The Three Phases of Life

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One of life’s great fascinations is watching people evolve over time. Some people grow and develop, while others seem to be stuck in patterns that limit their happiness and well-being. Others excel in certain areas of their lives while failing miserably in others. A small few are spectacularly successful by conventional measures yet are perpetually dissatisfied.

Is there a simple model we can use to make sense of these observations?

Many years of watching and thinking have led me to believe that we can further our understanding by simplifying the problem. The model we use consists of three fundamental states, characterized by the Yiddish words schlepper, macher, and mensch. First I will describe the states, and how people move from one state to the next. Then I will explain how people can get stuck in one of the earlier states, and how to address that failure mode. In addition, I’ll talk about people in different states in different parts of their lives at a given time. Finally, I’ll address the issue of the distribution of the population in the various states, and the implications for getting along in the real world.

I want to be a little precise with words here. I call the three states "phases," because I believe that there is a natural progression that is accessible to all people. The phases become available as people grow, mature, and come to terms with the real world, learning how to make appropriate compromises between their belief systems and the exigencies of everyday life. Unfortunately, sometimes people get "stuck" in a phase and don’t move on. That leads to thinking of them as a "class" of people. But the word class is overloaded with lots of other implications, social and otherwise. Hence I avoid the use of that term throughout the article.
Why is this important? We have a tendency to believe that life is complex, and there is a wealth of academic research on the interactions of social groups in many different contexts: family, business, teams, and so on. Most of it is inaccessible to the average person. What I have come to believe is that this very simple model explains a wide variety of real world data and has predictive power. A simple model that people can understand and apply and that works eighty percent of the time is more useful than a complex and hard to use model that works ninety-five percent of the time.

**Schlepper**

Let us begin with the first state. People in this phase are collectively known as "schleppers."

This term comes from the Yiddish verb "schlep," which means "to drag." Colloquially, it also means to carry something around, as in "schlepping those bags through the airport." In most common parlance, a "schlepper" is thought of as a lazy, sloppy person, but this is not the connotation that I wish to apply here. For me, a schlepper is someone who is in the first stage of his or her development.

Literally, a schlepper is a carrier. In the good old days, a perfect example of a schlepper was a caddie, a kid who carried golf bags. You are not doing a lot of heavy thinking when you are schlepping; you are performing useful but perhaps menial labor, usually in the service of someone else. Schlepping is not very glorious, but nonetheless one should not underestimate its importance.

First of all, just because you are schlepping does not mean you are forbidden to think. In fact, just the opposite is true: because the work content of schlepping includes little thinking, you can use this time to think and learn while you schlep. Many creative ideas occur during schlepping. For instance, how can I schlep this stuff with less effort? One of the very first caveman (or perhaps I should say "caveperson") schleppers invented the wheel as a result. The act of routinely repeating a boring, uninteresting task, or having to expend what seems like an inordinate amount of labor to achieve a mundane goal, often causes even the dullest schlepper to have an idea -- necessity (made most obvious by pain or fatigue) being the mother of invention. My experience is that people who have schlepped often see new and interesting ways to avoid schlepping, even when the schlepping is associated with a new domain. They develop instincts for when something is going to turn into a big schlep, and head off that eventuality at the pass. Ex-schleppers make great engineers, for example.

In general, we all need to schlep. It builds character, as trite as that may sound. It teaches us humility. Humility of the sort "If I don´t get smarter about this, I´m going to have to schlep the rest of my life." There are some interesting aspects of this phenomenon.

Schleppers quickly perceive the great injustice of life. Here you are, young, smart, good looking, and so on, and you have to schlep for some old, fat, dull idiot who just happens to be your boss. How did that happen?
Sometimes these bosses can be downright stupid, to the point of making you schlep more than you should have to. Other times, they can increase your grief through deliberate cruelty. And because you are the designated schlepper, you have two choices: schlep in silence, or go schlep somewhere else. The third option, making a ruckus, is usually counterproductive, as schleppers are basically interchangeable by definition, and noisy ones are quickly replaced.

