

Understanding Single Men at Mid-Life: Developmental Implications

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Abstract

There are many reasons for being single. The male who is at mid-point in life may be single for various reasons, including divorce, death, separation, religion, vocation, and interpersonal / developmental issues. Regardless of the cause, the single male has social, developmental, and relational issues to address and overcome. An increased awareness of how one develops at this stage in life is important if understanding is to be gained. The information in this study should not be interpreted as stating single status as a condition or an illness, nor is this research intended to be a *how to* guide; rather, it is intended to increase insight into developmental causation. The single male is a sum of his development. It is possible to live a healthy and fulfilled life as a single person provided that developmental issues are addressed and dealt with appropriately.

Understanding the Adult Experience

Theoretical Perspectives

Understanding how to aid a middle-aged, single male within the context of counseling requires that one understand the adult experience. In order to understand this, attention must be given to the theoretical perspectives that address developmental issues; the appropriate questions must be asked. Some of the questions addressing the developmental issues of the middle-aged focus on: the relationship between age, sex, and behavioral stages; the role of work, family, and self in the life course; how people adapt to the inevitable internal and external transitions; recurring preoccupations of adults; the correlation between age, cognitive and physical development; the various contexts for time passage; and finally, are adulthood and aging best understood by looking at commonalities of events and experiences, or are they best understood by looking at their variability (Schlossberg, 1984)? The previously mentioned is not meant to be exhaustive; rather, it is to serve as an example of the various perspectives involved when attempting to understand the single, middle-aged male. These are just a few of the issues that may be looked at from a theoretical perspective.

Transitions

The development of any adult (including the single male) will involve transitions. Understanding the various aspects of transition will require a definition in order to establish a foundational point of reference. According to Moos and Tsu (1976) :

Crisis theory asserts that people generally operate in consistent patterns, in equilibrium with their environment, solving problems with minimal delay by habitual mechanisms and reactions. When the usual problem-solving mechanisms do not work, tension arises and feelings of discomfort or strain occur. The individual experiences anxiety, fear, guilt

or shame, a feeling of helplessness, some disorganization of function, and possibly other symptoms. Thus a crisis is essentially a disturbance of the equilibrium, an “upset in a steady state.” (p.13)

At the forefront, this does not sound like a definition of transition; however, Moos and Tsu tie transition theory to crisis theory. In short, without some type of crisis, a transition will not occur. Transitions are brought about through some type of disturbance that creates the need for change or adjustment. Developmentally, this pattern fits all persons, including the single male. Schlossberg (1984) addresses transitional issues as they relate to being anticipated, unanticipated, chronic, and nonevent. Anticipated changes are those changes that predictably occur during the unfolding of the life-cycle. Unanticipated transitions are nonscheduled events that are not predictable. These types involve crisis, eruptive circumstances, and other unexpected occurrences that are not the consequences of the life-cycle transition. Chronic transitions are characterized by their pervasive presence. This type of transition may be a different experience for the single male due to the social, emotional, and physical ramifications of singleness. Schlossberg goes beyond crisis theory in dealing with transition; she attempts to tie transition into a specific context of causation rather than a general, theoretical framework. Understanding the developmental issues related to crisis, transition, and specific causation are an important ingredient to understanding how to counsel the middle age single male.

Singleness

Not everyone can, or wishes to fit the pattern of family living which is so often held up as the example of how life should be. This creates a barrier between the single person and the rest of mainstream society. The single person (male or female) may feel like an outcast or a loser for a variety of reasons. If the single person is single by choice, the social pressure may not be as

bad; however what does single by choice mean? Does this mean that the person would always want to be single, or does this mean that the person has not found the appropriate mate? Single by choice may include someone who has been in a bad relationship, and as a result, they have chosen to not be involved with anyone else. As illustrated, single by choice does not necessarily constitute a state of contentment or fulfillment. It should not be assumed, however, that single is the equivalent of unhealthy. There are a lot of people who are single and maintaining their physical and emotional health. Craig (1978) reports that:

The impact of the 'single-society' ranges far beyond their number. However, the numbers are staggering. One out of every three adults between the ages of eighteen and fifty in America is single. This is approximately forty-three million people. Of adults between the ages of twenty-two and thirty-five during 1978, twelve million were single. By 1987 there will be sixteen million singles in this age bracket. (p.7)

Admittedly, these statistics are dated; however, they remain as an example of the numerical significance that singles possess. These numbers also serve to counter the myth that the single adult is an outcast.

