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Life Stage Concepts across History and Cultures: Proposal for a New Field on Indigenous Life Stages

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Abstract

This paper draws attention to the pervasiveness of life stage concepts in human cultures and advocates the creation of a new field of study on *indigenous life stage concepts*. First, historical and cultural examples are presented to illustrate the widespread use of life stage concepts across times and places. Then, sociological research on the institutionalization of life stages in the 19th and 20th centuries in industrial societies is summarized, but with a new interpretation of how those life stage concepts arose. Next, the idea of life stages as *master narratives* is proposed, as a way of explaining how life stages provide the raw material for individuals to construct a personal identity narrative. The paper concludes by proposing that the exploration of indigenous life stage concepts is an exciting new potential field of study.

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For most of its first century, psychology was strongly influenced by life stage theories. Sigmund Freud [1915/1989], Jean Piaget [1936/1952], Lawrence Kohlberg [1958], and Erik Erikson [1950] all proposed stage theories that generated a massive amount of research over many decades. Other stage theories were proposed for religious development [Fowler, 1981], political development [Adelson, 1971], and adult development [Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978]. Although stage theories were challenged by other perspectives, most notably the behaviorists, who denied any inherent life stage program of development, stage theories remained influential through most of the 20th century. Toward the end of the 20th century, de-

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velopmental theorists increasingly questioned the premises and validity of stage theories [Baltes, 1987, 1997; Brainerd, 1978; Lerner, Hultsch, & Dixon, 1983]. However, life stage concepts have persisted in psychology as frameworks for studying specific fields, such as early childhood, adolescence, and emerging adulthood [Lourenco, 2016].

Yet it is not just in psychology that thinking of human development in terms of life stage concepts has been prevalent. In fact, life stage concepts have been a remarkably common approach to thinking about human life, across history and across cultures. A classic analysis of hundreds of anthropological accounts named life stages as one of 67 human universals, found in all cultures [Murdock, 1955]. This prevalence suggests that psychology might benefit from examining the patterns of indigenous life stage concepts that have developed in various times and places, and from asking what purposes life stage concepts now serve in human cultures. *Indigenous* here means arising in the course of cultural life, as distinguished from the life stage theories proposed by academic psychologists. Indigenous life stage concepts have been present in ancient times as well as in our time, and in traditional cultures as well as in postindustrial societies.

This paper draws together for the first time a diverse range of life stage concepts, across history and cultures, toward the goal of sparking interest in the development of a new field of research on *indigenous life stage concepts*. Specifically, I describe a range of life stage concepts across thousands of years of human history and across several cultures described by anthropologists over the past century. These life stage concepts are diverse, indicating that they have been constructed according to the social and cultural conditions of particular times and places. However, they have a number of features in common as well, and all follow a general biological template of growth, maturity, and aging.

The pervasiveness of life stage concepts in human societies indicates that they have an important function as *master narratives,* which help to structure social expectations and to provide individuals with a framework for developing a personal identity [Hammack, 2008; McLean & Syed, 2016]. Research that identifies and describes life stages as master narratives could be a fruitful way of generating insights into how people of different cultures structure the lifespan and on the functions that these life stage master narratives serve in individual lives. In this paper I present historical and cultural examples in order to illustrate the similarities and variations in these concepts and to generate interest in exploring them further.

The paper is organized into four parts. First, I present four historical examples of life stage concepts. Second, I present three cultural examples, from the anthropological literature. For both the historical and the cultural sections, the goal is not a comprehensive review of life stage concepts but to provide a range of examples to show similarities and variations in how life stages have been conceptualized. Third, I describe how life stages became more explicitly entrenched in industrial societies during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, via institutions such as compulsory education and the legal system, and subsequently became less institutionalized during the past century. Fourth, I introduce the idea of life stages as master narratives, and use it to explain the prevalence and the value of life stage concepts and their potential value for further study.

Life Stage Concepts in History: Ancient Greeks, Hindus, Jews, and Europeans

Life stage concepts extend back thousands of years in human history, in both Eastern and Western cultures. I will describe four of them briefly here: ancient Greeks, Hindus, and Jews, and Europeans from the 14th through the 19th centuries. It should be noted that all of the historical life stage concepts focused on the life course of males, with little attention to how the stages of life might be different for females until Europe in the 17th–19th centuries. Furthermore, the stages were ideals for development, not descriptions of how most people actually developed. All the life stage schemes extended through old age, even though it was not until the 20th century that most people lived beyond early adulthood. A summary of the four historical life stage concepts is presented in Table 1.

The Ancient Greeks: An Astronomical Framework

In Western societies, the most influential and enduring conception of life stages was developed by the ancient Greeks. There were many Greek scholars, and they proposed a variety of life stage concepts beginning around the 6th century BCE [Cole, 1992]. Sophocles, in *Oedipus Rex,* had Oedipus provide a three-stage answer to the Sphinx's riddle asking what creature walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at midday, and three legs in the evening: Man, who crawls on four "legs" during infancy, walks on two legs for most of his life, then walks with the aid of a third "leg," a cane, toward the end of life. Hippocrates, the first physician, proposed a four-stage scheme: childhood, youth, maturity, and old age. For Hippocrates, the four stages of life corresponded to the organization of other aspects of the natural world based on the number four: the four bodily humors (black bile, phlegm, yellow/red bile, and blood); the four qualities (hot, dry, cold, and moist); the four elements (air, fire, earth, and water), and the four seasons.

Each of these life stage schemes was influential, but ultimately the most influential and enduring Greek life stage conception centered around the number seven [Cole, 1992]. The seven-stage conception was first proposed by Solon (approx. 638 BCE to approx. 558 BCE), the Athenian statesman and lawmaker. Like Hippocrates, Solon believed that there was a correspondence between the numerical organization of the physical world and the numerical organization of human life stages. However, for Solon the key number was seven, which the ancient Greeks (and many others for two millennia afterward) believed to be the number of celestial bodies in the solar system: five planets, the moon, and the sun [Rawson, 2003]. Thus, the human lifespan was divided into intervals of seven, as shown in Table 1. Each of the life stages lasts seven years, except for the stage at the heart of adulthood, ages 42–56, which lasts two seven-year intervals.

Solon's scheme provided only a terse summary of the content of each life stage, and later thinkers in ancient Greece developed the content further, adding, for example, the development of ambition to the ages of 21–28 and the development of forbearance and gentleness to the ages of 63–70 [Opsopaus, 2000]. However, the organization of the lifespan into seven-year intervals proved to be remarkably enduring, because the astronomical framework on which it was based also endured, erroneous

Table 1. Historical life stages

Ages:	0-10	10-20	20-30	30-40	40-50	50-60	60-70	70-80	80-90	90-100	100+
Ancient Greeks	The age of being unripe	Approaching manhood; Limbs are growing; chin is touched with fleecy down	His powers ripen to greatest completeness	Season for courting and producing sons	His mind, ever open to virtue, broadens; Tongue and mind are at their best	Still able, but never so much as in the days of his prime	Time to depart on the ebb tide of death				
Hindus	*Brahmacharya*: Apprentice		*Grihastha*: Householder			*Vanaprastha*: Forest dweller			*Sannyasa*: Renunciant		
Jews	Begin to read Scripture	Begin to learn Jewish laws; Bar Mitzvah; Able to discuss Talmud; Ready for marriage	Seek an occupation	Able to exercise authority	Discernment, understanding	Capable of giving counsel	Become an elder, gain wisdom	White hair	A new, special strength of old age	Decrepitude bent under the weight of years	As if already died and passed away from the world
Medieval Europeans	*Infantia*: Learn to walk and speak; *Pueritia*: Development of reason and moral capacity	*Adolescentia*: Body reaches peak of strength and vigor; judgment reaches maturity	*Juventus*: Greatest power to help self and others		*Senectus*: Become grave in habits and bearing; not old, but have passed youth		*Senium*: Sense not as good as it was before; may begin to talk nonsense; exempt from responsibilities				

Sources: Aries [1962]; Armstrong [2012]; Chakkarath [2005]; Levinson et al. [1978]; Saraswathi et al. [2011]; Shahar [1990, 1997].

though it was [Aries, 1962]. In fact, as we will see shortly, the seven-year organization shaped views of life stages not only in ancient Greece and then in ancient Rome [Rawson, 2003], but arose again in medieval Europe and expanded even further in its influence.

