

## 9. Erikson's Psychosocial Developmental Stages

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*I came to psychology from art, which may explain, if not justify, the fact that at times the reader will find me painting contexts and backgrounds where he would rather have me point to facts and concepts. I have had to make a virtue out of a constitutional necessity by basing what I have to say on representative description rather than on theoretical argument.*

—Erik Erikson<sup>1</sup>

*I have nothing to offer except a way of looking at things.*

—Erik Erikson<sup>2</sup>

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### Erikson and Personal Identity: A Biographical Profile

Understanding Erik Erikson's own story of personal development facilitates and illuminates an understanding of the development of his psychology. And it was a remarkably individualistic life that he led. Erikson was an illegitimate child, born near Frankfurt, Germany in 1902, of a secret romance between his Jewish mother and an unknown Danish man. His mother married when he was three years old, but Erikson took after his biological father in appearance. His blond, Nordic appearance made him stand out among his young Jewish friends. In Germany and other parts of Europe at the turn of the century, anti-Semitic attitudes were quite pronounced (as was seen with Freud), and Erikson must have felt that he failed to fit into in with either the majority culture or the Jewish minority. Because of these unusual circumstances, he had an obvious "identity problem," which surely influenced not only his unconventional lifestyle, but also his ideas about the crises that each person encounters at each stage of his or her life.

As a young man, Erikson became a wanderer – almost a nomad – as he traveled through Europe. He also became an artist, and unsurprisingly given his independent nature, was largely self-trained. Erikson lived a bohemian lifestyle during these years, rebellious, but

also confused (Freidman, 1999). But he began teaching art to the children of Americans who came to Vienna to study psychoanalysis with Freud and his circle, specializing in children's portraiture. He also became a Montessori instructor. It was at this time that he began studying psychoanalysis with Anna Freud, as well as being analyzed by her. Through his studies and associations with the psychoanalytic community he became one of the few psychoanalysts who practiced and was certified without a medical degree, specializing in child psychiatry.

In 1933 Erikson, now married to Joan Mowat Erikson (née Serson), migrated to America to escape European fascism. Joan Erikson became Erik's editor and research collaborator; they had four children and remained married for 64 years, until his death in 1994 at age 81.

Erikson's real surname was Homberger, after his physician stepfather, but he changed it legally to Erik Homberger Erikson in 1939. Although he gave no formal reason for this change, some have suggested that this name symbolized a personal transformation, that he literally created himself, or gave himself his own identity, as "Erik's son," suggesting that he was the "son of himself." Erikson taught at several prominent universities and institutes, including Yale, Berkeley, the Menninger Foundation, Mount Zion Hospital in San Francisco, and Harvard. More than once his socio-political views caused him to move on from one place to another. He left Yale for Berkeley because of the anti-Semitic attitudes he encountered there. Later he left Berkeley for the Austen Riggs treatment center in Boston because he objected to signing loyalty oaths – this was during the McCarthy era – even though he was not himself a Communist, it was a matter of principle for him.

In addition to psychology, Erikson was also very interested in cultural anthropology, and he lived for a time among the Lakota Sioux in South Dakota and the Yurok tribe in California. He wrote on a wide variety of psychological and cultural themes, including combat stress in veterans (his term *identity crisis* came from research on war veterans<sup>3</sup>), cross-cultural child rearing practices, the dangers of nuclear war, racial tensions (he conducted lengthy conversations with social activist and Black Panther leader Huey Newton; Erikson, 1973), and juvenile delinquency. Among his books are *Childhood and*

*Society* (1950/1985), *Identity: Youth in Crisis* (1959/1980), *The Life Cycle Completed* (1982), *Young Man Luther* (1958), and *Gandhi's Truth* (1969). His well-known stages of development were first formally presented in *Childhood and Society*, but the first three of the books listed here are especially relevant for this chapter.

## Erikson's Psychosocial Emphasis

Erikson extended Freud's work by describing stages of development to include all of the human lifespan, from infancy through old age. Freud had little to say about stages beyond his genital stage (adolescence), although Erikson quotes him as stating that the important tasks of adulthood are "to love and to work" (Erikson, 1950/1985, p. 265). By contrast, Erikson's stages of young adulthood, and the middle and later years, are well developed and offer many insights into the kinds of tasks presented to each of us by life itself as people mature and grow older.