Developmental Issues

Attempting to define the period of middle age is similar to attempting to place a specific time table on a period of history. There are many opinions, and many disagree on when it begins or ends. Some theorists believe that lower-class people experience mid-life event at an earlier age than do middle-class people; thus, it may be wise not to tie the stages of adult development to a specific timetable (Farrell and Rosenberg, 1981). Parental considerations are a must when dealing with the single, middle aged male. If the parents are more dependent and have aged poorly, or if they are in need of physical attention, the male may begin to see himself as

becoming middle aged. This may be particularly true of the single male because of focal issues. A single man may tend to have a greater focus of attention on his parents than a married man with children; however, a man with children may enter mid-life awareness as a result of an occurrence related to his family of choice (wife or children). As earlier noted, these transitions may occur as a result of life-cycle change or as a result of crisis.

Balance. Transitions are an important part of life-cycle development. If one is to continue to grow, he must make a decision to create a balance between stability and change. Both are necessary, but one may upset the other if balance is not achieved. Clark (1967) states that:

A person is not a pile of stone, no matter how artfully arranged, laid down in concrete in early life...Personality is rather an ongoing process of interaction between the sociocultural world and the internal life of the individual- a process that continues throughout the life cycle. (p.26,63)

This statement sheds light on the fact that maintaining a healthy level of development is not a formula; rather, it is an artful balancing act which requires continued adjustment to a changing criteria. The single, middle aged adult has not only the responsibility of dealing with his singleness, but he must also pass through the life-cycle transitions with an artful sense of balance if he is going to remain healthy.

Stages

The passage through the stages of adulthood depends upon the manner in which a person has mastered the stages of childhood and adolescence. The earlier stages in life are a prerequisite for later stages. Norman and Scaramella (1980) believe that learning in the developmental states is based on separation and individuation; that is, the gradual internalizing of directives, knowledge, and skills to gain increasing structure, integration and capacity for self-

guidance. Norman and Scaramella are quick to point out that other factors influence development as well. Among those are panphasic influences, the intrafamilial, the socioeconomic and cultural environments. These are believed to have a significant influence on the developing personality. Norman and Scaramella state that:

A person at the start of adult life should have attained an ego identity which is a summation and integration of all of his or her previous identifications and identities, and which provides a consistency that characterizes an individual despite changes that occur over time and despite the many different roles assumed at any one period in life. Young adults should also have achieved a capacity for intimacy; their experiences within their families will have fostered sufficient independence and adequately firm self-boundaries that they need not fear, but rather seek interdependence with another. It is also important for them to have overcome the cognitive egocentricity of childhood to realize that other persons feel and perceive differently than they or members of their family do. It is also important to overcome the egocentricity characteristic of adolescence to realize that solving problems subjectively, even if carefully planned and thought through, is a very different matter from solving them in actuality, and to recognize that it is necessary to move into action to gain one's goals whether in love or on a career. (p.21)

If a single adult is to be healthy, he must have completed the criteria from previous stages of development. If he has not done so, an attempt should be made. If the middle aged male is demonstrating the egocentrism of a teen, or if he has not become socially independent, he may need to work on those issues even though he is past that physical age of development. This points out the importance of not placing a specific age limit on developmental stages. The

development of an individual may be based on transition achievement rather than on time passage.

