The Lifestory

A Holistic Theory and Visualisation of Lifestages

No part of this document was generated artificially.

Conceiving

My aim in this document is to present an introductory draft of a lifestages theory. It also serves as support for various practices and the web application, 'Lifestory' (2024), a platform for lifestage visualisation.

Deeply understanding the lifespan or life course, is significant for individuals navigating major and minor life decisions with a cognisant clarity and mindful meaning, and for society orienting the challenges of civilisation and life with aligned authenticity and learned lives. Imminent future developments of artificial intelligence, raised living conditions and internet connectivity makes the potential fruits of lifespan research particularly useful in this 21st century.

This document is divided into 3 parts:

1. **PRACTICES** for authentically developing a good life throughout the lifespan.
2. **STRATEGIES** for undergoing good life experiences as a theoretical framework.
3. **LITERATURE** as current research in life course research [In Progress].

In the PRACTICES section, I outline states of mind that enable one to deeply connect with a lifespan of the present moment, visualisation methods for painting a picture of a biographical past, and the concept of lifelong developmental timelines or 'curricula' that looks forwards to the future.

In the STRATEGIES section, I conceptualise 'lifespan' arcs commonly and ideally recorded, individual authenticity and their evolving identity frameworks, and the contributions of social impact on the course of one's life typically by mimicry and role models.

In the LITERATURE section [Not Included Currently], I discuss the psychology, sociology and anthropology of lifespan research and experience, exploring the interactions of internal states, social contexts and sociocultural constructions.

PRACTICE

In everyday life, people empathise mostly with close family and friends. Understanding the life experiences of different individuals outside one's immediate circle is mostly relegated to a rare competency of few professionals, such as social workers, clinicians, educators, writers. I believe the skills surrounding contextual lifespan perception build a healthy sense of meaning, empathy and collaboration for humanity, ultimately leading to fulfilled authenticity and prosocial behaviour.

In this section, I shall guide the reader through actionable practices for the lifespan in a timely fashion, across the past, present, to future. Whilst all the practices discussed have in common the employment of cognitive empathy and imaginative projection of life circumstances, the temporality attributed to each distinguishes their circumstances of use and unique purposes.

Past: Lifestory

People create all kinds of records of life experiences – diaries, journals, photo albums, vlogs, autobiographies. Historians comb through such experiential records to put together a life story of an individual as a history. Psychologists use the term 'narrative psychology'. In the present digital age, such information is often easily accessible and in greater abundance in the form of social media and one's digital footprint.

Often, a meaningful organisation can be formed from a retrospective look at the key phases of one's life, that forms the bulk of one's sense of assuredness, security and confidence in their self-identity. These kinds of reflections often take place during transition periods in the lifespan, and rarely at the very end of a life. From these reflective exercises, an evolving skeleton of a full lifelong autobiography can be excavated.

Lifestage Models

The reason this is included as a practice is because ultimately, an individual ought to subjectively generate their own idiosyncratic model, and include the moments, phases and lifestages that were, are and will be the most significant and meaningful to them, when creating their own lifestory.

A model of a lifespan is temporal, and hence can be divided by time indicators: months, seasons, years, several years or even decades. Key elements of a lifestages model include:

1. **Milestones** as temporary or one-off moments or events, often as a defining moment of a lifestage, or indicating commencement of new lifestages.
2. **Phases** as indicators of a continuous identity, routine or event, often overlapping, that form the backbone of the skeleton of the lifestory.

3. **Lifestages** as distinct phases that signify significant departure of lifestyle from prior phases characterised by growth and development.

Examples of milestones: final exams, starting work, moving out, travel trip, marriage, retirement.
Examples of phases: early primary school, volunteering, internships, jobs, overseas travel stay.
Examples of lifestages: early education, college, early adulthood, work, midlife crisis, living overseas.

In general, a phase is more descriptive of superficial changes compared to lifestages which encompass a longer period and are deeper, more serious and affect the entire individual – moving to live overseas for 3 years for the first time versus wearing goth clothing for 3 months as a fashionista.

