The Adult and Society: The Elaboration of Erik Erikson’s Legacy to Psychoanalytic Thought

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This paper traces the evolution of Erik H. Erikson’s ideas on development from his earliest seminal work, titled Childhood and Society (1950), through the masterful psychohistories, Young Man Luther (1958) and Ghandi’s Truth (1969), to his last contribution, the edited work of Adulthood (1987). In addition to describing the parallel course between his own adult developmental progression and his choice of subject matters from later developmental phases, the paper discusses the powerful human-and psychoanalytic-resistance to the study of development in the second half of life by building on Erikson’s discussions on the reasons for the mixed reception of his ideas among psychoanalysis.

Major Theoretical Contributions

More than any other theoretician, Erikson is responsible for providing us with a theory of development for entire life cycle. To Freud’s libidinal stages of Oral, Anal, Oedipal, Latency and Adolescence he added Young adulthood, Adulthood and Maturity, thus completing the “Eight Ages of Man”. From 1950 when Childhood and Society was published until the late 1970’s when Levinson (1978), Gould (1978), Valliant (1977) and Nemiroff and myself (1981) began to publish; Erikson’s “Eight Ages of Man” was the only well known and recognized life long conceptualization of development which existed. As they elaborated their own stage theories each of these authors acknowledged their debt to Erikson. In this sense he is truly the father of adult development.

Like Freud, Erikson (1950) saw the results of development from each stage stimulating or inhibiting the engagement of critical developmental issues at the next stage. For example, the establishment of basic trust prepared the infant to strive for autonomy which encouraged Oedipal initiative and so on. “… we do not consider all development a series of crises; we claim only that psychological development proceeds by critical steps- ‘critical’ between a characteristic of turning points, of moments of decision between progression and regression, integration and retardation”. Further, each critical step is “… systematically related to all others, and that they all depend on the proper development in the proper sequence of each item and that each item exists in some form before its critical time normally arrives”.

But unlike Freud (1965) and most other psychoanalytic developmental theoreticians of his time Erikson did not declare the adult “a finished product”. For Erikson (1950), the developmental process of psychological growth and expansion is life long continuing throughout adulthood. For example, young Adult intimacy “… the capacity to commit [himself] to concrete affiliations and partnership and to develop the ethical strength to abide to such commitments, even though they may call for significant sacrifices and compromises” prepares the young adult for the midlife task of generativity “… the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation”.

Introduction

Childhood and Society was published in 1950. During the 60 years which have passed since then, it and its worthy successors, particularly Young Man Luther (1958), Ghandi’s Truth (1969) and Adulthood (1978) have had a monumental impact on Western thought. In this paper I plan to critically assess the influence of Erikson’s ideas on psychoanalytic theory in general and on the field of adult developmental study in particular; in the process discussion the gradual elaboration of Eriksonian thought and its mixed reception by psychoanalysis.
Going against the grain of the pronounced psychoanalytic preoccupation with the intrapsychic world, Erikson indelibly linked development to the external world, to society to “Childhood and Society.”

He said (1950) “1) that the human personality in principle develops according to steps predetermined in the growing person’s readiness to be driven forward, to be aware of, and to interact with, a widening social radius; and 2) that society, in principle, tends to be so constituted as to meet and invite this succession of potentialities for interaction and attempts to safeguard and to encourage the proper rate and the proper sequence of their unfolding. This is the ‘maintenance of the human world’ ”.

The link between childhood and adulthood, between Childhood and Society, is of indispensable importance for Erikson (1950) because it is directly related to the orderly progression of civilization. “Every society consists of men in the process of developing from children into parents. To assure continuity of tradition, society must early prepare for parenthood in its children; and it must take care of the unavoidable remnants of infantility in its adults”.

Psychoanalysis has tended to neglect the impact of Society, i.e. culture, on development despite many examples of the power of cultural changes such as the profound changes which have taken place in the last fifty years in sexual practices (such as living together) and thinking and attitudes toward women.

The one shining exception is the new psychoanalytic theory of female development which was published in 1976, strongly influenced, I believe, by advances in female contraception and the Women’s Liberation Movement. In such a societal atmosphere Freud’s ideas on the subject became increasingly untenable without- and within-psychoanalysis. The impact of Society and adult experience is indeed, a powerful influence on intrapsychic life, development and psychoanalytic theory.

