3-1-2009

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Abstract: The purpose of the current article is to review identity development from a lifespan perspective. To accomplish this task, identity development is examined at various developmental stages including childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. The article utilizes Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory of development to investigate identity development throughout the lifespan. Research findings from empirical studies are included within this discussion. It appears that for many individuals, identity development is a lifelong process that extends well beyond the years of adolescence.

The influential writings of Erik Erikson (1902-1994) have stimulated over 50 years of social science literature (Schwartz, 2001). His theories on development have inspired countless research studies making him an especially relevant figure in the field (Kroger, 2007). Erikson wrote at length about identity, focusing mainly on the period of adolescence. However, he did offer insights on identity during both childhood and adulthood. Traces of his theories can be found in almost all forms of identity research. Therefore, it is appropriate to investigate this topic from his perspective.

The purpose of this study is to examine identity development from a life-span perspective. The article will begin with a description of Erikson's psychosocial theory of development. Next, attention will be given to identity development during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Each of these three sections will include a description of Erikson's theories; empirical studies will also be presented to help illustrate the process of identity development. Finally the article will close with a brief evaluation of Erikson's identity theory and comments will be offered for future research. Before starting, a few words are in order regarding terminology.

In reviewing the literature on identity, there is very little agreement on how identity is defined (Bosma, Graafsma, Grotevant, & de Levita, 1994). Erikson alone used a variety of identity related terms (identification, identity formation, identity development, identity consolidation, identity foreclosure, and identity resolution) without providing a great deal of explanation (Hoare, 2002). As a result, he has been heavily criticized for his ambiguous style of writing. The current article will utilize fewer terms in an effort to convey a clear message. Therefore, "identity development" will describe the overarching process of development, particularly during the adulthood years. "Identification" will be used to describe development during childhood and "identity formation" will apply to development during adolescence.

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ERIKSON'S PSYCHOSOCIAL THEORY

Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory revolutionized developmental thought (Hoare, 2002). He was one of the first to propose a life-span model of human development which included eight successive psychosocial stages. Each stage is associated with an inherent conflict or crisis that the individual must encounter and successfully resolve to proceed with development. It is worth noting that Erikson (1968) used the term crisis "in a developmental sense to connote not a threat of catastrophe, but a turning point, a crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential" (p. 96). The assumption is that each psychosocial stage has both a successful and unsuccessful outcome (e.g. trust versus mistrust, initiative versus guilt, intimacy versus isolation). Resolution of earlier stages is believed to directly affect the resolution of later stages (Marcia, 1993). Erikson (1968) summarizes with the following statement:

> I shall present human growth from the point of view of the conflicts, inner and outer, which the vital personality weathers, re-emerging from each crisis with an increased sense of inner unity, with an increase of good judgment, and an increase in the capacity 'to do well' according to his own standards and to the standards of those who are significant to him. (pp. 91-92)

Erikson goes on to say "The use of the words 'to do well' of course points up the whole question of cultural relativity" (p. 92) which highlights the emphasis he placed on sociocultural factors.

Erikson continues to receive a great deal of credit for recognizing the influence of culture on development (Hoare, 2002). He was the first to illustrate how the social world exists within the psychological makeup of each individual. Erikson (1959) believed that the individual cannot be understood apart from his or her social context. "Individual and society are intricately woven, dynamically related in continual change" (p. 114). This is a theme that permeates throughout all of Erikson's eight developmental stages and is especially relevant to the fifth psychosocial stage (identity versus role confusion) which occurs during adolescence. Before examining this developmental task, it is important to recognize what Erikson meant when he used the term "adolescence."

Erikson (1968) considered adolescence to be a transitional period of development following childhood and leading into adulthood. Unfortunately, he never defined a range of chronological ages for adolescence or other periods of life such as childhood and adulthood (Waterman, 1993). He also wrote in an era when attending college was less common than it is today; this has direct implications because of the

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emphasis he placed on vocational identity. It can be hypothesized that Erikson's version of adolescence refers to an age period roughly associated with middle and high school: ages 12 through 18. Arnett (2000) has since proposed a period of development referred to as emerging adulthood which encompasses the years beyond high school: ages 18 through 25. Identity development is an inherent component of emerging adulthood and there appears to be considerable overlap with the social tasks of adolescence that Erikson describes. Because this stage may be more relevant to what Erikson initially termed adolescence, it will be integrated with the hypothesized age ranges. Thus, adolescence will refer to the large span of ages 12 through 24 for the current study. It is equally important to operationalize age ranges for the other developmental periods that will be discussed. Childhood will include ages 6 through 11, young adulthood will include ages 25 through 39, middle adulthood will include ages 40 through 65, and late adulthood will consist of the years beyond age 65. Although Erikson (1968) believed identity formation is the focal point of adolescence, it seems logical to begin from the start with a discussion of childhood development and then proceed through both adolescence and adulthood.