Besides the temporal dimension of the lifestages, one may also, with experience, subjectively develop a model for the most meaningful categorical content in their lifestory. Here are some general examples:

2 Categories: personal, professional.
3 Sections: physical, social, work.
4 Quadrants: physical, mental, social, spiritual.
5 Aspects: travel, technology, education, social, health.

Other aspects may include: financial, material, family, emotional, stylistic, fitness, creative, faith development. Practical advice on developing a refined, authentic sense for what categories should constitute the model for one's life is based around continual and frequent development and reflection, detailed further in THEORY Individual .

Lifestory Visualisation

Lifestory, accessible on [journeyrecord.netlify.app], is a web platform for lifestage visualisation. It represents an interactive, zoomable timeline for key milestones, phases and lifestages across various categories of life. It is designed to focus on phases and the evolution of categorical indicators over time. My thesis is that drawing out one's own lifestory is not only useful to individuals in developing a wiser, bigger-picture view of their own lifespan, but useful to society as more people are able to compassionately recognise the stages of life others are in.

I personally initially created a mockup of this web application in mid 2023 (originally 'Journey Record'), in order to better visualise and understand lifestages. At the time, I was very much in limbo about my own self-identity and uncertain about what I had achieved in the past and about what I would be doing in the future. In a way, creating this little visualisation amid developing these theories and researching lifestages psychology, catalysed the formation of my current identity of which I am much more assured in, not only in the now and past, but with a flexibly considered perspective for the decades in the future.

I have since updated this web application in late 2024 following the writing and research associated with this document. I am currently developing functionality to allow information to be locally input into

the system and saved in a .csv format. To aid simplicity and universality of technological resources, only text is accepted. Hope you check it out and develop awareness of your own lifestory! – Timelessly, Angus

Present: Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the cognitive awareness of one's current bodily and psychological state. Reframed from the lifespan perspective, this involves developing 'life-contextual' awareness towards others. I hope the 2 practices outlined here regarding lifestages imagination and character discernment may enable more positive, holistic outlooks and discerning, investigative perspectives, applicable on a moment-to-moment basis.

1. **Lifestage Invocation**: considering the past, current and future stages of people's lives.
2. **Character Discernment**: judging what people find valuable and meaningful.

Lifestage Invocation

The term 'invoke' here means to visualise or generate conceptually in real-time. In other words, this is the practice of imagining the timeline of someone else's life, not dissimilar to the Lifestory Visualisation described in Past. To invoke the complete lifestage is to generate the timeline all the way from childhood, adolescence, adulthood and beyond, based on impressions, conscious and unconscious information about an individual, while inserting key moments into their lifestory as one gathers more explicit details. I expect that over time, gathering enough information to build a fairly comprehensive timeline of another's lifespan and to contextualise their present state within it, will build a stronger sense of connection – serving as the core of an empathic mind.

From the invoker's perspective, they then possess the greater responsibility and privilege of enacting influence to positively impact their futures, by seeing another in their entirety, in the current moment – that they are the product of their past, a potential of their future, and a moment in their lifetime. Compared to simple profiles and online bios that dominate the discourse of current generations, this kind of comprehensive judgement is personable, psychologically rich and fair at describing individuals:

1990: Alex is born to a wealthy middle-class nuclear family in America.

2015: studious upbringing led to graduate prestigious university with 1st class honours and finding love.

2025: NOW, positive, sociable and supported 20s led to high-paying corporate stable job, while taking care of 3 kids. Alex finds this phase of life difficult yet knows it will be rewarding and fulfilling.

2050: as kids move out, also travels and tours numerous countries.

2060: volunteers as a social worker with enough retirement funds to live as normally as

previous years.

> 2070: final years in good company, passes naturally.

> Dating Profiles: over 6', 27, work in finance, aquarius, ENFJ, soccer and gaming.
> Social Media Bio: coffee lover, travel enthusiast, puppy mom.

