The Mid-life Crisis in Development (Gould and Levinson Reading)

In narrative psychology, a major task for therapy is to give voice to aspects of client's lives that currently dominant discourses stifle. White and Epston (1990) think that therapeutic interventions work by attending to experiences not fitting the dominant story.

> ... persons experience problems, for which they frequently seek therapy, when the narratives in which they are "storying" their experience, and/or in which they are having their experience "storied" by others, do not sufficiently represent their lived experience, and that, in these circumstances, there will be significant aspects of their lived experience that contradict these dominant narratives. (White & Epston, 1990, pp. 14-15)

This sense of the insufficiency of one's life story, the sense that aspects of one's internal life are not adequately storied, is particularly common during the mid-life crisis, as described in the research of both Daniel Levinson (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978) and Roger Gould (1978).

One of the characteristics of mid-life is the emerging, yet uneasy, sense of the partialness and one-sidedness of the life structure—the life structure being how one connects one's motivations and desires and internal life with the broader world in which one lives. Narrative theorists would construe the self-structure as a type of life story. The identity constructed in early adulthood, while adequate to the demands of coping with and getting by in the domains of work and family, is now felt as incomplete. Aspects of lived experience were not attended to in elaborating an identity in youth and young adulthood and, in fact, were actively pushed out of awareness as the younger adult tried to adhere to an ego-ideal now felt as defined more by the categories of others than by self-chosen and internally authentic themes.

Levinson describes development as the course of the self-structure as it evolves through life. The self-structure is based on choices made, and choices involve both positive and negative elements, aspects to include and aspects to exclude. The self-structure can only be built out of the materials available in the prevailing culture. How these materials are synthesized into a viable structure enabling an individual to negotiate their roles in marriage and work, church, school, and community, determines the quality of the self-structure. Above all, the self-structure is an adaptation to the tribe, and although we can describe the adult self-structure as more synthesized and more self-regulated than the early accommodations of childhood, it is still fundamentally an internalization of roles and rules that had to be learned.

The mid-life crisis can be broken down into three aspects:

1. As one arrives at mid-life, one's life structure is more likely to be perceived as incomplete and insufficient. A feeling of staleness and boredom pervades; one feels that one's life script is routine or conventional. The loftier elements of the project or dream, which made the more prosaic aspects of life more endurable, are seen now as unattainable

and impractical. The self-deceptions marshaled during early adulthood in order to successfully perform one's roles become more apparent now that it may not be so necessary to keep one's nose to the grindstone. Less willing to accept the compromises made, the sacrifices agreed to, and the obligations assumed, the maturing adult surveys a now subjectively constrained and limited future, and feels that changes have to be made.

2. Liberated from internalized prescriptions and interdictions, no longer so obsessed with external achievements, there is an "opening up to what's inside" (Gould, 1978). Desires that in childhood were repressed because there just simply was not the mental equipment to contain them, are now attended to, re-assessed and even allowed expression.

3. Of course, from a conventional perspective, the social consequences of opening up to what's inside may not be acceptable. Jung spoke of one of the tasks in later life as acknowledging and working with one's shadow, those disowned and projected aspects of the self that were earlier rejected as incompatible with the ego-ideal. Gould writes that we have to live with the evil within.

> As children, before we had the mental capacity to control ourselves in any other way, we controlled our desires by refusing to know what they were.... Now we are thirty to forty years older and more capable. We can afford to know what we feel because, and only because, we now have the mental strength to control our desires. We can contain a passion without acting on it. (Gould, 1978, p. 295)

> To achieve an adult sense of freedom, we must pass through periods of passivity, rage, depression and despair as we experience the repugnance of death, the hoax of life and the evil within and around us. To enjoy full access to our innermost self, we can no longer deny the ugly, demonic side of life, which our immature mind tried to protect against by enslaving itself to false illusions that absolute safety was possible. (Gould, 1978, p. 218)

Levinson's initial model was based on research conducted with 40 adult males initially selected in 1969: biologists, novelists, executives and blue-collar workers. He interviewed each of them for several hours and conducted follow-ups. From the transcripts of the interviews, Levinson and his co-workers abstracted a model of the life course of the self-structure, a model articulating how there were seasons of life that manifested regular patterns that Levinson linked to specific ages. His model emphasized how periods of stability alternated with periods of transition. Oddly enough, the periods of transition occur at the ages of thirty, forty, fifty, and sixty, while the periods of stability occur in the mid-points of each decade.

