

Developmental issues in identity formation and self esteem



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Critically discuss the significance of understanding the developmental issues of identity formation and self-esteem as a guidance counsellor with reference to the work of at least 3 theorists covered on the module.

Early adolescence is a period of obvious human development and growth which occurs between childhood and adolescence. Adolescence is the transition from childhood to adulthood, it's when the form of attachment with their parents change as the child begins to seek autonomy from their parents and at the same time they need to keep their sense of relatedness to them. At the beginning of the adolescence the parent-child conflict approaches its peak. (Boyd & Bee, 2014) During this significant stage of the life cycle, young adolescents, 10 – 15 year olds, experience rapid and momentous developmental change. During this phase of young adolescent's education, to understand and respond to the distinct developmental characteristics is crucial. " *A person is not a composite of isolated attributes, but instead resembles a system of characteristics* ". (Schoon, I. 2006, p. xv)

Identity formation, also known as individuation, is defined as the development of the distinct personality of an individual characteristics that are possessed by one, by which one is recognised or known. Such traits include a sense of uniqueness from others and a sense of identity within society. From research we see that development is physical, cognitive or psychosocial is unique for every child. Some young people develop in certain areas faster than others but that does not mean that a slower or a faster development than the average is not uncommon. " *The assumption that the potential for development continues throughout life raises the question of*

what we mean by development. Are we to say that change and development are synonymous? ” (Sugarman, L. 1996, p. 3)

In this essay I will be discussing developmental issues of identity formation and self-esteem as guidance counsellor, for this I am mostly going to concentrate on Erikson, Marcia and Kohlberg and their theories. Eric Erikson (1902-1994) was a German born, American developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst well known for his theory on psychosocial development of humans. The intrinsic affirmation affiliated with Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development is that the personality is tenacious over the lifespan as the individual matures biologically and cognitively. Bee & Boyd refer to lifespan perspective as “ *the current view of developmentalists that changes happen throughout the entire human lifespan and that changes must be interpreted in light of the culture, and context in which they occur* ” (Boyd, D and Bee, H. 2003, p. 14). “ *The life-span perspective . Sees both the individual and the environment as potentially influencing and being influenced by each other* ” (Sugarman, L. 1996, p. 3). At each stage of development there is an associated set of developmental tasks. The fundamental element to a successful route through life’s stages is the distinction of the social environment. Erikson referred to this development in terms of the Epigenetic Principle, an organic perspective. He referred to this in his book “ *Identity, youth and crisis* ” (1968), and used it to encompass the notion that we develop through an unfolding of our personality in predetermined stages, and that our environment and surrounding culture influence, how we progress. Erikson explained the factors which have been linked with healthy identity development, these include: security, trust,

safety with having the freedom to explore their environment. According to Erikson, “ *to a achieve a healthy personality, an individual must successfully resolve a crisis at each of the eight stages of development in, as summarized in the table below:*” (Boyd, D and Bee, H. 2003, p. 28).

Figure 1: Erikson’s Epigenetic Principle and Middle Childhood, 8 Psychosocial Stages:

<i>Stage</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Stages of Development</i>	<i>Developmental Characteristics</i>
1	Birth to 1 year	Trust versus mistrust (hope)	Attachment & Bonding
2	1 to 3	Autonomy versus shame and doubt	Potty training & self-maintenance
3	3 to 6	Initiative versus guilt	Academic success, adding, abc’s, making friends
4	6 – 12	Industry versus inferiority	Social competence, friendship network
5	12 –	Identity	Loyalty & friendship

	18	versus role confusion	
6	18 – 30	Intimacy versus isolation	Falling in love, maintaining a relationship
7	30 to old age	Generativity versus stagnation	Having & nurturing children
8	Old age	Integrity versus despair	Imparting wisdom to others

(Boyd, D and Bee, H. 2003, p. 29).

