

Crisis of Psychosocial Exploration: A Brief Overview of Erikson and Identity Theories

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Abstract

The present research is broadly a review of Eriksonian identity theory and its manifestation in various other approaches to psychological and social development. It also covers some of the representative reactions to his concepts. Among many other researchers, James Marcia has made a considerable contribution to Erikson's theory by his identity status approach. This paper reexamines these propositions to explore possibilities of further research in this area and to maintain an equilibrium with the current scenario of research in psychosocial and developmental psychology and its influence on identity theory.

KEYWORDS: Identity Theory, Identity Status approach, Psychosocial Development, Identity crisis.

1. Introduction

The present research is broadly a review of Eriksonian identity theory and its manifestation in various other approaches to psychological and social development. It also covers some of the representative reactions to his concepts.

Erikson has exerted a profound influence on almost every researcher of identity studies. He started discussions on the theory of 'ego identity'. He has made an enormous contribution to identity theory by publishing his two influential books, namely *Childhood and Society* (1950) and *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (1968) and many research papers devoted to developmental aspects of identity formation. He has studied identity from the life-span perspective by giving clinical observations and some case studies in support of his views. So, he is called as the pioneer of identity and personality studies.

Among many other researchers, James Marcia has made a considerable contribution to Erikson's theory by his *identity status* approach. Jane Kroger is a follower of Erikson, has made an extensive study of different popular theories about identity. She stated that: "Erikson adopted a psychosocial approach to understanding identity by describing the interplay between the individual biology, psychology, and social recognition and response within a historical context." (J. Kroger 206) So, Erikson's theory of is a significant starting point.

The present study concentrates on *identity crisis* and uncertainty of youth about their social roles. The term has multiple meanings in different contexts. It is associated with every situation of conflict in human life. "Identity" and "Identity Crisis" are extensively used in many contexts. Their use has been so popular that it becomes difficult to define them. (Erikson 15) Adolescence is a highly traumatic phase in human life. It marks the end of childhood and the beginning of adulthood. With Erikson identity studies has evolved into a well-organized and coherent discipline.

2. Identity Theory

“Identity” is highly complex and multifaceted phenomenon. It is studied in multiple disciplines with great vigor and vitality. Popular domains in which identity is intermittently studied are social psychology, sociology, cultural and ethnic studies, philosophy, sociology, anthropology and so on. Nonetheless, it received particular attention in Erik Erikson’s discussions about adolescence. He states that: “Identity includes, but is more than, the sum of all the successive identifications of those earlier years when the child wanted to be, and often was forced to become like the people he depended on.” (Erikson 87)

Erikson used ‘identity crisis’ in connection with soldiers of Second World War II who returned to live as civilians in society. The crisis became prominent because they were trained in military code and were exposed to the uncertainties of warfront for many years. They were confused about their role in normal civil life. (Erikson 42)

The genesis of identity theory is thus found in experiences of soldiers who returned from World War II and were passing through the phase of confused identity. Adams G. R. compared this crisis with adolescents: “Over time and through clinical experience, he came to believe that the pathological difficulties which some veterans had in leaving one role (soldier) and entering another (civilian) were psychologically similar to the problem which some adolescents experience as they leave childhood and move through the transition of adolescence into adulthood. From this experiential framework has evolved a psychology of adolescent identity formation.” (Adams 3)

‘Identity’ and ‘crisis’ both denote a transition stage of development in the life cycle of every individual. The term crisis signifies “a necessary turning point, a crucial moment” and it can be “applicable to many situations like the crisis in individual development or in the emergence of new elite, in the therapy of an individual or intension of rapid historical change.” (Erikson 16) In developmental perspective, it is a crucial phase of normal development when the adolescents go through a confusion in deciding occupational choices and to follow a set of ideas and beliefs.

Sigmund Freud the father of psychoanalytic theory, proposed five stages of development. He influenced Alfred Adler, Anna Freud, Carl Jung and also Erik Erikson. Freud divided human life in five stage plan. These stages are also known as stages of psychosexual development.

The first stage in Freudian psychosexual theory is “Oral” stage. It involves sensations and gratification of oral organs such as the mouth, tongue, and gums. The stage lasts two years from birth. “Anal” stage is about toilet training. “Phallic” stage occurs between three to six years of age. This stage is crucial to determine sexuality and gender differentiation. “Latency” phase is from seven to twelve years of age. The “Genital” phase continues for the remaining lifetime.