Within the self-structure, Levinson identified a representation, an image, what Levinson sometimes calls a "dream," of what the self is, an image which is inherently partial and one-sided and incomplete, but which guides the project or journey of the self. The awareness of the insufficiency of the dream never reaches a point of critical mass until the

mid-life crisis, when the neglected aspects of self and experience draw attention away from the constricting adult definition of self maintained up until now. As much as the dream may embody and realize many ideals and aspirations, it also includes many elements of self-deception.

The self-structure is the result of the choices undertaken during the manufacture of the identity of adolescence. It is now tested on the high waters of adult life. This means that the adult identity still contains elements of the childish qualities of ego: its rigid prescriptions, its dos and don'ts, and its defenses against demons and monsters, as well as its collection of sensible rules and prohibitions, noble projects and ideals.

For our purposes we are focusing on the most critical transition period of the model—the mid-life age crisis at age forty. Levinson identified it as the most serious and most potentially disturbing. It threatens the self-structure, the stable identity achieved up to this point, and often precipitates divorce, abrupt career change, alcoholism and substance abuse, and sometimes spiritual confusion and angst.

We might identify a number of "causes" of the mid-life crisis: psychological, sociological, or anthropological. But the one that is most obvious and most unavoidable is the biological. Undeniably, we are aging. Mortality and death are no longer a matter of conjecture, no longer merely hypothetical. Death and age are no longer things that happen only to other people. By now we have lost one or both of our parents or some of our relations and maybe some close friends. Those who remain are looking old, graying, aging or becoming ill. And we are facing our first illnesses, the first signs of our own deterioration.

And this implodes upon our dream, our self-structure, which to be actualized had always implicitly contained the assumption that we would live indefinitely. The dream does not include its own terminus, its own finality. "Happily ever after" does not allow for cancer or Alzheimer's.

The is illustrated by the story of Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha. As a boy and as a youth, Siddhartha was kept inside the castle by his father, who did not want his son exposed to the miseries of mortals. He was sequestered and kept away from unpleasantness. But as he grew older, Siddhartha became restless and wanted to see what lay beyond the castle walls. He ordered his servant to prepare his chariot and was taken out to the streets of the city, where in succession, he saw an old man, a sick man, and a dead man. And it was this experience that caused Siddhartha to give up the things of this world and take up the life of a holy man.

This story can be interpreted as representing the condition of youth regarding old age and misery. By virtue of the protection afforded by our youth and by the solicitous attentions of society, we are not really exposed to death and mortality while young. As we go out into the world we have to face mortality nakedly, without the comfort of mother, without the stories of the nursery.

Levinson drew heavily on the theories of both Erik Erikson and Carl Jung when he interpreted his interviews. From the latter, he borrowed the concept of *individuation.*

Jung had shown how we could understand the personality as characterized by the relative predominance of thinking, sensation, feeling or intuition. Up until mid-life, most people can be characterized as emphasizing only one of the four biases. But at mid-life, the other biases make their demands on the self-structure. Jung also wrote of how, at mid-life—*the noon of life,* as he called it—the shadow side of our personality asserts itself.

Levinson describes a decreased concern for making it in the "tribe" at mid-life. The tribe is society. By terming it a tribe, Levinson is implicitly emphasizing the more archaic elements of social life and adaptation. Social life bequeaths to us many beneficial things, but the vestiges of our archaic past haunt us in the stifling identities society forces us to assume, identities that many argue are forever decided. Many civilized virtues that we esteem so highly are, in fact, the product of the evolutionary necessity of each individual fulfilling a narrowly circumscribed position in a hunting-and-gathering tribe.

As I showed earlier, our identities are simulations that we present to others in a social universe so that we may predict and control ourselves as well as enable others to predict and control us. The trick of the game—and it is, ultimately, a game—is to believe that these simulations are "real." There are times in life when the probability increases that we may see through these simulations, when the crack in the armour of personality reveals chinks through which the light can show through. One of these times is adolescence; another time is the mid-life crisis.

