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A Longitudinal Journey in Exploring Development in “56 Up”

The documentary “56 Up” is a film that follows fourteen British individuals throughout their lifetime. The film features a diverse group of individuals, each from different backgrounds in England, to portray how each person has evolved over time as well. The series started when each participant was seven years old and returned to document their personal lives and development every seven years old. The documentary highlights each participant’s social class, life choices, and aspirations through the incorporation of a longitudinal study of their lives. The documentary offers a portrayal on the lives of the participants over the course of the filming of the documentary as it captures changes that affected their experiences from childhood to middle age. Overall, the documentary serves the purpose of exploring the dynamics involved in everyone’s life experience and how these experiences shaped each person uniquely.

Within the documentary, “56 Up”, the viewpoints of the participants’ lives unfold as viewers can understand the personal triumphs and challenges of each individual. One of the most striking aspects of development in the film was the exploration of personal growth and change of everyone over several decades. This aspect allowed viewers to better understand the course of each individual’s development and how it impacted their lives today. It was intriguing to see how each person differed in that some achieved success in their chosen careers, some experienced shifts, and some even had complete career changes. This highlights the idea that while everyone had professional career aspirations, they had economic and societal influences that affected their overall career choice. For example, Neil Hughes initially struggled with severe mental health issues and homelessness. While Hughes did not have a plan for his future early in his life, he had a significant transformation and pursued a career in politics as this benefitted his economic, societal, and mental health issues altogether.

Neil Hughes is one character that stood out to me throughout this film as he endures a complex life journey from childhood to middle age. Around age fourteen, Neil had already started to exhibit signs of emotional distress and social withdrawal, indicating the onset of mental health issues. This highlights the importance that early adolescence has on one’s emotional well-being and its impact during these formative years. Neil’s most significant developmental challenge with his severe mental health issues includes his times of homelessness and depression. These difficulties pursued him a journey of instability with lack of direction as Neil is faced with isolation during this time. This correlates with Erikson’s stages of psychosocial development during young adulthood of intimacy vs. isolation, as Neil dealt with isolation in his 20s and 30s. However, despite his early struggles in life, Neil takes a remarkable turn in his 40s and 50s and becomes involved in politics. During this time, he finds purpose and stability through societal engagement and contribution to a more positive wellbeing. Entering his 50s and 60s, Neil experiences greater stability in his mental health due to the structure and meaningful activities in his life and the feeling that he serves a purpose as well. He reflects on his accomplishments throughout his life’s journey and exhibits both ideals of integrity vs. despair from Erikson’s psychosocial development ideals. Neil can accept his past and still find meaning in his life through strength, maturity, and growth.

One physical aspect of development that was distinctive in the documentary was the portrayal of aging and showing how time changed each person. There are visible signs of aging that can be seen throughout the film as well such as graying hair, wrinkles and changes in body composition. This aspect of aging allows the audience to connect deeper with this film as they can relate to the physical transformations involved and understand that aging, along with the challenges included, is a universal experience. One example of this was shown with Sue Davis as she demonstrates the physical signs of aging in a relatable manner. The film shows her once youthful face and vibrant hair to her more wrinkled face with thinned and gray hair to show the natural progression of aging throughout her development. Furthermore, Sue discusses how she had to change her routine as she aged to maintain a healthy lifestyle such as paying close attention to her diet and engaging in exercise. The documentary offers perspective on the unavoidable aspects of aging, challenges it brings, and the resilience in which people adapt to these changes as well.

Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development in middle to late adulthood and the idea around the stress of integrity vs. despair is an inconsistency portrayed within this film. According to Erikson, this stage involves individuals reflecting on their lives and either accepting their achievements and failures or feeling a sense of regret. However, the “56 Up” documentary demonstrates a wide range of emotions from the participants and expresses that many do not fit into these specific categories of integrity or despair but instead display a mix of both satisfaction and regret. For instance, the participants discuss fulfillment in their professional accomplishments while simultaneously explaining their regrets on missed opportunities or unfilled desires they once had. On the other hand, the film is consistent with the portrayal of physical aging and health in middle to late adulthood. Participants like Sue and Tony discuss a range of health issues that have become more prominent as they age such as joint pain, heart problems, and overall physical decline. The documentary offers a unique view into how these changes impact daily life and emotional wellbeing while also explaining the strategies used to cope with these aging conditions.

Altogether, this documentary offers a unique perspective on human development as the participants were followed over time and viewers can see how these individuals change and remain the same over time. This documentary allows the audience to observe the long-term effects of various life circumstances, events, and choices as well. The most significant strength of “56 Up” is its longitudinal study as it is completely different from other documentary formats. The longitudinal design allows the film to present the narrative of each participant’s life as a continuous story as opposed to focusing on one time of their lives. Furthermore, the longitudinal study allows the audience to understand how early life experiences and societal aspects interact to shape an individual’s outcome in life. Additionally, one limitation of “56 Up” is the selection bias in the participant group as participants were chosen to represent social classes in Britain.

However, the group was not representative of all demographics within Britain such as ethnic minorities or individuals from rural areas. Finally, I would have to say my personal most memorable moments of the film were the group reunions when the participants interact and reflect on their journeys together. “56 Up” is a powerful documentary that offers insight into human development through its use of a longitudinal study design. If I were to undertake a similar longitudinal documentary project in 2024, I would consider the idea of broadening demographic representation to ensure a more inclusive participant group and to include perspectives from a wide range of people. Furthermore, I would include participants of different genders and sexual orientations to reflect the diverse human experience and identities in the modern world as well. These approaches would ensure that the documentary captures a wider array of life stories and challenges.