Through the publication of the award winning Young Man Luther (1958) is second book; and Ghandi’s Truth (1969) his fifth; Erikson (1969) laid the foundation for the psychoanalytic study of “psycho-history”; clearly placing such investigations in a developmental context. “… the psycho-historian will want to inquire in some detail after the stage of life in which the actor acted, the recorder recorded, and the reviewer reviewed. He will want to learn about the place of that stage in the life cycles of each of these individuals; and he will want to relate their life cycles to the history of their communities”.

Erikson’s Contributions to the Field of Adult Development

In Chapter 7 of Childhood and Society (1950) Erikson directly anticipated the need for the discipline of adult development. “In this book the emphasis is on the childhood stages. The foregoing conception of the life cycle, however, awaits systematic treatment”. Although his focus in Child-hood and Society was on childhood and the effects of environment, he made several references to the ongoing process of intrapsychic evolution and the impact of biological aging on the adult; thus providing a focus and defining the unstudied territory for those who were to follow him. For example, this statement in Chapter 7: “The personality is engaged with the hazards of existence, continually, even as the body’s metabolism copes with decay”.

Erikson’s subsequent works, themselves, followed an adult developmental procession through late adolescence and young adulthood in Young Man Luther (1958); then through middle age in Ghandi’s Truth (1969); and culminated in the edited volume dedicated to Adulthood in 1978. Undoubtedly Erikson’s own developmental progression through adulthood influenced the choice of subject matter in these books and the focus on later and later developmental phases. As his thinking about adulthood evolved he defined the tasks, challenges, and resistances to the emerging field of adult developmental as illustrated by the following quotations.

In Young Man Luther, undoubtedly, in part to address the resistance to his own work; Erikson critically addressed the deeply entrenched psychoanalytic tendency toward psychic reductionism, i.e., understanding adult behavior and thought almost exclusively in terms of the experiences of childhood. By placing an added (and I would suggest an equal) emphasis on the impact of adult experience on normal development and the etiology of psychopathology, Erikson (1958) made a profound contribution to the field of adult development and introduced an idea which is still a highly controversial one in psychoanalytic thought.

“Psychoanalysis has tended to subordinate the later stages of life to those of childhood. It has lifted to the rank of a cosmology the undeniable fact that man’s adulthood contains a persistent childishness: that vistas of the future always reflect the mirages of a missed past, that apparent progression can harbor partial regressions, and firm accomplishment, hidden childish fulfillment”.

Erikson provided a splendid example of how to balance the influence of child and adult experience in his discussion of Luther’s life; providing us with a new template of adult developmental thinking and psychoanalytic psycho-history.

By the time; he wrote Ghandi’s Truth (1969), eleven years later; Erikson had a name for psychic reductionism. He called it originology.

“… I have characterized as originology the habitual effort to find the ‘causes’ of a man’s whole development in his childhood conflicts. By this I meant to say that beginnings do not
Erikson’s Ideas on Development

Explain complex development much better than do the ends, and originology can be as great a fallacy as teleology”.

Nine years later, in Adulthood (1978), a crosscultural volume devoted entirely to the subject of adult development, he again defined a field of study in its infancy. Using Erikson’s ideas in the preface, Stephan Graubard said, “The word ‘adulthood’ figures rarely in the scientific literature of our time; it has none of the concreteness that attaches to terms such as ‘childhood’ or adolescence, and indeed seems almost a catch-all category for everything that happens to the individual human being after a specific chronological age—whether eighteen, twenty-one, or some other”.

Continuing, he declared “The archives for the study of adulthood still wait to be created”. It is interesting to note that in the same year that Adulthood was published, 1978, Roger Gould, Daniel Levinson and George Valliant were creating those archives through the publication of their respective works, Transformations: Growth and Change in Adult Life (Gould), The Seasons of a Man’s Life (Levinson), and Adaptation to Life (Valliant).

The developmental study of the adult was not an esoteric undertaking for Erikson (1978), it has great clinical value. As phrased by Graubard, “... the problem is to develop analytic procedures that will make the study of ‘adulthood’ as common as the study of ‘childhood.’ Indeed, the greatest need may be to relate the two”.

Clinical Example: John

The following clinical example is intended to illustrate the importance of these seminal ideas of Erikson’s which have been elaborated by myself and others into a further appreciation of the contribution of experience during later developmental stages to normality and pathology.

