialization" of what Brim (1992) coined the "last uncharted territory in human development" (p. 171) has only recently taken clearer shape in aging and lifespan research. Still, many researchers of aging give middle adulthood slight or no serious attention, paying lip service to the issue without detailed conceptual and empirical consideration.

This book is the most recent attempt to accord middle age its rightful place in the study of human development, and we feel privileged to contribute to this endeavor by tracing the historical dimensions of middle age throughout the centuries. The aim of this chapter is to provide a comprehensive set of observations, analyses, and interpretations of the historical development of the concept of middle adulthood within the life span, with primary focus on social and behavioral science perspectives. "Comprehensive" means that we shall strive to open certain doors for understanding the historical development of the concept of middle adulthood. However, what is behind these doors can only be treated selectively, often by just highlighting names, studies, and approaches to illustrate more general trends. Given the focus of this volume on European research on middle age, and for the sake of brevity, we will consider predominantly Western European trends and perspectives in our historical argumentation. Moreover, we will be able to only briefly touch

on intercultural variations in the historical understanding of the concept of middle adulthood. Finally, it should be said that we, the authors of this chapter, are developmental psychologists and gerontologists with deep interests in the historical origin of our field, not historians with interest in development and aging.

Descriptive and Evaluative Aspects, Four Perspectives, and a Working Definition of Middle Age

Descriptive and Evaluative Aspects of Middle Age

Coming to terms with the phenomenon of middle adulthood requires a set of basic categories. One helpful pair of categories in this regard seems to be the distinction between descriptive and evaluative components inherent in the concept of middle adulthood. A descriptive analysis involves studying middle age from perspectives such as chronological age or commonly held opinions on its position in the life span. An evaluative perspective focuses on the perceived quality of middle age and the perceived salience and importance of events and experiences in middle age for lifespan development at large.

On the descriptive level, the easier task seems to be to approach the upper limit of middle adulthood by using common borders of when “old age” begins, such as retirement age. Formal retirement, however, is a rather young phenomenon in human history, dating back only to the late decades of the 19th century (Kohli, 1988). Although the idea that the life course could be separated into different stages has been prevalent for millennia, these notions—as will be shown in more detail later in the chapter—are quite diverse and do not allow one to narrow down the “exact” position of middle age during the human life span. Quite another approach to the issue of circumscribing middle age comes from Laslett (1989) in his sociohistorical account of the development of the ages of man. Laslett’s conception of a “fresh map of life” defines middle age in a complex manner that cannot be reduced to simple calendar age limits. What others regard as middle age is, in his terminology, a mix of the “second” and “third ages.” After a period of dependence, immaturity, socialization, and educational needs in the first age, the second age brings

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with it a measure of independence, maturity, responsibility, earning, and spending, followed by the third age, characterized by harvesting life achievements and personal fulfillment. The fourth age, according to Laslett, entails for the most part dependence, frailty, and dealing with approaching death.

At the evaluative level, there are also mixed connotations. Hall (1922) was not alone when he argued in the preface of his book on old age that middle age should be seen as “the prime, when we are at the apex of our aggregate of powers [. . .] commonly called our best” (p. vii). In Greek and Roman antiquity, middle age was viewed as the part of the life span “in blossom” (Nühlen-Graab, 1990). In contrast, Laslett (1989) maintained that the climax or “crown” of life is the third age, but argued that the climax sometimes occurs between the second and third age, or even between the first and second age, as may be the case with top-ranking athletes achieving their best physical performances quite early in their life course.

Introducing Four Perspectives to Reflect On Middle Age

It would seem then that middle age remains a slippery concept, regardless of whether one seeks to merely describe or evaluate it. Thus, we offer a classification of four major perspectives that address and differentiate middle age at both descriptive and evaluative levels. To wit, our plan of attack is to rely on a family of four historically framed perspectives on middle adulthood. Each of these perspectives will be treated in more detail in the following pages. We will attempt to delineate the multitude of ways middle adulthood has been understood throughout history. This could also be seen, to take the expression coined by Wittgenstein (1960), as describing the *Sprachspiel* (language usage) of the term *middle adulthood* in historical perspective.

The first perspective describes streams of events characteristic of particular historical eras. The common denominator to these streams of events is that they have fundamentally shaped the everyday world of people, how individuals planned their lives, and what society expected of the aging individual. In particular, we will address issues related to demography and the sociopolitical sphere. This perspective traces the origins of middle adulthood to the demographic and societal developments that naturally accompany the emergence of modern civilization.

In a second perspective, we consider how the genre of fiction over historical time is also able to add to the understanding of middle adulthood and its lifespan dynamics. This is, of course, a wide field, and we therefore only touch on some of the issues. For example, the German *Entwicklungsroman* (novel of development) is a classic form used to portray lifespan development. Middle age has been addressed in novels of development in endless variations.

A third perspective on middle adulthood illustrates how the ancients viewed the human life cycle. Philosophers have written a great deal about human development and the ethical conundrums appointed to various stages of the life cycle, and these classic notions of how life unfolds can be very illuminating.

A fourth perspective on middle adulthood discusses key theoretical conceptions and empirical approaches to the life cycle that stem from behavioral and social developmental science in historical view. We begin with forerunners during the 18th and 19th century, such as Tetens (1777/1979) and Quêtelet (1835), and then proceed to the present systematic research on the topic. One basic insight inherent in all of this work is that middle adulthood comprises a large portion of the "life map" and can be thought of as a "bridge of life" from which early lessons are conveyed to the later years. Another major message of this body of work is that pronounced interindividual variability in intraindividual developmental trajectories has been found in every period of the life span (Thomae, 1979) and, hence, also in middle adulthood.

A Working Definition of Middle Adulthood

When integrating various perspectives on middle age into a working definition of middle adulthood in terms of the essential *Familienähnlichkeiten* (family resemblance), to take another major concept of Wittgenstein's thinking (Wittgenstein, 1960), the distinction between descriptive and evaluative elements as introduced before is a helpful tool.