As with many other psychologists whose work is based in the psychoanalytic tradition following Freud, Erikson can be called an ego psychologist because he thought of the ego as something more than a check on the demands of the id and a moderator between id and superego. Rather, the ego has a life of its own. Although partly conscious and partly unconscious, the ego more clearly represents the total personality than does the id. Also, along with other ego psychologists, Erikson stressed the importance of social interactions in development, as opposed to Freud's emphasis on development as a psychosexual process. The role of sex was indeed downplayed by Erikson, as it was by most post- or neo-Freudians in the psychodynamic tradition (including Jung, Adler, Horney, and Sullivan). Although he did not overtly deny psychosexual phenomena such as oral fixation and Oedipus complex, Erikson not only downplayed the role of sex but also even the unconscious mind, focusing more on interpersonal, social, and cultural influences.

## The Stages of Development

Erikson saw that each stage of development presents its own unique challenges, which he called *crises*. Erikson believed that these

crises of the ego presented challenges to one's individual identity. Successful development of the personality (or psychosocial development) depends on meeting and overcoming these tasks or crises. As can be seen from Table 9.1 (based on Erikson, 1950/1985), Erikson's stages up until young adulthood parallel Freudian stages, and include Freudian concepts, but also greatly expand on them.

For Erikson, development proceeds according to the *epigenetic principle*. This term was originally used in embryology to denote physiological development as a kind of natural unfolding of the developing embryo into a fetus, then a child. If something disturbs the development of the embryo (an arm, for example) at the critical time in which that limb must develop, then the arm will never develop properly.

The counterpart to the limb in psychosocial development is some aspect of the personality, such as the sense of basic trust in his first stage. As with Freud, Erikson believed that successful development at each stage was requisite for successful development at later stages. The analogy with biology breaks down somewhat, however, as Erikson was a great optimist: he believed that one could, through psychoanalysis (for example), deal with and resolve earlier conflicts later in life, although this was not an easy task.

At each stage the developing child or adult is confronted with a conflict of opposing forces – basic trust versus mistrust in the first stage is an example. The child must experience both aspects of these conflicts; he or she must experience both trust *and* mistrust in order to come to a proper resolution. The child who trusts too much (is overindulged) becomes passive and dependent, whereas the child who mistrusts becomes cynical.

Notice in Table 9.1 that, in comparing Freud's psychosexual stages with Erikson's, the latter expands the scope of the so-called erogenous zones. For example, in Erikson's first stage of Basic Trust Versus Basic Mistrust the oral zone is expanded to also include respiratory, sensory, and kinesthetic functions. In general, the trend with Erikson is not to see these so much as zones of libidinal cathexis, but more simply as just parts of human physiological functioning that are especially important in the developing person at that stage. The brief descriptions of the stages in Table 9.1 also stress the social aspects of development over sexual aspects.

[Intentionally blank: Insert Table 9.1 in these pages.]

For each stage, Erikson specified a **basic strength** that arises from successful resolution of the identity crisis that the developing person faced at that stage. For Erikson, psychological growth is indeed growth of the ego. The opposite of a basic strength is called **core pathology**. For example, in Erikson's first stage (the period that Freud called the oral stage) hope is the basic strength, withdrawal the core pathology.

It can be argued Crane (2005) that Erikson's theory qualifies as a stage theory in the same way that Piaget's or Kohlberg's theories do because once again the stages refer to qualitatively different behavior patterns; they concern general issues; they unfold in an invariant sequence; and they are thought to be culturally universal. This may work as a generality, but one must also consider that life's difficulties, such as divorce or loss of a job or loved one, can set a person back (regression).

### **First Stage: Basic Trust versus Basic Mistrust (Psychosexual Mode is Oral, Respiratory, Sensory, Kinesthetic)**

The crisis the child faces at the first stage concerns basic trust versus basic mistrust. The basic strength of the first stage is **hope**, or the expectation that difficulties in life, presenting whatever challenges they may, will eventually result in a positive outcome. This sense of hope is, in turn, needed to meet the challenges presented at later stages of development. The antithesis of hope is a lack of hope and **withdrawal**.

The crucial social interactions are with the mother or mother surrogate. What must be emphasized is that, through these interactions, the child learns both trust and mistrust, but *in the right proportion*: a healthy sense of mistrust is also necessary for successful dealings with others in social relations. As with Freud, Erikson recognized that problems will develop not only if the infant's basic needs are neglected, but also if it is overindulged. With Erikson, however, the child's needs are not merely oral, and are not primarily sexual. In addition to experiencing pleasure from breast or bottle, the child needs physical contact and consistency in attention. The child's sense of trust grows along with the development of the ego: it senses that its needs will be met in an orderly fashion while also learning the importance of delay of gratification. An important example of ego

development and trust building is when the child learns to accept its mother's absence without undue anxiety. Later theorists, picking up on Freud and Erikson, stressed the importance of successful attachment bonding between mother and child (Chapter 12).

