ERIKSON AND ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT: CONTEMPORARY VIEWS ON AN ENDURING LEGACY

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Abstract: Many of Erik Erikson's theoretical contributions to our understanding of adolescent psychosocial development endure; some have even proven to be true. At the same time, in the decades since Erikson's seminal works there have been many advances in developmental theory, especially in the realms of identity and positive youth development, along with important critiques of adolescent psychosocial theory. Together, these advances and critiques provide new lenses through which Erikson's work may viewed. The present work thus reviews the enduring concepts and qualities as well as limitations of Erikson's views on psychosocial development in adolescence, while considering possible expansions in light of contemporary identity theories and technological advances.

Keywords: Erikson, adolescence, development, identity

Many decades after the publication of his seminal works, Erik Erikson's theories on adolescent psychosocial development remain relevant, vital, and even prescient. At the same time, subsequent advances in developmental theory, especially in the realms of identity and positive youth development, invite a reexamination of Erikson's work. Here, we offer an appreciation of these enduring qualities that can reinvigorate adolescent psychosocial theory by way of integrating contemporary perspectives.

Erikson's Enduring Contributions

Identity Formation As the Central Task of Adolescence

Many of Erikson's ideas about adolescence have endured, but none as prominently as advancing identity formation as the central theme of the psychosocial crisis of this life stage, "identity vs. identity confusion." Though Erikson was not the first to delve into the concept of identity, he was the prime initiator of a field of inquiry into this concept. Erikson's stage theory of development suggests before one is psychosocially equipped to engage in the work of identity formation, one must emerge from the preceding stage of childhood with "a sense of being able to make things and make them well" (1968, p. 123), or what he called "industry." If there is instead a negative resolution of the childhood psychosocial crisis—which

Erikson called "inferiority"—identity formation in adolescence is handicapped. In turn, the satisfactory achievement of identity in adolescence is essential for productively solving the crisis of the adulthood stage to follow, "intimacy vs. isolation." In this way there is a continuity and sequentiality in Erikson's ontogenetic perspective.

According to Erikson (1956), identity "connotes both a sameness within oneself (selfsameness) and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others" (p. 57). This notion of selfsameness or continuity of self helps accommodate the myriad physical, cognitive, and role changes inherent to adolescence, along with "all the confusing social cues of early life," ultimately serving as the mechanism "which gradually unites the inner and outer world" of the youth (p. 82; see also Hart, Maloney, & Damon, 1987). This idea of selfsameness is often called temporal-spatial continuity: A well-developed identity embraces a sense of sameness both across time and in different contexts (e.g., family, work). Côté & Levine argued that this idea is the most central in Erikson's theory of identity (1988), and from it is born a sense of invigorated self. To illustrate this notion, Erikson (1968) cited William James:

> A man's character is discernable in the mental or moral attitude in which, when it came upon him, he felt himself most deeply and intensely active and alive. At such moments there is a voice inside which speaks and says: This is the real me! (1920, p. 199).

Erikson (1968) stated that identity formation "arises from the selective repudiation and mutual assimilation of childhood identifications and their absorption in a new configuration" (p. 159). Particularly operative here is Erikson's use of the term *selective*. Indeed, he was clear that identity is not merely "the sum of childhood identifications. It is the inner capital accrued from all those experiences of each successive stage, when meaningful identification led to a successful alignment of the individual's basic drives with his endowment and his opportunities" (p. 94). This alignment of drives, endowment, and opportunities leads, ultimately, to the contents and commitments of oneself: "These new identification . . . force the young individual into choices and decisions which will, with increasing immediacy, lead to commitments 'for life'" (p. 155).

That the absence of some sense of one's commitments for life in adolescence may inhibit identity development was made evident in another of Erikson's (1968) references to James. Erikson notes (citing Matthiessen, 1948) that at age 26 James confessed, "Much would I give for a constructive passion of some kind" (p. 209). Indeed, this need for a "constructive passion" highlights not only the centrality of purposeful pursuits toward optimal identity development, but also forecasts a major theme in contemporary psychology on the nature of positive development and thriving in adolescence (Benson & Scales, 2009; Bundick, Yeager, King, & Damon, 2010).