Character Discernment

'Character Discernment' is the practice of understanding the most salient, meaningful values that deeply informs and influences everything about one's behaviour and actions. Similar to lifestage invocation, this may be done based on impressions or explicit information, continually updated with the acquisition of more insights. From this one can discern another human being's core character – their values, ethics, identity, meaning and purpose. Before any kind of judgement is imposed on another individual, one ought to apply the same standards of self-awareness to themself, by reflecting on the core tenets of their own constitution. From there, the same questions, now speculative and based primarily on judgement, can be asked of someone else:

1. Value Hierarchy
   a. What matters most to you?
   b. What would you prioritise when presented with a certain dilemma?
   c. What may be your 3 most important values?
2. Ethic Principles
   a. How would you act under pressure?
   b. How would you act if everything was going wrong that day?
   c. What might your top 3 ethical principles be for how to act?
3. Identity Conception
   a. How confident are you in introducing yourself?
   b. What kind of group would you fit in with and connect with the most?
   c. What might your 3 most important aspects of your identity be?
4. Meaningful Transcendence
   a. Do you have a sense of humour, lightness and optimism?
   b. Are you appreciative and grateful?
   c. What is meaningful to you?
   d. Do you have a purpose that is greater than yourself?

Most will lack explicitly clear answers to these difficult questions. Nonetheless, everybody implicitly possesses these unconscious, character-forming, fundamental truths about their lives – it presents in their overall behaviour, relationships and worldview. Discerning character is associated with deep, experiential intuition – the kind of unconscious, unexplainable sense based on a holistic interpretation of how one presents themself in the world. This intuition is in constant tension and reinforcement with more rational lines of thought towards wiser conduct and ought to be developed and matured with experience and deliberate focus.

Now, for what to do with these judgments, I suggest, is to hold them very loosely and update these assumptions with open curiosity. To be critical to discern character without externally imposing any effectual actions, until sufficient unbiased evidence is provided for an informed decision, unique to the individual, not stereotyped to a group identity.

It is a useful practical skill to ask these questions and to judge the character of individuals and groups is a central task of being human, for cooperation, collaboration and competition. Perceiving present positive and negative potential, rather than intrinsic qualities, places emphasis on the ability for people to grow in a positive direction than be fixed by their immutable past. This is beneficial especially for adolescents, children and toddlers, to be treated with a compassionate eye for positive human development and improvement of character.

Futures: Development

'Developmental Curricula' involves the breakdown of development into various branches of development, each with their own tree of development or timeline. These dimensions relate to the meaningful categorical content discussed in PRACTICE Past. This encourages the cultivation of continued growth past the first two decades of life, further explaining the increase in human variation along the lifespan.

A key contention here is standardisation versus individualisation. As people start off with widely varying life circumstances and are impacted by their environment and systemic norms, it can be useful to conceptualise a developmental framework that is both general and personal, weighted by the individual. For example, for a first-world born citizen, physical development can be analysed laterally by aspect and vertically by time:

Internal: Medical, Diet, Sleep
  I. Be mostly free of debilitating illness with a functional body.
  II. Have a fair balanced diet, uncommon illness and fair sleeping arrangement.
  III. Have a balanced diet, rare illness with strong immunity and a consistent sleeping routine.
  IV. Excellent diet with strong immunity and personalised sleeping arrangement.
  V. Masterful, natural diet, mastered immunity and rejuvenating sleep.

Bodily: Fitness, Hygiene, Appearance
  I. Possess a functional body.
  II. Fair flexibility, coordination, strength, endurance with basic hygiene.
  III. Strong flexibility, strength, endurance with good hygiene and style sense.
  IV. Excellent athleticism with great hygiene and personalised style.
  V. Masterful athleticism with authentic aligned appearance.

External: Finances, Materialism, Geography

    I.   Possess basic necessities of food, water and shelter.

    II.   Have money for basic living and materials with a place to call home.

    III.   Spare savings with quality possessions and own living space.

    IV.   Excellent income with personalised possessions and designed custom space.

    V.   Mastery of economic resources with authentic possessions and aligned space.

Mapping out personally catered levels of development, gifts one with a continual sense of what to look forward to in life, rather than depriving oneself of unobtainable comparisons. The idea is not to be discouraged by unobtainably high levels, but to be in a continual, striving state of motivation in life.

If comparison must be made, it should be done using a well-rounded framework across people of roughly the same social standing to enable universal dignity and respect for all persons. A common comparison that illustrates the balance of development is the scarcity of financial wealth with spiritual, emotional richness. Creating such a general developmental framework is a difficult affair, for the aforementioned being well-rounded yet universally fair.