The child must not only learn to trust in its mother but also to trust in itself. This comes with learning of self-regulation, as when the child acclimatizes to teething and learns to suckle at the breast more gently.

Erikson believed that the mother or mother figure plays an important part in the child's development of trust, not only by meeting the child's basic comfort and nurturance needs, but by having confidence in herself. He believed that an anxious mother transmitted this anxiety to the child, which he saw as unhealthy: a mother's tension causes a corresponding state of tension in her baby, resulting in a feeling of insecurity and lack of trust.

### **Second Stage: Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt (Psychosexual Mode is Anal, Urethral, and Muscular)**

That the toddler struggles to gain a sense of autonomy or control of bodily functions, large, and small motor skills, should be quite obvious to the parents of such children. Walking, talking, and later dressing and feeding oneself, as well as learning to control bowel functions, are all tasks that the child learns during this stage. And increasingly, she or he wants to do these things without adult help. But adults realize that the child is not always capable of doing these things herself, and patience with letting her have her own way can wear thin. The child, in turn, seems at times to be at war with her parents. She wants to do things on her own, yet can't – a very frustrating situation all around! The child often feels ashamed of his or her lack of control when, for example, sitting on a potty trying to control urinary or bowel functions. The parent also risks increasing the child's shame, either unintentionally (by a lack of patience, for instance) or intentionally (by exhibiting anger or ridicule). Shame and doubt are the natural opposites of childhood autonomy.

How is a parent to handle such conflicts? There are, unfortunately, no easy answers to the dilemma of the willfulness seen in the "terrible twos." **Will** is indeed the basic strength of this stage, **compulsion** the negative core weakness. The parents must be patient with the child,

but not to the point of sainthood. Parents must establish – and children desperately need – rules or standards of proper behavior. The child must learn the meaning of the word “no.” But often the willful child learns this only too well – she frequently defies parental requests using this same word. Here Erikson, like Kohlberg (Chapter 7), stresses the learning of “law and order.” But parents who over control their children risk increased shame and lack of a sense of autonomy: such over controlling behavior can break the child’s will and (Erikson believed) lead to the kinds of “anal” neuroses (extreme compulsiveness or messiness) described by Freud.

Erikson also noted that different cultures have different standards of parental expectations for children’s behavior. The Lakota Sioux tribe, for instance, does not try to force children to learn how to control their toilet behavior; instead, children learn naturally in time through imitation. By contrast, the standards for children in the United States today may seem much more restrictive; Erikson (even back in his time) thought that our society was very restrictive and “sanitized.”

In recapping, Erikson expanded Freud’s ideas about the so-called anal stage in several ways. First, he expanded the notion of the child’s need for control or autonomy beyond just toilet training, to a number of physical challenges such as walking, learning to do things for him or herself, and so forth. Second, he emphasized the role of the development of the ego here as in other stages, as opposed to Freud’s developmental psychology anchored in id impulses. And third, rather than see the challenges of childhood from the limited standpoint of a given culture, he noted that these challenges and the way they are handled by parents and society differ across cultural settings.

### **Third Stage: Initiative versus Guilt (Psychosexual Modes are Genital, Locomotor)**

Here again Erikson does not break away from Freud – he does acknowledge oedipal factors in development – but yet at the same time he expands and broadens the description of this stage by increasingly recognizing social factors. On the more traditional side he states that “Infantile sexuality and incest taboo, castration complex and superego all unite here to bring about that specifically human crisis which the child must turn from an exclusive, pre-genital

attachment to his parents to the slow process of becoming a parent, a carrier of tradition” (1950/1985, p. 256). But notice that this Freudian endorsement also contains the notion that the child identifies with the parent, and by doing so learns to adopt and internalize the role of the same-sex parent through observation and imitation. *Initiative* is implied in these attempts at imitation, but *guilt* occurs when the child’s developing conscience feels in competition with the parent (i.e., oedipal feelings). The parents are viewed by the child as big, powerful, and threatening – and the truth in these perceptions is evident even if one discounts the Freudian notions of castration anxieties or penis envy.

Initiative is actualized through the child’s expanding repertoire of capabilities. Children at this age are extremely active and mobile, or in Erikson’s terms, locomotive. They are talkative, and they experiment and learn through imaginative play. (The latter idea seems likely to have been inspired by Erikson’s training in the Montessori method; notice, too, the parallel with Piagetian theory.) The child’s conscience can put a damper on this very active development, however, if parents instill guilt feelings by insisting too strongly on “good” behavior. Thus while the basic strength associated with this period is a sense of *purpose*, the core weakness is *inhibition*.