With respect to defining elements of middle age on the descriptive level, most approaches—be they scientific or lay conceptions of middle age—emphasize its unique position in the life course as turning point between the rise and decline of the flow of life. Because demographic, political, and cultural influences shape our lives, conceptions of middle adulthood should be seen as inherently dynamic. Furthermore, it seems that any attempt to identify middle adulthood in objective calendar age

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terms is problematic and preliminary, although traditionally the 40s, 50s, and early 60s of the human life span have often been identified as middle age, ending with retirement. Middle adulthood is also characterized by pronounced interindividual variation of intraindividual development, thus questioning any attempt to seek uniformity in this life period.

Regarding defining elements on the evaluative level, middle adulthood generally tends to be perceived positively, especially when compared to the period of old age. As has often been noted, middle age prepares individuals for the existential challenges of old age, which have been described as the struggle between despair and ego-integrity (Erikson, 1950). In addition, middle adulthood has been identified in many lifespan developmental conceptions, with the major exception of orthodox psychoanalysis, as the period of the life course with the most direct influence on the course and outcome of old age (Lachman, 2004).

We will use this working definition throughout the remainder of the chapter as a frame of reference, which will then be enriched and differentiated due to the content and findings of each of the chapter's major sections.

Perspective 1

Insights From Historical Demography

It may sound like a truism that the emergence of a circumscribed period of middle adulthood presumes that life expectancy allows for it. Thus, from a demographic perspective, middle age was created by the increase of life expectancy in modern society, which was—as is well-known—quite low until about two centuries ago. For example, while the ancient Greek and Roman empires (roughly from 1100 BC to 600 AC) saw a considerable number of old people, mean life expectancy at the time was about 30 to 35 years, after correcting for the high likelihood of death at birth and in early infancy (Gutsfeld & Schmitz, 2003). To take the example of Germany, life expectancy began to rise after the low mark of the Middle Ages and particularly after the Thirty-Year War (1618–1648). Nevertheless, reaching the age of 40 did not become a normative life event in Germany until the 17th and 18th centuries. Later, from the end of the 19th century until the present, life expectancy rose sharply: It was about 46 years at the beginning of the 20th century and about 79 years at the beginning of the 21st century (Lehr, 2000).

As a consequence of considering such demographic trajectories, people rarely considered what we would call middle age in their personal life planning until around the beginning of the 19th century. In all probability, residents of 18th-century Europe alternated fearing old age and denying that they would live long enough to see it. At the time, society did not regard old age as a distinct life period (a process which began in the early 20th century), but as the beginning of the end of life, a process that was expected to end abruptly. Only when the likelihood of survivorship beyond the age of 40 increased and became a normative event in objective demographic terms, but also in the everyday world experience, did people begin to anticipate a long and secure period following the completion of one's education and entry into marriage.

More recent demographic changes, starting in the 1970s, also helped usher in the notion of middle age. Middle age—as a separate and distinct life stage—somehow began to be characterized not only by the increase in life expectancy but also by a decrease in the end of childbearing. The first of these trends gives rise to a separation of middle adulthood from old age, while the latter implies a relative decrease in time spent rearing children and therefore a separation of middle adulthood from young adulthood (see also Moen & Wethington, 1999).

Sociopolitical Influences

In ancient time, an important aspect of the social construction of middle age was the fact that middle-aged men were considered too old for war service. Middle adulthood was a “safe port” for men in the life course, a welcome retreat from war service (Gutsfeld & Schmitz, 2003). However, in more recent history, this safe port role changed; particularly in World War II (1939–1945), middle-aged men until their 50s were recruited in the final phase, and men in their 40s were still drafted to serve in the Korean War (1950–1953).

In ancient Greece, entering middle adulthood was an important prerequisite for fulfilling major societal and legal duties. For instance, so-called Epheten, similarly to jurors in presence, had to be 50 years or older. Generally, those between the age of 30 and 50 (i.e., those in the middle years, more or less) were the most powerful societal group in Greece as well as in ancient Rome. Furthermore, the upper limit of middle age in Greek antiquity was probably the calendar age of 60, roughly indicating

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the time in life when one's property was transferred to one's children (Gutsfeld & Schmitz, 2003).

Sociopolitical history redefined middle adulthood with the "institutionalization of the life course" (Kohli, 1986). According to the institutionalization thesis, since the late 19th century, modern life has been structured around a period of education and socialization toward career development and achievement, followed by a four- to five-decade long period of involvement in the labor force, and finally, mandatory retirement combined with a pension system. The latter provided the monetary basis for the remaining period of life and helped create a unique class of pensioners in society. Note in this context that European retirement legislation, specifically Bismarck's political efforts toward the introduction of a definite retirement age, only happened in the 1870s. Retirement was mandatory at the age of 70 for blue-collar workers and, although only about 20% actually did retire (Borscheid, 1992), it contributed substantially to the definition of middle adulthood by introducing its upper age limit. In 1916, retirement age in Europe was changed to 65. In contrast, mandatory retirement was outlawed in the United States in 1970, which effectively erased the common upper limit of middle age, at least in the United States. It should be noted that retirement age is now rising in many European countries; this will have an impact on the understanding of middle age. Also, retirement age is a good example for the interaction of normative and nonnormative events (Baltes, Reese, & Lipsitt, 1980) in the societal and individual definitions of middle age. On the one hand, middle age may be prolonged to what before was frequently seen as early old age (or the young-old), when retirement age is rising. On the other hand, sharp health declines in persons in their 50s or 60s may serve on the individual level as a marker for the end of middle age and the beginning of old age.

As a consequence of the institutionalization of the life course, middle adulthood signaled the forthcoming end of the "working phase" of the life course. However, this probably was strongly shaped in terms of life quality by social class and job type. In the so-called working class, middle adulthood frequently was associated with the emergence of major illnesses due to work involvement, whereas middle adulthood in many middle-class jobs implied the right to reduce the number of heavy day-to-day job duties and prepare for the imminent retirement period.

One might argue that the institutionalization of the life course and its consequences apply predominantly to middle-aged men. However, given an ever-increasing portion of women in the labor force in the second half of the 20th century, the concept can be generalized to women as well.