3. Erikson’s Eight Stages of Psychosocial Development

Erikson provided a continuation and elaboration of Freud’s theory of psychosexual development which is based on the childhood experiences and formation of sexual identity. His emphasis is mainly on the importance of identity crisis in ego development and also successful completion of each of the eight stages. Thornburg reported that: “Ego development became the central issue in his theory,

whereas instinct was central to Freud's. Erikson outlines eight stages of man, based on the epigenetic principle of psychosocial development." (Thornburg 27)

Erikson stated that human development begins with infant's first exposure to the society and it continues even in late adulthood or old age. He maintained that "Psychoanalysis today is implementing the study of the ego, a concept denoting man's capacity to unify his experience and his action in an adaptive manner. It is shifting its emphasis from the concentrated study of the conditions which blunt and distort the individual ego to the study of the ego's roots in social organization." (Erikson 15-16).

Many developmental theorists describe development in the form of stages. Among others, Erik Erikson has made a significant contribution to identity theory. Influenced by Freud's psychodynamic theory and Anna Freud's views about ego's defense mechanisms, he shifted the focus from psychosexual development to normative psychosocial development of the individual with particular emphasis on identity formation.

He endeavors to bridge the gap between biological and psychosocial developmental perspectives. He expanded Sigmund Freud's five stage theory and proposed eight stages of development with emphasis on social and cultural orientations of the individual. Kroger (2004) argues that: "Moving beyond Freud's goal of raising human misery to mere unhappiness, Erikson painted not only a more optimistic picture of human capabilities but also shifted the emphasis of psychoanalysis from pathology to healthy functioning. Finally, Erikson recognized that personality development did not end in adolescence but rather continued to evolve throughout the lifespan." (J. Kroger 16)

His theory is based on the *epigenetic principle*: "Whenever we try to understand growth, it is well to remember the *epigenetic principle* which is derived from the growth of organisms in *utero*. Somewhat generalized, this principle states that anything that grows has a ground plan, and that out of this ground plan the parts arise, each part having its time of special ascendancy, until all parts have arisen to form a functioning whole." (Erikson 92).

In each stage, there are two conflicting forces which are responsible for causing a crisis. Each stage is also characterized by a crisis which is according to Jane Kroger "a crucial turning point where development must make a move for better or for worse as one orients to the physical environment and social and historical contexts." (J. Kroger 23)

Erikson has mentioned eight stages. The first stage is known as "Trust vs. Mistrust." It is the first episode which begins the development in infancy. This stage occurs from infancy to two years when the infant goes through the first crisis in life. This stage is a continuous learning for the infant to trust and mistrust. It develops a strong mutual relationship between the infant and its mother or caretaker. It occurs during *oral* stage or infancy. The infant's first exposure to the social training associates begins with it. It is about his awareness of the microcosm of society in which the pendulum oscillates between trust and mistrust.

The baby develops trust when all its needs are addressed. When love and warmth supplement his exposure to the outer world, he develops trust. He feels secure in the hands of his caregivers. Gradually through successful completion of this phase

develops *hope*, an essential quality for the construct of identity in future stages of development.

The conflict between trust and mistrust occurs every day in his life because of this dependency: “In his gradually increasing waking hours, he finds that more and more adventures of the senses arouse a feeling of familiarity, of having coincided with a feeling of inner goodness...The infant’s first social achievement, then, is his willingness to let the mother out of sight without undue anxiety or rage, because she has become an inner certainty as well as an outer predictability.” (Erikson 247) Positive outcome and not complete or successful resolution of this conflict is *hope*.

The second stage is “Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt”. It corresponds with anal stage or bowel training. The stage involves training of two simultaneous but opposite processes: holding on and letting go”. (251) Holding on may develop positive or negative character traits in a child. Positively, it implies retaining positive traits like care, love and affection. ‘Letting go’ suggests “an inimical letting loose of destructive forces” (251)

The absence of trust both from within and in outer control will give rise to negative emotions like shame and doubt. This stage is a continuous struggle between a sense of personal capabilities and societal expectations.

Erikson further explains that this is a crucial stage “for the ratio of love and hate, cooperation and willfulness, freedom of self-expression and its suppression. From a sense of self-control without loss of self-esteem comes a lasting sense of goodwill and pride; from a sense of loss of self-control and of foreign overcontrol comes a lasting propensity for doubt and shame.” (Erikson 254)

He observed that young children and adolescents always strive for autonomy. Thornburg analyzed this need for autonomy and noted that the adolescent strives for three types of autonomy. They are behavioral, emotional and value autonomy. Need for behavioral autonomy arouses out of the restrictions on behavior imposed by parental control and authority. Adolescents need parental support and guidance during this phase.

