Psychodynamic Aspects of Identity Formation in College Women

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This intensive clinical study investigated the role of developmental and psychodynamic forces in the identity formation of 48 randomly selected college senior women. Using Marcia's four identity statuses as a typology of the forms that late adolescent identity formation may take, this research explored the intrapsychic aspects which are central to each group. By means of a clinical interview, psychodynamic portraits of each of the statuses were developed. Case material is presented herein. Discussion centers on identification histories, on the quality of the ego-superego balance, and on significant early psychosexual conflict and defenses. Theoretical implications of the clinical findings are discussed with respect to Eriksonian and psychoanalytic formulations of late adolescent growth. The special nature of female identity development is also considered.

INTRODUCTION

While subtle and complex clinical observation has bequeathed richness to the understanding of psychopathology, the phenomenon of normal development lies scattered among piecemeal and often unrelated variables, is shrouded behind obscure part-theories, or, at best, is designated as the obverse of pathology. This observational and theoretical lacuna seems to become most apparent whenever the larger culture struggles to comprehend and assimilate "problematic" societal subgroups. Then, stereotypes are pitted against projected images, ideals against modal realities, and the lack of carefully compiled data hinders informed judgment.

The late 1960s was the age of crisis among youth, a visible and mystifying...
occurrence which the mass media leaped to overformulate. In the absence of a reliable developmental theory of its own, psychological research obligingly adopted popular categorizations, and a spate of poorly conceptualized studies on "activists" and "the alienated" appeared. Not surprisingly, these studies found "significant" differences among the behaviorally defined groups, but these were differences which hung in isolation, unable to advance very far the construction of an heuristic theory which could absorb and explain time-bound behavioral shifts in an essentially timeless process of ontogenesis.

Similarly, the "crisis" among women in the early 1970s has laid bare the fundamental weakness in our understanding of the development of a woman. And, again, once the communications network of the culture had provided labels, psychologists obediently began conceptualizing and researching the differences between "liberated" and "traditional" women. As with the problem of youth, questions of incidence, of phenomenology, of the relationship of superficial attitudes to deep psychological processes were largely ignored.

The one theory within psychology elaborate and powerful enough to generalize beyond its own particular brand of data is that of psychoanalytic thought. This framework, however, is tied to a reductionistic metapsychology and, in addition, is unable to account for the vagaries of social influence and change. Psychoanalytic formulations of such problems as restless youth and angry women seemed to necessitate the transformation of these groups into recognizable pathologies before analysis could be attempted. Responsive to these weaknesses, ego analytic and social analytic schools of thought were engaged in inventing inductive and holistic concepts which would extend and/or modify the parent theory in order to account for later stages of growth, to integrate social reality and internal dynamics, and to, more generally, provide a more viable model of nonpathological development.

Erikson's concept of identity, which evolved within this historical effort, was of particular interest to those interested in the phenomenon of normal adolescent growth. In delineating a developmental epoch with a phenomenology deducible from a larger developmental schema, Erikson provided a truly psychosocial construct which is sensitive to the vagaries of intraindividual conflicts and resolutions and also responsive to age-specific societal demands to which the individual must accommodate. Identity, then, seemed to provide a theoretically derived guidepost to orient research into late adolescent development.

Erikson (1956), however, couches the identity construct in connotative and suggestive terms. He defines identity as the embodiment of (1) the conscious sense of individual identity, (2) the silent doings of ego synthesis, (3) the unconscious striving for continuity of personal character, and (4) the maintenance of inner solidarity with a group's ideals and identity. The process of identity formation embraces an evolving configuration "established by ego