Furthermore, historical periods of economic stagnation have probably had an impact on the understanding of middle adulthood in subjective as well as objective terms. For instance, being confronted with unemployment in middle adulthood, as was the case during the Great Depression in the United States and during the Weimarer Republik in Germany, would naturally alter older individual's estimation of their "best years." Even in recent times, the natural experiment of German reunification in 1990 resulted in a loss of employment opportunities among many East German men and women "in the middle" of their careers. It remains to be seen how this will affect their experience of old age.

Most recently in historical-societal terms, dramatic changes in the culture of old age, specifically the introduction of what frequently is labeled as the "50+ generation" as well as the societal awareness of the baby boom generation, have had a lasting effect on the understanding of what middle age is or is not (Lachman, 2004). On the one hand, the baby boomers are often discussed in terms of who they will be rather than who they are: Around 2010 to 2015, this cohort will begin to retire, and their impact on societal and health expenditures is a major concern. At present, however, they constitute the largest middle-aged cohort ever alive and also the first to embrace aging with a proactive, "can do" attitude toward both their personal development and their emerging political agenda (Silverstone, 1996). Their vigor has seemingly stretched middle age toward something like the sixth or even the seventh decade. On the other hand, older people's organizations (such as the American Association of Retired Persons [ARRP] in the United States), as well as the emergence of the "silver market," have extended their sphere of influence even below the magic border of age 50 and have thus appropriated a large section of middle adulthood. In Germany, the expectation is that the baby boomer generation will play an important role in the growth of the consumer market in decades to come and by this means even contribute to the reduction of the unemployment rate (Naegele, Gerling, & Scharfenorth, in press).

Perspective 2

From the Genres of Fiction, Film, and Music

The genre of fiction has addressed middle age in many variations, creating prototypes or stereotypes of this period of the life span. A few glances are illustrative: Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* (ca. 1200–1210), frequently regarded as the classic version of the German *Entwicklungsroman*

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(i.e., a novel showing the development of an individual's character), treats middle age as dealing with what has been achieved or not (in Parzival's case, searching for the grail) and what still is achievable or still has to be achieved. Shakespeare (1564–1616) addressed the ages of man in Act II, Scene 7 of his play *As You Like It*: "And then the justice, In fair round belly with good capon lin'd, With eyes severe, and beard of formal cut, Full of wise saws and modern instances; And so he plays his part." What then follows, according to Shakespeare's play, is the "sixth age," with a dramatic shift toward experiences of loss: "Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything." Going further, consider Grimmelshausen's *Der Abentheuerliche Simplicissimus Teutsch* (The Adventurous Simplicissimus; 1668) and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* (Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship; 1821–1829) as additional classic versions of the German Entwicklungsroman. Here, middle age appears, specifically in the Grimmelshausen developmental novel, as a slippery terrain with the risk of failure, but also as the time of mastership and coming to terms with life's experiences, losses, and achievements, as in Goethe's novel.

The role of the middle-aged woman is not as evident as that of the middle-aged man in the genre of fiction. One example is Brecht's *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* (Mother Courage and Her Children; 1937), showing all the ambivalences of a woman as she enters middle adulthood, while caring for her children during Germany's Thirty-Year War (1618–1648). Variations of middle-aged protagonists found in post-World War II fiction in German-speaking countries are heavily influenced by the long-term consequences of the war as well as the ambivalences of the Wirtschaftswunder (German economic miracle) unfolding in the 1950s. For example, in Siegfried Lenz's novel *Der Mann am Strom* (Man at the River), published in 1957, the confrontation of a blue-collar worker in his 50s with the challenges of the modern industrial world is described. In the novel *Homo Faber* by Max Frisch, also published in 1957, a successful engineer in his 50s with a strong belief in rationality and the omnipotence of technological development has to accept that highly unlikely events (e.g., having intercourse with one's own daughter whose existence was not known to the father) can nevertheless happen and change one's whole life. A world-famous stereotype of middle age and its potential in terms of thoughtful and persistent analysis (not activism) is Commissaire Maigret in George Simenon's famous crime stories. Similarly, Raymond Chandler's protagonist Philippe Marlowe as the classic "cool" detective in the middle of his life may also come into the picture here, with work such as *The Big Sleep* (1939) and *The Long Goodbye* (1954). More recently, American writer John Updike has produced a strong

stereotype of middle adulthood and, at the same time, of America in the 1970s and 1980s with his books featuring Harry Angstrom, called "Rabbit," as the "hero" (ending with *Rabbit at Rest*, published in 1990). Rabbit appears as the classic American middle-class man of that time struggling with his business (selling Toyota cars), the ups and downs in his marriage, his relationship to his children, and coming to terms with unfulfilled aspirations in his personal life.

When it comes to film and the role of middle age, actors as diverse as Humphrey Bogart (classic in *Casablanca*), Sean Connery (specifically in his James Bond roles), and Woody Allen (with all his potential to reveal right and wrong communications in "mature" relationships between men and women) may come to mind. Middle-aged men appear in these roles as being capable of taking decisions against their primary desires for the sake of higher political goals, such as supporting resistance to the Nazi regime (*Casablanca*), resisting all danger and even saving the whole world (James Bond), or surviving the day-to-day miscommunications in core personal relationships (as shown in many Woody Allen movies).

In the music business, particularly in rock music, among the classics of the "young wild" coming to middle age is Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones, who has been on the stage for more than 40 years. The same holds for ex-Beatle Paul McCartney, although in contrast to Mick Jagger, he has developed in his middle age toward the mature composer and musician always searching for new musical frontiers.

In sum, the genre of fiction has produced many middle-aged prototypes and stereotypes, in which the tension between mastering a particular skill and running the risk of no longer being capable of coping with life appears in rich diversity. Differences between European and U.S. fiction can be found, for instance, in the role of World War II consequences (coping with the Nazi regime, coming to terms with the *Wirtschaftswunder*), which had a stronger impact on the course and outcome of middle age in European, and specifically German, fiction as compared to that of North America.

Perspective 3

Traditional Stages of the Life Course

Traditional scientific conceptions of the divisions of the human life span from a simple two-stage conception of the human life course to a conception of 10 stages of human development (Nühlen-Graab, 1990, p. 21). Other metaphors and so-called life step rhymes helped a wider

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audience to better understand the flow of life. These historical divisions of the life span into distinct stages were not always pegged to calendar age and were typically loaded with evaluative connotations (Table 1.1).

