



Encyclopedia of Educational Psychology

Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development

Contributors: Edited by: Neil J. Salkind

Edited by: Neil J. Salkind

Book Title: Encyclopedia of Educational Psychology

Chapter Title: "Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development"

Pub. Date: 2008

Access Date: December 11, 2015

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks

Print ISBN: 9781412916882

Online ISBN: 9781412963848

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412963848.n93>

Print pages: 352-355

©2008 SAGE Publications, Inc.. All Rights Reserved.

This PDF has been generated from SAGE Knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

In one biography, Erik Erikson is referred to as an architect of identity. He was trained in psychoanalysis, and one of his main scholarly interests was describing the nature of humankind. He engaged in personal and cultural observations in his theoretical writings about identity formation. His major contribution was the formulation of an elaborate life-span theory of identity formation based on eight life stages. Each stage is based on age-appropriate and culturally defined crises, or turning points, which demand that the individual choose between dialectic and opposing developmental outcomes. Each stage outcome provides a contribution to identity formation in the form of ego strengths.

Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development has been useful in helping teachers and educators to understand child development for more than 50 years. It remains a solid theoretical perspective for understanding child and adolescent development and adult learning. There is an ever-expanding body of research that demonstrates Erikson's many ideas can be empirically supported as being valid and practical.

Definitions of Identity

Identity is defined in many ways. Most often Erikson refers to *ego identity*, or the portion of personality that functions to direct, guide, and select thought and action. It is the part of personality that refers to the consistency and sameness that a person uses as a style of individuality and its meaning about the self for significant others like family members, teachers, or friends. Identity can be thought of as a form of relatively persistent character one shares with others.

In addition to ego identity, Erikson also refers to the stable and coherent, but yet evolving, character one develops with a group's ideals in the form of social identity. Social identity is most readily observed in the expectations and commitments to the values, goals, and ideals of institutions such as religion, politics, occupation, and the family. In particular, social identity is based on the ideology that is formed within a commitment to a particular institutional value. For example, an occupational identity based on the achievement motive of capitalism differs from an occupational identity based on the conformist motive of a communism ideology. Religious identities differ within Protestant, Catholic, Islamic, Hindu, Jewish, or other forms of religious social ideologies. Likewise, political identities vary among party, state, or group ideologies.

Families vary as to the values, goals, and aspirations that parents have for their children, and identification with family ideologies will vary widely within any given community. Many factors will contribute to whether youth will identify (or not) with their own family values and ideologies. Indeed, individuals strive toward psychology unity, where various domains of identity across the various institutional ideologies merge into a comfortable coherent and consistent sense of individuality. Extreme differences in values or incompatible goals or values in adopted commitments create angst or anxiety that links with self-consciousness and discomfort, leaving a person with a sense of fragmentation. A fragmented self (or incompatible elements within either an ego identity or a social identity) will lead to uncomfortable states of anxiety and a sense of inner conflict.

Eight Life Stages

The eight life stages that facilitate identity formation are set by societal expectations to

accomplish specific developmental tasks. Each of these tasks, as it is successfully resolved, provides an innovative strength to both ego-and social-identity development. These stages are based on an epigenetic principle wherein the individual is driven toward, is aware of, and interacts with life dilemmas. Human growth is based on a dialectic struggle of inner (psychological) and outer (social) forces where each stage of life involves a crisis or turning point. Each of the life stages provides a critical point to increase potential for growth in identity based on an ontogenetic evolution. Healthy development is based on the assumption that every stage comes to its ascendance: A crisis is resolved and is, ideally, concluded with an effective and meaningful identity resolution. To complete a life stage, a person must synthesis (or resynthesize) early childhood identifications for novel and newly constructed identifications. Put another way, the individual must both selectively repudiate and assimilate childhood identifications with new configurations of ego identity.

Each stage of life consists of issues regarding a designated age or stage, questions and virtues, appropriate precursors, contributions to identity, and a radius of social order. Erikson begins with infancy and a crisis of trust versus mistrust. In general terms the question to be answered is 'What do I have and what can I give?' The virtue is hope. In early childhood, the crisis is autonomy versus shame and doubt. The question is 'What can I will freely?' and the virtue is will. Somewhat later in childhood the crisis becomes initiative versus guilt, and the question is 'What can I imagine I will be?' The virtue is purpose. For the school-age child, the crisis is industry versus inferiority, and the question is 'What can I learn to make?' The virtue is competence. In adolescence, the crisis is identity versus role confusion. The question is 'Who do I choose to be ideologically and occupationally?' The virtue is fidelity. In young adulthood, the question the crisis is intimacy versus isolation. The question focuses on 'What I can give to another?' The virtue is love. In middle adulthood, the crisis is generativity versus stagnation. The question is 'What I can give and care for?' The virtue is care. As one approaches old age, the crisis is integrity versus despair. The question is 'What is the essence of my existence?' The virtue is wisdom.

The radius of social order begins with the important power of the maternal person and expands through school, community, technology, and beyond. In infancy, the contribution to identity is time perspective versus time diffusion, and the radius is the maternal person. In early childhood, the contribution to identity is self-certainty versus identity consciousness, and the radius is parental care. In childhood, the contribution is role experimentation versus negative identity, and the radius is the basic family. For the school-age child, the contribution is the anticipation of achievement, and the social radius is the neighborhood, school, and technology. In adolescence, the contribution is identity consolidation, and the social radius includes peer groups, models of leadership, and ideological perspectives of the social institutions associated with occupation, family, religion, and politics.