John entered analysis at age 38 because of severe anxiety which was interfering with his law practice. Clearly neurotically organized, he had grown up with significant sexual and aggressive inhibition which not surprisingly turned out to be primarily Oedipal in origin. The analysis of his infantile conflicts was the same as would occur in any classically conducted analyses. But in my opinion more was required of me, namely to analyze his young adult conflicts as well as to relate the adult themes to their infantile antecedents.

These conflicts centered around a pregnancy with his first girlfriend during college and the refusal of his family to accept her or the child. Cut off financially when he decided to marry, in retaliation John severed all ties with his family.

Within a year of two he realized that the marriage was a mistake and literally fled to California. There he eventually remarried and focused his life around his new wife and two sons.

The adult developmental work centered around his rejection of his own son and estrangement from his father. The pressure which lead to his entering analysis as he entered midlife was the unconscious realization that he needed to repair both of these relationships before his son grew into manhood and his father died.

He did just that, eventually bringing his teenage son into his home and effecting a rapprochement with his father. When the analysis ended he was back in the developmental mainstream, in the midst of a three generational mix which brought him great satisfaction and responsibility.

Erikson’s concept of new developmental challenge in adulthood was at the core of a theoretical orientation which in my opinion greatly enhanced my capabilities as an analyst and the results of this successful analysis.

The Human-and Psychoanalytic-Resistance to the Study of Adult Development

Despite his own eloquent efforts and a burgeoning field of literature, and courses on adult development in many psychoanalytic institutes, Erikson’s work, in particular, and the entire field of study, in general, remain on the periphery of psychoanalytic thought despite having received wide acceptance in such diverse fields as psychology, anthropology, history, and literature.

In Adulthood (1978), with his usual clarity and directness, Erikson explained that the resistance to a detailed understanding of adulthood is not limited to psychoanalysis; indeed, it is ubiquitous, since it is based on a “dreadful”, universal, human dilemma. “We know the long and violent history of the attempt on the part of empires and creeds alternately to counterpoint and reconcile or refute and exclude the belief systems that emerge from the truly ‘dreadful’ human dilemma of having to reconcile a heightened need for generational renewal of having to reconcile a heightened need for generational renewal in a ‘real’ Here and Now with the certainty of individual death.”

“One must begin with such fundamentals if one wishes to understand the necessity for adults to arrive at some formulation of adulthood and to gain some objective perspective on its precursors”.

Because the resistance is rooted in the core of the human fear of both living and dying, Erikson tells us that we should not be surprised at its tenacity.

“But then we must consider how long it took enlightened humanistic and scientific mankind to acknowledge to chart the existence of developmental stages—physical and emotional, cognitive and social—in childhood and youth, not to speak of the highly diverse history of the treatment of children through the ages as creatures existing and developing at the
whim of fate- and of the adults. No doubt there has been a deep-seated adult resistance (first discovered and explained by Freud) not only to the remembrance of one’s own childhood, but also to the recognition in children of developmental in the universe a safe and sanctioned place within a well-defined point of view”.

This ubiquitous adult human need for a “safe and sanctioned place with a well-defined point of view” functions as a tenacious defense against the awareness of the anxiety and insecurity generated by physical aging and constant intrapsychic change, in an external environment which is capricious, unpredictable and dangerous. “A well defined point of view,” is a gentle reference for the human, and psychoanalytic, tendency to turn ideas and theory into soothing but rigid dogma to guard against the realization that each of us, and our ideas, will inevitably be replaced by the young, and will inevitably die.

An example of a “well defined point of view” is the entrenched psychoanalytic belief that development ends in adolescence, that the adult is a finished product for whom development has little relevance. The end to such resistance is not yet in sight, Erikson (1978) tells us for “we still face powerful problems arising from the relativity adhering to the adult’s task of defining his position as a person and as an observer of ongoing life”.

Erikson (1978) saw the resistance to development in psychoanalysis as the cause of an artificial and unnecessary dichotomy between the genetic and developmental points of view. If it is to contribute to “…an inclusive human psychology, psychoanalysis can not shirk the task of accounting not only for the way the individual ego holds the life cycle together, but also for the laws which connect generational cycles with individual ones- and the social process with both”.

If the two points of view are reconciled Eriksonian developmental theory can make a considerable contribution to clinical theory. “In my extension of the principle of stages to adulthood and old age, the dystonic aspect of each stage remains related to the potential for a major class of disorders”.