The Young Adult. During the early stage of young adult life, usually between the ages of 18 and 30, most consider making commitments that greatly influence the course of the remainder of their lives. At this stage, the two most critical decisions to be made are the choice of occupation, and the choice of a mate (Norman and Scaramella, 1980). This is where the single adult and the non-single adult part ways in their development. The selection of vocation may be influenced by spousal selection; thus, the decision making process is influenced by a completely different set of variables. Norman and Scaramella state their position on the single adult:

The choice of a marital partner is not a necessary step in the life cycle and persons can lead happy and satisfactory lives without marrying, but as approximately 97 percent of people in the United States marry, relatively few mentally and physically competent persons never marry. There are many reasons why people marry. The desire to have a spouse rests upon the human's biological makeup and the need for prolonged nurturance in the family or origin. In the family in which children grow up, they can feel secure because their well being is as important, if not more important, to their parents than the parents' welfare, and because, by and large, they are accepted simply because they are their parents' children rather than because of their achievements. (p.24)

Many of the issues addressed by the single male population may tie into this concept. The male is generally task and achievement oriented, and he generally gains his self worth from his job, or job related achievements. The combination of an achievement oriented male with singleness can create issues of self worth. If a single male is experiencing self-esteem problems, it may be due to the fact that he feels he must get his approval from the highly impersonal and criteria based

resource of achievement. He may not have experienced unconditional acceptance from someone who loves him for who he is and not what he does. Some who are single may have found a source of unconditional positive regard, but many have not. Encouraging the single male to simply get married is not necessarily the answer. He should not seek a solution to his self-image issues through another person. The other party will have issues of their own, and the two will become entangled. The single man's internal issues will not be resolved through acquisition of a spouse; rather, they will become amplified. That is not to say that the single male with issues should never marry; he should marry for reasons other than getting a *fix* for his issues. The interpersonal issues related to the single male's self worth apply to the young adult as well as the middle aged adult male.

The Middle Years. The young adult generally makes the transition into his middle years between the age of 30 and 40 (Norman and Scaramella, 1980). Developmentally, the attitudes toward life change. Many at this age consider definitive commitment. Some, who are unhappy with prior choices decide that this is the time for change. This is a time when truly creative persons reveal their capacities. A great deal of independence may be experienced as they become less directly attached to their family of origin, and they may even feel as sense of mastery. Norman and Scaramella address this issue as it relates to the career oriented male:

...men with careers move past the age of 35, the ambitious become impatient at being subordinates and they are apt to enter a phase in which they are impatient to "become one's own man." They may enter upon a period of intense striving to gain a promotion. Some will grow resentful, and perhaps depressed, because they are not appreciated, and then face the decision to move to another company, or risk the insecurity of striking out on their own. Such decisions depend on basic characteristics that relate to childhood

experiences as well as the individual's situation. Old sibling rivalries may have fostered a competitive attitude; a mother's expectations for achievement lead to a drive toward accomplishment; oral fixations lead to a need for security that interferes with impulses to risk independence, etc. (p.28-29)

These remarks point to how the current status of the middle aged male relates to developmental issues. Many theorists believe that the start of middle age is closer to 40. At this age, many men go through what has been dubbed *mid-life crisis*. This may be triggered by the realization that more time is in the past than is in the future. Significance may become an issue at this point in life. Many men (especially singles) who have focused on achievement as their primary resource for self-worth have come to the place in life where self-worth may be derived from a sense of significance. Questions related to purpose may lead into this. This may be due in part to the fact that an awareness has been raised concerning the passage of time and the time spent on things that are of little value. This may create a crisis on the part of the middle aged man. He may slip into a reaction formation in which he lives the remainder of his life attempting to *make up* for lost time. He may slip onto depression, or he may attempt to make transitions as a result of his crisis. Whatever the case, the values have changed, prior decisions are regretted, and a new direction may be desired. This is a simpler task for the single male. He does not need to consult the spouse for approval, nor is he tied to her insecurity issues. Within the single male, there may be a lack of unconditional positive regard held over from earlier stages of development; thus, he may have been living in a reaction formation from earlier stages. The mid-life symptoms may be less noticeable to the single male due to preexisting and overlapping issues from earlier stages of development.

Summary

There are many reasons for being single. The male who is at mid-point in life may be single for various reasons, including divorce, death, separation, religion, vocation, and interpersonal / developmental issues. Regardless of the cause the single male has social, developmental, and relational issues to address and overcome. An increased awareness of how one develops at this stage in life is important if understanding is to be gained. This research is not intended to be a *how to* guide; rather, it is intended to increase insight into developmental causation. The single male is a sum of his development.

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