Ultimately, Levinson's model adheres to the continuity of the self-structure, and after the mid-life crisis, the age forty period of transition, Levinson felt that the self-structure re-builds and goes on, and that at age fifty another period of transition will take place, and then another at age sixty. But he felt that the self-structure nevertheless persists. He conceived of the self-structure as the psychological bridge between self and society, and theorized that the role of society in the equation of the self continues well into maturity. But I want to suggest that the role of society in constituting the self-structure can be transcended in the case of some paths of development, and that the ego, identity, self-structure—call it what you will—may be transcended altogether.

At this point, I shall introduce a caveat. My intention is only to outline a path of *optimal* development. This model allows for and acknowledges that not all individuals will follow this path; indeed, most never move beyond the mid-way point of the scheme. Whether we describe these variations as just a part of normal human variance, or whether we describe these variations as failures of growth, or deviations from a natural course, is ultimately an empirical question.

Many psychological models of development do not contain stages of higher development. Assuming such stages *do* exist, there are two ways we can explain the paucity of the frequency of higher stages. In the entirety of the human population, these stages are relatively rare: most people simply do not reach them. Consequently, when we consider actual studies carried out that include older samples, is no wonder that psychology does not have well-established models for higher human development. But there is also the issue of operationalization. In order for a construct to have a place in a psychological model, it must be measured. If there is no extant measure for a construct, there will be no way to look for its occurrence, no way that it will appear in our observations. Our

theories have to tell us that a certain rock exists before we can look underneath it. Without a method of measurement, we cannot record, we cannot observe, and we cannot quantify.

The mid-life crisis is a time when the conditions are ripe for change. In some cases, this change can precipitate a spiritual transformation. But for many, indeed most, the self-structure will be re-consolidated in maturity. The mid-life crisis provides a period of transition, and if the conditions are right, the spiritual spark may be ignited and the ego will embark upon the path of its own undoing, its unraveling into egolessness. But some people do not respond well to the mid-life crisis. And some people continue on in their lives in a decidedly secular way.

In childhood we take in visions of perfection and ideas of how things can be (often based on our parents' ideas of how things should be). In psychoanalysis, these are called *introjects*. In adolescence we take in yet more abstract and conceptualized versions of these same things. Part of our personality is the goals and images of perfection that we hold (literally). Levinson thought that we start to lose many of these images or visions in mid-life. Once we closely look at, critically examine, and let go of many of our ideals, so many of which are based on and grounded in an essentially childish way of apprehending the world, we can begin to discover who we really are. Such a discovery can be both exhilarating and terrifying.

In childhood we developed many primitive mechanisms in order to achieve self-control and mastery over our unpredictable emotions and our volatile musculature. This was because we did not have the mental ability, the cognitive equipment, to control ourselves by any other means than repression, denial, and exclusion. But with maturity, and with more sophisticated and more powerful modes of knowing ourselves, we can allow ourselves to experience what we did not allow ourselves to experience in childhood. We can acknowledge feelings and affects that in childhood might have threatened our precarious accommodation to reality. We can give way to or provide a psychological space for previously taboo feelings. We can now more benignly constrain aspects of our selves rather than shut them off entirely, because we can know without having to act, without having to discharge powerful negative feelings. The childhood controls, which have been ingrained into our cognitive-affective habits and which have been imprinted into the musculature of our armoured bodies, can be uprooted and exposed to the light of day. Gould defines maturity as "the release from arbitrary constraints" (p. (321). In Buddhist paths, particularly the Tantric, practice includes the transmuting of passions, and this is possible once we remove the harshly punitive and primitive childhood controls constructed around the superego.

As we let go of and relinquish childhood voices, we have the possibility of an inner-directedness not heretofore experienced. This inner directedness can express itself in many ways.

For example, with mid-life there is more openness to sexual and sensual experiences. Wilber (1991) has characterized his *Vision-Logic Stage* as centaur-like, based on a re-integration of the physical and mental. Labouvie-Vief (1994) shows in mid-life how the ego structure becomes less hierarchical, less organized around top-down executive control structures which contain and repress organismic structures, how organismic processes can co-exist with the mental rather than be controlled and subordinated by it. Kegan (1982; 1994) speaks of the *Interindividual Stage* as more relaxed, more accepting of emotional and physical experiences. Loevinger (1976) wrote of her *Autonomous Stage* that it was more open to and appreciative of sensual experiences (pp. 25-26).