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Evaluation of Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Stages Part A. Background

Information Erik Erikson was a psychoanalyst and developmental psychologist from the mid-1900s who is most well-known for his stage theory of psychosocial development. During each of the eight stages he outlined, an individual faces a psychosocial conflict which must be overcome in a positive way for successful personality development and the attainment of a virtue. Virtues are strengths which can help with the resolution of ensuing crises. Because Erikson strongly emphasized adolescence as a crucial period related to identity development, this paper will be focusing on adolescence and early adulthood.

Erikson's ideas were greatly influenced by Sigmund Freud, another well-known psychoanalyst, psychologist, and the creator of id psychology. Meanwhile, Erikson is considered the creator of ego psychology, which emphasized the role of the ego as being more than a servant to the id. Freudian theory stressed conflict between the id and the superego and focused on sexual development, while Erikson emphasized conflict that can take place in the ego itself and focused on the role of society on growth and sense of self. Like Freud, Erikson believed that personality develops in a fixed order and that each stage is built upon the effective completion of the previous stage. However, Erikson furthered Freudian understanding by developing his stage theory to encompass the entire lifespan, suggesting that there is always room for continued growth and development throughout one's life. While both believed that each stage consists of a crisis crucial for development, Erikson considered these crises to be psychosocial because “

they involve psychological needs of the individual (i. e. psycho) conflicting with the needs of society (i.

e. social)” (McLeod, 2017). His research suggests that each individual must learn to acknowledge both extremes of each stage, not rejecting one or the other. Only when both extremes are understood and accepted as essential and useful can the stages virtue surface. Virtues are often considered character strengths, which the ego can use to resolve subsequent crises. Erikson also hinted that the outcome of one stage is not permanent and can be modified by later experiences (McLeod, 2017). Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development 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) occurs during infancy.

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

Discouragement can lead to feelings of shame and doubt, while success in this stage will result in the virtue of will. Stage three of Erikson’s theory

occurs during early childhood and is classified by a conflict between initiative and guilt. Children begin to play, make up games, initiate activities with others, and ask countless questions due to their thirst for knowledge. If this tendency is squelched through criticism or control, children may develop a sense of guilt. A healthy balance between initiative and guilt is important so a child knows how to exercise self-control and produces in the virtue of purpose. Industry versus inferiority, the fourth stage, occurs during middle to late childhood and results in the virtue of competence. As children interact more with peers through classrooms and clubs, peer groups become a major influence on child's self-esteem.

As children attempt to win approval they demonstrate talents/skills that when reinforced, children begin to take pride in. Encouragement leads to the child feeling confident in their abilities and industriousness, while discouragement causes feelings of inferiority. The fifth stage, identity versus role confusion takes place during adolescence. Through exploration of beliefs, values, and goals, teens search for a sense of self and a personal identity. Success in this stage will lead to the virtue of fidelity. Stage six occurs in young adulthood as individuals begin to explore romantic relationships.

By forming healthy relationships with others, individuals experience intimacy and gain the virtue of love. Generativity versus stagnation takes place during middle adulthood as individuals begin to establish careers and families.

Giving back to society by raising children, being productive at work, and becoming involved in the community leads to the virtue of care. The final of the eight stages takes place as persons enter senior citizenship. It is at this

time, post-retirement, that individuals begin to reflect on their life and either view life as being successful or unproductive.

Seeing life as negative results in feelings of dissatisfaction and despair, but viewing life as complete leads to the virtue of wisdom and the acceptance of death without fear. The development of identity appears to be one of Erikson's greatest concerns in his theory, as well as in his own life.

Identity versus role confusion plays out during adolescence (approximately ages 12-18), at which time peer relationships begin to gain new meaning and importance. For positive resolution, during this stage, an adolescent must undergo a conscious search for identity, which is built on the resolution of—and virtues from—previous stage conflicts.

Erikson proposed that two different identities must be understood: the sexual and the occupational. The importance of forming a sexual identity was especially important to Erikson's theory because the following stage (intimacy vs. isolation) focuses on the formation of durable romantic relationships.

