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Evaluation of Erik Erikson’s Psychosocial StagesPartA. Background InformationErik Erikson was a psychoanalyst anddevelopmental psychologist from the mid-1900s who is most well-known for hisstage theory of psychosocial development. During each of the eight stages heoutlined, an individual faces a psychosocial conflict which must be overcome ina positive way for successful personality development and the attainment of avirtue. Virtues are strengths which can help with the resolution of ensuingcrises. Because Erikson strongly emphasized adolescence as a crucial periodrelated to identity development, this paper will be focusing on adolescence andearly adulthood.

Erikson’s ideas were greatly influencedby Sigmund Freud, another well-known psychoanalyst, psychologist, and the creatorof id psychology. Meanwhile, Erikson is considered the creator of egopsychology, which emphasized the role of the ego as being more than a servantto the id. Freudian theory stressed conflict between the id and the superegoand focused on sexual development, while Erikson emphasized conflict that cantake place in the ego itself and focused on the role of society on growth andsense of self. Like Freud, Erikson’s believed that personality develops in afixed order and that each stage is built upon the effective completion of theprevious stage. However, Erikson furthered Freudian understanding by developinghis stage theory to encompass the entire lifespan, suggesting that there is alwaysroom for continued growth and development throughout one’s life. While bothbelieved that each stage consists of a crisis crucial for development, Erikson consideredthese crises to be psychosocial because “ they involve psychological needs ofthe individual (i. e. psycho) conflicting with the needs of society (i.

e. social)” (McLeod, 2017). His research suggests that each individual must learnto acknowledge both extremes of each stage, not rejecting one or the other. Only when both extremes are understood and accepted as essential and useful canthe stages virtue surface. Virtues are often considered character strengths, which the ego can use to resolve subsequent crises. Erikson also hinted thatthe outcome of one stage is not permanent and can be modified by laterexperiences (McLeod, 2017). Erikson’s theory of psychosocialdevelopment consists of eight stages: trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs.

shame, initiative vs. guilt, industry vs. inferiority, identity vs. role confusion, intimacy vs. isolation, generativity vs. stagnation and ego integrity vs. despair. The first of the eight stages as outlined by Moore (2017a) occursduring infancy.

Whether an infant develops a sense of trust or mistrust dependslargely on the quality of the maternal relationship. If the baby receives carethat is constant and reliable they will develop a sense of trust and obtain thevirtue of hope. The second stage, autonomy versus shame and doubt, occursduring toddlerhood. As a child begins to discover their independence, it isimportant that parents encourage exploration.

Discouragement can lead to feelingsof shame and doubt, while success in this stage will result in the virtue ofwill. Stage three of Erikson’s theory occurs during early childhood and isclassified by a conflict between initiative and guilt. Children begin to play, makeup games, initiate activates with others, and ask countless questions dueto their thirst for knowledge. If this tendency is squelched through criticismor control, children may develop a sense of guilt. A healthy balance betweeninitiative and guilt is important so a child knows how to exercise self-controland produces in the virtue of purpose. Industry versus inferiority, the fourthstage, occurs during middle to late childhood and results in the virtue ofcompetence. As children interact more with peers through classrooms and clubs, peer groups become a major influence on child’s self-esteem.

As childrenattempt to win approval they demonstrate talents/skills that when reinforced, childrenbegin to take pride in. Encouragement leads to the child feeling confident intheir abilities and industriousness, while discouragement causes feelings ofinferiority. The fifth stage, identity versus role confusion takes place duringadolescence. Through exploration of beliefs, values, and goals, teens searchfor a sense of self and a personal identity. Success in this stage will lead tothe virtue of fidelity. Stage six occurs in young adulthood as individualsbegin to explore romantic relationships.

By forming healthy relationships withothers, individuals experience intimacy and gain the virtue of love. Generativityversus stagnation takes place during middle adulthood as individuals begin toestablish careers and families. Giving back to society by raising children, being productive at work, and becoming involved in the community leads to thevirtue of care. The final of the eight stages takes place as persons entersenior citizenship. It is at this time, post-retirement, that individuals beginto reflect on their life and either view life as being successful orunproductive.