Expanding on this idea, Robert Nemiroff and myself, particularly in our second book The Race Against Time: Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis in the Second Half of Life (1985) have attempted to elucidate the manner in which adult developmental conflict- always in association with infantile factors and determinants- is involved in the elaboration of adult psychopathology; and the usefulness of psychoanalysis as a treatment modality throughout the life cycle.

**Clinical Example: Robert**

Hopefully, this second clinical example will demonstrate the usefulness of a more balanced consideration of infantile and adult factors, as suggested by Erikson and elaborated on by other adult developmental theorists.

I had first evaluated Robert at age 17 after he was accidentally electrocuted. The experience left him without an arm and possibly sterile. The evaluation revealed that he was a highly intelligent, inhibited young man clearly in need of analysis for his psychoneurosis which was deeply entrenched well before the tragedy which occurred when he was 16. My recommendation for analysis was summarily rejected by the patient who received no treatment of any kind until he returned to my office at age 31.

The years between 17 and 31 had not treated him kindly. Although he had completed college, married and fathered a child, he had become obese, depressed and “unable to think.” Much of the early work of the analysis centered around his oedipally based inability to become emotionally and financially independent from his powerful, controlling father.

As the relationship with his father was analyzed, thus demonstrating the power of the analytic process, Robert gained the strength to approach his disgust of his obese, disfigured body. As he began to mourn for the perfect teenage body which he had lost so many years before, the phase specific adult developmental task of accepting the aging process in the body also began to surface, leading to a detailed investigation of the formerly unconscious interrelationship between these adolescent and young adult experiences.

As he had medical checkups (for the first time since the accident), lost weight and began to work out regularly, pride in his body returned for the first time in many years. This lead to an upsurge of strongly repressed sexual fantasies which again focused attention on infantile sexual conflicts. And so the work continued, with the adult developmental orientation continually complimenting and enhancing the work on oedipal and preoedipal themes.

**The Evolution of Erikson’s Adult Developmental Ideas**

In this section I will trace the evolution of Erikson’s ideas on adult development by following them from Childhood and Society through Young Man Luther and Ghandi’s Truth to Adulthood.

In Childhood and Society Erikson defined three adult developmental stages and described a major polarity for each. They are the very familiar and widely recognized Young Adulthood, for which the polarity is Intimacy vs. Stagnation and Maturity which is defined by Ego Integrity or Despair.

In Chapter 7, the “Eight Ages of Man”, Erikson, through his phase-specific polarities, defined for the first time, although he did not use the terms, adult developmental tasks for each of
the three adult developmental stages. They are now more commonly referred to as Early (20-40), Middle (40-60) and Late (60-80) Adulthood. Late Late Adulthood has been added to address the increasingly common persistence of life beyond age 80.

Erikson’s definition of the primary development task for each of the three developmental stages of adulthood are the foundation on which he built his theory of normal development in adulthood and, therefore, the natural starting point for a consideration of the evolution of his thinking.

Early adulthood: Intimacy vs. Isolation

Intimacy he told us (1950), is the capacity, which emerges for the first time in Young Adulthood, to commit “… to concrete affiliations and partnerships and to develop the ethical strength to abide by such commitments, even though they may call for significant sacrifices and compromises”.

Addressing the role of the three major forces which shape development- mind, body and environment- he continued: “Body and ego must now be masters of the organ modes and of the nuclear conflicts, [from earlier stages] in order to be able to face the ego loss in situations which call for self-aboration: in the solidarity of close affiliations, in orgasms and sexual unions, in close friendships and in physical combat, in experiences of inspiration by teachers and of intuition from the recesses of the self. The avoidance of such experiences because of a fear of ego loss may lead to a deep sense of isolation and consequent self-absorption”.

Without directly saying so Erikson challenged the prevailing psychoanalytic notion that the capacity for genitality, the ultimate expression of human sexual love, is achieved by the end of adolescence, when development, according to Freud’s conceptualization of childhood stages, ends

He said, “Strictly speaking, it is only now [in young Adulthood] that true genitality can fully develop; for much of the sex life preceding these commitments [in adolescence] is of the identity-searching kind, or is dominated by phallic or vaginal strivings which make of sex-life a kind of genital combat”.