Erikson believed the behaviour of the main caregiver (usually the mother) is critical to the child's resolve of this crisis, the caregiver must be consistently loving, and must respond to the child predictably and reliably. He goes on to state that "*infants whose early care has been erratic or harsh may develop mistrust .*" (Boyd, D and Bee, H. 2003, p. 29). It was Erikson's belief that throughout one's lifetime, they experience different conflicts or crisis. Each of the conflicts can arise at a certain point in life and needs to be successfully resolved before progression to the next of the eight stages. Failure to successful complete a stage can result in a reduced ability to complete further stages and therefore a more unhealthy personality and sense of self. These stages can be resolved successfully at a later time.

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Erikson's theory has not been without its critics. " *At times, he overemphasizes the symbiotic relationship between individual development and societal progress and, .. has been criticized for having a conformist theory* " (Sugarman, L. 1996, p. 93)

Socially competent adolescents can strike a balance between their identity as individuals and as part of groups, the ability of maintaining equality, and their own wants, needs, desires and their ability to meet the needs of others. Identity is the major personality target that a child needs to achieve during this phase in order to become a content, productive and satisfied adult. The particular stage which is relevant to identity formation takes place during adolescence, known as " *Identity versus Role Confusion* ". " *Identity is influenced by how the adolescent sees him/herself and is also based on their relationships with others and their perception of how others see them .*" (O'Brien, E. Z. 2013, p. 151). In development stage five, adolescents need to decide who they are, which are their strengths and weaknesses and what their path in life is. Erikson considered *Identity Formation* as personality and role experimentation, with the number of choices it can be overwhelming so adolescents may seem to appear to go through a period of moratorium. Moratorium is defined as " *A crisis in progress, but no commitment has yet been made* " (Boyd, D and Bee, H. 2003, p. 312). Many teenagers during this period can try out roles to see if they right, for example a teenage girl trying to be glamorous and flirty (her sexuality maybe blossoming), or a teenage boy who is experimenting with the tough guy image. Erikson never saw identity as static or unchangeable but believed identity formation was a life-long process, across the life span. Also pressurising someone into an identity

can result in rebellion in the form of chartering feelings of unhappiness and a negative identity. Erikson also referred to *identity crisis* which is period by which the adolescent is troubled by their lack of identity, which can result in the inability to continue responsibilities as adults or entering into isolation, or losing one's identity in the crowd. This change in adolescence is usually an indication of an individual's development of multiple perspectives in social relationships. " *adolescent adjustment predicted changes in authoritative and neglectful parenting styles more robustly than these styles predicted changes in adolescent adjustment* ". (Eccles, J., 2012, p. 2)

Marcia is another significant theorist who elaborated upon Erikson's perception of *identity crisis* and *identity confusion* . James Marcia (1937 -) a Canadian clinical and developmental psychologist took Erikson's theory further. He described the process as having four basic, main steps on the continuation of identity development, the structure is designed to classify adolescents into one of four main stages of identity. The identity statuses are used to pinpoint the progression of an adolescent's identity formation. In Marcia's theory, he states that identity is " whether an individual has explored various alternatives and made firm commitments to: an occupation, religion, sexual orientation and political values. ** REFERENCE Marcia's four identity statuses are in the table below:

Figure 2 : Marcia's identity statuses

Experienc Not
ed crisis in

Crisis

HIGH LOW

		Identity		
Degree of		achievement	Foreclosu	
commitm	HIGH	ent status	re	Committ
ent to a		(crisis is	status	ed
particular		past)		
role or				
values		Moratoriu	Identity	Not
	LOW	m status	diffusion	Committ
		(in midst	status	ed
		of crisis)		

Degree of crisis

(O'Brien, E. Z. 2013, p. 153)

Marcia's theory does not conclude that each adolescent will go through and encounter all four identity statuses. Some may experience only one or two identity statuses throughout their adolescence. Furthermore unlike Erikson's, Marcia's theory takes into account multidirectional movement between and among the various identity statuses. For example, an adolescent may experience a traumatic event such as their parents separating, or an assault, which may cause them to re-assess their perception of the world and it's value system. The type of crisis may result in them reverting to a previous enacted identity status as to adjust to this new situation.