Identity Development As Inherently Relational

It takes more than predetermined readiness by persons to address successive crises to propel growth. According to Erikson (1968), identity is "dependent on the process by which a society (often through subsocieties) identifies the young individual . . . A community's ways of identifying the individual, then, meet more or less successfully the individual's ways of identifying himself with others" (p. 159). As reflective of person-in-society, identity thus emerges not only from selection among childhood identifications, but further from "the way in which the social process of the times identifies young individuals—at best recognizing them as persons who had to become the way they are and who, being the way they are, can be trusted. The community, in turn, feels recognized by the individual who cares to ask for such recognition" (1982, p. 72).

In these reflections, we see not only that Erikson acknowledged the relational nature of identity, but a bi-directionality of influence between young persons and their communities. This idea that development occurs at the interface of the person and society (and its demands and support; see Schwartz, 2001) remains a theoretical tenet of many contemporary developmental theories. Relational developmental systems theory (Ford & Lerner, 1992; Overton, 2006), has its roots in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and Brandstädter's (1984) action theory: Humans are active producers of their own development through interdependent relations between individuals and the multiple levels of their ecologies (see Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003). Erikson acknowledged that young people can influence their communities insofar as the community feels recognized when the young person cares to ask for such recognition. At the same time, Erikson did not elaborate on this notion of bidirectionality, nor did he explore in any depth the mutually beneficial interactions youth could have with their communities. According to relational developmental systems theory, these interactions in turn contribute not only to the identity formation of the youth but also the identity assumed by the community as supportive of its youth (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998).

Psychosocial Moratorium

Though he generally focused on the development of identity as progressing in a relatively linear fashion, Erikson pointed out potential developmental benefits of what he called a "psychosocial moratorium." This is a socially-sanctioned time when one can experiment with roles and discover where there is a match between one's passions and socially desirable, vocational, and community roles. Erikson described this concept of moratorium as a distinct period

> The individual through free role experimentation may find a niche in some section of his society, a niche which is firmly defined and yet seems to be uniquely made for him. In finding it, the young adult gains an as-

sured sense of inner continuity and social sameness which will bridge what he was as a child and what he is about to become, and will recognize his conception of himself and his community's recognition of him (1956, p. 58).

Such a planned delay does not suggest a withdrawal but instead an active (if uneven) process of exploration "by regressive recapitulations as well as experimental anticipations, often aggravated by an alternation of extremes" (Erikson, 1982, p. 100). Furthermore, Erikson characterized a psychosocial moratorium as "a selective permissiveness on the part of society," typically culminating in a "commitment on the part of youth [ending] in a more or less ceremonial confirmation of commitment on the part of society" (Erikson, 1968, p. 157). Here again we see the interplay between the young person and his or her social environment. In contemporary society, psychosocial moratoria, especially in later adolescence often take the form of attending college, participating in a study abroad program, working at an internship, or engaging in a service program like AmeriCorps, CityYear, or the Peace Corps.

Additional Enduring Contributions Related to Adolescent Development

Erikson's contribution to our understanding of youth development cannot be reduced to identity formation alone; indeed, Erikson incorporated a number of other critically energizing dynamics that foster development in adolescence. Three of these include: a) a focus on virtues as psychosocial strengths, b) the notion of the epigenetic principle, and c) the role of technology in adolescent development.

Virtues as Strengths. Erikson proposed what he called "virtues" or "inherent strengths" for each of his stages of psychosocial development (1968, p. 328). The virtue of adolescence is fidelity. "Fidelity," Erikson (1962) wrote, "when fully matured, is the strength of disciplined devotion. It is gained in the involvement of youth in such experiences as reveal the essence of the era they are to join—as the beneficiaries of its tradition, as the practitioners and innovators of its technology, as renewers of its ethical strength" (p. 23). In describing this strength, he stated "The adolescent looks most fervently . . . for adults and ideas to have faith in . . . and in whose service it would seem worthwhile to prove oneself trustworthy . . . However, adolescents fear a foolish, all too trusting commitment, and will, paradoxically, express [their] need for faith in loud and cynical mistrust" (1968, p. 129). Fidelity, thus, is also an inherently relational notion.