As can be seen in Table 1.1, there is no single universally accepted definition of middle adulthood (Nühlen-Graab, 1990). While there was nothing such as middle age in the dichotomous view of the life course, all remaining conceptions address different facets of the phenomenon of middle age. "Middle" age tends to be included in the second half of life in conceptions involving four and five life stages, while inclusion of more life stages enhances the description of "middle," but also entails an increasingly limited definition of its lower and upper limits in terms of calendar age. The 10-stage conception places middle age roughly at the age range of 30 to 50 years. Gender differences always were important in these conceptions because it was tempting to use female menopause as a natural limit for the end of middle age and the beginning of old age. As a consequence, there always was a tendency to date the beginning of old age earlier in women, which also meant a shortened period of middle adulthood for women, compared with men.

Historical Metaphors of the Life Course

In addition to the historical partitioning of the life course, other metaphors have been used across the centuries to help understand the life flow and its expected and unexpected ups and downs. These metaphors were an important means of providing advice to others and handing down hearth-fire wisdom to one's children about how life unfolds. This is simply commonsense knowledge of what is "normal" at which periods of the life course as well as, from a society's perspective, what can be expected from societal members at which ages. The metaphor of a "life staircase" (*Lebenstreppe* in German, *Degrés des Ages* in French) with one part of the staircase going up while the other is going down, was a powerful metaphor that became quite popular across Europe in the 16th century (Schriften des Rheinischen Museumsamts, 1983). The Renaissance and the Enlightenment nurtured such life course metaphors in the hopes of revealing a rational structure underlying the flow of life.

Life staircases came in many variations (e.g., separate variations for men and women) and depicted different life stages. Figure 1.1 shows a life staircase, drawn in 17th-century Germany (Augsburg), which includes both sexes. The writing under the life stairs refers to the most common

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Table 1.1 Historical Stages of the Life Course at a Glance

Youth				Old Age					
Summer				Winter					
Two-stage conception according to the year's extreme seasons									
Child, Young Man			Adult			Old Age			
Sunrise			Sun summit			Sunset			
Three-stage conception according to the day course									
Child 0–20		Young Man 20–40		Man 40–60		Old Man 60–80			
Morning/Spring		Noon/Summer		Afternoon/Fall		Evening/Winter			
Four-stage conception according to the year's seasons									
0–15		15–30		30–45		45–60		60–Death	
Five-stage conception according to Varro									
0–7	7–14	14–28		28–50		50–70		Death	
Infantia	Pueritia	Adolescentia		Inventus, fermissima aetatum omnium		Aetas seniores, id est gravitas		Senectus	
Six-stage conception according to Isidor of Sevilla									
0–7	7–14	14–21	21–28	28–35	35–42	42–49	49–56	56–63	63–70
Ten-stage conception according to the "Hebdomaden" separation of the life course									
0–10	10–20	20–30	30–40	40–50	50–60	60–70	70–80	80–90	90–100
A child	A young man	A man	Well-done	Standing still	Old age begins	A frail old person	No more wisdom	Children's mockery	Needs the mercy of god
Ten-stage conception based on astrological analogy (Also given is the content of a German so-called life step rhyme dating from the 16th century.)									

SOURCE: Adapted from Nühlen-Graab (1990).

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Figure 1.1 Example of a Life Staircase (“Lebenstreppe”); Augsburg, Germany, circa 1660

SOURCE: Joerissen, P., & Will, C. (1983). *Die Lebenstreppe* (S. 22). Köln, Germany: Rheinland-Verlag.

version of life step rhyme (see also Table 1.1, last row) and says (from left to right): 10 years—a child; 20 years—a young man; 30 years—a man; 40 years—well-done; 50 years—standing still; 60 years—old age begins, 70 years—a frail old person (*Greis*), 80 years—no more wisdom; 90 years—children’s mockery. One hundred years of age is coming on a different level on the left-hand side beside the 90-year stage with the text: 100 years—needs the mercy of God.

The life staircase metaphor not only attracted much attention from the art world in ever-new variations (*Schriften des Rheinischen Museumsamts*, 1983), but also was frequently found cheaply produced in the living room of many private homes. The central element of this lay world metaphor was a two-dimensional image of human development with a balanced up-and-down movement as people age. In the majority of these depictions, middle

adulthood clearly possessed a privileged position at the apex of the drawing, shown as occurring at the culmination of earlier life periods and before those characterized by decline. Middle adulthood was unique because it symbolized the pinnacle of human development and the turning point of the life course; thereafter, the dynamics toward decline and death were unavoidable. Again, the iconography for women was more pronounced toward decline, which was assumed to occur earlier in their lives compared with men and taking a more dramatic downward trajectory.

On Philosophical Treatises of Middle Adulthood

Human development has been an important subject of philosophical thought from the dawn of time. A recent book edited by German historians Gutsfeld and Schmitz (2003) affords an overview on how the aged were perceived in classical antiquity, pointing to important differences and similarities in Athens, Rome, and Sparta. The ideas of Aristotle, Plato, Seneca, and others are regularly recited in contributions to the history of contemporary gerontology. Perspectives on middle adulthood were, in a sense, indirectly addressed in classical Greek philosophy, given the Greeks' basic understanding of *old age*. In particular, Aristotle held a rather pessimistic view of old age, whereas middle adulthood was, in his conception, a period of life that still shared all the advantages of earlier life phases but not the disadvantages of old age. Plato had a much more positive attitude toward old age and thus did not consider the potential of middle adulthood as highly as Aristotle. Philosophical treatises of the life course generally posit the position that the ideals of full human maturity, autonomy, wisdom, responsibility, moral judgment, and identity can only be attained in later life, despite the fact that most bodily functions, by then, are on the wane.

Nonetheless, ancient philosophers rarely *explicitly* speculated in well-developed treatises about the nature of middle age. As a rule, classical treatises separate the old from the young. The period of middle age, as defined by contemporary research, is sometimes subsumed under old age in these treatises, sometimes under young adulthood. Because very few people reached what we would call "old age" and because societies were rarely able to provide prolonged freedom from societal obligations to what we would call "young adults," we argue that there was simply no need for a social construction of middle age as a separate and unique period of life. This seems to be particularly true for the female life course. In early societies, the main task for women was simply to raise children.