Some amazing truths reveal themselves to observant schleppers. For example, schlepping in silence causes erosion of the stomach lining, so the learning schlepper will attempt to deal creatively with his work or social situation in such a way as to minimize grief. Quitting and schlepping somewhere else (option two, above) is most often found to not be a solution at all, for just as all schleppers are interchangeable, all schlepping jobs are basically the same. Most of the time, it’s out of the frying pan and into the towering inferno.

Skipping over the schlepper phase is dangerous, even if you could do it. Actually, some people do -- those who are born rich. They never get to experience the joys of schlepping -- for instance, the joy of creative schlepping, or the pride one takes in a load well-schlepped. As a result, they never understand what most of the world is going through. They take too much for granted and are not well grounded in reality. And, it is almost impossible to become a schlepper later in life if you never were one to start with.

But more important, you miss out on important lessons -- humility, the value of a dollar earned through a hard day’s work, the intrinsic unfairness of the world, and how screwed up things are down in the trenches. The other irreplaceable lesson comes through contact with the enormous variety of people the real world presents the schlepper -- the gonifs,¹ the liars, the cheats, and what used to be called in less politically correct times, "the common people." Most important, there are those wonderful others who see something special in you and say to themselves "Why is this kid schlepping? Surely he can do more," and then act on it. They become our mentors, coaches, and champions, and that is one of the ways we move beyond the schlepper phase.

Sooner or later, every schlepper must come to understand that in order to make progress, you have to move beyond the schlepper phase. This involves investment. You can schlep forever and blame it on the evils of the class system, or free-market capitalism, or whatever, but the system is there. To stop schlepping, you have to be able to do something that gets someone to say, "Hey, I´m not paying you to schlep that stuff, get someone else to do it!" Often this takes the form of actually making the effort to get more education or training, thinking, or doing something that makes you stand out in a positive way. It requires, in Churchill’s words, blood, sweat, tears, and toil. You must show that you can add value at the next level. This is a two-part proposition. First, you have to get the training, acquire the skills, get the result, do the deed. Then, you have to get someone influential to recognize that something has changed, and that you are ready to graduate from the schlepper phase. These are the mentors described above.
So, we all start out as schleppers. Kids are the schleppers in every family. Think of being a schlepper as being an apprentice. Kids are apprentice adults. If they are watchful, can avoid getting killed, and listen from time to time, they can graduate to adulthood. If not, they remain kids forever.

Resign yourself that in everything you do -- every new job, every new sport, every new relationship -- you start out as a schlepper. How long you remain one is up to you. And remember, while you are a schlepper, to maintain your dignity.

**Macher**

The second phase of life is that of the macher. I believe the origin of "macher" is related to the verb "to do" or "to make."

Phase two is the longest, and in some ways, the most enjoyable phase of life. A macher is someone who gets things done, who makes things happen, who gets results. When you are a macher, you are "putting points on the board." This phase is incredibly productive, and most machers get a real sense of satisfaction from doing what they do. Some machers enjoy it so much that they stay machers forever -- and this is not a totally bad thing. If it weren´t for the machers of the world, we´d all still be schlepping.

Machers are not just the inventors, the entrepreneurs, the craftsmen, and the geniuses -- although those folks generally are machers. What distinguishes a macher is that he or she adds value and makes a difference. Being a macher is usually equated with high performance, not the ordinary or mundane. Those who put in their eight hours and don’t mess up too often aren’t machers; they’re sort of advanced schleppers. No, to be a macher, you have to be in that category that is often characterized by the exclamation "We need a real macher to fix this!" In many firms, machers are the "rainmakers," the folks who generate business. The litmus test is this -- if you take away the macher, the organization not only suffers greatly, it’s just not the same.

Machers have the following interesting characteristics. They are usually very focused, to the point of being driven. They are intense. They are results-oriented. They understand the goal and can get it in the crosshairs. It is usually a bad thing to get between a macher and the macher’s desired result.