THEORY

The lifespan is composed of lifestages, which are in turn composed of intimately interacting phases and milestones. Key lifestages tie together a coherent and authentic identity not only for the individual, but for groups of individuals.

This section is my version of the good life – a concept fascinated by scholars for millennia across the world, and a question everyone must contend with in their own life. I breakdown conceptions of lifestages, propose examples for adult development in a contemporary world and expand on the significance of role models and social interaction on identity. Finally, I theorise on the 'lifeline', a common thread that knits together the tapestry of one's life from birth to death, and the development of individuality through authenticity and personal taste.

Society: Lifestages

On an individual level, lifestages represent completely unique arcs that demonstrate holistic change. Observations can be extrapolated from individuals and groups across the world to compose a set of universal lifestages across humankind. My theory is unique in its holistic scope – not seeing either the mind as the primary mode of transcendence and spirituality as the highest form of growth and experience, or physical financial status as the primary marker of success and growth, but integrating the perspectives of body, mind, people and spirit.

Lifestage Phases

The basic building block of a lifestage, is the full holistic (physical-mental-social-spiritual), moment-to-moment state of the individual. The lifestage is characterised by extending this momentary condition temporally into an evolving piece taking into account pasts and futures, not just the present state. Each stage is distinguished by sufficient change across the whole person, often consisting of several years or even decades. Such phases are not necessarily always positively developmental, they simply categorise experience.

On a less grander scale, phases make up a lifestage and can signify more piecemeal and practical developments across months, years, or even weeks. The phases in a lifestage can be broken up with as many subdivisions as is practical and meaningful, and can be differentiated by several key qualities:

1. **Isolated Phase**: one-off phase that never repeats and can be interpreted as a milestone.
2. **Seasonal Phase**: returning phase that may evolve slightly over subsequent repeats, but remains mostly consistent either by time or content.
3. **Evolving Phase**: phase that evolves in a practical sense yet remains similar in content. These evolutions can be labelled as distinct phases, but related to previous phases.

Making sense of overlapping seasons and evolutions across a category can be tricky, yet it is this intertwined character of phases that characterises a richly developing lifestory. Additionally, it allows a vast array of creative interpretations and compositions:

> Emotional Milestone: Close One Passing, Graduating Speech, Summer Road Trip, Wedding
> Event Milestone: Graduating School, Overseas Vacation, First Internship, often signifying the closing and starting of a lifestage.

> Down/Up Seasons: indicate a simple valence of negativity or positivity, a property that can just be added onto the content of a phase.
> Intense/Relaxed, Work/Break Seasons: indicate effort or energy expended, which say more about the content but can still be interpreted as an additional property of a phase.

> Parenthood Evolution: prime example is raising kids from growing up as babies, toddlers, children, teens, adolescents, adults as stages of care, then empty nesters and elderhood.
> Business Evolution: phases as a company increases in size thresholds from 1 to 2, 10, 50, 250 employees or in revenue amount.

There have been numerous proposed ways to model adult development over recent decades. Many define phases of adulthood by age ranges, such as early, middle, late adulthood and old age. Ascribing specific age-ranges to adulthood is not as useful as in childhood development, due to the exponentially increasing differences in life circumstances and behaviour that compound in life, which can account for up to 70% of variance in health and psychology.

Lifestage Milestones

Zooming into life phases, we can define measurable and specific healthy milestone markers of adult lifestages using the more general futures developmental guidelines outlined in PRACTICE Futures. For physical bodily development, as an example my personal milestones might look like:

Bodily: Fitness, Hygiene, Appearance

I. Possess a functional body.
   A. Able to walk, run, jump, complete basic movements
II. Fair flexibility, coordination, strength, endurance with basic hygiene.
   A. 3km run, 20 push/sit ups in 1 minute, can touch toes
   B. Essential wardrobe, basic oral, bodily hygiene routine
III. Good flexibility, strength, endurance with good hygiene and style sense.
   A. 10km run under 50 minutes, 40 push/sit ups in 1 minute
   B. Versatile wardrobe, skin, appearance routine
IV. Excellent athleticism with great hygiene and personalised style.
   A. 42km marathon distance under 4 hours, 50 push/sit ups in 1 minute, deadlift 100kg
   B. Personalised wardrobe, personalised hygiene routine
V. Masterful athleticism with authentic aligned appearance.
   A. 200 km ultramarathon or iron-man triathlon, deadlift 150kg
   B. Authentic styling and presentation, automatic and rejuvenating hygiene practices