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Having fulfilled this life task, they were thought of as old. This statement seems to be valid even for European societies in the 19th and early 20th centuries (see Borscheid, 1992).

Perspective 4

Precursors of Lifespan Developmental Science

At the end of the 18th century, German scholar Tetens (1736–1807) was among the first to organize then-current theoretical conceptions on the human life span into a consistent picture. Tetens (1777/1979) embraced the classic dynamic of the rise and decline in human development, assuming that energy loss begins in the middle of the life span and accelerates across old age until death. Belgian mathematician and social statistician Quételet (1796–1874) added much to developmental science with his fundamental assumption that the flow of the human life course has its own laws that remained to be discovered by forthcoming lifespan-related research (Quételet, 1835). Quételet developed concrete ideas about the relations between calendar age and specific kinds of psychosocial development, thus clearly supporting the notion that every period of human life should receive focused scientific attention. For example, Quételet assumed that mental illnesses were most likely to occur (and least likely to remit) between the ages of 30 and 50, that is, during middle adulthood. To transpose this to a more general argument, there was the assumption that what happens during middle adulthood is probably the most important determinant of the course, content, and outcomes of old age. Quételet also made a very important and convincing argument for interindividual differences in intraindividual variability, which should hold for any life period, including middle adulthood. Quételet mentioned sex, geographical, national, and social influences as important driving forces for such variation.

Motives for the Consideration of Middle Adulthood in Classic Life Course Conceptions in the 20th Century

In the preface to *Middle Age and Aging*, Bernice Neugarten (1968b) wrote about her pioneering efforts to teach a course on adulthood and old age in social sciences at the University of Chicago in the early 1940s. This

field came to be called the "developmental behavioral sciences" by the end of the 1960s:

In the first years of that curricular effort, the lack of published materials was a major handicap. Today the situation has drastically altered, for a wealth of studies has appeared, many being of considerable sophistication. The problem is now mainly one of organization, for the studies are scattered throughout a wide range of psychological and sociological books and articles. (p. vii)

According to Lehr (1978), the principal reasons why middle adulthood has long been neglected in developmental psychology are (a) the long-time predominance of biological theories of development, (b) the lack of research questions for a pedagogically oriented developmental psychology, (c) sampling problems and related methodological discussions, and (d) a research focus on social groups that are supposed to be disadvantaged or discriminated against.

However, some psychological approaches to the study of developmental processes in middle adulthood have been inspired by the results of gerontological research, showing that a substantial part of behavior in old age is determined by biographical factors: "Present behavior can only be completely understood if past behavior is known" (Shanas, 1975, p. 500). As an example, much research on intelligence, learning, and memory in middle adulthood was initiated to improve knowledge about how some older individuals maintain cognitive capacity while others experience cognitive decline. Other contributions to the developmental psychology of middle age were motivated by research interests in the long-term consequences of developmental paths that could be observed in childhood and adolescence. The progress of American longitudinal studies of child development, with origins in the 1920s and 1930s (Eichorn, Mussen, Clausen, Haan, & Honzik, 1981; Kagan & Moss, 1962; Maas & Kuypers, 1974; Terman & Oden, 1959; Vaillant, 1977), reflects these research interests.

Probably the oldest motive for research on middle age is apparent in early endeavors to discover the characteristic peaks and troughs, or laws, characterizing lifelong developmental processes (see also the perspectives described in previous sections). That is, middle age appears to be the major turning point in the life cycle. For example, a contribution by Neugarten (1968a) on the awareness of middle age focuses on this idea. Based on an extensive set of studies carried out in the Committee on Human Development at the University of Chicago (see also Achenbaum, 1995),

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Neugarten argued that a then-recent issue of *Time* magazine, portraying 40- to -60-year-old Americans as “the command generation,” corresponded very well with the self-perceptions of middle-aged Americans.

Middle-aged men and women, while they by no means regard themselves as being in command of all they survey, nevertheless recognize that they constitute the powerful age-group vis-à-vis other age groups; that they are the norm-bearers and the decision-makers; and they live in a society which, while it may be oriented towards youth, is controlled by the middle-aged. (Neugarten, 1968a, p. 93)

According to research by Neugarten and colleagues (1968a), middle age was perceived at that time as a distinctive period in the life cycle, that is, a period qualitatively different from other age periods. Individuals in the middle saw themselves as the bridge between the generations in family, work, and community. Moreover, time perspective changed from a focus on time-since-birth to a focus on time-left-to-live. Simultaneously, feelings of maximum capacity and ability to manage environmental demands as well as a highly differentiated self were expressed. Only very few expressed a wish to be young again.

A Glance on Selected Life Course Conceptions

Jung

Carl Gustav Jung (1928, 1933) has influenced the psychology of middle adulthood insofar as—similar to Hollingworth (1928)—he advocated the thesis that as a matter of principle, human beings are open to new experiences and able to realize potentials of development in this period of life. The thesis is reflected clearly in the formulation that middle-aged adults try to re-experience in their inner worlds what they previously found in the outer world. The general introversion of mental (or “psychic”) energy is also seminal for increasing one’s awareness of collective consciousness and symbols. According to Jung, acknowledging collective themes is an important developmental task as well as an important opportunity for inner growth in the second half of life. Jung’s perspective on middle age (which is suggested to start at about age 40 and end at about age 65) proceeds from the assumption of major changes in physical and psychological life. People begin to experience decline in physical capacity and start

to realize that they are no longer able to do things they used to do in younger years. From a psychological perspective, acquisition of new knowledge and skills becomes less important, and priority is given to questions of meaning and spirituality.