Seeing life as negative results in feelings of dissatisfactionand despair, but viewing life as complete leads to the virtue of wisdom and theacceptance of death without fear. The development of identity appears to beone of Erikson’s greatest concern in his theory, as well as in his own life. Identityversus role confusion plays out during adolescence (approximately ages 12-18), at which time peer relationships begin to gain new meaning and importance. Forpositive resolution, during this stage, an adolescent must undergo a conscioussearch for identity, which is built on the resolution of—and virtues from—previousstage conflicts.

Erikson proposed that two different identities must beunderstood: the sexual and the occupational. The importance of forming a sexualidentity was especially important to Erikson’s theory because the followingstage (intimacy vs. isolation) focuses on the formation of durable romanticrelationships.

An individual must actively ask—and seek the answers to—questionslike “ Who am I?” and “ Who do I want to be?” They must develop a sense of self, identify what they want to do or be, and recognize their sexual role. From thisthey will obtain fidelity, which involves maintaining personal beliefs in spiteof opposition; being faithful, loyal, and committed to oneself and to others. An adolescent who successfully reaches fidelity is more likely commit topersonal values and to institutions. When individuals become unsure aboutthemselves or their role in society, role confusion (or identity crisis—a termcoined by Erikson) may develop. In this case, individuals may begin to experimentwith different lifestyles or rebel against society. If a teenager feelspressured into an identity from his or her parents, they are also likely torebel, establishing a negative identity in addition to feelings of malcontent(Moore, 2017b). Intimacy versus isolation occurs duringyoung adulthood and, as was the case with identity versus role confusion, isfirmly built upon the successful resolution of previous stages.

Intimacysignifies one’s ability to interact lovingly and openly with another humanbeing on a deep and personal level. According to Erikson, to fully commit toanother, one must give up parts of the self; intimate couples need to compromisewithout losing a sense of self. Without the sense of identity from adolescence, an individual will often fear committed relationships and instead withdrawthemselves into isolation, which sometimes results in depressive feelings. Successful resolution of this stage comes from young adults learning todeveloped intimate relationships with others, and leads to the virtue of love. Young adults who are successful during this stage become more willing tosacrifice and compromise for the sake of their relationships, learn to connectwith others on social and interpersonal levels, form sincere relationships, anddevelop the faculty to commit to others for mutual fulfillment. Young adultswho do not successfully move through this stage can develop unhealthyexpressions of intimacy, such as promiscuity or reclusively (Moore, 2017b). Part B. Critique Based on Contemporary Empirical EvidenceErikson strongly emphasized theimportance of developing a sexual identity during the fifth stage of histheory.

His theory supports the idea that acknowledging one’s true sexualidentity will lead to healthy personality development. In a world wherenon-heterosexuals are the minority, Becker, Cortina, Tsai & Eccles (2014), soughtto analyze conflicts in the process of identity formation for non-heterosexualyouths compared to their heterosexual peers. Assuming both non-heterosexual andheterosexual adults discern their true identity, they should eventually haveroughly equal mental health indicators (depressive affect, suicidal thought orideation, and alcohol/drug use). Becker et al.

(2014) measured three primaryoutcomes: (a) indicators of mental health; (b) feelings of social alienation; and (c) self-esteem as an indicator of psychological well-being. Theyhypothesized that these three markers of conflict in identity formation may behigher for non-heterosexual youths because their minority status creates stress, such as having a lack of access to positive role models. Due to minority stressors, non-heterosexual identity is likely to be formed in isolation, with littlesocial support, at least until the individual embraces their minority identityand actively seeks minority group support (& role models). To this extent, identity must be formed before youths can successfully cope with potential stressors. Looking at a total sample of 2, 451students from southeastern Michigan, ages 16 to 28, they were able to confirmtheir hypothesis. Compared to their heterosexual peers, depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation, alcohol consumption, and social alienation were higher innon-heterosexual youths.