Identification in Childhood (Ages 6-11)

The process of identity development begins much earlier than adolescence. Erikson (1968) believed that seeds of identity are planted at a young age when the child recognizes himself/herself as a unique being, separate from his/her parents. As maturation occurs, the child takes on characteristics and admired features of parents or significant others. Erikson called this process identification. Identification allows the child to build a set of expectations about what he or she wishes to be and do. However, the child eventually loses interest in merely adopting the roles and personality attributes of parents or significant others; it is at this point that the process of identity formation is set in motion.

According to Erikson (1968), identity formation begins when the usefulness of identification ends. Taking on characteristics of others no longer provides satisfaction; the individual experiences a desire to shape his or her world in unique ways. Identity formation begins with a synthesis of childhood skills, beliefs, and identifications into a coherent, unique whole that provides continuity with the past and direction for the future (Marcia, 1993). Erikson did not discuss identity development during childhood at great length. Alternatively, he offered great detail about the process of identity formation during adolescence.

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Identity Formation in Adolescence (Ages 12-24)

Erikson (1968) believed the primary psychosocial task of adolescence is the formation of identity. Therefore, he called the developmental conflict identity versus role confusion. There are several contributing factors to the formation of identity. The onset of puberty during adolescence leads to newfound cognitive skills and physical abilities (Kroger, 2004). In addition, increased independence and autonomy leads to greater interactions with neighborhoods, communities, and schools. According to Erikson (1968), this allows the individual to explore vocations, ideologies, and relationships. He gave particular attention to the career domain, stating "In general, it is the inability to settle on an occupational identity which disturbs most young people" (Erikson, 1968, p. 135). New expectations of adult responsibilities are gradually assumed as the adolescent matures. With adulthood on the horizon, eventually the twin identity questions emerge: "Who am I?" and "What is my place in this world?" (McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006). When the individual is able to assess their personal attributes and match these with outlets for expression available in the environment, Erikson (1963) would say identity has been formed. However, when the individual is unable to manage this developmental task, role confusion occurs.

From Erikson's perspective, identity refers to a sense of who one is as a person and as a contributor to society (Hoare, 2002). It is personal coherence or self-sameness through evolving time, social change, and altered role requirements. The formation of identity is a major event in the development of personality and associates with positive outcomes (Marcia, 1993). Identity provides a deep sense of ideological commitment and allows the individual to know his or her place in the world (Hoare, 2002). It provides one with a sense of well-being, a sense of being at home in one's body, a sense of direction in one's life, and a sense of mattering to those who count (Erikson, 1968). Identity is what makes one move with direction; it is what gives one reason to be. Erikson clearly believed that having a solid sense of identity is crucial to further development. However, not all people successfully resolve this developmental task.

Role confusion can lead to a very different human experience. It causes the individual to seriously question one's essential personality characteristics, one's view of oneself, and the perceived views of others (Bosma et al., 1994). Consequently, the individual experiences extreme doubt regarding the meaning and purpose of their existence, leading to a sense of loss and confusion. Due to changing physical, cognitive, and social factors, nearly all adolescents experience some form of role

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confusion (Kroger, 2004). However, most actively resolve these issues and progress towards later developmental stages.

In summary, Erikson (1968) believed that adolescence is a time in which identity normally becomes the focus of concern. Research appears to support this notion by indicating that the most extensive advances in identity development occur during the college years (Waterman, 1985). Major gains are expected during college as students make important decisions that pertain to various life domains including occupation, friendship, romantic relationships, and religious or political beliefs (Waterman & Archer, 1990). "College environments provide a diversity of experiences that can both trigger considerations of identity issues and suggest alternative resolutions for identity concerns" (Waterman, 1993, p. 53-54); Erikson would certainly agree. However, not all individuals attend college and have the opportunity to explore the aforementioned identity domains. Even for those who do, is it realistic to think that they will make commitments in these areas that will remain unchanged throughout life? It is for these reasons that identity development beyond adolescence will now be discussed.