In the urge for emotional autonomy, parents should take cautious steps to save adolescents from emotional alienation. Thornburg further explained this need for emotional autonomy in following words: “The adolescents must give up much of his childhood dependency, learn self-reliance, and come to identify with his parents as friends or confidants rather than as models. Parents can facilitate these processes by encouraging independence in adolescents. If they set up conditions for gradual emancipation, the adolescents will be able to work out his independence with minimal internal conflict or rebellion.” (Thornburg 114)

Initiative vs. Guilt is a stage which occurs during three to five years when child prepares for learning in school. The child explores different possibilities to go daringly around because of newly acquired locomotor skills. His initiative to explore is so prominent that the child escapes the attention of elders and attempts to wander into forbidden areas.

This is a crucial stage dealing with the child’s first experiences of the society because “infantile sexuality and incest taboo, castration complex and superego all unite here to bring about that specifically human crisis during which the child must turn from an exclusive, pregenital attachment to his parents to the slow process of becoming a parent, a carrier of tradition.”(Erikson 256)

At the age of 6 to 12 years, the child learns to master his environment and begins to acquire necessary social skills. This stage according to Erikson is “Industry vs. Inferiority”. The child begins to attract the attention of the elders and other members of the household. Loving and responsible parents positively nurture this industriousness.

The opposite of industry is a feeling of incompleteness or inferiority. If the child is slow to acquire these skills leads to a sense of inferiority and incompleteness. However, a sense of inferiority gives the power to tackle the forthcoming challenges. Erikson explained the contrast between strengths and weaknesses of the different stages and explained this stage in following words. “This stage differs from the earlier ones in that it is not a swing from an inner upheaval to a new mastery. Freud calls it the latency stage because violent drives are normally dormant. But it is only a lull before the storm of puberty, when all the earlier drives reemerge in a new combination, to be brought under the dominance of genitality.” (Erikson 260)

Erikson further elaborated these crises that arise out of this conflict in more details as: “The danger at this stage is the development of an estrangement from himself and his tasks—the well-known *sense of inferiority*. This may be caused by insufficient solution of the preceding conflict. “the child may still want his mommy more than knowledge; he may still prefer to be the baby at home rather than the big child in school; he still compares himself with his father, and the comparison arouses a sense of guilt as well as a sense of inferiority.” (Erikson 124)

Fifth stage ‘Identity vs. Role Confusion’ is the most decisive stage in the life cycle of every individual. It occurs during 12 to 20 years. This stage acts as a mediator between the end of childhood and the beginning of puberty or adolescence. Prominent bodily changes, genital development, and changes in roles in the social relationships make the youth either more responsible or more anxious. They are concerned about how they demonstrate their skills and eager to prove abilities in the chosen occupation.

It is integration phase which covers past identifications and also future goals. Erikson suggests that “The integration now taking place in the form of ego identity is, as pointed out, more than the sum of the childhood identifications. It is the accrued experience of ego’s ability to integrate all identifications with the vicissitudes of the libido, with the aptitude developed out of endowment, and with the opportunities offered in social roles” (Erikson 261)

Adolescents gradually develop a sense of responsibility to assume primary social roles. They are beset with the existential question: “Who am I?” Peers and not teachers or parents, exert strong influence on this group. The sixth stage ‘Intimacy versus isolation’ begins at the age of about 20 years. This stage is also known as ‘young adulthood’ or early phase of adulthood. The crisis differs in the successive stages. Adulthood and following old age needs emotional support and attention.

In fact, each stage of human life is a crisis. Only out of struggle and conflict develops a healthy and emotionally strong personality. Every crisis gives strength to develop a new ability to sustain in this society. It facilitates complete psychosocial and emotional development. Meyerson emphasized this need as: “It may sound like a contradiction of terms, but many crises are *normal*; in adolescence, in fact necessary. It depends on the degree and whether the crises help or hinder the development of necessary areas of personality without doldrums, pain, hurt, experiment, defiance,

exaltation, responsibility, concern, love, hate, mood swings, rebellion, etc.; it would not be adolescence. That is adolescence without normative crisis is not adolescence.” (Meyerson 40) Thus, the adolescents’ identity crisis is focused on assuming a social role and it successfully ends in establishing stable identity.

During ‘generativity and stagnation’ stage, the dependency and responsibility shifts from older generation to younger generation. While individuals struggle to achieve economic and social stability, they also look forward to continuing their tradition in the future generation. The adults now mature, need support, encouragement and guidance from the offspring.