It was also found that during earlier development (16-20years), non-heterosexual adolescents grew towards increasingly higher risk behaviorsthan their peers, but the two groups began to converge in the years followinghigh school. This is consistent with Erikson’s theory which indicated that non-heterosexualand heterosexual adults should, eventually, have roughly equal mental healthindicators as long as they achieve a firm sense of identity. Erikson proposed that teens who strugglewith identity confusion (often due to parental pressures) are more likely to experimentwith different lifestyles, exhibit acts of delinquency, and establish anegative identity that may restrict with future identity development (e. g. developing a criminal record that limits future career options). A studyperformed by Mercer, Crocetti, Branje, van Lier & Meeus (2017), thoroughlyexplored the relationship between identity formation and delinquency. Duringfive annual assessments (spanning from age 14 to 18) adolescents’ delinquencywas rated by the adolescents themselves, as well as their mothers and fathers.

Using a sample of 47 Dutch adolescents, they were able to conclude thatexperimentation with delinquency debilitates identity formation by increasingindividuals’ reconsideration of commitments (negative comparison of currentcommitments to possible alternatives), and in turn, decreasing adolescents’commitment (both social and personal). According to Erikson, adolescents whomove from one commitment to another lack a sense of meaning or purpose, whichcontributes to identity confusion. Research also found that delinquency oftenoccurs in adolescents who are using it to differentiate themselves from theirchildhood roles, exert autonomy and independence from their parents, andexplore possible identity alternatives. To this degree, Erikson’s theoryappears to be accurate; lack of concrete personal identity leads to rebellionand the potential establishment of negative identities, while delinquencycyclically interferes with personal identity development.

It was identified inthis study that encouraging young adults to increase exploration (activeinvestigation of commitments and discussion of commitments with others), maylead to manageable short-term goals, which increase engagement and ultimatelyidentity formation. Erikson defines fidelity as “ the abilityto sustain loyalties freely pledged in spite of the inevitable contradictionsof value systems” (Erikson, 1968). Erikson maintained that fidelity is anecessary component in healthy development, and without it an individual ismore likely to struggle with future positive development. Brittian & Lerner(2013) developed a study to analyze the validity of this claim. To measurefidelity, youth (starting in 6th grade and continuing till 10thgrade) were asked questions about how important six different items were totheir life.

Items included “ Doing what you believe is right, even when it isunpopular;” “ Telling the truth, even when it’s not easy;” and “ Standing up forequality.” These items were chosen because they were believed to reflect acommitment to personal and prosocial values when faced with opposition. Throughthe analysis of over 7, 000 youths, researchers were able to identify threedistinct developmental trajectories in relation to adolescents’ fidelity: highand increasing, moderate and increasing, and low and decreasing. Based onErikson’s belief that fidelity links individuals to their context, researchershypothesized that youth who show high fidelity are also more likely todemonstrate higher community contribution and lower levels of risky problembehaviors. Upon thorough data analysis, their hypothesis was confirmed.

Severalcontextual factors were also identified as associated with different fidelitytrajectories. Youth with adult mentors and/or parents who exhibited highdegrees of warmth, involvement, and knowledge were more likely to display highfidelity. In general, boys were more likely to be in the lowest trajectorygroup. However, this study only found partial support for fidelity being apredictor of development in later adolescence. Without significant data, thisstudy does not fully support Erikson’s claim that fidelity is a key componentin healthy development, but it does not in any way oppose his theory. “ There isno certain way of knowing if these adolescents’ fidelity would continue tochange through the end of adolescence and into the beginning of youngadulthood, given that we only examined trajectories from Grade 6 to Grade 10. However, based on the relative stability of the trajectory groups identified inthe present research, one could hypothesize that there would not be dramaticchanges within or across groups” (Brittian & Larner, 2013).

Erikson strongly believed that it is onlypossible to experience genuine intimate relationships after one has establisheda secure sense of identity because “ the condition of twoness is the one mustfirst becomes oneself” (Erikson, 1980). In the 21st century, youngadults in western societies are more commonly delaying adult commitments toattend college. According to Beyees & Seiffge-Krenke (2010), this allows themto extend the number of years during which they explore life alternatives, whichdisconnects them from commitment and intimate relationships leading to changesin expectations, quality, and duration of romances. Because many of thedevelopmental tasks previously thought to occur during adolescence (i. e. identity formation) now extend into emerging adulthood, researchers arequestioning whether Erikson’s developmental ordering of identity and intimacyis still valid, or whether they are in fact overlapping. To evaluate thevalidity of Erikson’s developmental ordering of identity and intimacy in the 21stcentury, Beyees & Seiffge-Krenke (2010) collected data from 93 Germanyouths (52 females and 41 males) over the course of 10 years. They assessedidentity and intimacy in adolescence (age 15) and then again during emergingadulthood (age 25).

