The Ego Virtue of Fidelity as a Psychosocial Rite of Passage in the Transition from Adolescence to Adulthood

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ABSTRACT: In traditional societies, rites of passage are frequently utilized to signify life transitions. In contemporary society, there is a marked absence of ceremonial rites of passage for the transition from adolescence to adulthood. In this article we argue that developmental theory offers a contemporary understanding of rites of passage. Anthropological writings on rites of passage and developmental theories share in common notions of separation, transition, and incorporation. Erik Erikson's psychosocial stages and corresponding ego virtues or strengths are argued to represent alternate conceptions of rites of passage as applicable to contemporary society. In particular, the ego strength of fidelity is regarded as evidence that the individual has successfully negotiated the transitional phase of adolescence and has experienced a positive resolution to the identity crisis. Research findings on the connection between identity and fidelity are discussed. Applied implications regarding the notion of fidelity as a rite of passage are discussed in terms of interventions for troubled young people who are facing difficulties in becoming incorporated into society.

The transition from childhood into adolescence and, in turn, into adulthood, has been explored by anthropologists and psychologists alike. The focus of study in the anthropological literature has been on rites of passage—public initiation ceremonies or rituals—that are attached to these transitional points in the life span (van Gennep, 1908/1960). Indeed, Kimball (1960), who wrote the introduction to the English translation of van Gennep's (1908/1960) groundbreaking an-
The Rites of Passage, explained that passage might be understood as transition.

Many writers, from social psychologists to family therapists, bemoan the lack of ceremonies in modern society to mark the transition into adulthood (Quinn, Newfield, & Protinsky, 1985; Sebald, 1992; Steinberg, 1985). Counselling psychologists Allan and Dyck (1987) write: “In many ways our present day Western civilization is an exception in the history of man because of its lack of rites of passage for the young adolescents. Though some formal rites do exist (Confirmation, Bar Mitzvah, graduation, driver’s license) most young people are left to make or discover their own challenges or rites of initiation” (p. 25).

A thesis of this article is that although advanced, technological society lacks a uniform ceremony to mark life course transitions (the focus of this paper being the transition from adolescence to adulthood), there are parallels between anthropological notions of rites of passage and psychological approaches to the study of human development. In particular, embedded in theories of human development is the notion that stages of development are demarcated according to transitions and tasks. The stage construct shares some commonalities with rites of passages and their associated ceremonies.

We begin with a discussion of the anthropological conception of rites of passage. Then, concepts associated with developmental psychology (i.e., stages, transitions, and tasks) are related to rites of passage. In particular, Erik Erikson’s writings on psychosocial stages and ego virtues are compared to rites of passage. The ego virtue of fidelity is argued to provide evidence of a successful psychosocial rite of passage from adolescence (identity versus identity confusion) to young adulthood (intimacy versus isolation). The paper concludes with a discussion of implications for practice that can be derived from an understanding of fidelity as a contemporary rite of passage into adulthood.

The Anthropological Conception of Rites of Passage

The concept of rites of passage and its three major sequences of separation, transition, and incorporation were put forth by the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1908/1960). Separation refers to people, in groups or individually, separating from society as a whole. Such separation can be expressed in symbolic and physical terms (Fasick, 1988). For example, among the Wakamba of East Africa (Mbiti, 1969, cited in Dunham, Kidwell, & Wilson, 1986), initiates are separated from the village for three days during which time they are