Hindu Life Stages: From Duties to Detachment

The Hindu life stage scheme has endured for over 3,000 years with few alterations [Chakkarath, 2005; Tarakeshwar, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2003]. According to ancient Hindu law, as outlined in the holy writings known as the *Dharmashastras,* there are four life stages *(ashramas),* summarized in Table 1: apprentice *(brahmacharya),* householder *(grihastha),* forest dweller *(vanaprastha),* and renunciant *(sannyasa).* Each stage carries a distinctive *dharma,* that is, a set of role-related duties. The transition from one stage to the next is marked by changes in major roles rather than by strictly chronological age; hence, the age divisions in Table 1 are rougher and more approximate than for the other historical life stage schemes.

The first major life stage, apprenticeship, begins in late childhood, around the age of 8, and lasts until education is completed and marriage occurs, traditionally around the age of 20. In this stage, young men are expected to be celibate, to learn humility, and to be devoted to gaining the knowledge necessary to lead a life that is useful to themselves, to their families, and to society. Traditionally, a boy would leave home and live in his teacher's house during this life stage [Williams, 1996]. In order to promote a focus on learning and avoid distractions, austerity was required in food, personal comforts, and conduct. Simplicity was expected in dress and ornamentation.

The second stage in the Hindu life course is entered upon marriage. This is the householder stage, devoted to family and work roles. The primary dharma of the householder is to have children and raise them to be dutiful members of society, and to work productively so as to support a wife, children, and extended family. This is the most worldly of Hindu life stages, when it is acceptable to enjoy sensual pleasures and to strive for material gain and prosperity. However, even during the householder stage, role-related duties come first. Work must be done to support the family, whether it is enjoyable or not. Marriage must be maintained, whether it is happy or not; divorce is taboo.

The third Hindu life stage begins when a man's first grandson is born. The term for this stage, *vanaprastha,* literally means forest dweller, indicating that the ideal for this stage is to leave the bustle and distractions of daily life and enter the quiet and contemplation of the forest, at least in a spiritual sense. Although few people actually leave society to dwell in the forest, the expectation during this life stage is to withdraw gradually from the family and work roles of the householder stage, and turn toward more spiritually elevated concerns. Sexuality ends, as it is considered impure to engage in sexual relations once one's children have entered marriage. In addition to gradually leaving family and work roles, there is an expectation of moral development, specifically, the development of humility and equanimity. In this stage a person should grow to recognize and accept the transience of emotional states, social status, and relationships. Traditionally, as part of this stage women would give their jewelry to their daughters and daughters-in-law, and men would transfer their property to their sons.

The final stage of the Hindu life course is renunciation. This is a stage of deepening the detachment from the world begun in the previous stage. The renunciant is expected to recognize that death is near and to abandon attachments to people, material things, and social status, focusing instead on attaining spiritual emancipation *(moksha)* from the cycle of rebirth. A person in this stage is expected to lead an austere life and spend hours in meditation, prayer, and reading of the scriptures.

Although the Dharmashastras divide the life course into four stages beginning at the age of 8, there is also a traditional series of rituals that mark childhood substages [Chakkarath, 2005; Saraswathi, Mistry, & Dutta, 2011]. For the first month of life, mother and baby are secluded. Then, at 1 month, there is a name-giving ceremony, in which the extended family gathers to celebrate the new life, and the mother ceremoniously places the child on the father's lap to be named. At around 6 months, another family ritual marks the introduction of solid food. At the age of 2–3, the child's hair is shaved to mark the end of infant dependence on the mother. At the age of 5–7, the child begins school, marking the end of early childhood. The end of each of these stages and the beginning of the next is marked by rituals involving the entire extended family and emphasizing both the child's personal distinctiveness and membership in a family constellation [Saraswathi et al., 2011].

Jewish Life Stages: The Talmud's Instructions for Living

A third ancient life stage scheme was presented in the Talmud, a collection of commentaries on the Jewish oral tradition known as the *Mishnah,* assembled around 1,600 years ago, in the 4th and 5th centuries CE [Goldberg, 2003]. The literal meaning of *talmud* is instruction*,* and the commentaries include instructions for many aspects of life, including ideals for each portion of the lifespan.

As shown in Table 1, in the Talmud's stages the early years of life are marked by relatively frequent transitions: first learning to read scripture at the age of 5; then becoming able to learn the Jewish laws by the age of 10; reaching the age of moral responsibility at the age of 13, marked by the ritual of the Bar Mitzvah; at the age of 15 becoming able to discuss the Talmud and by the age of 18 becoming ready for marriage.

From the age of 20 onward, the life stage scheme of the Talmud is divided into 10-year intervals. The early adult stages involve taking on adult roles – marriage, an occupation, positions of authority – then, in middle adulthood, gaining maturity of judgment and wisdom. Of particular novelty is the ideal of the age of 80 as a time of reaching a "special strength of old age." This view is in sharp contrast to Solon's later life stages, in which already at the age of 63–70 all that is left is to "depart on the ebb tide of death," and the Hindu scheme, in which old age entails only the prospect of seeking austerity and simplicity while waiting patiently for this life to end.

Europe from the 14th through the 19th Century: The Steps of Life

Not much was written about life stages (or anything else) in the West for nearly a millennium after the Talmud's life stage scheme had been proffered. However, beginning in the 14th century there was an extraordinary revival of interest in life stage

concepts in Europe. Numerous texts were written proposing life stage schemes. In addition, life stages became depicted in art, first with religious motifs but then in secular forms that became popular all over Europe, across social classes.

Like Solon and other Greeks 2,000 years earlier, some medieval writers in the 14th and 15th centuries believed in a natural, physical correspondence between the solar system and the structure of human life, represented in the number seven, which they believed to be the number of heavenly bodies (five planets, the moon, and the sun). Accordingly, they postulated seven human life stages. However, others proposed life stage schemes with three, four, five, six, or twelve stages [Shahar, 1997].

Medieval writers also varied in their specific stage descriptions and intervals, but one common scheme is shown in Table 1 [Aries, 1962; Shahar, 1990, 1997]. The terms in Table 1 are in Latin, the dominant written language in the West at that time. The first stage, *infantia,* comprised the childhood years 0–7. Some writers discerned sub-stages at ages 0–2, when children learn to walk and their initial set of teeth comes in, and ages 2–5, when they become adept speakers of their native language. The second stage, *pueritia,* lasted from age 7 to 14. This was, even then, considered school age (although most people were illiterate and never attended school), as well as the age when the capacity for reason and for making moral judgments first developed. Although this is the period when the moral sense was believed to develop and a proclivity for "sin" arose, moral judgment was viewed as a capacity still in development and children were not considered responsible for any crimes committed before the age of 14.