Machers are charismatic, in both the good and bad sense. It is unusual for a macher to not be charismatic, because this trait is so often linked with leadership. There are exceptions, but not enough of them to warrant more space here.

There is a dark side. Machers will err on the side of believing that the end justifies the means, because, to them, it does. They can be absolutely ruthless. People who are squeamish about hurting other people’s feelings will often employ machers, who have no such compunctions. The macher has no illusions about what he’s getting paid for -- it’s to get a result. But, if the truth be known, the macher would almost always do it for free --
achievement is a very potent drug.

Machers can be self-limiting. The really good machers discover early in their careers that you have to be careful about breaking too much glass. Annoy enough people and you won´t be able to get others to help you -- even other machers! There are a lot of obnoxious young machers, but very few obnoxious old machers; the reason is obvious. It´s hard for machers to progress if they can´t build groups, consisting, incidentally, of other machers. The scope of the problems they are asked to solve increases, and gets to the point where fielding a team is the only answer. If the macher is incapable of developing the interpersonal skills necessary to get others to play, he will eventually wind up isolated and be overtaken by even more clever machers.

Machers enjoy a side benefit that is not insignificant. To some extent, they can be *prima donnas* and make their own rules. Why? Because many people and organizations will tolerate some pretty outrageous behavior if the problem to be solved is serious enough or the gain is big enough. So the macher can avoid much of the petty tyranny of organizations and bureaucracies by explicitly placing himself outside the normal system. Many machers choose this path simply because this is the only way they can function, by setting up a context in which they can get the job done by their rules. In any other context, they will fail because they have to obey constraints that they judge to be too onerous. But, live by the sword, die by the sword. When a macher fails, there is never an insufficiency of people waiting to bury him -- his enemies tend to accumulate and have long memories. To survive outside the system, you have to be really good and have real integrity. If you don´t, your first mistake will be your last.

Sometimes machers can become intoxicated by the power they wield and can really get out of control. In the end, an overly aggressive macher will self-destruct, but not before creating a pretty big mess. Machers rarely fade away quietly; rather, they go out in a blaze of fireworks. Hubris just catches up, and since machers do everything on a grand scale -- they do have vision -- they generally fail spectacularly.

Can you be a macher without having been a schlepper? Yes, but it is rare. Machers who have not served some kind of apprenticeship usually have a piece missing. It is tough to be a macher if you are not grounded in reality, and schlepping is the quintessential training ground in reality.

Machers tend to stay in the macher phase because they are an elite. They enjoy lots of tangible and intangible rewards in the business world in exchange for the results they achieve for their organizations. They are constantly being recruited for bigger and better challenges. It´s a great life, and the risks are few -- organizational backlash from time to time, and perhaps a premature coronary from excessive Type-A behavior. But most machers can deal with it.

In other areas of life, being a macher means being competent; actually, it means performing at the highest level of competence. There´s a tendency to aspire to be a macher in all parts of one´s life. Once one has become a macher in one part, it can be frustrating, as competency can be highly domain-specific. Ergo, many machers become one-dimensional, focusing
their energies in their area of dominance. Since they tend to be competitive by nature, this is a natural stalling-out point for them. Once you are better than most of your peers, what is there left to strive for?

As exalted as machers are, there is a higher state. The Yiddish word for it — mensch -- is pretty much untranslatable into English.

**Mensch**

A mensch is a gentleman, a "fine person." But that doesn’t quite capture the feeling of "He’s a real mensch!" The essence of being a mensch is to have a global perspective, to be somewhat introspective and philosophical, and to be kind. A mensch is good at listening and very good at seeing the other person’s point of view.

We should remark here that the very word "mensch" means "man" in German. But remember, we are using the Yiddish meaning in this article, and so can assert that this phase of life is available to both sexes.