These are four identity statuses proposed by Marcia, furthering Erikson's theory. Marcia described the process as having four main, reoccurring steps. Identity formation has two key parts: Crisis and Commitment. For fully achieved identity, young people must have both examined value/goals and reached firm commitment. For *Identity achievement* : Marcia suggests that adolescents who have experienced crisis and reached an undertaking to ideological, occupational or other objectives. *Moratorium* : is when a crisis is in progress, but no commitment has yet been made. With *foreclosure* : adolescents who have made a commitment without having gone through a crisis. Then *identity diffusion* : this represents either an early stage before the crisis, or a failure to reach a commitment after a crisis. " *Marcia suggested that identity involves the adoption of ideals and values, sexual orientation and work possibilities. He formulated the idea of status which allowed for a more fluid conception of identity formation .*" (O'Brien, E. Z. 2013, p. 168) According to Schlossberg the best way to cope with a crisis or transition in life, is to adapt the *4 S's System: Situation, Self, Supports and Strategies* . (Schlossberg, N. K., 2011)

Minority teenagers, especially those of colour in a predominantly white culture, face the task of creating two identities in adolescence . (Boyd, D and Bee, H. 2003, p. 316) Boyd and Bee define *Ethnic Identity* as a sense of belonging to an ethnic group. American developmental psychologist Jean Phinney, proposed in 1990 that in adolescence, the development of a complete ethnic identity moves through three stages:

1. *Unexamined ethnic identity* : which is very similar to Marcia's identity status called foreclosure.

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2. *Ethnic identity search* : parallel to crisis in Marcia's analysis of ego identity.

3. *Resolution* : Of conflicts and contradictions – similar to Marcia's status of identity.

Young people of colour often develop two identities, a psychological sense of self and an ethnic identity. (Boyd, D and Bee, H. 2003, p. 317) In addition to establishing a sense of personal identity minority teens must also develop an ethnic identity. Some resolve this developmental task by creating a bicultural identity for themselves, one that allows them to interact comfortably with members of the majority group, individuals who belong to other minority groups and members of their own group. . (Boyd, D and Bee, H. 2007, p. 284)

An ethnic identity is identification with definite ethnicity, usually on the basis of a presumed shared ethnic descent. Ethnic groups are often also united by common cultural, behavioural, linguistic or religious traits. “ *They must also develop an ethnic or racial identity, including self-identification as a member of some specific group, commitment to that group and it's values and attitudes* “. (Boyd, D and Bee, H. 2007, p. 284). Phinney's stage model is a useful general description of the process of ethnic identity formation. While others resolve the dilemma by consciously choosing their own ethnic group's patterns and values, yet this choice could limit their access to a larger culture but they make this as an informed decision. Also adolescents from different cultural backgrounds who try to compete and succeed in the most dominant culture might be shunned by their own peers.

Based on the studies which have derived from Erikson's & Marcia's Theories there is a need to examine the pro's and con's of both theories. Erikson's can be ambiguous about the causes of development and his theory does not have a universal structure for crisis resolution. Erikson's theory is more a depictive overview of human social and emotional progression that does not comprehensively explain why or how this advancement occurs. Furthermore Erikson does not clearly explain how the outcome of one psychosocial stage influence personalities at a later stage. Then on the more positive side of Erikson's theory is, it's ability to bring together important psychosocial developments across the entire lifespan. Also " *Erikson was more positive than Freud as he believed that negative outcomes in a stage could be resolved at a later date* ". (O'Brien, E. Z. 2013, p. 22) Unlike Erickson's stage theory, Marcia's theory accounts for multi-directional movement among and between the various identity statuses. Finally Marcia *formulated the idea of status, which allowed for a more fluid conception of identity formation* . (O'Brien, E. Z. 2013, p. 168)