The third stage, *adolescentia,* is the most complex and ambiguous stage. Much of the description of this life stage pertained to physical development, specifically growing to full physical strength, vigor, and stature. Reaching this stage also conferred a greater ability for learning theoretical subjects and developing reasoning abilities, and included a heightened fondness for the company of peers. Many writers described adolescentia as lasting from the age of 14 to 21, but some extended it to 25, 28, 30, or even to 35 years. Dante believed that adolescentia ended at the age of 25, when maturity of rational judgment was reached, and the age of 25 was also when, in Roman law, a young man was at last freed from legal guardianship in civil matters [Shahar, 1990]. The ambiguity of the end of adolescence is strikingly familiar in our own time, when a substantial literature has accumulated in psychology showing that people vary in the criteria they believe define the entry to adulthood and the age at which they believe themselves and others to have reached adulthood [Arnett, 1998, 2015; Nelson & Luster, 2015].

In medieval writings, after *adolescentia* comes *juventus,* or youth. This was purported to be an age of peak ability to help the self and others. Writers also varied in when they believed this stage ended, with some placing the end at 40, others at 45. *Senectus,* the next adult life stage, lasting from about the age of 40 to 60, was described as an age of gravity in habits and bearing, half-way between youth and old age. The final stage, *senium,* beginning at the age of 60, was viewed as a time of declining mental and physical strength, and included release from military, civic, and work duties [Shahar, 1997]. In some accounts, the final stage is portrayed in dire terms, as a stage of coughing, spitting, and dirtying oneself, until death and a return to the ashes from which we were believed to have come [Aries, 1962].

At the same time as medieval writers were presenting their views of life stages, life stage depictions were proliferating in art. The earliest life stage art in the 14th cen-

tury focused on the ideal Christian journey [Cole, 1992]. In the center was a portrait of Jesus or an angel, and life's journey was shown as a series of stages in a circle around the religious image, culminating in death and the entry to eternal life. Each stage was represented by an image of a person typical of that stage.

However, by the 16th century, depictions of life's journey had been transformed from a circle to a rising and descending staircase, the steps of life *(Lebenstreppe)* [Aries, 1962]. The number of steps varied – sometimes seven, sometimes nine, ten, or eleven [Cole, 1992]. The early steps began with infancy, followed by stages of childhood and youth. Generally, midlife was depicted at the top of the staircase, as the peak time of life, followed by descending steps showing aging, decline, and ultimately death. Each life stage was illustrated with a person of that age standing on the step.

Like the circle of life, early art depicting the steps of life in the 16th and 17th centuries had a religious theme, culminating in the entry to heaven after death [Burrow, 1988]. However, by the 18th and 19th centuries, when the steps of life became a common theme in popular art, the secular had won over the sacred. The theme was no longer life stages as steps toward salvation, but life stages as prescriptions for the proper social roles associated with each period. Each step showed a person who represented the performance of the roles associated with the stage, e.g., the student in middle childhood, the youthful warrior, and the community leader at midlife [Cole, 1992]. From the 17th century onward, steps-of-life art showed not just men but women and couples. The popularity of the steps of life motif grew through the 17th and 18th centuries and reached its peak in the 19th century, when even the poor could afford cheap penny reproductions of life stage art [Cole, 1992].

Implications of the Historical Life Stage Concepts

What can we conclude, from this brief overview, about the meaning and purpose of life stage concepts in the history of human societies? First, it is striking that the schemes have such different ways of dividing up the lifespan, from just four stages in the Dharmashastras to 14 in the Talmud. This is a useful reminder that for humans the lifespan is not really divided into clear and definite biologically based stages, the way an insect has stages of larva, juvenile, and adult. Instead, conceptions of human life stages are only partly biological and are also culturally and socially constructed. Historical traditions have created different ways to "slice up the stream of behavioral change" into separate life stages, in ways that suited the aesthetic preferences and role requirements of each time and place [Brainerd, 1978, p. 174]. Culturally created stages had the effect of making developmental change discontinuous, because distinct roles and responsibilities were assigned to each life stage.

A second and complementary conclusion is that despite the diversity in the number and dividing points of historical life stages, certain common features are evident. Across the historical life stage concepts, childhood and youth are stages of immaturity and preparation for the roles of adult life. Early adulthood is a time of taking on important roles in work and family. Middle adulthood is a period of reaching maturity and the peak of one's intellectual and social capacities, when, as Solon stated, "the tongue and the mind for fourteen years together are now at their best." In late adulthood we inevitably experience primary aging and the eventual decline of our physical and cognitive facilities.

Third, it is notable that the historical life stage concepts devote so little attention to childhood. None of them propose that childhood is a time of special importance in social relationships as a foundation for later development, which has been one of the staples of psychological theories throughout psychology's history. Perhaps this omission is due to the fact that the schemes were proposed by men, and men of these historical eras had little to do with the care of young children. Whatever the source of this omission, it is surprising and puzzling from a modern psychological perspective.

A fourth commonality is that all the historical life stage schemes are ideals, a vision of how life should unfold, not a description of how it actually was unfolding for most people in that specific place and time. There is no provision in any of the schemes for dying young and never reaching old age or even "middle" age, even though that was the fate of most people in every society until the 20th century [Cole, 1992; Kohli, 1986]. No one in these schemes fails to learn what they should in childhood or proves to be unequal to the demands of adult roles. In all the historical life stage concepts, children become prepared for the roles of adult life, young people take on their adult responsibilities with alacrity, and midlife adults become successful, admirable, and wise. The only pessimism concerns old age, which tends to be framed in terms of physical and cognitive decline and imminent death, except for the Talmud's hopeful assertion that reaching the age of 80 confers "a new, special strength of old age."

Finally, with the exception of the life stage art of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, most historical life stage concepts applied to a relatively narrow sector of their own societies: male, literate, and relatively affluent. Nevertheless, the historical life stage schemes provide a sense of how people in other times and places thought about the structure of a human life, and of the similarities and diversity in the concepts they developed.

Life Stages across Cultures: Insights from Anthropology

For over a century, anthropologists have described the ways the lifespan is organized into stages in the cultures they have observed. In one of the earliest anthropological texts, van Gennep [1909] proposed a classification scheme for the "rites of passage" that had been found to be common in societies worldwide, and noted how the rites often marked the transition from one life stage to another: "The individual life consists of a succession of stages, of which the ends and beginnings constitute ensembles of the same order: birth, social puberty, marriage, parenthood, class progression, occupational specialization, death" [p. 4; translated by Johnson-Hanks, 2002].

In the century since, life stages have been a major part of the ethnographies anthropologists have written to describe the cultural practices they have observed [Foner & Kertzer, 1979; Fry, 2006; Fry & Keith, 1982; Keith, 1990; Keith et al., 1994; Kertzer & Keith, 1984; Kertzer & Schaie, 1989]. As noted earlier, an analysis of hundreds of anthropological accounts concluded that life stages constitute one of 67 human universals, found in all cultures [Murdock, 1955]. Life stage models and concepts have been critiqued in anthropology in recent decades, but remain influential [Fry, 2006; Johnson-Hanks, 2002].