Importance of Psychosocial Moratorium

Each of the first five life stages provides an important precursor to identity formation, and the remaining three offer further consolidation through the virtues of love, care, and wisdom. However, Western societies, in particular, provide an extended period of time for role experimentation to explore identity options and select and make commitments to those identity fragments that will become integrated into a uniformed sense of ego identity and social identity. This period of time is called a *psychosocial moratorium*. It

is a period when schools, parents, and communities allow for experimentation and offer opportunities for teenagers and sometimes even emerging adults to explore what they can do to select and prepare for an occupation, profession, or career. During this time, youth can find many teachers, parents, adults, and others ready to role model and assist in preparing them through education, mentoring, and apprenticeship experiences. Failure of youth to effectively utilize the psychosocial moratorium can result in a negative identity whereby youth identify with negative features or characteristics of society that cause the youth to appear rebellious or alienated.

Women's Identity

The most controversial aspect of Erikson's theory of identity development is his writings on gender differences. In early psychoanalytic writings based on observations during play therapy, boys were observed to use play building blocks to make towers, whereas girls made circles or walled enclosures. This led to notions of boys using outer or phallic space and girls using inner biological space in their psychology development and to the belief that girls' development was based, in large part, on their biological destiny of procreation and motherhood. Thus, identity formation for men occurs with identity formation functioning clearly as a precursor to intimacy formation. In contrast, for women, identity formation unfolds concurrently with intimacy formation. There has been ample critique of this controversial statement on gender difference; however, there is little strong empirical research evidence of a longitudinal nature to establish whether or not this hypothesis is accurate. Most of the evidence that has been presented to indicate Erikson's notion of biological destiny for women's identity formation trajectory has been of a qualitative nature and could easily be interpreted arguably as supporting or not supporting this assumption. Nonetheless, the position on biological determinism was maintained by Erikson throughout all of his lectures, writings, and interviews. In a historical period of heightened feminism, this position was unpopular and often criticized.

Identity Statuses

Theoretical perspectives are often difficult to define and measure. Only limited aspects of Erikson's theory of psychosocial development have been defined well enough to measure. The two stages most widely studied have been *identity versus role confusion* and *intimacy versus stagnation*.

James Marcia identified two dimensions from Erikson's writings that are part of the developmental process of identity formation. These dimensions include a searching or crisis process and an outcome of commitment. Using these two dimensions and crossing them at the midpoint in the middle he created four states (which he called *statuses*): no searching and no commitment, no searching and commitment, searching and no commitment, and searching and commitment. In his framework, searching, or *identity crisis*, involved active attempts to formulate or construct an identity. *Commitment* refers to the construction and formulation of a comfortable sense of identity. No searching and no commitment is called *identity diffusion*. No searching but with commitment is called *foreclosure*, a form of identity where there is a passive acceptance of identity of a previous generation or parents. Searching but no reported commitment is called *moratorium*, an individual who is in the process of actively trying to formulate a sense of self through discovery and or self-creation. Finally, evidence of past searching and current commitment is called *identity achievement*. Clinical and

social science research reveals that adolescents and youth with diffused ego identity are most likely to have mental health problems, whereas their peers who are identity achieved are most likely to have the best mental health of the four types of identity status types. These findings are fully consistent with Erikson's theory of ego-identity formation.

Jacob Orlofsky and colleagues used three major criteria for assessing a person's level of intimacy as suggested by Erikson:

1. Does the person have close relationships with male and female friends?
2. Does he or she have an enduring heterosexual relationship?
3. Are the person's close relationships deep or superficial? (Depth includes openness, affection, respect, loyalty, a capacity to accept and resolve differences, and mutuality.)

Based on these criteria, five relationships, or intimacy statuses, can be identified through interview techniques. At the two extremes are the intimate and the isolated statuses. The intimacy status involves love and an enduring commitment. In the isolated status, the person is withdrawn and has no close personal associations. Between these two extremes are three other types. The preintimate status is a loving relationship but with no enduring commitment. A stereotyped status is an association with male or female friends that lacks depth and closeness. The pseudointimate status is artificial; it only seems to have depth and caring.

Wide use of the intimacy and identity statuses has revealed that individuals who are identity diffused are also intimacy isolated. In contrast, identity-achieved individuals have considerably more intimate relationships. This is again consistent with Erikson's notions of interstage linkages among identity and intimacy resolutions in the fifth and six stages of ego-identity development.

Power of Educational Institutions

Social institutions have a variety of processes by which they motivate and encourage individuals to develop. The strongest influence is through the ascendance of age-based crisis points where the expectation is that the individual will make a turning point by resolving a challenge between two opposing oppositions (e.g., identity formation versus role confusion) during the teenage and emerging adult years. Work and educational systems provide mentors and teachers to help guide and direct youth to make choices through role modeling, instruction, encouragement, and other positive educational techniques. Erikson indicates that the best teachers are ones that know how to balance play with work to make the decision a pleasurable and positive experience. Educational research clearly demonstrates that positive instructors and peers enhance identity formation among students during the high school and college years.

Gerald R. Adams

- intimacy
- ego
- identity
- erikson's theory of development
- social identity
- identity status

- virtues

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412963848.n93>

See also

- [Identity Development](#)
- [Psychoanalytic Theory](#)
- [Psychosocial Development](#)
- [Social Development](#)

Further Readings

Coleman, R. (Ed.). (2000). The Erik Erikson reader. New York: W. W. Norton.

Erikson, E. H. (1963). Childhood and society. New York: W.W. Norton.

Friedman, L. J. (1999). Identity's architect: A biography of Erik H. Erikson. New York: Scribner.