Lawrence Kohlberg (1927-1987), an American psychologist best known for his work on the *Theory of stages of moral development*, also known as a stage theorist. Kohlberg's theory was developed from the research and principles of Jean Piaget's identity development. Previously, *Piaget (1932) suggested a two-way theory of moral development (moral realism and moral relativism)* . (Hearne, L., 2017, p. 11). Kohlberg's moral development is focused on the cognitive process rather than the actual moral actions of a person. Continually people who are able to cognitively discuss appropriate moral choices do not always exhibit moral behaviour. Furthermore, persons

can know the right moral decisions to make and decide to respond in the opposite manner . *However, the theorist whose work has had the most powerful impact has been Kohlberg (Bergman, 2002; Colby et al., 1976, 1981). Moreover, theories of moral reasoning have been important in explanations of adolescent antisocial behaviour. (Boyd, D and Bee, H. 2006, p. 335). Kohlberg’s moral judgement development seems to have a parallel relationship between age and stage. “ Before the age of ten years of age a child believes rules are fixed, handed down by a higher authority (such a parent or adult) and subject to change. After the age of ten, the child realises that rules are flexible and can be modified, with the agreement of others. ” (O’Brien, E. Z. 2013, p. 120) Kohlberg based his theory on interviews he conducted with children and adolescents regarding moral reasoning. He then devised ‘ moral dilemmas’, the answers to which were used to categorise moral development, one of example of this is the Heinz dilemma. *Where a woman was near death from a specific cancer but there was one drug which doctors thought might save her. But the drug was very expensive to make & it was made in her same town, it was \$2, 000 for a small dose of the drug so her husband became desperate and broke into the laboratory to steal the drug for his wife .* Kohlberg then suggested 6 responses for this moral dilemma to assess people’s reasoning on their decision. Listed below are the six stages of Kohlberg’s moral development:*

Level	POSTCONVENTIONAL	Stage 6: Self-
1	Shared standards,	selection of
3	rights and duties	universal values

		and principles
		<i>Stage 5:</i> -Sense of democracy and relativity of rules
		<i>Stage 4:</i> Fulfilling duties and upholding laws
Level	CONVENTIONAL	
I		
2	Performing right roles	<i>Stage 3:</i> Meeting expectations of others
		<i>Stage 2:</i> “ Getting what you want” by trade-off or in exchange for behaving
Level	PRECONVENTIONAL	
I	Values in external events	<i>Stage 1:</i> Punishment avoidance
1		

Figure 2: Kohlberg’s Theory of Moral

Development

Various theorists have criticized Kohlberg’s theory, by those who placed more emphasis on learning moral behaviour and by those who believe moral

reasoning is based mostly on emotional factors rather than on their ideas of fairness and justice. “ *Carol Gilligan claims Kohlberg’s theory is flawed because his research was based on male responses and represents a male perspective of moral development and reasoning “ . . . ”* (O’Brien, E. Z. 2013, p. 138) From Gilligan’s work with women she deduced that women apply an ethic of care in the judgements rather than a ‘ male’ ethic of justice.

Eisenberg has defined “ *empathy as an affective response that stems from the apprehension or comprehension of another’s emotional state ”*

However .” *an empathic response usually turns into either sympathy or personal distress ”* (Eisenberg, 2000, p. 671)

In conclusion young adolescents warrant educational experiences and schools try to care for their physical, intellectual, emotional/psychological, moral/ethical, social developmental and spiritual, characteristics. Parents, practitioners and others who work with young adolescents need to be aware of both obvious and subtle changes in their developmental characteristics. Changes like these can give adults intuitive into the demands facing young adolescents and emphasise possible logic for transference in their capabilities and behaviour. Educators and career guidance counsellors and policymakers today need to persevere with their support of initiatives that allow young adolescents with developmentally appropriate environment and learning experiences. “ *Teenage aspirations, especially educational, in combination with academic attainment are an important predictor of adult social status. ”* (Schoon, I. 2006, p. 138).

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