Four related terms have been used by anthropologists to characterize life stages: age grades, age sets, age structuring, and age stratification. It is not necessary here to

go into the distinctions between the terms. Suffice it to say that all are ways of describing the social organization of the lifespan into a series of stages.

The conclusion of many anthropologists, on the basis of observing cultures around the world, is that life stages are a fundamental and universal way of organizing human social life [Meyer, 1988]. According to Fry [2006], "every culture recognizes a series of age grades, which are loosely defined, fairly broad divisions of life from birth to death" (p. 63). Similarly, Fortes [1984] observed: "The cross-cultural evidence is that stages of maturation are identified, named, culturally defined, and built into the social structure of all societies" (p. 100). Anthropologists see life stage concepts as ways that cultures organize social life and provide people with guidelines for the roles they are expected to fulfill at various times in their lives and the duties associated with those roles. Life stages help people locate themselves, and others, into a coherent and meaningful place in their social world. As Foner and Kertzer [1979] observed, "to know which age grade an individual occupies… is to have a fairly clear idea of his socially defined roles and tasks, his rights and responsibilities, his relations with age peers and age dissimilars" (p. x).

In the sections below, life stages in three cultures are described: the Gusii of East Africa, the people of the Trobriand Islands, and the Maya of southern Mexico and Central America. As with the historical section, the goal of this cultural section is not a comprehensive review but to present a range of examples, from different geographical and cultural regions, in order to illustrate the ways that various cultures structure the lifespan into distinct stages and to demonstrate both the variability among cultures and the similarities between them. A summary of life stages in the three cultures is presented in Table 2.

All the cultures described in the sections that follow have changed dramatically in recent decades, due to colonialization, missionary activity, the influence of national governments, and the globalization of media and the world economy. Because the goal of this section is to present examples of how people in different cultures have conceptualized life stages, the focus will be on life stage concepts at the time the cultures were first described by anthropologists, during the early-to-mid 20th century.

The Gusii of East Africa: Life Stages in a Polygynous Culture

East Africa is the region long recognized by anthropologists as having many of the most distinctive life stage schemes [Foner & Kertzer, 1979; Kertzer & Keith, 1984; Maybury-Lewis, 1984; Sangree, 1989]. One of the best-known ethnographies of East Africa was based on the work of the LeVines on the Gusii [LeVine & LeVine, 1966, 1989].

Table 2 shows the structure, order, and content of life stages among the Gusii. Infants are breast-fed, require constant care from others, and sleep beside their mothers. Weaning takes place at around the age of 2 and is a major transition in the life of young children. Often they resist weaning, and mothers must put an unpalatable substance on their breasts or send them to the grandmother for a period. After weaning, children no longer sleep alongside their mothers but with older siblings. During early childhood, from about the age of 2 to 6, they perform simple tasks such as carrying messages from one person to another. Beginning with this life stage, the terms for the

Table 2. Life stages in three cultures

	0–2 years	2–6 years	6–12 years	12–18 years	18–35 years	35–60 years	60+ years	Afterlife
Gusii								
Females	Breast-feeding; sleeps with mother	Weaned; play; simple tasks	Child care; household work	Field work, food preparation, sex play	Work in fields, child care, food preparation, household work	More children, grand-mother role	Leisure and socializing, higher status, possible spiritual role	Protect and punish the living
Males			Cattle herding	Cattle herding and stealing, sex play	Build house; attend beer parties; warriors	Beer parties, cattle management; new wife	Resolve community disputes	
Trobriand Islanders								
Females	Breast-feeding; sleeps with mother	Weaned; play	Peer group play, sex play	Skirt-making, food preparation, sex play; live in house with unmarried girls	Child care, yam cultivation, making skirts and banana leaf bundles, food preparation, household work	Grandparent; peak of economic power	Withdrawal from work; lowered status	Leisure and youth followed by rebirth
Males				Yam cultivation, seafaring expeditions, sex play; live in bachelors' house	Child care, yam cultivation, seafaring expeditions, hunting, fishing		Withdrawal from work; raised status	
Maya								
Females	Breast-feeding; sleeps with mother	Weaned; play; simple tasks	Child care, weaving, tortilla-making	Weaving, tortilla-making, courtship	Child care, weaving, cooking	Adult work; senior civic and ritual roles	Released from obligation of daily work roles; honored ritual roles	Soul remains in vicinity of grave for period person was alive; then reborn
Males			Errands, maize cultivation	Maize cultivation and other adult work; bride service; courtship	Crop cultivation, care of horses and mules; junior civic and ritual roles			

Sources: Hull [2004]; LeVine [1980]; LeVine and LeVine [1966, 1989]; Malinowski [1927]; Rogoff [2011]; Weiner [1987]; Vogt [1990].

life stages are different for females and males, reflecting gender divisions in roles, responsibilities, and paths through life.

In middle childhood, beginning around the age of 6, Gusii children take on more responsibilities. The main duties are, for girls, child care and household work, for boys, herding cattle. Cattle and agriculture formed the heart of the traditional Gusii economy.

The entry to the adolescent stage, which is marked by initiation rites, takes place at around the age of 9 for girls and 12 for boys. Following initiation, daily duties become more like those of adults: agricultural work and food preparation for girls, cattle herding and stealing for boys. Boys' heads are now shaved, and they sleep in the "bachelors' house" with other unmarried boys. A boy at this stage is *omomura,* a warrior, and traditionally part of this stage involved fighting the young men in adjacent cultural groups. Cattle were the main economic currency not only for the Gusii, but also for other cultural groups in the region; stealing cattle and protecting your group's cattle from being stolen was a major part of daily life for adolescent boys and young men. For girls as well as boys, sex play is acceptable during the adolescent stage. Marriages are arranged by parents, but during adolescence Gusii choose their own sexual and romantic partners.

Marriage marks the transition to the next life stage, and the life trajectories of females and males diverge sharply at this point. For girls, marriage usually takes place around the age of 15, shortly after menarche. Because the Gusii are polygynous, often her marriage takes place to an older man, as his second, third, or fourth wife. For young men, first marriage rarely takes place before the age of 20, and often does not take place until the ages of 25–30. Young men must accrue enough cattle or other goods to pay the required "bridewealth" to the parents of the girl he seeks to marry, and that effort may take years.

The next life stage might be called middle adulthood and is marked by the marriage of one's first child. Now other people are obligated to call one by the honorific title of "mother" or "father." However, people in middle adulthood often continue to produce children of their own, even as they also begin to have grandchildren. Fertility among the Gusii is extremely high, around 10 children per woman, and women typically have their first child around the age of 16–18 and continue to have children into their forties. As noted, men are often polygynous and will take a second wife during this life stage if they can afford to do so [LeVine, 1980].

When a woman reaches menopause, it marks the entry to a new late-adulthood life stage for both her and her husband. She gains greater leisure and economic security (through her now-grown sons), and participates more in social life with other women in the community. Some women pursue a new career as a diviner or ritual practitioner for couples with fertility problems. Men, meanwhile, are under a great deal of social pressure to find another wife, if they have not already. Men with only one wife cannot achieve the leadership role of "lineage elder" in this stage, with the power to adjudicate community disputes as part of a village council, and their social status diminishes.

A final stage that is important to mention is the afterlife stage of ancestor spirit. The Gusii believe in the presence and power of deceased ancestors, and devote a substantial amount of their cultural life to placating them and seeking to gain their favor. So, ancestor spirit is, in a sense, the final "life" stage for the Gusii.