There’s a big difference between machers and mensches. First, machers usually have a very hard edge to them; mensches are mellower, softer, and more patient. Machers have a sense of urgency; mensches have a sense of inevitability. The mensch really believes that it all comes out in the wash. The schlepper is often viewed as dull or stupid, when in fact all he may be guilty of is ignorance; the macher is viewed as being smart or clever; the mensch is always viewed as being wise. You go to the macher when you want a problem solved now; you go to the mensch when you are looking for a long-term solution. In some sense, the schlepper can’t do anything, the macher is the tactician par excellence, and the mensch is the strategist.

Before I let you think that the mensch is just a Yiddish incarnation of Yoda, I should point out that the mensch is not just a dispenser of advice, but also a doer of deeds. The thing that sets the mensch apart is that he not only knows the right thing to do, but he acts on it, even at great personal cost. Unlike the macher, the mensch is not at all interested in getting the credit for the result. He is vitally interested in the result for its own sake, and doesn’t really care if anyone ever knows he was the facilitator. A typical mensch-like thing to do is to make a large, anonymous donation to charity, for example.

Machers sometimes make good mentors, but only as an almost accidental side effect of their primary objective, which is getting results. Machers more often mentor more junior machers, as opposed to schleppers. Mensches, on the other hand, make superb coaches and mentors, because they are so highly attuned to the needs of others; they help everyone because they empathize with everyone. They also have a quintessential long-term perspective, so they understand the leverage of developing others and building infrastructure. They understand the Zen-like beauty of injecting energy into the system, unaware of when or where the positive consequences of that act will appear -- yet confident that it certainly will.

The mensch also provides a lot of lubrication in any organization. He’s
above the fray, committed to the organization and its goals, but without a personal agenda, unlike the macher, who always has one. The macher is territorial, whereas the mensch is extraterritorial. The mensch will endeavor to be a peacemaker, a mediator, and someone who is creative in trying to find a solution when there appears to be none. Appearances notwithstanding, the mensch is a highly effective person. His strength comes from his ability to work well with everyone, and the respect everyone has for him.

Can you become a mensch without having been a macher? There are two points of view.

The first point of view is that the schlepper-to-mensch transition is sort of like going from apprentice to master craftsman without ever having been a competent journeyman in between. In this point of view, the wisdom the mensch exhibits is accumulated from years of being a macher; the really good machers age well and eventually become mensches.

The problem with this point of view is that there seem to be some clear exceptions. Just as we have noted that many machers never graduate to menschhood, it is also the case that we find a few people displaying the characteristics of mensches who have not been machers. They have schlepped for extended periods of time but have not become bitter. They have accumulated wisdom, are kind, and are secure in themselves. They universally understand people and the human drama, and exhibit lots of empathy. Their judgment is impeccable. The mystery is where their wisdom came from.

More on Mensches

The Swiss physicist and ecologist Olivier Guisan told me twenty-five years ago that the key to growing up was to have one’s eyes opened without having one’s heart hardened. A maturing process that enables us to cope with the sometimes daunting realities of life, without becoming cynical, is essential. The schlepper is typically a pessimist, the macher a cynic. The mensch is an optimist. He believes in the goodness of people and in civilization’s ability to find solutions to complex problems. His own humanity is of course part of this, but he ignores that.

The noted psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has described a model in his book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. In this theory, there is a tension between knowledge and skill set versus the task worked on. If the task is too easy, boredom sets in, and people are unhappy. If the task is -- relatively speaking -- very challenging compared to competence, then people are stretched, but tense and anxious as a result. When there is a reasonable match -- not too easy, not too hard -- then a "flow state" is achieved. Csikszentmihalyi calls the achievement of the flow state the "flow channel," because it spans a broad range of competency and task difficulty. Flow is a state of grace, where achievement is high and one experiences a feeling of incredible well-being; athletes call it "being in the zone." What is interesting is that in this model, schleppers would appear to be unhappy because they are constantly below the flow channel, working on tasks that they find boring. Machers, it would appear, are
troubled because they are most frequently working above the flow channel -- they are characteristically "in over their heads." And, mensches, by my reckoning, are happy and effective because they are so often in the flow channel. If achieving flow is a key, then mensches would seem to have discovered it.