Bühler and Rothacker

The classic works of Charlotte Bühler, written in Vienna in the 1930s, have made a lasting contribution to our knowledge of middle adulthood. In her book *Der menschliche Lebenslauf als psychologisches Problem* (The Human Life Course as a Psychological Problem), Bühler (1933) elaborated a model of lifespan development that echoed the well-known dynamics of gains and losses. Middle adulthood again is seen as a transition period, before “regressive” tendencies take over. Bühler’s attempts to empirically support her conceptions, using detailed reconstruction of the biographies of both well-known and ordinary persons, make her work all the more valuable. In contrast, German philosopher and psychologist Erich Rothacker (1938) argued that middle age is the stage of occurrence of a major crossing over of two fundamental trajectories in the human life span. According to Rothacker, while physiological functioning begins to decrease, psychological functioning continues to mature and grow until death (Kruse, 2000).

Erikson

In his well-known theory of ego development, Erik H. Erikson (1950) differentiated eight stages or “psychosocial crises” of the expanding ego. These crises are a consequence of both inner-world and outer-world demands, reflecting biological processes of maturation, personal experience, and aspirations as well as social norms and institutions. The theory states that the resolution of psychosocial crises determines future ego development; that is, failing to adapt successfully to the demands of a specific crisis prevents people from coping successfully with the demands of later psychosocial crises.

Each crisis is defined by a “positive” and a “negative” outcome. In early adulthood, the outcomes are intimacy and ego isolation, whereas in late adulthood, they are ego integrity and despair. Intimacy refers to the development of mutuality in a heterosexual partnership, while ego integrity refers to the acceptance of one’s own life as inevitable, appropriate,

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and meaningful. In middle adulthood, building on the achievements of former ego development (i.e., a sense of basic trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, and intimacy), individuals have to manage the psychosocial crisis of generativity versus stagnation.

In his classic monograph, *Childhood and Society*, Erikson (1950) stated that generativity refers primarily to "the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation, although there are individuals who, through misfortune or because of special and genuine gifts in other directions, do not apply this drive to their own offspring" (p. 46). Moreover, generativity is said to include the more popular synonyms of productivity and creativity, which, however, cannot replace generativity. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Erikson argued that "the ability to lose oneself in the meeting of bodies and minds leads to a gradual expansion of ego-interests and to a libidinal investment in that which is being generated" (p. 47). As a consequence, Erikson's understanding of generativity implies advances in both psychosexual and psychosocial aspects of lifelong development (see also McAdams & Logan, 2004).

Marcia

Marcia (1980) expanded on the work of Erikson with respect to the development of identity. In Marcia's view, the status of identity development is determined by two dimensions: obligation and exploration. In contrast to the theoretical position of Erikson, further development of identity does not necessarily imply perceptions of crisis. Marcia (1980) differentiated between four developmental stages of identity, with some people passing through all and others passing through only some of the stages.

The first stage, "identity diffusion," is characterized by low levels of exploration and obligation. The second stage, "foreclosure," implies an adoption of norms and values from significant others. As such, foreclosure is simultaneously characterized by a low level of exploration and a high level of obligation. The third stage, "moratorium," corresponds to the crisis described by Erikson. Here, questions of identity involve a high level of exploration and a low level of obligation. Finally, "identity achievement" is characterized by high levels of exploration and obligation after people have extensively worked through alternative identities and established a preferred identity for themselves. Empirical evidence shows that this stage of identity achievement is not often reached before middle adulthood

(Kroger & Green, 1996). Moreover, a specific form of identity diffusion has been shown to result from failing to adapt successfully to critical life events or other developmental demands. As such, identity diffusion in middle adulthood might reflect a kind of regression due to unresolved tasks and challenges (Marcia, 1989; Whitbourne, 1986).

Peck

The contribution of Robert C. Peck to the understanding of psychological development in the second half of life proceeds from the perspective that Erikson's eighth crisis (ego integrity vs. despair) refers to a major issue of life after age 30. Specifically, Peck (1956) proposed to divide this crisis into several stages that represent "quite different kinds of psychological learning at different stages in the latter half of life" (p. 44). Concerning middle age, Peck distinguished between four stages that may occur in different sequences. The first stage, valuing wisdom versus valuing physical powers, refers to both inescapable decreases in physical strength, stamina, and attractiveness as well as to accumulated experiences and accomplishments. Peck defined wisdom as "the ability to make the most effective choices among the alternatives which intellectual perception and imagination present for one's decision" (p. 45). Successful adaptation to the demands of this stage of middle adulthood implies that self-definitions and behavior no longer rely primarily on physical aspects of the self. The resolution of the second stage, socializing versus sexualizing in human relationships, refers to a redefinition of partnership that accentuates aspects of individuality and companionship instead of sexual aspects. The third stage, cathetic flexibility versus cathetic impoverishment, refers to a time period during which most people are confronted with living with their children, experiencing the death of a parent, and seeing social relationships with peers diminish. Simultaneously, this is the time period during which maturity and status offer the best opportunities "to reinvest emotions in other people, other pursuits and other life settings" (p. 45). The fourth life stage, mental flexibility versus mental rigidity, refers to the risk of becoming more and more set in one's ways, inflexible, opinionated, and closed-minded. Successful adaptation to the demands of this developmental stage implies that "people learn to master their experiences, achieve a degree of detached perspective on them and make use of them as provisional guides to the solution of new issues" (p. 46).

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Havighurst

Robert Havighurst (1948) introduced the concept of developmental tasks to refer to age-specific challenges that reflect biological changes, social roles, norms and expectations, and personal aspirations. Similar to the concept of crisis, successful development is conceptualized as the resolution of a conflict between the actual state of development and normative demands of the inner and outer world. However, Havighurst's concept of developmental task does not imply that individuals indeed experience a kind of crisis, as suggested by authors like Erikson and Peck. Early adulthood is described as a period during which people are well prepared for learning new things and numerous changes of behavior occur due to new experiences. By contrast, middle adulthood, particularly the period between the ages of 30 and 40, is characterized by a high degree of stability: "This is the period of least introspection and self-awareness. Doubts about oneself have been put to rest. The ego is in command, maturation introduces no new factors, and the situation is generally stable and satisfactory" (Havighurst, 1963, p. 31). For Havighurst, the decade from age 40 to age 50 is the prime time of life, a period of "expansion of power and influence," of "growing interest in civic and cultural study and activity" (p. 63). The following decade from age 50 to age 60 is characterized by interindividual variability, primarily nurtured by variables such as sex and membership in social groups. In sum, Havighurst claimed that in middle adulthood, that is, the period from age 30 to age 60, men and women reach the peak of their influence on society, and at the same time, society makes its maximum demands on them for social and civic responsibilities.