The Trobrianders of New Guinea: Yams and the Sea

New Guinea is perhaps second only to East Africa in providing vivid examples of how cultures have organized the lifespan into distinct stages. One of the best-known of these examples involves the people of Trobriand Islands, first described by Bronislaw Malinowski [1929/1987] in the 1920s, then by Annette Weiner [1987] half a century later. Weiner [1987] reported that Trobriand life had remained much as Malinowski had described it, but she was able to supplement and expand his account with greater access and attention to the lives of women. Table 2 shows the sequence of Trobriander life stages.

Infants and mothers are secluded for the first two months of life, in order to protect babies from disease. After this period has passed, infancy is a life stage of being carried around and adored almost constantly. Babies are nursed on demand and lavished with affection. Fathers play a special role in caring for them, more than in most cultures.

Weaning takes place at around the age of 2, once the child can ask for food and drink. To accomplish weaning, mothers leave the toddler in the care of others for a few days, usually the maternal grandparent. After toddlers return, they sleep with their fathers rather than their mothers. As among the Gusii, after toddlerhood Trobriander life stage terms are gender-specific, reflecting their gendered social organization from childhood through adulthood (Table 2).

By around the age of 4–5, children form a peer play group where they spend most of their daily lives. From the age of 5 until they reach puberty, most of their days are devoted to games, such as tug-of-war and hide-and-seek. Sex play begins by the age of 7 or 8, as children imitate the behavior they have witnessed among their parents in their one-room households.

The transition to adolescence marks a major turning point in the lives of young Trobrianders. Upon reaching puberty, boys move into the bachelors' house, and girls into a house with other unmarried adolescent girls. Sex play intensifies, and it is normative for adolescents to have a variety of love partners during these years. Adolescents become more involved in adult work than they were previously, with boys accompanying their fathers in hunting, fishing, and seafaring expeditions, and girls assisting their mothers in household work and in making the banana leaf skirts that are the main female attire. However, adolescence is experienced mostly as a life stage of leisure, freedom, and romantic and sexual adventures.

The transition from adolescence to young adulthood is marked mainly by marriage. Once a couple marries, she stops wearing the shorter skirts typical of adolescent girls, and both of them cease wearing the bright red seashell necklaces that denote romantic and sexual availability. In the transition from adolescence to young adulthood, freedom and leisure are relinquished for the serious daily duties of adult life. The young couple moves into their own household and works side by side in their yam garden. Yam cultivation is a major part of adult work, because yams not only provide nourishment but serve as currency for purchasing other goods. In addition, young women are responsible for food preparation, skirt-making and child care. Young men are responsible for fishing, hunting, canoe-making, and seafaring expeditions, and are also involved in child care. The transition to full, socially recognized adulthood takes years. As Weiner [1987] observed, "only when villagers are married, have small children, and are fully committed to economic and political endeavors will

they be considered adults" (p. 67). Up until then, they are still called "small boys" and "small girls."

There is no clearly marked "middle age," but as the couple's children enter marriage they accumulate greater economic power. Their sons, the wife's brother, and the husband's sister's sons are all obligated to contribute yams to them at each harvest. They may also gain more land through matrilineal inheritance. In young as well as middle adulthood, an important part of men's economic activity entails traveling by canoe to neighboring islands to trade ornate white armshells and necklaces. These items are a kind of currency that also serve as emblems of power and status.

Reaching old age means no longer having to contribute to daily economic life. However, old age is regarded quite differently for men and women. For men it often results in an elevation of their status, as they become *toboma,* an old, honored man. For women, old age usually means a loss of status. Up until this stage, in many respects adult women have greater power than adult men due to matrilineal inheritance and the important economic and ceremonial roles they serve.

Death is not the end, to Trobrianders, but the entry to a pleasant and leisurely afterlife stage. They believe that after death the spirit *(baloma)* is transported to Tuma, the Island of the Dead, where life continues much as before, only with less work and more enjoyment. Although aging occurs on Tuma, when it becomes old *baloma* merely bathes in the sea, sloughs off the aged, wrinkled skin and is rejuvenated as a fresh, virile youth. After a few cycles of this, baloma returns to the land of the living and is reincarnated in the family lineage, entering through the head of the mother. Trobrianders believe that conception takes place as a combination of baloma and the mother's blood, with no involvement of the father.

The Maya of Latin America: A Maize-Centered Culture

The Mayan cultural area stretches over southern Mexico and parts of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. For over 4,500 years, the Mayan economy centered around the cultivation of maize, beans, and squash, especially maize, which was regarded with religious devotion. The Mayan culture persisted through Spanish conquest and incorporation into 20th-century nation states, although it has changed substantially in the early 21st century. The account here is based on the reports of anthropologists whose field work took place over several decades in the late 20th century: Gibbons [Gibbons, Stiles, de la Garza Schnellmann, & Morales-Hidalgo, 1990], Hull [2004], Vogt [1990], and Rogoff [1990, 2011]. Although there were variations among the Mayan groups they studied, there was consistency in the content and sequence of their life stages (Table 2).

In the early months of life, infants are mostly with their mothers, nursing or strapped to her back with a large cloth while she works. Older sisters help with infant care, increasingly once the child begins to walk at around 12 months; girls in middle childhood or adolescence are often seen carrying an infant on their hips. Weaning takes place when a new baby is born, usually around the age of 2 or 3, and marks a major transition to less time with the mother and more in the care of older sisters or grandmothers.

In early childhood, children begin helping with family duties in small ways, learned through observing, overhearing, and taking part in the work and daily ac-

tivities of older siblings and parents. They are also allowed time to play, roaming the village with siblings and friends, and visiting relatives. Their play is often related to their future work, for example, making mud tortillas or pretending to weave on a play loom. Once they reach middle childhood, children are given important gender-specific responsibilities. By the age of 6 or 7, girls care for younger siblings and learn to weave, wash clothes, and make tortillas. Boys begin to accompany their fathers by the age of 9 in planting, cultivating, weeding, and harvesting the family's crops. During adolescence, girls and boys make substantial contributions to the household economy.

However, adolescence does not last long. By the age of 15 or 16, young people begin to make the transition to marriage. Adolescent boys and girls are generally discouraged from socializing together, so they must slip in a brief conversation when they can, in the marketplace, at fiestas, or visiting in the homes of relatives. When a boy and a girl start to walk together publicly, and the boy starts to visit her at home, the relationship is viewed as serious and is expected to move toward marriage. The marriage arrangement entails an elaborate ritual process lasting up to 2 years, during which the boy performs work for the girl's family in order to gain their trust and compensate them for the impending loss of the daughter they have raised. Marriage takes place only after this bride service is completed.

Upon marriage, the bride typically moves into her husband's family household. Their young adulthood is devoted to gender-specific adult work: for women, boiling maize kernels, grinding maize into flour, tortilla-making, other cooking, weaving and sewing clothes, carrying firewood and water, and washing clothes; for men, planting and hoeing maize and other crops, tending mules and horses, and playing music on ritual occasions. Traditionally, large families were common, which meant that most of adult life was devoted to caring for and providing for children.