An individual must actively ask—and seek the answers to—questions like “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 this they will obtain fidelity, which involves maintaining personal beliefs in spite of opposition; being faithful, loyal, and committed to oneself and to others. An adolescent who successfully reaches fidelity is more likely committed to personal values and to institutions. When individuals become unsure

about themselves or their role in society, role confusion (or identity crisis—a term coined by Erikson) may develop. In this case, individuals may begin to experiment with different lifestyles or rebel against society. If a teenager feels pressured into an identity from his or her parents, they are also likely to rebel, establishing a negative identity in addition to feelings of malcontent (Moore, 2017b). Intimacy versus isolation occurs during young adulthood and, as was the case with identity versus role confusion, is firmly built upon the successful resolution of previous stages.

Intimacy signifies one's ability to interact lovingly and openly with another human being on a deep and personal level. According to Erikson, to fully commit to another, one must give up parts of the self; intimate couples need to compromise without losing a sense of self. Without the sense of identity from adolescence, an individual will often fear committed relationships and instead withdraw themselves into isolation, which sometimes results in depressive feelings. Successful resolution of this stage comes from young adults learning to develop intimate relationships with others, and leads to the virtue of love. Young adults who are successful during this stage become more willing to sacrifice and compromise for the sake of their relationships, learn to connect with others on social and interpersonal levels, form sincere relationships, and develop the faculty to commit to others for mutual fulfillment. Young adults who do not successfully move through this stage can develop unhealthy expressions of intimacy, such as promiscuity or reclusiveness (Moore, 2017b). Part B. Critique Based on Contemporary Empirical

Evidence Erikson strongly emphasized the importance of developing a sexual identity during the fifth stage of his theory.

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

(2014) measured three primary outcomes: (a) indicators of mental health; (b) feelings of social alienation; and (c) self-esteem as an indicator of psychological well-being. They hypothesized that these three markers of conflict in identity formation may be higher 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 little social support, at least until the individual embraces their minority identity and 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 2,451 students from southeastern Michigan, ages 16 to 28, they were able to confirm their hypothesis. Compared to their heterosexual peers, depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation, alcohol consumption, and social alienation were higher in non-heterosexual youths.

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

Using a sample of 47 Dutch adolescents, they were able to conclude that experimentation with delinquency debilitates identity formation by increasing individuals' reconsideration of commitments (negative comparison of current commitments to possible alternatives), and in turn, decreasing adolescents' commitment (both social and personal). According to Erikson, adolescents who move from one commitment to another lack a sense of meaning or purpose, which contributes to identity confusion. Research also found that delinquency often occurs in adolescents who are using it to

differentiate themselves from their childhood roles, exert autonomy and independence from their parents, and explore possible identity alternatives. To this degree, Erikson's theory appears to be accurate; lack of concrete personal identity leads to rebellion and the potential establishment of negative identities, while delinquency cyclically interferes with personal identity development.

It was identified in this study that encouraging young adults to increase exploration (active investigation of commitments and discussion of commitments with others), may lead to manageable short-term goals, which increase engagement and ultimately identity formation. Erikson defines fidelity as "the ability to sustain loyalties freely pledged in spite of the inevitable contradictions of value systems" (Erikson, 1968). Erikson maintained that fidelity is a necessary component in healthy development, and without it an individual is more likely to struggle with future positive development. Brittan & Lerner (2013) developed a study to analyze the validity of this claim. To measure fidelity, youth (starting in 6th grade and continuing till 10th grade) were asked questions about how important six different items were to their life.

Items included "Doing what you believe is right, even when it is unpopular;" "Telling the truth, even when it's not easy;" and "Standing up for equality." These items were chosen because they were believed to reflect a commitment to personal and prosocial values when faced with opposition. Through the analysis of over 7,000 youths, researchers were able to identify three distinct developmental trajectories in relation to adolescents' fidelity:

high and increasing, moderate and increasing, and low and decreasing.

Based on Erikson's belief that fidelity links individuals to their context, researchers hypothesized that youth who show high fidelity are also more likely to demonstrate higher community contribution and lower levels of risky problem behaviors. Upon thorough data analysis, their hypothesis was confirmed.