The Rise and Fall of the Concept of Midlife Crisis

The still most popular approach to crisis or developmental tasks in middle adulthood is the notion of midlife crisis (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978). This concept emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, to some extent as a consequence of an overestimation of the importance of biological factors and to some extent as a consequence of the growing popularity of psychoanalysis. Even if the concept of midlife crisis might reflect "pure figment" or a kind of collective fantasy concocted by middle-aged white males for middle-aged white males (Whitbourne, 1986), the concept was originally (and sometimes still is) thought of as having

fairly recognizable dimensions. As Rosenberg, Rosenberg, and Farrell (1999) noted,

The midlife crisis was not a professional crisis, nor a marital crisis, nor an economic crisis, although these surface manifestations could certainly signal its presence. . . . Midlife crisis theory was less a paradigm than a set of beliefs or assumptions about the relation between the subject's experience of self . . . and correlative attitudes, symptoms and personality dimensions. The end of young adulthood and the beginning of middle age was thought to produce a reevaluation of the self, and (potentially) accompanying symptoms of depression, anxiety, and manic flight. (p. 49)

The notion of midlife crisis can be substantiated with reference to the work of Karin Horney, Erich Fromm, and, particularly Carl Gustav Jung. In *Neurosis and Human Growth* (1950), Horney argued that experience of crisis is a prerequisite for the realization of the universal need for self-fulfillment. Similarly, in *Escape from Freedom* (1945), Fromm argued that individuation, that is, the maturation of a unique and individual personality, implies a disengagement from former attachments. Freedom through disengagement is characterized as a risk because tolerating freedom always means to exchange trustworthiness in social relationships for uncertainty. According to Jung (1928, 1933), fulfillment of individuation is not possible without tension and disturbance of homeostasis. For the process of individuation, it is inevitable to experience crisis. Self-fulfillment through individuation is conceptualized as introversion, a tendency that might also lead to a growing awareness of singularity and isolation (see also Rank, 1945).

The concept of midlife crisis does not receive strong support from the current literature. In summarizing new thoughts and new directions of research on middle age, Reid and Willis (1999) concluded that the midlife crisis has been overdramatized.

Some individuals, it is true, find the reality of faded youth and lost opportunities to be distressing. In addition, the growing realization of the inevitability of one's own mortality may lead to a sense of hopelessness and despair. However, for many individuals, the beauty of development during midlife involves an emerging sense of perspective regarding one's own place within the life cycle. (p. 277)

As early as 1978, Lehr noted that theoretical accounts of crises in midlife do not regularly rely on empirical data nor are they supported by

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them. Similarly, in a paper titled "Common Dimensions of Personality Development," Norma Haan (1981) concluded,

Strictly speaking, most writers are not positing formal stages of personality development. Instead, they are describing circumstances arising from social or biological events that acquire the person to re-accommodate, for example an "empty nest" or menopause. Because we have no knowledge of adult structural changes, our best questions may concern the possibly more pervasive and invariant ways that people negotiate inevitable changes in their milieu during lifetimes. (p. 147; see also Eichorn, Clausen, et al., 1981)

Summary View on Life Course Conceptions and Middle Age

Summing up the aforementioned contributions from classic life course conceptions, we submit that although middle age was always considered as a period of transition, this must not be equated with the beginning of inevitable decline. Even if people are said to have reached a maximum of achievement and power (Neugarten), this does not mean that further development is to be equated with quantitative losses in social roles, physical abilities, and psychological functioning. Instead, transition in middle age is conceptualized as qualitative change, implying potentials for further development. Moreover, at least implicitly, descriptions of middle age always refer to a lifespan developmental perspective.

Historically, a good deal of research on development in middle age was motivated by an interest in further development of young adults, while other research was inspired by the insight that late-life development must be conceptualized as a continuation of former processes of development. The theories of Jung, Erikson, Havighurst, Marcia, and Peck all state that successful development in middle age requires the solution of specific developmental tasks. The long-standing interest in the concept of midlife crisis similarly reflects the assumption of lifetime specific requirements. The empirical evidence supporting the prevalence and developmental impact of a midlife crisis has, however, remained weak. In conclusion, it can be stated that most theoretical accounts reflect an overall positive evaluation of middle age; that is, middle age is seen as a period that offers substantial potentials for psychological growth.

Insights on Middle Adulthood in Classic Empirical Work in Developmental Science and Gerontology

Early cross-sectional studies that examined a wide range of individuals, from 18 to 60 years of age, such as the work on mental abilities provided by Yerkes (1921) or the study by Miles and Miles (1932), which covered the first until the eighth decade of the human life span, were not much interested in what happens during the rather “quiet” years of the human life span, that is, middle adulthood. By and large, the issue in developmental psychology in the 1930s and 1940s was to make a strong point that aging is worthy of study. Thus, it is no surprise that the classic handbook edited by Cowdry (1939) titled *Problems of Aging* hardly touched on middle adulthood in its 32 chapters.

Empirical work directly addressing middle adulthood has remained a rather rare enterprise. In Germany, for example, Lehr and Thomae (1958) conducted a study on middle adulthood with low-level white-collar workers aged 30 to 50. The rationale for the study was the high number of young men who died during World War II and the ensuing societal need to learn more about the potential of middle adulthood in the labor force. In addition, the Bonn Longitudinal Study on Aging (Lehr & Thomae, 1987) addressed middle age, at least indirectly, by the study’s reconstruction of detailed biographies of its participants. The goal was to better understand the flow and outcome of aging as observed in seven measurement occasions from 1965 until 1983. Findings of the Bonn Longitudinal Study on Aging not only point to a high degree of inter-individual variability in physiological, psychological, and social dimensions of aging, but also to the existence of different patterns of aging embedded in different biographical set-ups. More specifically, results of the Bonn Longitudinal Study on Aging show that although there was a trend toward higher life satisfaction among those who reported more activity in social roles, some people (especially woman) might gain higher life satisfaction from low activity and social disengagement. Moreover, results showed a complex interaction of gender and stress exposure on the one hand and life satisfaction on the other hand, suggesting that the consequences of specific stressors cannot be understood without taking into account the individual ways people try to cope with the respective stressors.