Young and middle adulthoods are not sharply divided but are nevertheless distinguished in a variety of ways. Young adults typically live in the husband's family household; by middle adulthood, they have their own household, and as their children marry, new spouses and grandchildren are added to the household. Women make the shift from subordinate daughters-in-law in young adulthood to dominant mothers-in-law in middle adulthood. There are many religious, civic, and ritual roles that are part of adult life, and these roles are often designated as appropriate for either young or middle adults.

Similarly, there is no sharp division or ritual that marks the transition from middle to late adulthood, but this is nevertheless a distinction that is widely recognized. For example, in a young couples' marriage there are specific roles that are to be filled by an "old woman" and an "old man." It is customary to kiss the back of elders' hands when greeting them, to show respect. Older adults cut back or stop working at some point, often depending on health as well as age. After a young and middle adulthood of caring for and providing for others, they shift at last to being cared for by others.

Mayan afterlife beliefs, 500 years after the Spanish conquest, remain more traditional than Catholic. They believe that the *inner soul* leaves the body at death, but stays near the grave for a period corresponding to the number of years the person lived. At the conclusion of this period, the inner soul then joins the pool of inner souls kept by the ancestors, and is eventually reincarnated.

Implications of the Cultural Life Stage Concepts

Although this examination of life course concepts across cultures was not intended to be comprehensive, several observations are notable. First, there are strong similarities in the patterns across the three cultures. All have an infant stage of dependency and constant care, an early childhood stage whose entry is marked by weaning, a middle childhood stage in which there is time for play as well as gender-specific responsibilities, an adolescence that is understood as preparatory for adulthood, a young adulthood devoted to work and family roles, and a middle adulthood of rising authority. However, striking differences are also evident. Sex play in adolescence and even in middle childhood is approved among the Gusii and the Trobrianders, but among the Maya boys and girls are kept apart and barely speak to each other until marriage is imminent. In old age the differences are even more pronounced, and are gendered as well: status rises for Gusii women but only for polygynous men, and for Trobriand men but not for women. Overall, the patterns in these three cultures suggest a hypothesis for a broader cultural analysis of indigenous life stages: a biological template of growth, maturity, and aging, but subject to cultural variations, especially in adulthood.

Secondly, it is striking that both the Gusii and the Trobrianders have terms in their language that pertain to the various life stages. This signifies that life stage concepts structure how the people in these cultures think about development through the lifespan. It is not just that people recognize that a process of development takes place over the lifespan and that people change as they age, but that they see people as categorically different from one stage to the next, with corresponding expectations for role responsibilities and behavior at each stage. It would be worth investigating how common it is for cultures to have specific terms corresponding to life stages.

Third, across the three cultures there are many ways of marking the transition from one life stage to the next. Sometimes there is a ritual, such as marriage, which signifies the transition to young adulthood and its many family and work responsibilities. Sometimes the transition is in social arrangements, such as the weaning that marks not just the end of breast-feeding but the end of the child sleeping next to the mother at night. The transition may also be gradual, in the increase in responsibilities from early childhood to middle childhood or the elevation in status that takes place from young to middle adulthood.

Developed Countries in the Modern Era: From Institutionalization to Individualization

Life stage observations and analysis have a long tradition not only in anthropology but in sociology. Sociologists have examined how societal institutions came to structure the sequence of life stages in modern industrial societies. In the sociological account, life stages were established in the course of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as the development of nation states and the industrial economy led to the *institutionalization* and *standardization* of the life course (Table 3) [Mayer, 1986, 2004]. Primary education became mandatory in the 19th century, and minimum ages for employment were established in the early 20th century, which meant that childhood became clearly set apart from adulthood and a standard timing for entry to middle

Table 3. Life stages and associated institutions, late 19th and early 20th centuries

Life stage	Institution
Infancy and early childhood	Pre-institutional
Middle childhood	Primary school
Adolescence	Secondary school
Young and middle adulthood	Work and family
Old age	Retirement

Sources: Kohli [1986]; Mayer [2004].

childhood was established at the age of 6–7, when children were required to begin school [Kertzer, 1989]. Also in the early 20th century, the legal age for adulthood was established, age 18 for most purposes, and secondary education became legally required, which set adolescence clearly apart from childhood at one end and adulthood at the other. Government-funded pension programs were established, which declared a "retirement age" of 65, beginning in Germany in 1889 and gradually spreading over the industrialized world. Eventually pension programs were accompanied by mandatory retirement ages so that people were required to leave the labor force at the age of 65 whether they wished to or not.

The result of establishing these institutions was that the stages of the life course became more standardized and predictable. Early childhood became the stage after infancy but before entering school. Middle childhood became the stage of attending primary school. Adolescence became the stage of being in secondary school and of remaining a minor under the law. Late adulthood became the stage of retirement. Thus, institutionalization and standardization were accompanied by *chronologization,* in that the normative timing of life stages and their transitions became increasingly predictable [Kohli, 1986]. For example, one historical analysis in the USA found that the median number of years for the sequence of four role transitions to adulthood – finishing education, leaving home, starting employment, and entering marriage – was 22 in 1880 but had shrunk to just 14 by 1970 [Modell, Furstenberg, & Hershberg, 1976]. Surviving to the later stages of life became more likely as medical advances led to greater longevity. For example, an analysis of the lives of women in Massachusetts found that the proportion who experienced all the adult milestones of marriage, parenthood, surviving to at least the age of 55, and having a husband who also survived to at least the age of 55, increased from 21% in 1830 to 58% by 1920 [Uhlenberg, 1969]. In sum, as institutions became established, a sequence of life stages lasting from infancy through late adulthood became gradually standardized and normative.

However, according to sociologists, during the second half of the 20th century the institutional framework of life stages gradually weakened [Kohli, 1986, Mayer, 2004]. As the industrial economy morphed into the postindustrial economy, institutionalization was succeeded by *deinstitutionalization.* Standardization was followed by *destandardization.* Chronologization waned and was replaced by *individualization,* as people were both allowed and required to exercise more individual agency to chart their way through the life course and to determine for themselves the timing of the transitions from one life stage to the next [Heinz, 2002]. For example, the transition from education to work became blurred and prolonged, as young people increas-

ingly combined secondary and tertiary education with part-time or full-time work, and the transition to full-time work became increasingly precarious and unstable, as union-protected jobs became replaced by short-term jobs and temporary contracts. Similarly, the timing of first marriage, once a permanent transition occurring within a narrow range of years in the early twenties, became stretched out to a range between the ages of 20 and 40, often preceded by cohabitation and followed within a few years by divorce. Retirement became less concentrated at the age of 65, as many people retired before that age and others worked long after, out of choice or necessity.

The sociological perspective has contributed a valuable historical context for understanding how the rise of societal institutions established a sequence of explicit life stages in industrialized societies. It also explains how and why the influence of those institutions waned in the late 20th century and the timing of life stage transitions became more variable as a consequence. However, there is a problem with the sociological claim that life stages were established with the development of the institutions that accompanied the rise of the industrial economy. As we have seen in the historical section of this paper, life stages were well known and well established for centuries, even millennia, before the rise of industrialization. Furthermore, anthropologists have shown how the age-grading of the lifespan into distinct stages is pervasive worldwide in the cultures they have studied, even though none of those cultures is industrialized.