Erikson's acknowledgement of these virtues in some ways foreshadows the strengths-based or assets-based approach to adolescent development, namely, "positive youth development." The successful navigation of adolescence cannot be marked simply by the absence of psychosocial deficiencies or the mere achievement of competence in identity formation or other developmental domains (e.g., school, family, community). According to W. Damon, this approach "envisions young people as resources rather than as problems for society [and] emphasizes

the manifest potentialities rather than the supposed incapacities" (2004, p. 15). Erikson acknowledged the importance of assets in his formulation of psychosocial virtues, yet he focused only on one virtue in each life stage, whereas contemporary theories of youth development entail young people embodying a great variety of virtues, and their development is affected by the presence (or absence) of various community assets. The Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets framework (Benson, 1997) includes a set of key internal (individual) and external (community) assets that contribute to the positive development of youth (one grouping of which incorporates the notion of "positive identity"). Lerner's 5 C's of Positive Youth Development model (2004) focuses on a grouping of identity-relevant adolescent strengths including competence, character, connection, confidence, and caring or compassion. Both of these prominent models maintain, as did Erikson, that youth develop a sense of self through constant interactions with their environments; indeed, Erikson's framework included the building of trust and mutual faith between youth and their communities. However, Erikson's approach did not include all of young persons' assets, which, from a contemporary view, contribute to an identity that not only gives them a sense of their place in the world, but gives them full license to see themselves as active contributors to it.

The Epigenetic Principle. One of the major issues in theories of human development includes how the theorist understands growth. How and why do persons grow from A to B? What forces inside and outside the person explain change over time? Erikson (1968) used as his main thesis the epigenetic principle: "Anything that grows has a ground plan, and that out of a ground plan the parts arise, each having its time of special ascending, until all parts have arisen to form a functioning whole" (p. 92). In this light, persons unfold according to a prescribed sequence of stages. The energy that propels growth is the "crisis" in each stage (such as the adolescent crisis of "identity vs. identity confusion"). Satisfactory resolution of the crisis of each stage informs the shape and ease of later growth. For example, persons in early adulthood who are facing the "crisis" of "intimacy vs. isolation" has a leg up if they emerge from adolescence with a firm sense of identity. As evidence of this, successful identity development has been found to promote a healthier grasp of romantic relationships (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010).

The Role of Technology. Often not mentioned by scholars of his work, but of great importance to those interested in updating it, Erikson acknowledged the role of technology in the psychosocial development of youth—a notion which bears particular importance in today's ubiquitously cyber-connected world. "That part of youth," Erikson (1968) wrote, "will have the most affirmatively exciting time of it which finds itself in the wave of a technological, economic, or ideological trend seemingly promising all that youthful vitality could ask for" (p. 129). He also asserted that adolescent development benefits from "the pursuit of expanding technological trends, [enabling youth] to identify with new roles of competency and invention" (p. 130). However, Erikson did not overemphasize the importance of

technology. On one hand, he stated, "There is no reason to insist that a technological world, as such, need weaken inner resources of adaptation, which may, in fact, be replenished by the good will and ingenuity of a communicating species" (Erikson, 1964, pp. 103–104). On the other hand, he stated, "The technological world of today is about to create kinds of alienation too strange too be imagined" (Erikson, 1964, pp. 104–105). Indeed, evidence of this is the growing prevalence of cyber-bullying (Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2008) and concerns about "internet addiction" in many youth and their consequent withdrawal from society (Young, 2009).

