

## **Lifespan Construct**

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Susan K. Whitbourne's (1985) lifespan construct derives from her identity theory.

Lifespan construct is a combined sense of past, present, and future events that are connected by their common occurrence to the individual. Cognitive-affective schemata are part of building this construct and shape the way adults approach identity-discrepant experiences. Cognition is the organizer of the experiences, and all events are measured against these experiences. The affective aspect is the individual's evaluation of events that lead to positive or negative feeling-states.

Lifespan construct development is shaped by identity and values. Identity assimilation and identity accommodation help to negotiate new experiences associated with changes in age through adulthood. Identity assimilation is the practice people use to maintain a sense of self-consistency when confronted with conflicting experiences or information about the self. Identity accommodation is the practice of changing oneself in response to different experiences. Values such as family, work, and self-development further contribute to the development of the construct. Individual aspirations combined with identity and values create the basis for appraising the significance of events that shape lifespan construct. Lastly, Lifespan construct has two manifestations, the "scenario" and the "life story", that operate as the structural components.

The "scenario" is comprised of expectations about the future. It is strongly affected by age norms that define key transition points and related "acceptable" ages for making such transitions. People will vary though to the extent that they will conform to the ages of the standard social sequence of transitions. This is due to an individual's evaluation of their

background, perceptions of their ability to meet demands, and susceptibility to being molded by outside forces. Identity formulation begins in adolescence and is when individuals begin to gain a sense of self. The scenario translates the lifespan construct into plans for the future in the area or areas deemed important by the identity. Use of general-future directed thoughts helps conceptualize future orientations that underline future planning and achievement of future goals. With these thoughts, the scenario is created by the individual and is expected to be met by a particular age or time. As the individual advances through the scenario they laid out, the second manifestation begins.

Building of the “life story” begins at the same time revisions are being made to the scenario. The life story integrates past events into an organized sequence, which gives them a personal meaning and sense of continuity. The use of “story” is meant to convey that by its retelling by the individual to the self and others cause a rehearsed feel. Alterations to certain life events may occur because of the retelling, which is a function of cognitive processes. These processes lead to simplifying and highlighting central scenes. This is done to amplify and intensify past events that are of emotional significance.

Motivational biases and informational biases transform initial perceptions of events to an altered form in the life story. Motivational biases such as egocentrism, beneficence, and cognitive conservatism are used to maintain and preserve the individual’s identity. These are used to assess experiences that compatible with the identity. They also serve as identity preservation and maintenance of self-esteem. Informational biases such as salience, representativeness, and correspondence between actions and settings also influence how events are interpreted. This leads to the eventual shape these events will take within the life story. Both of these biases can lead to distortions of events as a coping mechanism. The life story can

undergo several transformations that make it more congruent with the objective aspects of past events.

Scenario and life story work together to restructure identity in response to a need to make changes that better align an individual's estimation of capacities with their actual capacities. The age-related transformations made while building the scenario and life story are important to maintaining identity and a positive view of oneself while aging. The scenario acts as game plan of how individuals want to live their lives while the life story becomes a person's autobiography that is told when asked about their life. Identity is the main source of lifespan construct and determines the content by which the sense of self is defined and the greatest commitment to identity is made. Lifespan construct is specific to the sense of time over the lifespan that is constantly experienced by the individual.

**See Also:**

**Further Reading:**

Rutt, J. L., & Löckenhoff, C. E. (2016). Age Patterns in Mental Representations of Time:

Underlying Constructs and Relevant Covariates. *Experimental Aging Research*, 42(3), 289-306. doi:10.1080/0361073x.2016.1156975

Whitbourne, S.K. (1985). The Psychological Construction of the Life Span. In J.E. Birren & K.W. Schaie (Eds.), *Handbook of The Psychology of Aging* (pp. 594-618). New York, NY: Van Nostrand Reinhold

Whitbourne, S. K., Sneed, J. R., & Skultety, K. M. (2002). Identity Processes in Adulthood:

Theoretical and Methodological Challenges. *Identity*, 2(1), 29-45.

doi:10.1207/s1532706xid0201\_03