This makes it likely that the direction of effects is actually the reverse of what has been postulated in the sociological analysis. It is not that the rise of institutions in the industrial economy established a sequence of life stages, but that the institutions themselves were founded on preexisting widespread beliefs about the timing and sequence of life stages [Neugarten & Moore, 1968]. For example, age 7 became the age of beginning primary school because it was already viewed as the age when children became capable of exercising greater self-control and taking on more responsibilities. Adolescence became the age of secondary school because it was already recognized as being a life stage that was different from middle childhood (because puberty was taking place) but not yet adult. The retirement age inaugurating the transition to late adulthood was established at the age of 65 because it was widely viewed as being roughly the age when people became incapable of doing the kind of agricultural and industrial work that most people did at the time and were therefore in need of care and support. In sum, indigenous life stage concepts were the foundation on which the institutions of the modern era were built. Reciprocally, modern institutions reinforced life stage concepts and made the sequence of life stage concepts more regimented and predictable. Subsequently, the erosion of the institutions changed the length and timing of the established life stages.

Life Stages as Master Narratives

The previous sections have presented life stage concepts from history, anthropology, and sociology. Given the diverse and rich panoply of concepts represented across these areas, how should life stages be understood in psychology in the 21st century? I propose that indigenous life stage concepts are best understood as *master narratives,* from which individuals draw materials for building their personal identity narrative.

The idea of master narratives was proposed as a way of conceptualizing how people form a personal identity out of culturally available concepts [Hammack, 2008, 2011; McLean & Syed, 2016; Thorne & McLean, 2003]. Personal identities are individualized and unique, but they are also culturally patterned. As McAdams [2014] observed, "culture provides a menu of images, metaphors, plots, and characters for the making of narrative identity. Autobiographical authors sample the menu that their culture presents them. They appropriate culturally valued narrative material in ways that capture, as well as contour, their own personal experience" (p. 65). The concept of master narratives has existed for decades in psychology, under a variety of terms, including "narrative structures" [Sarbin, 2001] and "canonical forms" [Bruner, 1987]. However, recent contributions by several theorists have developed this concept into an important new integrative theory of the relation between master and personal narratives that can be applied to the life stage concepts discussed here [Berntsen & Rubin, 2004; Fivush, Habermas, Waters, & Zaman, 2011; Habermas, 2007; Hammack, 2008, 2011; McLean & Syed, 2016].

According to these theorists, each culture provides a master narrative that includes values, beliefs, and social norms. These social norms include age norms, that is, expectations for how people should behave at different ages [Hammack & Toolis, 2014; McAdams, 2014; Settersten & Mayer, 1997]. I propose that each culture's master narrative includes beliefs about what the sequence of life stages should be, what should happen within each life stage, and when people should make the transition from one life stage to the next. These life stage master narratives provide people with guidelines and guideposts for navigating their way through the life course and developing a personal identity [McAdams, 2006/2013]. Life stage concepts tell people what they should be doing, and when, as they progress through life.

Life stage concepts are one form of what theorists of master narratives call a *life script* [Berntsen & Rubin, 2004; Rubin & Berntsen, 2003; Thomsen & Berntsen, 2008]. The idea behind life scripts is that cultures have a set of beliefs, traditions, and assumptions that life events should occur in a specified order at specified times. Applied here, to life stages, it could be stated that cultures have expectations that a series of life stages will be experienced from beginning to end, in a specified order, with distinct roles and duties for each stage, and with transitions between stages taking place at expected times. These expectations help people make sense of each time of life and allow them to anticipate and prepare for the requirements of the life stages to come. However, people who are unable or unwilling to conform to cultural expectations for life stages and the timing of life stage transitions may be subject to criticism and rejection, as we will see in the next section.

Alternative and Counternarratives of Life Stages

One of the key features of master narratives is that they are compulsory [Hammack & Toolis, 2016; McLean & Syed, 2016]. In the course of socialization, children learn their culture's master narrative, through participation in daily life, through the telling of stories, and sometimes through direct instruction [Fivush et al., 2011; Habermas & Reese, 2015]. Master narratives provide materials for the development of a personal identity, but they also constrain the range of acceptable identities. That is, the development of a personal identity entails not simply the process of selecting

from a limitless range of possibilities, but selecting from possibilities that conform to the master narrative [Hammack, 2008; Hammack & Toolis, 2016]. In this sense, master narratives have a moral component; they not only offer guidance for developing an identity, they tell us how we *should* be [McLean & Syed, 2016].

Nevertheless, within any culture there may be individuals who fail to find the master narrative satisfying as a basis for their personal identity, and who consequently seek *alternative* or *counter*narratives, which are "story structures that are created in resistance to the master narratives" [McLean & Syed, 2016, p. 324]. The development of a counternarrative may be especially prevalent among people who feel excluded from the master narrative, such as ethnic and sexual minorities. Over time, if a particular counternarrative becomes prevalent enough, it may change the master narrative [Hammack & Toolis, 2014].

Alternative/counternarratives can be readily applied to life stage concepts. Cultures vary in how strictly or leniently they enforce the social norms that accompany the life stage master narrative [Arnett & Tanner, 2009; Gelfand, 2012]. In the three traditional cultures described earlier in the paper, there is little tolerance for deviation and it would be difficult to function socially without conforming to the life stage master narrative; however, in more diverse, populous, and individualistic cultures, there may be greater tolerance for life stage counternarratives. In addition to ethnic and sexual minorities, examples of groups who may have a life stage counternarrative include religious minorities and the working class [Jensen, 2008, 2012, 2015; McAdams & Guo, 2016; McLean & Syed, 2016].

Even where counternarratives are tolerated, they may be stigmatized. One illustration of a life stage counternarrative and the stigma it can provoke can be found in research on people who remain single into their thirties and beyond in developed countries. Marriage is a cultural universal, and has traditionally marked the entry to the young adulthood life stage [Arnett, 1998], as it does in the historical life stages and all three of the traditional cultures described earlier in the paper. However, an increasing proportion of young people in developed countries remain single into their forties. In the USA and in Europe, about one fourth of 40-year-olds have never married [Corselli-Nordblad & Gereoffy, 2015; Social Security Administration, 2014]. In urban areas of Asian countries, such as Tokyo and Bangkok, from one fifth to one third of women aged 40–44 have remained unmarried [Frejka, Jones, & Sardon, 2010]. Being single during the "young adulthood" decade of the thirties is often criticized. DePaulo [2006] has presented extensive evidence of "singlism" in the USA, in which "people who do not have a serious, coupled relationship are stereotyped, discriminated against, and treated dismissively" (p. 2). In Japan, women who remain unmarried into their thirties have been subjected to the derisive term "parasite singles" [Brinton, 2010].

These negative perceptions indicate a social cost to departing from the standard life stage script. The stigma against remaining single suggests that people who do not conform to the cultural expectations for each life stage are likely to feel "off-time" compared to their peers [Neugarten, Moore, & Lowe, 1965; Settersten & Mayer, 1997]. In order to avoid this feeling, most people seek to follow the life stage master narrative of their culture, including marriage as part of young adulthood. However, if remaining single continues to become more prevalent as a part of the young adulthood stage, it may be that the stigma will fade as a new master narrative of this stage develops.