Findings showed a strong positive developmental progressionin both identity and intimacy from age 15 to 25. At age 25, however, intimacywith a partner was strongly predicted by identity development duringadolescence, reflecting Erikson’s developmental ordering. Their ten-yearlongitudinal study revealed that identity development proceeds and is stronglylinked to intimacy development for youths in westernized nations in the 21stcentury, proving that Erikson’s ordering of his developmental stages isaccurate and consistent.             Accordingto Erikson and many others, intimacy is a key component of a successfulmarriage. Boden, Fischer, & Niehuis (2009) set out to understand the extentto which emotional intimacy and changes in intimacy during young adulthoodpredicted marital adjustment 25 years later. Early indications of intimacy (witha friend, romantic partner, or spouse) were assessed at college graduation andannually over a period of 2 years, and again 6 years later.

Marital adjustmentof individuals who got married or remained married was assessed 25 years after initialcontact. A sample of 422 individuals, 49. 8% male and 50. 2% female, completed aquestionnaire measuring demographic information, marital status, duration ofmarriage, income, religion, ethnicity, and emotional intimacy. Emotionalintimacy was assessed using a predetermined scale consisting of 39 items meantto evaluate feelings, attitudes and behaviors of affection, closeness, sharing, and relationship problem-solving.

Researchers were able to conclude thatintimacy and increases in intimacy from the first wave of data retrieval to thefourth wave greatly predicted marital adjustment 25 years later. Becauseintimacy is an emotional skill which is not only developed in late adolescencebut groomed throughout young adulthood, individuals who have refined this skillin their close relationships are more likely to reap benefits later on inmidlife. Whereas those who did not practice emotional intimacy in lateadolescence and young adulthood reported lower levels of intimacy andexperienced less marital adjustment in the final stage of data retrieval. Researchers suggested that this may be because individuals with higher levelsof intimacy can better identify others’ emotions, needs, and desires.

Thisstudy strongly supports Erikson’s belief that intimacy must be achieved duringyoung adulthood for future healthy committed relationships to develop. Thisstudy shows that intimacy skills acquired in late adolescence and furtherdeveloped throughout young adulthood have a long-reaching effect on maritaladjustment.             Evendecades later, Erik Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development remains authenticand reliable. At least with stages 5 and 6, which occur during adolescence and youngadulthood, there are many longitudinal studies that support Erikson’s theory. Beckeret al. (2014) confirmed Erikson’s notion that identity must be formed in adolescencefor positive developmental growth through analyzing mental health indicators ofnon-heterosexual youths who face conflict in the process of identity formation. Erikson’s hypothesis that there is a correlation between lack of identity developmentand delinquency was confirmed by Lier & Meeus (2017), who found thatdelinquency often occurs in adolescents who feel they have not identified aconcrete sense of self and are attempting to pursue independence from theirparents.

Brittian & Lerner (2013) confirmed that the virtue of fidelity, which emerges alongside identity formation, is another necessary component inhealthy development. Erikson’s stage theory relies heavily on the successfulresolution of earlier stages. Without a sense of identity and fidelity to buildupon, Erikson believed an individual in young adulthood is not capable offorming truly intimate relationships. Beyees & Seiffge-Krenke (2010) solidifiedthis claim through a longitudinal assessment that recognized identitydevelopment at age 15 to be a strong predictor of intimacy with a partner atage 25. This concept was further supported by research of the associationbetween emotional intimacy during young adulthood and later marital adjustmentby Boden et al. (2009).

Of course, due endless societal evolution and the sequentiallynew issues that come along with it, the validity of Erikson’s psychosocialtheory—and ultimately all developmental theories—should be questioned andstudied repeatedly.