### **Fourth Stage: Industry versus Inferiority (Psychosexual Mode is Latency)**

According to Erikson, the child has at this stage (per Freud) sublimated oedipal impulses and “now learns to win recognition by producing things. He has mastered the ambulatory field and the organ modes . . . . He develops industry – i.e., he adjusts himself to the inorganic laws of the tool world . . . . His ego boundaries include his tools and skills: the work principle . . . teaches him the pleasure of work completion by steady attention and persevering diligence” (1950/1985, p. 259). The basic strength of this stage is therefore *competence*. The child that is ill prepared for school or lacks the tools for learning from life’s experience will despair. Successful resolution of crisis at this stage stems largely from preparation at earlier stages. Erikson used the term *inertia* (as in inert, or passiveness) to define the core pathology, the antithesis of competence. But for most children, this is a period of relative calm, as it was in Freud’s exposition. Inner

conflicts give way to increased learning and mastery of the skills needed to succeed in later life.

### **Fifth Stage: Identity versus Role Confusion (Psychosexual Mode is Puberty)**

Adolescence is a time of great change: the body and the sexual organs mature, new expectations for social and academic adjustments arise with the transition to middle school, self-image typically suffers, and life can be very stressful, especially in the earlier transition stage. The basic task of this period is to separate oneself from one's parents – especially the same-sex parent – and to assume an identity of one's own. The latter is a very difficult task; many people do not fully succeed in it today until they are well beyond their teen years! Oedipal conflicts again return with full force (in agreement with Freud), but the child who is no longer quite a child must now learn to displace the sexual feelings for his or her opposite sex parents onto others. In the later phases, this is done partially through ritual courtship practices traditionally known in our own society as “dating.”

Teens not to merely learn “who they are,” they must at the same time learn to define and invent themselves. Identities are tried out like new suits of clothes. Role models may be parents, teachers, coaches, film stars, athletes, or “outlaws.” Parents can rightly guess that the latter is a potential nightmare. But parental perceptions can be distorted too; teen rebelliousness sometimes takes a “dark” turn, but this doesn't mean that the youngster has lost her or his core set of values. “Metallic” or “Goth” appearances and piercings are usually just experiments (though tattoos are permanent), and the worried parent can usually get through these stages with the mantra that “this, too, shall pass!” But there are times when the wise parent must put his/her foot down and assume a more authoritarian role: teens, like small children, sometimes require the imposition of rules and limits, especially where their activities border on danger – as in the cases of drug experimentation, permissive sexual behavior, or hanging out with the “wrong crowd.” The conflict for the parent, then, is how much freedom to grant, and how much control to assume, over the young person who is at once both a child and an adult. The fostering

of mutual respect and appreciation of the positions of both parties is the key.

The teen years are indeed a time of identity crisis, or in Erikson's terms “a turning point of increased vulnerability and heightened potential” (1968, p. 96). The basic task is, in Erikson's terms, *fidelity* or truthfulness and consistency to one's core self or faith in one's ideology. The core pathology is *repudiation* of the assumption of a healthy role formation. Repudiation can take the form of defiance of authority or of resignation and despair, which Erikson termed *diffidence*.

Some of the coping mechanisms for the teen who is confronting his or her identity that Erikson discusses (also see Kroger, 2000) are:

- **Foreclosure:** In order to suppress the anxiety that attends lack of identity, some adolescents prematurely assume an identity of convenience; someone else's value system, such as that of one's parents, without giving the matter very much thought or consideration. **Example:** “My father was a dentist – I know that's what he has in mind for me and that is what I shall become.”
- **Moratorium:** A “time out” or suspension of the search for oneself while exploring different options. **Example:** Erikson himself used this strategy in his youth as he wandered through Europe before committing himself to a career.
- **Diffusion:** This essentially represents a kind of apathy in which the youth lacks any kind of passion or commitment. **Example:** “I don't really feel committed to anything – I do what I can to get by in school.” As another example, from Arthur Miller's (1949/1976) play, *Death of a Salesman*, the character Biff states: “I just can't take hold, Mom, I just can't take hold of some kind of a life” (cited in Erikson, 1959/1980, p. 97).
- **Positive role identity or identity achievement:** This is the sense of really knowing who one is and in general, where one is headed in life. **Example:** “I know that I value justice – I intend to study law and do my part to make a better world.”

- **Negative role identity:** This refers to the rebellious denial of the expectations of parents or society; the opposite is instead chosen. **Example:** The son of a police officer decides to join a gang of drug users and petty thieves.