Lifestage conditions or dependencies account for variations in life circumstances. Those conditions that yield the highest probability for allowing certain developmental experiences to occur, may be called a 'lifelink'. On the other hand, variables that heavily deprive the opportunity for other developments to occur, are a 'lifeblock'.

1. **Lifelink**: enabler or dependency of conditions for certain life developments. Often these also serve to increase the odds of preventing worse outcomes in later lifestages.

2. **Lifeblock**: disabler or condition that may block out certain life developments from occurring. These can be overcome with sufficient lifelinks.

Secure attachment style among partners as a lifelink for a healthy long-term relationship.
Sufficient income as a lifelink enabling the pursuit of greater meaning and authenticity in work.

Late-night drive gone awry, causing permanent immobility and a lifeblock to physical athleticism.
Lack of formal education credentials as a lifeblock to government jobs.

The lifelink of acquiring wisdom, whether through learning processes or stories for instance, is unique in its ability to catapult individuals over certain lifestage developmental milestones without requiring the individual to actually experience the reality and lesson. However, the acquisition of wisdom as opposed to experience is less likely to stick and be impactful in one's life without that direct experience – wisdom only offers a dilution of experience and passing of a developmental milestone.

Social: Humanity

A good life is defined by a lifespan consisting of the sum of momentary fulfillments in the criteria for what makes a good life – determined by the individual, social group and society they reside in, which evolve and change particularly across lifestages:

1. Individual Level: people grow to value different things by their own genetics, autonomy and behaviours.
2. Social Level: people are affected by their close social circle and networks.
3. Societal Level: everyone is influenced in part by their surrounding culture and norms.

> Sherlock Holmes values finding the truth, Socrates valued the living virtuously as a good life.
> Christians may value love, grace, peace over sin, academics value knowledge over ignorance.
> The West may value individualism, freedom and meritocracy, the East may value education, harmony and balance.

These interactions across the social spheres culminate to affect our models and conceptions for what makes a good life. The idea of the lifespan for individuals can be expanded to groups. Most commonly, these can be groups in the form of family, friends, teams or crews, companies and institutions, extending into communities, regions, states, countries, societies, civilisations and the world. Of particular interest are groups that really stick together and share in much of their decisions, and life experiences.

In the 20th century, Albert Bandura expanded on the behaviourist and cognitivist models of psychology via social learning theory. This focused on observation and imitation to better understand interpersonal and group dynamics. Still, the cliche, 'you are the average of the 5 people you spend the most time with' holds up across social circles, role models and wider networks. We find and interact closely with role models primarily live in person but also across key mediums in social media, books and biographies, and word of mouth from others. The key types of role models include:

1. Exemplars: those who are at the top of their field, or have great characteristics and achievements.
2. Fictions: fictional characters with admirable and larger-than-life characteristics.
3. History: biographies of inspirational figures.

In , we discussed subjective ways for the individual to organise their own lifestory. An objective approach is to create a standardised framework for all individuals. This common framework can be formed by a decision amongst a group, to support learning by close peer comparison and frequent interactions. These come in the form of company hierarchies and promotion ladders within a group, and mutual group goals for an artist collective, film studio, book club, research group or engineering firm, typically based on some group constitution or central values framework reviewed on a consistently occasional basis.

Individual: Identity

Individuals have a unique disposition about the world, an amalgamation of circumstance and decision. If an autopsy of identity was made across the lifespan, each lifestage may yield different conclusions about who the person claimed to be at their end of life. How does this add up?

Authentic Lifelines

All people genetically differ. All people have completely idiosyncratic life experiences. For all these internal and external differences, all people develop identities through the lifestages and have a unique composite experience of the world. Despite this, not many people are able to develop an authentic identity and way of living. Authenticity is a quality that is deliberately developed over time, with attention to internal and external states. While identity repeatedly fades, authenticity uniquely remains.

