Identity in Adolescence: Influences of Dysfunction and Psychosocial Task Issues

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The Erikson Psychosocial Stage Inventory (EPSI) was utilized in two studies to investigate task resolutions (trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, identity) in adolescence. In the first study, a comparison of delinquents and non-delinquents indicated that delinquents have less successful task resolutions. In the second study, a comparison of adolescents with high and low dysfunctional attitudes again revealed that troubled adolescents have less successful task resolutions. In this study, 7th graders, 12th graders, first-year college students, and junior and senior college students participated. Older adolescents demonstrated more successful task resolutions than younger adolescents, and different identity issues were salient during early adolescence as compared to later adolescence. Also, first-year college students had more problems with identity consolidation and less positive overall task resolutions than high school seniors or college juniors and seniors. A life-context approach to identity formation is discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Erik Erikson's seminal ideas regarding adolescent identity and psychosocial task development have been the impetus for myriad investigations into

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personality growth and change during the adolescent years (Prelinger and Zimet, 1964; Marcia, 1966; Schiedel and Marcia, 1985). In Erikson's eight-stage psychosocial theory (1950, 1959, 1968), the nature of development throughout life is dynamic. Development involves the resolution of specific tasks which occur in an epigenetic fashion. There is not only an intricate balance of both positive and negative aspects of task resolutions but also each stage comes about because a new dimension of social interaction becomes possible with increasing psychological, physical, and cognitive maturity. Infancy and childhood stages deal with task resolutions of trust, autonomy, initiative, and industry. In adolescence the task of identity consolidation demands a reintegration of previous roles into a stable identity. Positive resolution of identity issues is related to positive resolutions in other psychosocial task areas.

If resolution of identity issues is related to other psychosocial task resolutions, then troubled adolescents may have more difficulty forming a positive identity during adolescence. With troubled youth, such as delinquents, a feeling of inadequacy or inferiority with respect to society's views of what are appropriate behavioral objectives may create an impediment for successful identity consolidation. Ryan and LaVoie (1986) indicated that delinquent adolescents have higher social maladjustment scores compared to nondelinquents, and some appear to have adopted a negative identity. Positive identity integration thus appears more problematic for delinquents. Other troubled youth, such as adolescents with dysfunctional attitudes, may also have difficulty in successfully resolving identity issues. Weissman (1979) believes that dysfunctional attitudes are developed from past experiences. A person with dysfunctional attitudes exhibits negative self-evaluations, an insecurity about acceptance by others, and negative views of emotional and behavioral control.

The hypothesis that troubled adolescents would exhibit more difficulties with positive identity formation was investigated in two studies. In the first study, it was expected that delinquent adolescents would demonstrate fewer successful task resolutions (trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, identity) than nondelinquent adolescents. In the second study, adolescents with dysfunctional attitudes were compared to adolescents with more functional attitudes. It was again expected that adolescents with dysfunctional attitudes would demonstrate fewer successful task resolutions.

Further, the second study was conducted to investigate task resolutions in younger and older adolescents. In this study, seventh graders, twelfth graders, first-year college students, and junior and senior college students participated. Two hypothesis were formulated regarding expected changes in ego development. First, age differences on psychosocial task resolutions would be expected theoretically as older individuals would have had more