### **Sixth Stage: Intimacy versus Isolation (Psychosexual Mode is Genitality)**

Erikson viewed *intimacy* or closeness and mutual sharing with another as the basic strength of this stage, *isolation* as its core pathology. Erikson believed that intimacy between two people as a couple was only possible when each had developed a strong sense of identity separately. Unfortunately, many couples in his day married at a very young age, so this was by no means always the case. The dilemma is that it is difficult (though possible in rare cases) for two people to grow and mature together unless they have first matured separately. Not surprisingly, divorce is a common outcome for couples who marry while still quite young and immature.

Young adults often still have not advanced in maturity from adolescence. Although some have achieved a level of maturity by the early twenties, many others do not arrive at this level until well into their thirties – and still others *never do* attain full maturity! In today's complex world, attainment of maturity and relative independence seems to take considerable time. Perhaps it is fortunate, then, that people tend to marry somewhat later than they did in the 1950s.

By *genitality* Erikson referred to sexual intimacy. This is the physical correlate of psychological intimacy. Good sexual relations depend on the ability of each partner to share and care, not to exploit or hurt the other. Sexual love must be unselfish.

### **Seventh Stage: Generativity versus Stagnation (Psychosexual Mode is Procreativity)**

To a great extent both Freudian and Eriksonian psychoanalysis emphasized the normalcy of traditional morality. At the times they were writing conventional social standards called for young men and women to marry and produce children. The man was expected to have a career or profession, which for the woman was optional. Times have obviously changed, as today marriage itself is seen by many people as an option, even if they are engaged in a long-term relationship and

have children. Homosexual marriage, though quite controversial as of this writing, may one day be accepted in society. But homosexuality itself, once seen as a psychological disorder, is no longer considered such by psychiatrists and psychologists.

When Freud and Erikson were writing, sexual intercourse culminating in mutual orgasm in a marital relationship was considered the ideal expression of complete fulfillment between a man and a woman. Since the pioneering work of Masters and Johnson (1966), ideas about sex and love have changed. The combination of sex, love, and commitment (whether or not people are married) still resonates with many people as an ideal kind of relationship. But other options – for instance, protected sex for its own sake between consenting adults prior to or without marriage – are now also acceptable to many people. Variations in sexual practices that go beyond standard intercourse are also now widely accepted by sex researchers and by the public as valid and welcomed alternatives in promoting mutual satisfaction to sexual partners.

With these changing mores in mind, some of the earlier psychoanalytic writings may seem quaint to today's reader. Freud in particular, for all his talk about sexual repression, would today be seen as a bit prudish in his ideas, and in his own life. But Freud began a trend of openness about sexual matters that continued well into the twentieth century, and changes in attitudes toward sexual practices were only beginning to be felt at the time the first edition of Erikson's *Childhood and Society* first appeared in 1950; thus this context must be considered when evaluating his work. Remember too that Erikson was breaking new ground by extending the stages of development into the adult years and throughout the remainder of the lifespan. His writings on the later stages of development were highly innovative, if somewhat sketchy.

Erikson's ideal of *generativity* thus includes what many see as old-fashioned notions about conventional sex between married adults. But he also went beyond this: generativity in its broadest sense refers to creative and productive activity through work (recall Freud's purported dictum on the importance of "love and work" from above). Generativity is about much more than sex and procreation! Erikson's concept embraces a sense of caring for the future; caring for the next generation. Indeed, Erikson included working for a better world as

part of his concept. He recognized that fulfillment in life can be achieved without necessarily having children (or *procreativity*). But it does require the ability to care for and about others. The opposing concept to generativity is *stagnation*, or the loss of self in self-absorption.

Erikson also realized that, though generativity is a dominant theme in the middle years (thirties, forties, and fifties), this kind of caring concern for future generations has its seeds in early adulthood – the childbearing years – and continues throughout the remainder of the lifespan. A sense of connectedness of one generation with another is implied in the concept, and generativity is, in the broadest sense, a symbolic link to immortality through acts and works that will survive the individual. Based on his own research as well as that of others, Dan McAdams (2001) stated that “Highly generative adults tend to express a more spiritual understanding of life . . . than do less generative adults. Generativity is also positively associated with volunteerism, community involvement, and voting. Social institutions such as schools, churches, and government agencies depend on the generative efforts of adults.”