> Identity: Popular Kid, College Sportsman, 9-5 Worker, Christian Mother
> Authenticity: Sociable, Physical Activity, Conscientious, Christian
>
> 'University student' may be an identity that many people can take on, but 'Student' is likely to be authentic, representing a lifelong curious and scholarly mindset over the long run.

Authenticity can be broken up into 2 factors:

1. Internality: following an internal truth, whether intuition or principles or purpose
2. Congruence: similarity between internal and external presentation

Anyone who focuses on following a script for behaving externally can be described as inauthentic or the more pejorative 'fake'. Someone with an undeveloped authenticity may follow an internal truth, but be less developed in the way that is expressed in behaviour externally. When there is a strong alignment of congruence between one's internal and external world, they are said to be authentic.

In following with authenticity, every individual upon a retrospective analysis of their lifespan, has a **'lifeline'** that describes the unique essence of the person's total overall character and life choices. The most common lifeline is the one without a start or an end, where people carry out their lives in relative

aimlessness and a mixed bag of experiences heavily informed by their surrounding environment and network.

A lifeline is based on the theory that humans are perpetually seeking for their next psychological breakthrough. This kind of seeking may be active or extremely passive, from enlightenment seekers to nihilists, to the average person paying the bills and carrying out their day. This means that there exists a latent question, usually hidden from the individual at present, that they must answer in order to move forward for their continued development. The individual has to uncover what the question is that resonates most deeply to them. Once they have identified the question that resonates most deeply, they must engage in the necessary actions to answer the question.

Aesthetic Tastes

The difference between taste and style can often be attributed to the idea that taste is objective and about discernment more than style is subjective and expressive. However, when taste is deeply examined, I hypothesise that taste is just as subjective as style as 'experts' may agree that certain things are tasteful, but likely have disagreements about details or the reasoning for why that is so. Hence, taste is the refinement of one's aesthetic preferences and priorities, often referring to taste in music, art, food, sports, and various other cultural phenomena. It serves as a meta-skill by supporting the most important development of skills according to one's taste. More broadly, taste acts as a filter of selection towards any situation where there is discernible choice, whether life philosophy, airplane brand, shoe size or economic policy.

This creates a situation of countless tastes one can have and keep track of! To manage overwhelm, one ought to establish the most important tastes to keep track of – a list of tastes of tastes. As a practical and contemporary example, a 'tier list' is a popular way to manage and evaluate tastes, for example:

1. Arts: Visual Mediums, Music Genres, Cooking Cuisines,
2. Popular Culture: Literary Authors, Movies, Video Shows, Video Games, Celebrities
3. General: Colours, Shapes, Brands, Animals
4. Events: Music Concerts, Festivals, Celebrations, Conventions, Educational Discussions
5. Sciences: Chemical Elements, Compounds, Natural Laws, Inventions

Natural development of taste typically happens over a long period of time by the cycle of 2 processes:

1. **Taste Volume**: consuming or experiencing several samples of the subject that taste is being developed in, across different variations in medium, circumstance, context, people.
2. **Taste Reflection**: thinking back on the quality compared to adjacent samples to incrementally assuage priorities and what is subjectively better than others.

As mentioned, the reflection component can be practiced by way of tier lists:

1. Create a tier list by process of ranking.

2. Check back later after sufficient volume, and edit based on more refined experiences and further categorisations or properties.

As the list becomes increasingly more stable with minimal changes over time, that is an indication of a refined taste. If experimenting with novel tastes, a long enough period should be accounted for over the duration of the life phase to give an objective assessment. Over time, a refined taste leads to a solid and stable authentic identity and a clearer lifeline, enabling the flourishing of the individual alongside values of what makes a good life.

Passing

This document is a work in progress and there are a couple points I'd like to expand on in future practice.

Firstly is more thought and data into specific adult lifestages, phases and milestones with examples and statistics. Secondly is the practice of constructing lifestage models with mostly individuals first, then groups. Thirdly is my own personal development of taste, discernment and lifestage invocation and future development before I comment further for other people.

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