Several contextual factors were also identified as associated with different fidelity trajectories. Youth with adult mentors and/or parents who exhibited high degrees of warmth, involvement, and knowledge were more likely to display high fidelity. In general, boys were more likely to be in the lowest trajectory group. However, this study only found partial support for fidelity being a predictor of development in later adolescence. Without significant data, this study does not fully support Erikson's claim that fidelity is a key component in healthy development, but it does not in any way oppose his theory. "There is no certain way of knowing if these adolescents' fidelity would continue to change through the end of adolescence and into the beginning of young adulthood, given that we only examined trajectories from Grade 6 to Grade 10. However, based on the relative stability of the trajectory groups identified in the present research, one could hypothesize that there would not be dramatic changes within or across groups" (Brittian & Larner, 2013).

Erikson strongly believed that it is only possible to experience genuine intimate relationships after one has established a secure sense of identity because "the condition of twoness is the one must first become oneself"

(Erikson, 1980). In the 21st century, young adults in western societies are more commonly delaying adult commitments to attend college. According to Beyees & Seiffge-Krenke (2010), this allows them to extend the number of years during which they explore life alternatives, which disconnects them from commitment and intimate relationships leading to changes in expectations, quality, and duration of romances. Because many of the developmental tasks previously thought to occur during adolescence (i. e. identity formation) now extend into emerging adulthood, researchers are questioning whether Erikson's developmental ordering of identity and intimacy is still valid, or whether they are in fact overlapping. To evaluate the validity of Erikson's developmental ordering of identity and intimacy in the 21st century, Beyees & Seiffge-Krenke (2010) collected data from 93 German youths (52 females and 41 males) over the course of 10 years. They assessed identity and intimacy in adolescence (age 15) and then again during emerging adulthood (age 25).

Findings showed a strong positive developmental progression in both identity and intimacy from age 15 to 25. At age 25, however, intimacy with a partner was strongly predicted by identity development during adolescence, reflecting Erikson's developmental ordering. Their ten-year longitudinal study revealed that identity development proceeds and is strongly linked to intimacy development for youths in westernized nations in the 21st century, proving that Erikson's ordering of his developmental stages is accurate and consistent. According to Erikson and many others, intimacy is a key component of a successful marriage. Boden, Fischer, & Niehuis (2009) set out

to understand the extent to which emotional intimacy and changes in intimacy during young adulthood predicted marital adjustment 25 years later. Early indications of intimacy (with a friend, romantic partner, or spouse) were assessed at college graduation and annually over a period of 2 years, and again 6 years later.

Marital adjustment of individuals who got married or remained married was assessed 25 years after initial contact. A sample of 422 individuals, 49.8% male and 50.2% female, completed a questionnaire measuring demographic information, marital status, duration of marriage, income, religion, ethnicity, and emotional intimacy. Emotional intimacy was assessed using a predetermined scale consisting of 39 items meant to evaluate feelings, attitudes and behaviors of affection, closeness, sharing, and relationship problem-solving.

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

This study strongly supports Erikson's belief that intimacy must be achieved during young adulthood for future healthy committed relationships to develop. This study shows that intimacy skills acquired in late adolescence and further developed throughout young adulthood have a long-reaching effect on marital adjustment. Even decades later, Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development remains authentic and reliable. At least with stages 5 and 6, which occur during adolescence and young adulthood, there are many longitudinal studies that support Erikson's theory. Becker et al. (2014) confirmed Erikson's notion that identity must be formed in adolescence for positive developmental growth through analyzing mental health indicators of non-heterosexual youths who face conflict in the process of identity formation. Erikson's hypothesis that there is a correlation between lack of identity development and delinquency was confirmed by Lier & Meeus (2017), who found that delinquency often occurs in adolescents who feel they have not identified a concrete sense of self and are attempting to pursue independence from their parents.

Brittian & Lerner (2013) confirmed that the virtue of fidelity, which emerges alongside identity formation, is another necessary component in healthy development. Erikson's stage theory relies heavily on the successful resolution of earlier stages. Without a sense of identity and fidelity to build upon, Erikson believed an individual in young adulthood is not capable of forming truly intimate relationships. Beyees & Seiffge-Krenke (2010) solidified this claim through a longitudinal assessment that recognized identity development at age 15 to be a strong predictor of intimacy with a

partner at age 25. This concept was further supported by research of the association between emotional intimacy during young adulthood and later marital adjustment by Boden et al. (2009).

Of course, due to endless societal evolution and the sequentially new issues that come along with it, the validity of Erikson's psychosocial theory—and ultimately all developmental theories—should be questioned and studied repeatedly.