### **Philanthropy as a Form of Generativity**

Erikson’s concept of generativity implies not simply having children but to giving back or contributing to society and future generations. In the case of philanthropy, giving consists of donating money and time to worthy causes. The Biblical adage “For of those to whom much is given, much will be required” (Luke 12:48) applies. Or as another saying has it, “You can’t take it with you.” Thus, in the nineteenth century, great money givers included men who made enormous wealth in the industrial revolution, such as Andrew Carnegie (founder of U. S. Steel) and John D. Rockefeller (Standard Oil). These were joined in the twentieth century by billionaires such as J. Paul Getty (oil industry) and Howard Hughes (aircraft and tools). Vast portions of their wealth was used to establish libraries, museums, educational endowments and for medicine and scientific research.

Now in the twenty-first century the world’s second richest man, Warren Buffett, has joined the world’s wealthiest man and his wife,

Bill and Melinda Gates, in their efforts to fight worldwide disease (including AIDS and malaria) and famine, and to promote educational and scientific research enterprises. Although much less wealthy by comparison, the rock artist Bono uses his influence to raise money and lobby governments to advance similar causes. So at a time in which corporate greed and corruption has been making headlines, it is refreshing to see this all of this industrial capital being put to use for such noble causes. And although these names are making news today due to the magnitude of their contributions, many other wealthy and successful business people have contributed large sums to worthy causes in recent years, including Ted Turner, Walter Annenberg, and John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur. Former President Bill Clinton recently (at the time of this writing) raised an incredible seven billion dollars for treatment of AIDS in African countries. Contributors included Gates and Buffett, but also media personalities such as Barbara Streisand and media giant Rupert Murdoch.

Carnegie believed that the man who died rich died in shame. Much of his fortune went to financing the arts and education. Rockefeller, though he did die a very wealthy man, was a devout Baptist who gave away vast portions of his wealth. “Rockefeller raised the quality of training doctors in America and found a vaccine for yellow fever. [His foundation] also drove the ‘green revolution’ in agriculture that ended famine in much of the world and, by some estimates, saved 1.5 billion lives” (*The Economist*, 2006). In the same article it was noted that Gates’ mother taught him the importance of giving back, and that Buffett didn’t believe in dynastic fortunes (though too be sure, his descendents will not be left impoverished). It will be interesting to observe the progress of the Gates Foundation in improving the quality of life for both the underprivileged as well as the rest of us over the ensuing years because according to *The Economist*, their combined projected contributions of well over sixty billion dollars dwarfs that of Carnegie and Rockefeller combined (in adjusted dollars). The possibilities are astounding! But the lesson for the rest of us is that we each can do something to contribute to making the world a better place, be it in monetary donations to favorite charities, or in volunteering our time to help others.



## **Eighth Stage: Integrity versus Despair (Psychosexual Mode is “Generalized”)**

*Integrity* in the later years of life implies acceptance of a life that was well-lived. It does not mean that life is over, for these can often be very productive years. But by this age a person begins take a reflective and evaluative look back at his or her life. A person may ask questions like “Was my life fulfilling?” or “What was I able to accomplish?”

Life is full of choices and there are always many roads that were not taken by all of us. Everyone makes mistakes, including some major or even tragic ones. To be fulfilled does not mean that one has led a perfect life! But if one has managed life reasonably well and come to grips with one’s shortcomings, practiced meaningful self-forgiveness where called for, and taken into account both positive and negative factors from one’s past, then a positive sense of integrity ensues. *Despair*, however, implies a lack of further hope. Despair can result from unfulfilled potential or a feeling that one has wasted one’s life, without hope for personal redemption.

Despair is often disguised by an outward attitude of contempt toward others. Such contempt, according to Erikson, really reflects contempt for the self, projected outward.

After a lifetime of living and learning, Erikson stated that *wisdom* is the basic strength associated with later years, based on the well-lived life. *Disdain* is the core pathology of this stage.

### **The Life of Integrity and the “Unbearable Lightness of Being”**

How ought a person to live the “good life”? This is a question that philosophers and theologians have grappled with for centuries. A person has only one life to live, right? Perhaps, but Buddhists and Hindus believe in reincarnation.

Friedrich Nietzsche posed an interesting thought experiment. Suppose time and the universe were (as was then thought) infinite in magnitude and eternal with respect to time. Would this mean that ultimately by random chance atoms would rearrange themselves at

some time and place in such a way that our world would be replicated exactly? And in fact, if one really thinks about it, wouldn’t this same recurrence happen over and over in the course of infinite time, where all people and all things would then exist in exactly the same configuration? (The argument is similar to that of a roomful of monkeys randomly banging away on typewriters over the eons, eventually reproducing Shakespeare’s works.) Nietzsche called this concept the *eternal return*.