Another example of changing life stage schemes and cultural resistance to such changes can be seen in the response to the rise of the new life stage of emerging adulthood [Arnett, 2002, 2013, 2015]. Over the course of the past half century in developed countries, a confluence of demographic changes has taken place that has made the entry into a stable young adulthood later than ever before, including longer and more widespread tertiary education and later entry to marriage and parenthood. These changes have led to the rise of a new life stage that is distinct from either the adolescence that precedes it or the young adulthood that follows. Arnett [2002] proposed that there is now a new life stage of emerging adulthood between adolescence and young adulthood. Although this term has gained some public attention beyond academia [e.g., Henig, 2010], there has also been a great deal of public ridicule directed at people in their twenties for reaching adulthood "too late," with their later entry to adult roles allegedly reflecting their laziness and "narcissism" [Twenge, 2013]. One way of understanding this ridicule is that the rise of this new life stage challenges the previous life stage master narrative and has consequently provoked resistance and negative moral judgments. It may be that, with time, as the experience of a life stage of emerging adulthood in between adolescence and young adulthood becomes more familiar and typical, it will also become more acceptable as part of the life stage master narrative.

The Development of Life Stage Master Narratives

When do children gain a full understanding of life stage master narratives? According to researchers on master narratives, children begin telling stories from an early age, in conversations with their parents and others, and these stories often carry underlying meanings about how a human life should unfold [Bohn & Berntsen, 2008; McAdams & Guo, 2016]. However, it is not until early adolescence that there is the attainment of the ability to construct "a full life narrative [that] involves the integration of multiple personally significant experiences into an overarching story that encompasses an entire life" [Fivush et al., 2011, p. 328]. The adolescent's personal narrative is drawn from the materials of the culture's master narrative, which reflects at least an implicit awareness of master narratives on the part of the adolescent. This characterization of the development of a personal narrative in adolescence, drawn from master narratives, is similar to the long-standing proposal in identity theory, going back to Erikson [1950], that identity development is concentrated in adolescence and is structured and constrained by the range of possibilities provided by the social and cultural environment. Today, many researchers and theorists on identity development and on the relation between personal and master narratives view the process as culminating not in adolescence but in emerging adulthood [Berntsen & Rubin, 2004; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Luyckx, Meca, & Ritchie, 2013].

The development of a personal identity out of master narrative materials includes the construction of a life script, which specifies appropriate ages for transition events and expectations about what should happen during different life stages [Habermas & Reese, 2015]. This awareness, too, appears to grow substantially in early adolescence. For example, Habermas [2007] reported that from the age of 8 to 16, views of the age norms for 25 life events became increasingly similar to adults' views of the age norms for these events. Likewise, Bohn and Berntsen [2008] found that from the

age of 9 to 15, free nomination of the 10 most important events likely to happen to a newborn over a lifetime – in effect, a life script – became more similar to the views of adults.

The insights from research on the development of personal identity out of master narratives inspire many promising questions for research on the development of life stage concepts. Does the ability to construct a culturally based sequence of life stages surge in early adolescence, as it does for life scripts? Does this ability continue to develop and deepen from early adolescence through emerging adulthood, as identity development more broadly apparently does? How would the life stage concepts of an 80-year-old, who has experienced nearly all of the life stages, differ from the life stage concepts of an adolescent or emerging adult in the same culture, for whom most of life is yet to come? For any age differences that might be found in such a study, would it be possible to tell how much of the difference was a cohort difference rather than a developmental difference? Research on life stage concepts should include comparisons of different age groups, from middle childhood through late adulthood.

Methods for Investigating Indigenous Life Stage Concepts

We know that all cultures seem to have life stage concepts, but we do not yet know much about how the people within cultures view those concepts. The idea of indigenous life stage concepts opens up a vast new research vista on how people of various cultures conceptualize the life stage master narrative of their culture and how they see their personal narrative in relation to it. Research on this topic was pioneered a half century ago by Bernice Neugarten and her colleagues. Their research asked adults about the "best age" for a variety of family and occupational events, such as marriage, becoming a grandparent, and entering retirement [Neugarten et al., 1965]. The findings generated the important concept of the "social clock," an implicit set of cultural expectations for when various life events should be completed, whereby people judge themselves and others as being "on-time" or "off-time."

Since the classic studies by Neugarten and colleagues, a substantial literature has accumulated on how people view age norms and age expectations, mainly in sociology, using a variety of methods. There has been a great deal of theory and research in sociology on the "age structuring" of the life course, including the "cultural scripts" that help individuals to find a meaningful place in their social world [Mayer, 1986]. A wide variety of methods has been used to examine adults' conceptions of the life course [Settersten & Mayer, 1997]. For example, research in Neugarten's tradition has asked people about "cultural age deadlines" for various family and occupational events [Settersten, 2003; Settersten & Hägestad, 1996a, 1996b]. Research on "subjective age" has asked people how old they feel and compared their responses to their chronological age [Montpare, 2009; Rubin & Berntsen, 2006; Stephan, Demulier, & Terracciano, 2012]. The *life review* method focuses on older adults, asking them to recall the most important events, persons, and turning points in their lives [Butler, 1963; Disch, 2014; Haight & Webster, 1995]. Similarly, the *life history calendar* approach asks people to plot the most important events and transitions that have occurred in various domains of their lives [Axinn, Pearce, & Ghimire, 1999; Freedman, Thornton, Camburn, Alwin, & Young-DeMarco, 1988; Morselli, Berchtold, Granell, & Berchtold, 2016].

Although there have been many methodological approaches to asking people to reflect on the course of the lifespan, no studies have yet entailed what I am proposing here: to have people indicate their conceptions of the stages or periods of the entire lifespan, both for themselves and for people generally in their culture. The methods used in previous studies on related topics could be used as a basis for developing new methods to explore the life stage questions.

The prominence of life stage thinking across history and cultures suggests there may be great potential in exploring the cultural similarities and differences worldwide in how people conceptualize life stage master narratives and how they see their personal narrative in relation to the master narrative. In light of the recent increase in migration and immigration and the corresponding increase in the proportion of the world that is multiethnic, an especially fruitful area within this topic may be the views of people who are part of multiple cultural backgrounds and how they reconcile and integrate divergent life stage master narratives [Hammack, 2011]. Research should also investigate within-culture variations in life stage concepts, by gender, sexual orientation, and social class [McAdams & Guo, 2016].

Conclusion: The Potential of Life Stages Research

The goal of this paper was to draw attention to the richness and diversity of indigenous life stage concepts and to stimulate a new field of research that would investigate these concepts in a broad and systematic way. Research on indigenous life stage concepts has the potential to generate compelling material on how people think about the course of human life, including their own, and the diversity of their concepts depending on culture and other variables. It also has the potential to inform our understanding of other questions pertaining to human development. For example, the pervasiveness of indigenous life stage concepts across cultures and history begs the question, what is it about human cognition that promotes this apparent tendency to divide the lifespan into distinct stages, each with its own term and its own set of roles and responsibilities? Decades of research have led to the conclusion that human development is more continuous and less discontinuous than stage theorists such as Piaget had proposed [Lourenco, 2016]. Yet how do we account for an apparent human tendency to take continuities in development and make them discontinuous, by introducing roles, statuses, and responsibilities that are distinctive to each life stage?

Other compelling questions are suggested by the pervasiveness of indigenous life stage concepts. How do indigenous life stages serve to structure people's social lives and relationships? What are the psychological and social consequences when people perceive themselves as following a personal developmental trajectory that is out of sync with their culture's master narrative so that they perpetually feel themselves to be "off-time"? How do master narratives change as people come into contact with counternarratives, via immigration or global media, and what are costs and benefits of those changes for individuals? Do those costs and benefits vary depending on age and other factors? In short, this paper has raised many questions that may be worthy of further investigation.

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