The primary concern of this stage is ‘generativity’. The adult now looks forward to contributing towards “care” of the rest of the world. Stagnation occurs when excessive “self-love” does not allow the individuals to explore the possibilities of social work, philanthropy or charity. Erikson states that: “Where such enrichment fails altogether, regression to an obsessive need for pseudo-intimacy takes place, often with a pervading sense of stagnation and personal impoverishment. Individuals, then, often begin to indulge themselves as if they were their own—or one another’s—one and only child; and where conditions favor it, early invalidism, physical or psychological, becomes the vehicle of self-concern.” (267)

The stage ‘ego integrity vs. despair’ occurs in late adulthood when the individual takes a review of the life and experiences either integrity or despair. His thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes are developed beyond any conceptual change. It sometimes brings “despair” because the life is nearing the end. Body strength and creative energy of the youth gradually comes down. The integrity is in question. Erikson further clarifies (1963): “In order to approach or experience integrity, the individual must know how to be a follower of image bearers in religion and in politics, in the economic living and in the arts and sciences. Ego integrity, therefore, implies an emotional integrity which permits participation by followership as well as acceptance of the responsibility of leadership.” (269)

This stage thus brings forth the perpetual fear of losing time and approaching death. Such feelings of restlessness which emanating from lack of time to start over something again or to finish an unfinished business in life are the cause of despair. A person with integrity has all the required qualities acquired through all the previous seven stages.

4. Literature Review of identity theory

In the purview of diverse approaches towards identity theory, Erikson’s identity crisis and its extension in Marcia’s research about four Identity statuses, numerous research papers on identity development deserve attention due to their unique and detailed treatment of identity. This section briefly summarizes major research articles available on this subject. It will demonstrate the scope depth of identity research. However, all these views are not considered for the analysis of selected novels. Also, it is not a comprehensive survey. It is only representational of the vastness of the identity studies in the domains of different disciplines and areas of research.

James E. Marcia, a Canadian psychologist, has thoroughly investigated possibilities of validation of methods for analysis of normative identity crisis occurring primarily in adolescence. He is the first psychologist to standardize Erikson’s approach although in a selective way. He adapted Erikson’s ideas and

expanded the fifth stage “Identity and role confusion” into four ‘identity statuses’. These statuses were not rigidly organized, nor do all of them occur in the lifespan of every individual. It is, therefore, worth mentioning that Marcia gave a new dimension to ‘identity studies’ after Erikson.

To achieve a sense of stable identity, the adolescent has to face many difficulties and has to make a commitment in two crucial areas “occupation and ideology”. There are two criteria to measure the extent of identity achieved namely ‘commitment and exploration or crisis’. Marcia J. E (1967) states that: “faced with the imminence of adult tasks (e.g. getting a job, becoming a citizen, planning marriage) in which he must now become one of the ‘givers’ rather than the ‘given.’”(J. E. Marcia 340) Adolescent determines to choose a suitable occupation and works hard to achieve it. The process of going through different crisis makes him strong and helps him to achieve his destination. He simplified Erikson’s conceptualizations about identity and role confusion stage in the life cycle.

Marcia’s approach is criticized as inadequate and incomplete. However, he discarded this discrepancy by clarifying that he has not undertaken comprehensive operationalization of Eriksonian stage theory. Based on these assumptions, he invented “identity status” approach. However, his status theory is an independent research work modeled on Erikson’s ideas and aimed at classifying individuals of different orientations. Marcia (1993) has clarified the doubts of his critics that: “The identity status labels themselves are not Erikson’s, nor has he ever advocated or approved a status approach. The labels were taken from Erikson’s writings to connote characteristics of identity formation mentioned by him, but not necessarily emphasized or used in the same way by him. For example, Erikson uses the term “moratorium” to apply to “a time period provided by societies during which its youth are freed from demands of production in order to integrate their identities.” (19-20)

Ego identity is the widely studied phenomenon. Many psychologists have acknowledged Erikson’s contribution to identity theory. However, it was not possible to consider his abstract and ambiguous statements as the basis for scientific study. So, there was a need to standardize his perspective. Marcia J. E. (1966) elaborated Erikson’s “Identity versus Role Confusion” by suggesting four types of identity statuses or types. They are evolved from Erikson’s writings and are based on two crucial criteria namely “exploration” or crisis and “commitment”. He developed the technique of Identity Status Interview (ISI) and an incomplete-sentences blank technique to assess ego identity.

However, Schwartz(2005) has pointed out many discrepancies in identity status theory of Marcia. He claimed that identity status theory has not paid sufficient attention to ethnicity or nationality. He recommended extension or expansion of identity research to include public health issues, improving the quality of life and reducing the threat of terrorism.

Hogg, Deborah, and White (1995) have studied two different theories in sociology about identity. These theories have nothing in common with Erikson’s identity theory, although they employ similar terms like “social psychology”, “self” and “social identity”. This study is about sociological implications of identity in the context of social psychology.