In the novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* Milan Kundera (1984) considers this possibility and its moral implications. He asks:

What does this mad myth signify? Putting it negatively, the myth of eternal return states that a life which disappears once and for all, and does not return, is like a shadow, without weight, dead in advance, and whether it was horrible, beautiful, or sublime, its horror, sublimity, and beauty mean nothing. We need to take no more note of it than a war between two African kingdoms in the fourteenth century, a war that altered nothing in the destiny of the world, even if a hundred thousand blacks perished in excruciating torment . . . how can we condemn something that is ephemeral, in transit? In the sunset of dissolution, everything is illuminated by the aura of nostalgia . . . (pp. 4-5).

But on the other hand:

If the French Revolution were to recur eternally, French historians would be less proud of Robespierre . . . There is an infinite difference between a Robespierre who occurs only once in history, and a Robespierre who eternally returns, chopping off French heads. (p. 4).

The first scenario – what happens just happens, then passes and in time is forgotten, Kundera believes carries no weight – instead, it calls for a “lightness of being.” But the second is “heavy” – the consequences are in a sense “eternal.” He asks the reader “What then shall we choose? Weight or lightness?” The novel then proceeds with four characters, two of whom seem to embody “lightness” – a lifestyle of living in the present and seeking pleasure whenever it can be found; and two whom represent “heaviness” – a way of life that looks to the past and to the future and weighs the consequences of their actions. The plot takes place in Czechoslovakia during the time of the uprising of the people against the Soviet Union, in Prague,

1968. The moral implications of the characters and their actions, and their implications for personal integrity, are wisely left to the reader.

### Joan Erikson: The Ninth Stage

Joan Erikson was Erik's partner in thinking and in authorship, though sometimes a silent one – yet they worked as a team for over sixty years. In *The Life Cycle Completed* (Erikson, 1997) much of what is seen in this final revision of an earlier book came from Joan's hand, including final chapters written by her alone. Yet Erik's voice is there, too. When the earlier (Erikson, 1982) version first appeared, Erik Erikson "left no page free of underlining, exclamation marks, and notes. Only an artist would be so daring and forthright," according to Joan Erikson, in her preface to the extended edition (1997, p. 5). In fact, it could be said that neither of the Eriksons were ever quite satisfied with their achievements, because they were both, in fact, living and experiencing the life cycle first hand while at the same time observing themselves and others. And the truth is that they first wrote about the eighth stage before they had even come close to experiencing that stage for themselves. Clearly, the Eriksons came to believe, "the role of old age needs to be reobserved, rethought" (J. Erikson, p. 62).

This rethinking led Joan Erikson to formulate a ninth stage of *very* old age – for most people, this occurs in the eighties or in the nineties (for those who are fortunate enough to live so long!). It is a time when physical health begins to deteriorate, when one has lost many close friends and family members, and when death itself becomes a much closer reality. In doing so she recognized (as Erik also had) the always close connection between culture and identity. In our own culture, she observed, old people are often isolated from the rest of the community. She quoted Erik as saying "Lacking a culturally viable ideal of old age, our civilization does not really harbor a concept of the whole life" (p. 114). As a result, she noted that "aged individuals are often ostracized, neglected, and overlooked; elders are seen no longer as bearers of wisdom but as embodiments of shame" (p. 144). She believed that "Something is terribly wrong. Why has it become necessary to send our elders 'out of this world' into some facility [such as retirement communities and assisted living facilities] to live

out their lives in physical care and comfort?" (p. 118). Such treatment runs quite counter to traditional cultures, in which elderly people are cherished and valued for their wisdom and their connectedness with the past, and their contribution to and connections with the younger generations (generativity again). More positively, she believed that "old people can and do maintain a *grand-generative* function" (p. 63; as in grand-parenting).

Among the challenges of the ninth stage is the loss of autonomy (per the second stage of development) due to increasing loss of physical (and sometimes mental) independence. Loss of self-esteem is a common result, and reduced hope and trust (or regression back to the first stage) may result.

Joan Erikson promotes Lars Tornstam's (1993) concept of *gerotranscendence* toward the final stage of life, which consists of these changes in perception:

1. A feeling of "cosmic communion" with the universe (or spiritual connectedness),
2. Time being circumscribed (the future is limited),
3. Reduced mobility, implying a narrowing of personal space,
4. Death being seen philosophically as "the way of all living things," and
5. A sense of self expanding to include "a wider range of interrelated others" (J. Erikson, in Erikson, 1997, p. 124).

She also offers a number of constructive suggestions on how our society could improve on its regard for, and care of, its elderly (e.g., hospice is good, but isolation from others – especially the very young – is not).

