

Adolescent identity exploration: a test of erikson

[Sociology](#), [Identity](#)



Theory of Transitional Crisis Kidwell, Dunham, and Richard (1995) investigated Erikson's theory that adolescent identity exploration is associated with a variety of symptoms, such as fluctuations in ego strength, mood swings, rebelliousness, and heightened physical symptoms. They sampled a total of 82 high school students (43 males, 39 females) between the ages of 14 and 17.

These students were academically superior high school students who attended the Florida State University Summer Science and Mathematics Camp during the summers of 1988 (30 students) and 1989 (52 students). The minimum requirements for admission to the program included percentile ranks of 90 or more on standardized achievement tests, as well as sustained high academic performance. The students were from the middle-to-upper-middle class socioeconomic status. They responded to the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) and the Ego Identity Interview (Grotevant & Cooper, 1981).

Results showed that adolescents who were actively engaged in identity exploration were more likely to produce a personality pattern characterized by self doubt, confusion, disturbed thinking, impulsivity, conflict with parents and authority figures, reduced ego strength, and increased physical symptoms. Although results were interesting, there are several limitations in the study that must be considered. The Ego Identity Interview (Grotevant & Cooper, 1981) was based on Marcia's (1964) operationalization of Erikson's theory (1968) regarding adolescence as a time of increased exploration and commitment.

The semi-structured interview was designed to gather evidence of exploration and commitment in six domains: occupation, religion, politics, friendships, dating, and sex roles. Family relationship was not one of the domains in the Ego Identity Interview. Family should be included as one of the domains to be measured because it plays a big role in an adolescent's life. Adolescents who are exploring may tend to have poor social judgment and may be rebellious and hostile toward parents and authority figures whom they tend to blame for their own problems (Feldman, 2003).

As such, it is important to include the family domain in the interview to assess adolescents' commitment and relationship with their immediate family members. Next, Erikson's theory does not apply to people in reduced economic circumstances who cannot afford a moratorium in adolescence to explore different roles and develop an ego identity. Moratorium is a period in which an adolescent avoids commitment. This stage may be a luxury available only to those with means to attend college or take time out to travel (Slugowski & Ginsburg, 1989 as cited in Schultz & Schultz, 2005).

The socioeconomic status of the families-of-origin for the student samples was middle-to-upper-middle class. Therefore this fits with the criteria of adolescents to confirm Erikson's theory. Generalizations could not be made to all adolescents, especially those coming from the lower socioeconomic status. Furthermore, this study was carried out in the United States, as such, it could not be compared to other adolescents across other cultures. Erikson argued that the period of active exploration is likely pronounced in the gifted, just like the sample in this study.

A similar pattern of findings may not be revealed in a less select group of comparable age. Perhaps the “ crisis” will surface at a later age, or perhaps the profiles will differ. Such questions remain to be addressed in future research. Also, the adolescent in this study were involved in a new and unfamiliar environment, being in a camp away from their families and living on a college campus for a period of six weeks. This may imply that the exploration process may be encouraged by the exposure to the new and different environment.

The adolescent may likely to be experiencing a need to explore and learn about the new setting they are in. This may lead to confusion and uncertainties which may result in the skewed results of the study. When Erikson developed his theory, he suggested that males and females move through the identity versus identity confusion period differently. He argued that males are more likely to proceed through the social development stages in order, developing a stable identity before committing to an intimate relationship with another person.

In contrast, he suggested that females reverse the order, seeking intimate relationships and then defining their identities through these relationships (Feldman, 2003). These ideas should be considered by the researchers when designing this study. Gender differences in identity formation should be explored. This also suggests that Erikson’s psychosocial stages of development may not always progress in the order he proposed. Despite the limitations, Erikson’s theory had a great deal of popular appeal, as he shifted the focus away from the more psychosexual emphasis of Freud’s toward a more psychosocial focus.

Erikson elaborated on Freud's stages of development. Whereas Freud emphasized on early childhood, Erikson suggested that development continues in a succession of 8 stages over the entire life. Erikson made efforts to collect cross-cultural data, which is something that Sigmund Freud never did. His theory has been validated in cross cultural studies for example by Nurmi, Poole, & Kalakoski (1996) who studied Australian and Finnish adolescents. This helped to show that his theory had explanatory power that extended beyond a limited population.

References Feldman, R. S. (2003). *Development across the life p.* 3rd ed. New Jersey: Prentice Hall. Kidwell, J. , Dunham, S. , & Richard, M. (1995). Adolescent identity exploration: A test of Erikson's theory of transitional crisis. *Adolescence*, 30, 1-7. Retrieved May 8, 2008 from EbscoHost database. Nurmi, J. E. , Poole, M. E. , & Kalakoski, V. (1996). Age differences in adolescent identity exploration and commitment in urban and rural environments. *Journal of Adolescence*, 19, 443-452. Retrieved May 8, 2008 from EbscoHost database. Schultz, D. P. & Schultz, S. E. (2005). *Theories of Personality.* 8th ed. Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.