Coté J. E. (1996) took an examined identity in the context of psychology and sociology. Because of such diverse approaches, identity has become a complex

discipline. Coté argues that: “The problems with the concept of identity seem to lie with its promise to explain much about human behavior, but in doing so, the concept takes on a multidimensionality, making it difficult to characterize easily and to arrive at a consensus regarding just what it is.” (Coté 130)

Chavez and Gido-DiBrito (1999) have studied aspects of racial and ethnic identity in the context of adult learners from minority populations in the United States. Stets and Burke (2000) studied differences between identity theory of the self and social identity theory. They pointed out that “although differences exist between the two theories, they are more differences in emphasis than in kind, and that linking the two theories can establish a more fully integrated view of the self” (Stets 224). Their study is based on identity theory from a sociological perspective which studies individuals in a structured society.

Schwartz (2001) further reviewed the identity research undertaken after Erikson. He reviewed six theories which he claims, are “alternative to Marcia’s identity statuses.” He reviewed identity studies and its development from Freud to Erikson. He has pointed out many inadequacies in Marcia’s limited understanding of ego identity. He argues that: “Ego identity, then, represents a coherent picture that one shows both to oneself and to the outside world. Career, romantic preferences, religious ideology, and political preferences, among other facets, come together to form the mosaic that represents who one is. The more complete and consistent that mosaic is, the closer to ego identity synthesis one is, whereas the more disjointed and incomplete the picture is, the more ego identity confusion one will manifest.” (Schwartz 9)

Côté J. E. & Schwartz S. J. (2002) argued that to some extent, identity status research has foreseen individualization theory. There should be integration between psychological and sociological viewpoints about identity studies. They further explain this need as: “The comparison of similar elements between psychological and sociological perspectives may yield a richer understanding of identity formation processes and help to pave the way for future interdisciplinary research. (571)

Kumru & Thompson (2003) selected a sample of 476 adolescents in Turkey and examined identity status and self-monitoring behavior. This research was stimulated by Marcia’s identity status approach evolved from Erikson’s conceptualizations about identity formation. Lavoie and De Vries (2004) empirically investigated in the domain of existence. They studied university students of different ages. Their focus was on the relationship between identity and death orientations in adolescents with the psychosocial point of view. Inspired by Erikson’s psychosocial framework and Marcia’s identity status approach, they argue that identity development researchers rarely examine death as a separate domain of interest for this age group. They further predict that: “The conceptual framework created in the current study could be further utilized in such an endeavor.” (Lavoie 239)

Sneed, Schwartz and Cross (2006) claim that Identity Status approach of Marcia has failed to know non-White ethnic identity crisis. They found that: “Erikson’s theory of identity is posited as a universal theory of identity development in terms of both structure and process. Despite the plethora of research that has been conducted on the identity statuses, it is unclear how relevant this research is to identity development in non-White populations.” (Sneed J. R. 63)

Sokol J. T. (2009) critically examined Erikson's life-span perspective. He claims that "identity development is a lifelong process that extends well beyond the years of adolescence" (139) He attempted to restate terms like identification, identity-formation, and identity development. He reorganized Erikson's life-span into three broad categories namely childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

The second stage determined by Sokol is "identity formation" which equals Erikson's principles: "sameness and continuity." The adolescent identifies himself with parents, peers and other members in the family in decision-making about "occupation and ideology." Third stage "identity development" indicates achievement of a stable identity in adulthood (age 25 and beyond). Sokol acknowledged Erikson's contribution to identity theory: "Although Erikson may not have been clear regarding identity development beyond adolescence, we will always be indebted to him for a great deal of discussion and conversation he has stimulated on this intriguing topic." (Sokol 145)

Kiesling & Sorell (2009) explored religious and spiritual identity formation during adulthood. Their approach was influenced by Erikson's views and related research on identity. Ong, Fuller-Rowell, and Phinney (2010) have approached ethnic and racial dimensions to the identity. They addressed key issues pertaining to measurement processes of ethnic identity based on the theoretical perspectives of Erikson and Marcia.

5. Concluding Remarks

Having seen different theorists on identity, it is found that James Marcia made a unique contribution by operationalizing Erikson's abstract ideas about identity. He concentrated on the fifth stage and embarked on suggesting criteria to understand and evaluate "identity formation" process during adolescence. This paper, therefore, deals with Erikson's life-span perspective to 'identity crisis' and a brief review of its extension in various theories such as James Marcia's *Identity Status* approach. This paper thus covers the scholarly discussions on identity and developmental perspectives on identity studies.

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