It seems appropriate to end this section with this quote from her final chapter (p. 128):

*To grow old is a great privilege.*

## Evaluating Erikson

### Erikson's Positive Contributions

Erikson's quotations cited at the chapter's beginning suggest a kind of modesty – Erikson brought his artistic sense and sensibilities to his writing and offers a new way of looking at things. But his modesty belied his major contribution to psychology.

It is true that the days of the “Grand Theories” in psychology – those attempts to unite the many threads from extant research findings and isolated observations into a tightly woven fabric of theoretical “silk” – seem to be a thing of the past. Piaget, Freud, Erikson, and some of the humanists (Rogers and Maslow) were all theorists in this grand sense. There is much more demand today for hard data to support more modest models and mini-theories, without the speculative gaps that existed for these earlier theorists.

But Erikson's perspective has achieved several worthy ends. He not only expanded Freud's theory to later stages of life, but he also broadened it considerably, by emphasizing cultural differences and by his stressing the development of the ego through identity challenges that were more psychosocial than strictly biological. In couching his theory in terms of these identity crises, he provided a broad (and yes, artistic) framework for viewing development throughout the lifespan. Although based largely on personal observation and intuition, including reflections on his own life, many of these observations were indeed insightful, and have led to many new and fruitful research studies (e.g., de St. Aubin, McAdams, & Kim, 2003; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1998, on generativity). Erikson's belief that couples who married young were most likely to succeed when each of the individuals has achieved a degree of identity themselves has also received support in empirical research (Helson & Pals, 2000; Pals, 1999), at least in terms of women's self-identity. And Marcia (1966; 1980) has studied adolescent identity formation according to Eriksonian principles.

### Critiques of Erikson

If Erikson's artistic, prosaic style has inspired many people it can also be criticized for its vagueness and subjectivity. Erikson himself

accepts this criticism implicitly in affirming that he was guided by his artistic sense, not by scientific training or methodology.

Erikson also wrote in the male voice, as was typical of psychologists (and indeed, most scientific writers) of an earlier age. But beyond that, Carol Gilligan (1982) believed that he also portrayed a masculine psychology in his stages of development. She noted that Erikson (1968) recognized a somewhat different pattern of development for girls and women – one that depends more on intimacy and relationships with others and less on autonomy, separateness, and independence – but that Erikson failed to update his stage descriptions accordingly.

### Putting Erikson in Perspective

Though the criticisms of Erikson seem valid, Erikson seemed to want to be taken “as is” rather than to address them through revision. Perhaps, then, it remains for others to update Erikson, both in terms of the need to differentiate girls' and (women's) developmental paths from boys' (and men's) and in the more general need to fill in the conceptual gaps in his theory with new research findings.

Erikson will no doubt be remembered as a great synthesizer as well as an original thinker; and as a one who provided a valuable conceptual framework for understanding human personality development through personal identity, yet still within the psychodynamic tradition. There is also little doubt that his ideas will continue to guide research in human development for many years to come.

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## For Thought and Discussion

1. In the first stage of development – Basic Trust Versus Basic Mistrust – Erikson believes that an anxious mother can transmit her anxiety to her child, with negative consequences for that child’s development. Suppose a correlational study was conducted in which a correlation was indeed found between mothers’ and babies’ anxiety. Correlation, of course, does not imply causation. What alternative explanations might be suggested to account for this finding?
2. If you have (or have had) children at the second stage of development (Autonomy Versus Shame and Doubt), think of the kinds of conflicts of will you have had with your children. Make notes on these and share with the class.
3. Pick any two of Erikson’s eight stages. Think of someone you know who seems to fit into each of these stages in a positive or negative way. Describe them (share with the class).
4. Class discussion: Erikson and Freud were both very traditional in their ideas about sexual adjustment. Think about how times have changed, and discuss alternative ideas.
5. Erikson thought that anxious mothers transmitted their anxiety to their infant children, resulting in feelings of insecurity and lack of trust. What alternative explanations might account for such insecurity in babies?
6. Think about your own life and where you are going. What kind of an old age would you like to have? (For class sharing.)
7. How does the treatment of elderly people in our culture differ from that of traditional cultures? How might the treatment of elderly people be improved in our society?
8. To what extent do you think that Erikson’s framework applies (or fails to apply) to women as well as to men? To what extent do you think it would work or not work with other cultures?

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## Notes

1. Erikson (1950, p. 13).
2. Erikson (1950/1985, p. 359). Both this and the previous quote suggest a kind of modesty in Erikson regarding his contributions. In a sense, both quotes are accurate, yet taken at face value they belie his true genius. There always has been and hopefully there always will be a place for the keen perspective of the artful eye in psychology.