Identity Development in Adulthood (Ages 25 and Beyond)

Erikson held that identity development does not end with its formation (Hoare, 2002). He viewed it as an ongoing process that captures one's investments throughout the long years of adulthood. Thus, identity development is both a normative period of adolescence and an evolving aspect of adulthood. In contrast to Erikson's extensive writings on the adolescent identity formation process, he did not offer detailed comments regarding identity's evolution throughout the adult life (Kroger, 2007). As a result, he has been criticized for extending his theory beyond adolescence without providing much detail. To complicate matters further, Erikson conveys contradictory messages speaking on identity development beyond adolescence. According to Erikson (1968), the final identity is "fixed at the end of adolescence" (p. 161). He suggests that identity concerns fade as issues of intimacy (followed by generativity and ego integrity) become the main focus. Alternatively, Erikson proposed that identity-defining issues of adolescence do not remain fixed; they retain flexibility for modification throughout the adulthood years due to new life experiences. Clearly these two statements appear contradictory; this is why it is difficult to assess identity development beyond adolescence from his perspective. Thankfully, others have picked up where Erikson left off.

There appears to be a considerable scope for identity development beyond adolescence (Kroger, 2007). The identity-defining domains of

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meaningful vocational, political, religious, interpersonal, and sexual choices remain key foundational issues during young adulthood (ages 25-39). Vaillant and Milofsky (1980) suggest that young adulthood is a time of developing and consolidating goals, particularly in the areas of career and family. On top of implementing a vocational pathway, the demands of partnering (and possibly parenting) raise new issues for many young adults. Research has indicated that in transitioning from young to middle adulthood, both men and women frequently change their values, goals, what they find important in life, and what they are generally striving towards (Harker & Solomon, 1996).

Identity related issues continue to emerge during middle adulthood (ages 40-65). During this time period, individuals begin to reclaim opposite-sex qualities and experience a shift in perspective on time (Kotre & Hall, 1990). Women tend to take on more masculine characteristics while men take on more feminine characteristics (Huyck, 1990; James, Lewkowicz, Libhaber, & Lachman, 1995); in addition, the reality that life is "half finished" begins to sink in. It is not uncommon for individuals to reevaluate, refine, and readjust vocational and social roles during middle adulthood (Kroger, 2007). Changes in life circumstances can also cause a reexamination of identity issues (Waterman, 1993). Midlife career changes, geographic relocations, resuming one's education, divorce, remarriage, death of loved ones, and adoption are all viable possibilities for middle adulthood. Finally, the commonly used phrase "midlife crisis" is often associated with identity related issues, although research indicates that this is an infrequently occurring event (Berk, 2007).

Examination and evaluation are two words synonymous with continued identity development in late adulthood (ages 65 and beyond). Retirement allows the individual to reflect upon the choices that have been made throughout the course of life. Reviewing one's life in a positive manner allows the individual to experience satisfaction. Alternatively, a negative life review can leave the individual with feelings of regret. Kroger (2002) conducted one of the few studies on identity revision and maintenance processes during late adulthood. Results showed that important identity processes included reintegrating important identity elements from younger years, rebalancing relationships and other social roles, readjusting to loss and diminished physical capacities, and finding life meanings. The argument could be made that identity development is still just as much an issue in late adulthood as it is earlier in life.

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CONCLUSION

In summary, Erikson's psychosocial theory is composed of eight developmental stages which span throughout the course of life. Each stage presents the individual with an inherent task or conflict that they must successfully resolve to proceed with development. Erikson placed a great deal of emphasis on sociocultural factors because he believed these strongly influence development. Such factors are especially relevant in the process of identity formation. Erikson believed that childhood identifications lay the groundwork for identity formation in adolescence. The process of forming an identity involves creating a coherent sense of self and who one is in relation to the world. Adolescence represents an optimal time for identity development due to a variety of physical, cognitive, and social factors. Although Erikson believed identity was largely "fixed" by the end of adolescence, he did suggest that identity continues to evolve throughout adulthood. Unfortunately, he did not give great detail on what this process looks like. Research shows that identity development continues to be an ongoing process throughout adulthood. Just as in adolescence, vocations, ideologies, and relationships continue to remain important identity issues. Several studies have been presented to support this notion.

Much like forming an identity, reviewing the literature on this nebulous topic is no small task. As discussed earlier, researchers use a variety of terms and phrases when describing the process of identity development. It is also difficult to find continuity with regards to developmental periods and associated ages. A strong effort has been made to use terminology that connects Erikson's work with more recent empirical studies in a manner that is understandable and coherent. It would be wise for future researchers to use agreed upon terms and definitions so as not to confuse readers and fellow colleagues. No matter what you call it, identity development is a major psychosocial task and one that appears during many phases of life. Although Erikson may not have been clear regarding identity development beyond adolescence, we will always be indebted to him for the great deal of discussion and conversation he has stimulated on this intriguing topic.

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