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Probably the best-known American study from a historical view of the development of this literature is the work of Henry S. Maas and Joseph A. Kuypers. In their book *From Thirty to Seventy*, Maas and Kuypers (1974) report results from a 40-year longitudinal study of adult lifestyles and personalities. Summarizing the evidence on continuity, constancies, and change, the authors noted that the most remarkable of their findings was that many of the parents found to be similar in lifestyle or personality in old age were also alike in their young adulthood. They continued that this general statement needed further qualification, because there was much variation in the strength of relationship between early and later adulthood for the different personality groups and lifestyle clusters. "For some groups, young-adult associations are very few, weak, and not particularly meaningful; for others the associations are many and strong" (p. 202). Moreover, findings indicate that even when people fail to realize developmental potentials or suffered from unfortunate developmental conditions in young adulthood, later years offer new opportunities. In sum, the results of Maas and Kuypers's study indicate that the "popular and literary myth of inescapable decline in old age" (p. 215) is not supported by empirical evidence. Moreover, results on the development of personality and lifestyles run contrary to the assumption of normative life crisis and universal sequences of stages in middle adulthood.

What has empirical work on middle age achieved up until the 1980s? Research on the subjectively perceived segmentation of the life course does not support the notion of normative stages or crises in adulthood. Biographical studies point to the importance of subjective perceptions and interpretations of individual experiences and episodes that, regardless of chronological, biological, or social age, challenge individual capacities to grasp the opportunities and cope with the demands of actual situations. The results of early longitudinal studies clearly disprove the hypothesis of a normative crisis as well as the hypotheses of a general continuity between the third and the fourth or the discontinuity between the fifth and the sixth decade of life (Lehr, 1969, 1978; Lehr & Thomae, 1965).

In their now classic book *Present and Past in Midlife*, Eichorn, Mussen, et al. (1981) distinguish between three major controversies in the developmental literature. The first is whether differences found in cross-sectional research designs reflect real age changes or simply cohort-specific socio-historical contexts. The second controversy concerns the consistency of interindividual differences, that is, the question whether rank order within a given group remains stable when time and circumstances change. The

third controversy is about appropriate models of change. The three longitudinal studies carried out at the Institute of Health and Development (IHD)—the Guidance Study, the Berkeley Growth Study, and the Oakland Growth Study—offer substantial insights into each of the three controversies. Moreover, the IHD's intergenerational studies demonstrate that sociohistorical events do not have an equal impact on all members of a cohort. Results on the consistency of interindividual differences, particularly on sex differences in paths to psychological health in the middle years (Livson, 1981), provide evidence that although self-reports reflect considerable long-term consistency, there is great situational variation in more specific behaviors (see also Eichorn, Clausen, et al., 1981). Furthermore, the now well-known work of Glen Elder on the effects of experiencing the Great Depression at different ages (Elder, 1974) extends the many former cohort studies that simply demonstrate differences without assessing possible reasons for cohort-specific development. Whether more recent empirical research on middle adulthood will add to these fundamental insights on middle adulthood remains to be seen (see Lachman, 2004; other contributions to this volume).

Summary and Conclusions

With this chapter, we hope to have shown that there are good reasons supporting the heuristic fruitfulness of a historical analysis of the concept of middle adulthood. Current developmental science and empirical work in developmental psychology does not operate in a vacuum. Being aware of the history of the concept of middle adulthood illustrates the relativity of current approaches and allows one to identify each approach's intellectual roots. Second, review of the historical scope of treatments of middle adulthood may enrich current and future research on the issue by providing a collection of ideas and perspectives that are frequently forgotten in the day-to-day business of developmental science. Third, we argue that a historical treatise of middle age can directly add to the clarification of this period of the life span in conceptual and empirical terms.

That said, we have started this work with the insight that middle adulthood has long been neglected in the developmentally oriented research literature. We then outlined four historically framed perspectives on middle adulthood. Proceeding from the assumption that these perspectives could be a helpful starting point for a more systematic scientific approach

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to the characteristic features, tasks, and processes in middle age, we proposed a preliminary definition that differentiates between descriptive and evaluative elements inherent to the concept of middle age.

It is time to review our preliminary definition of middle adulthood, based on the insights afforded by the four perspectives on middle adulthood. As put forth in our definition, the four perspectives provide convergent support for the view that middle age possesses a unique position in the human life course. Middle age is, by most accounts, a turning point, that is, the bridge between the rise and fall dynamics of the life course. However, it also seems as if a detailed descriptive analysis of middle adulthood is, in a sense, similar to what Heisenberg (1969) coined an *Unschärferelation* (uncertainty relation): On the one hand, we all know what we mean when talking about middle age; on the other hand, any purposeful attempt to define the phenomenon of middle adulthood reveals its opacity, the fuzzy status of the concept. The concept of middle age seems to be quite dynamic and strongly subject to history-graded forces such as demographic, political, and cultural transitions. Thus, our discussion of the diverse perspectives on middle age supports our preliminary definition in yet another respect: Any attempt to identify middle adulthood in objective calendar age terms is problematic in principal terms, although traditionally, the fifth and sixth decades of the human life span have often been identified as the upper limits of middle age. Modern theoretical and empirical research on human development, however, emphasizes that any life period, including middle age, is characterized by pronounced interindividual variation of intraindividual trajectories. In that sense, middle-aged adults may provide fundamental insights into the heterogeneity of old age observed in current-day aging research (e.g., Nelson & Dannefer, 1992).

With regard to its evaluative notions, our discussion of the four perspectives of middle adulthood has found a preponderance of positive connotations. This is true not only compared with the period of old age, but also in relation to earlier ages; middle age entails taking over responsibility at both personal and societal levels. This process is strongly reflected in the classic use of the term *maturity*. At the same time, popular views on the crisis aspect of middle adulthood, although addressed here and there in a variety of spheres from the genre of fiction to empirical developmental science, seems to be problematic and should not be a substantial element of the evaluative component of the term *middle adulthood*.

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