Surprisingly, you don´t have to be old to be a mensch, although many of the traits associated with mensches can come with age. No, being a mensch is a state of mind, available to all of us with the proper perspective and attitude.

Mensches are happy people. They are surrounded by happy people. They can deal with life´s worst surprises and help others to do so, too. They have extremely well integrated and balanced lives, and they are at peace.

**Population Distribution**

For every hundred schleppers in the world, there are ten machers, and one mensch.

Why are there so many schleppers? The easy answer is to steal from Lincoln and say, "God must have loved them, because he made so many." But even so, one would think that frustration would cause almost everyone to graduate sooner or later. Alas, it is not so. First, laziness plays a big part: Many people are just not willing to do what it takes to move up. Second, it requires maturity: There is an attitude adjustment that is required to graduate -- you need to take responsibility for your own destiny. It is easier to complain about the system and your inability to advance than it is to take matters into your hands and succeed in spite of obstacles. Finally, there is a commitment to continue to grow. Moving beyond the schlepper zone is a fundamental change, and it scares many people, because it implies a new way of life that is bereft of the simpler comforts that the schlepper enjoys. Because the "no gain" comes with "no pain," many schleppers can never quite get over the emotional barrier it takes to graduate. I think these three factors -- sacrifice, maturity, and fundamental life change -- explain why there are so many schleppers out there.

All this exists in the context of a real, sometimes harsh, external world. In my experience, intelligence and talent play much less a part in graduation than do hard work and a determined attitude. In today´s global economy, I believe that the opportunity is there, that there are no insurmountable cultural, social, or other barriers. If you allow yourself to believe that external factors rule, you will consign yourself to the role of a schleper. You can prevail over others who block the path, but no one can lift you over a barrier that you construct for yourself. That there are only ten machers for every hundred schleppers is the greatest waste of human capital that I can imagine. It is a situation that I find untenable as we move deeper and deeper into the information economy. The schlepper jobs are going away, but the attitudes that have allowed them to persist for so long are not.

For those who graduate, a relatively short period of their lives is spent
schlepping. If you are in this category, most of your life will be spent as a macher, so try to be a good one. If machers could look at this period of their lives as apprentice mensches, we might all be a little better off. I don´t think it would make them much less effective, and, in the long run, we´d all live longer and be happier. But it´s tough to alter the macher´s behavior, because he believes his effectiveness is tied to all the characteristics that distinguish him from the mensch. It´s a puzzle.

I worry that my estimate of one mensch for every ten machers may be higher than the actual ratio. The world needs more mensches, as they seem to be in constantly short supply. In too many cases, their period of menschhood is short, as their spirit is more durable than the body that contains it.

Summary

The model makes certain assumptions. You start out as a schlepper, grow to be a macher, and hope to become a mensch. That is the usual progression, with the exceptions noted above. Even though the model is simple, it is not perfectly neat; anytime we deal with generalizations about people, we will have "messy" exceptions to deal with.

The problem is that while I can tell you what you need to do to become a macher, I can´t give you a recipe for becoming a mensch. You can´t become a mensch through hard work, the way you can become a macher. It may be that mensches are born, not made. Asking how to become a mensch is a little like asking how to become wise, or how to become enlightened.

It helps to have come under the influence of a mensch or two, especially early in life when they can serve as examples. Growing up with a macher for a father and a mensch for a grandfather -- and seeing how their styles played against each other -- could be very enlightening, if the schlepper child were especially aware.

Another key idea: understanding that the mensches of the world want nothing in return for their kindness, but that you pass it on to the next generation.

But what do I know?

Dedicated to Roslyn Rosenthal Marasco, 1921-1998

Footnotes

1A gonif is a common thief.

2Pronounced "chik-SENT-mee-hi."

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