Critiques and Expansions of Erikson's Theories of Adolescent Development
     Despite the broad influence of Erikson's theories of adolescent development, they have not been above criticism. Though Erikson did make a passing note of the importance of subidentities such as ethnic and sexual, his cursory exploration of them has invited some criticism. For example, Sneed, Schwartz, and Cross (2006) reviewed the identity literature—starting with Erikson and into the present day—from a multicultural perspective, and reported that despite an emergence of research on ethnic and race identity, it is still unknown to what extent Erikson's psychosocial theory applies across subgroups. Moreover, Sorell and Montgomery (2001) maintained that Erikson's theorizing gave priority to a masculine orientation toward individuality and agency over a feminine orientation toward connectedness and nurturance. Levine (2002) built on this critique by asserting that gender differences serve best as "a proxy for the more fundamental distinction between the ideal-type identity constructions of independence and interdependence," through which women are more likely to "struggle to assimilate a sense of independence into [their] sense of an interdependent self" and men "struggle to assimilate a sense of interdependence into an independent sense of self" (p. 273).
     Another important critique of psychosocial theory is that, despite his acknowledgement that not all development is linear, Erikson posited a stage theory in which humans typically progress from one stage to the next and encounter the psychosocial crises sequentially. Stage theories have for many years been brought into question (Flavell, 1977). Bandura (1998) stated that human functioning is simply "too multifaceted and multidetermined to be shrunk to a few discrete categories," that humans typically "do not exhibit a stable progression through the postulated sequence" of developmental stages, and that "where stages differ in gradation rather than in kind, the notion of stage progression is stripped of meaning or simply acknowledges the logical necessity that a brief adoptive duration precedes a longer one" (pp. 309–310). Baltes (1997) took a similar position, saying that the prominent role taken up by relational developmental systems theories in contemporary developmental psychology (as discussed earlier) is a testament to the "multicausality, multidimensionality, multidirectionality, and multifunctionality" of human ontogenesis and inadequacies of stage theories (p. 369).

Erikson's work has also been criticized as lacking in rigor and being unamenable to operational definition (Côté & Levine, 1987). One of the more prominent theoretical advances of Erikson's theories of identity that addresses these concerns can be found in the work of James Marcia (1966). Marcia postulated four ways to resolve identity crises:

- Identity diffusion in which a young person has not yet explored different ways of being in the world nor made choices about vocation or ideology

- Identity foreclosure in which one makes commitments to a certain kind of life without wrestling with options or possibilities

- Identity moratorium in which one is in the midst of wrestling with options but has not yet committed to an identity

- Identity achievement in which one has experienced an identity crisis, evaluated possibilities, and made a commitment to live in a way that has temporal and spatial continuity

- This fourfold framework and its measurement system have spawned several hundred studies as well as a number of critical reviews (Côté & Levine, 1988; Van Hoof, 1999)

Many other extensions of Erikson's (and Marcia's) work have since been proposed. Among them, Grotevant (1987) asserted that the identity exploration process is a function of young persons' skills (e.g., perspective taking or critical thinking) and their orientation toward (or away from) exploring their identities. Berzonsky (1990) also focused on process, adding three sociocognitive processing orientations: the informational style (active seeking of identity-relevant information), the normative style (closed-minded reliance on parental or social norms), and the diffuse or avoidant style (general evasiveness of identity issues). Waterman (1990) observed two different forms of achieved identity, one motivated primarily by extrinsic factors and the other motivated by a more intrinsic source he called "personal expressiveness," marked by a sense of purpose and fulfillment. Côté (1997) took a more sociological perspective on identity development in his identity-capital model, focusing on the role of social structures in identity formation and the degree to which identity components permit the accrual of social capital. Moreover, diverse subfields of identity have garnered much attention in recent decades. Beyond the focus on ethnic and racial identity reviewed by Sneed et al. (2006; see also Phinney, 1990) and the call for a greater understanding of gender identity by Sorell and Montgomery (2001), the field has been expanded to include moral identity (Blasi, 1984; Hart & Fegley, 1995), civic identity (Yates & Youniss, 1999), and religious and spiritual identity (see Roehlkepartain, King, Wagener, & Benson, 2006). Together, these theoretical extensions have helped to provide greater depth and breadth to Erikson's original formulation of identity development in youth.

Identity: Youth and Technology

Since Erikson published his defining works, of the ideas he integrated into his theories, perhaps none has developed at a faster rate and with greater consequence than the effects of technology. While prescient in his assessment of the importance of technology in the development of youth (and its potential to contribute to their senses of both connectedness and alienation), Erikson could not have envisioned the prominent role digital technologies play in the lives of today's adolescents. Undoubtedly, cell phones (and with them the capacity to communicate via text messaging) and the Internet (especially using social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter) are redefining how young people connect with each other and their electronically connected world. How these new rules of socializing might change psychosocial development, and how one thinks of one's digital self vis-à-vis one's real self, remains to be seen; to date, very little research has investigated such nascent developmental phenomena (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008). While this technological trend may indeed be promising all that youthful vitality could ask for, it is yet to be determined whether the perils are offset by the promises.

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