When he placed genitality within a context of “lasting social significance” his definition became a description of the major components of Young Adult life as we now understand them. For “the utopia of genitality” should include:

1. Mutuality of orgasm
2. With a loved partner
3. Of the other sex
4. With whom one is able and willing to regulate
   the cycles of
   a. Work
   b. Procreation

Middle adulthood: Generativity vs. Stagnation

In explaining the brevity of his discussion of generativity Erikson (1950) reminded us that Childhood and Society. “… the emphasis is on the childhood stages, otherwise the section on generativity would of necessity be the central one, for this term encompasses the evolutionary development which has made man the teaching and instituting as well as the learning animal”. Indeed, it took several books and a professional lifetime for Erikson to elaborate on the seminal idea presented here, as we shall see.

Once again Erikson gently chided psychoanalysis for ignoring adult development. “It has taken psychoanalysis some time to realize that the ability to lose oneself in the meeting of bodies and minds leads to a gradual expansion of ego-interests and to a libidinal investment in that which is generated”. Breaking new ground and expanding the concept of psychosexual development into adulthood he forthrightly declared, “Generativity thus is an essential stage on the psychosexual as well as on the psychosocial schedule”.

Why he asked, has the “fashionable insistence on dramatizing the dependence of children on adults” blinded us “to the dependence of the older generation on the younger one. Mature man needs to be needed; and maturity needs guidance as well as encouragement from what has been produced and must be taken care of”.

Without telling how or why generativity replaces intimacy as the dominant developmental preoccupation Erikson defined Generativity as “… primarily the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation … the concept is meant to include such more popular synonyms as productivity and creativity, which, however, cannot replace it”. Erikson’s fascination with midlife would have to be put aside for a decade or more, superceded by the orderly and developmentally appropriate preoccupation with Young Adulthood. For could midlife really be understood without a more detailed understanding of that which preceded it? Apparently not.

Late adulthood: Ego Integrity vs. Despair

Ego Integrity is the ripened fruit of the previous seven stages of gestation. It may be compared to the finest and rarest of wines, the distillate of a lifetime. In later works it became nearly synonymous with wisdom. Ego Integrity is not automatically acquired with age and experience. Rather, like all previous developmental advances it is the direct consequence of the successful engagement and mastery of the developmental
Leaving childhood behind, with his (and our) task clearly defined, Erikson began the quest for new knowledge about adulthood in his own characteristic way- by moving in orderly fashion from childhood to Young Adulthood, to con-duct, life Freud, the indepth study of one human being, Young Man Luther.

**Young Adulthood-Young Man Luther**

In *Young Man Luther* (1958), Erikson’s next book, he shifted his focus from child development to adult development, focusing primarily, but not exclusively, on Young Adulthood. In the introduction the publishers noted that Erikson had expanded his focus to include problems of productivity in middle age as well, in an attempt to investigate his views of the entire human life cycle.

Acknowledging his debt to the ego psychology of Freud, Anna Freud, Aichorn, Hartmann and Rappaport; Erikson focused in the prologue on a theme which remained central to his thinking and crucial to the work of all psychoanalytically oriented adult developmentalists ever since: namely, the effect of childhood experience on the evolving adult personality. Individuals discover and understand this relationship through searing, and oftentimes painful introspection, as did both Freud and Luther.

“In this book I have described how Luther, once a sorely frightened child, recovered through the study of Christ’s Passion the central meaning of the Nativity; and I have indicated in what way Freud’s method of introspection brought human conflict under a potentially more secure control by revealing the boundness of man in the loves and rages of his childhood. Thus both Luther and Freud came to acknowledge that ‘the child is in the midst.’ Both men perfected introspective techniques permitting isolated man to recognize his individual patienthood. They also reasserted the other pole of experience, man’s involvement in generations: for only in facing the helplessness and the hope of the newly born in every child does mature man (and this does include woman) recognize the irrevocable responsibility of being alive and about”.

Erikson postulated a developmental model for society as well as the individual, and he fit Luther (and Freud) into his schema in the role of developmental catalyst or influence. Tradition ‘molds’ the individual ‘channels’ his drives. But the social process does not mold a person merely to house-break him; it molds generations in order to be reinvigorated by them. There is an optimum ego synthesis toward which the individual aspires; and there is an optimum societal metabolism for which societies and cultures strive. Luther was one of the rare individuals who was capable of creating such a new developmental synthesis.

“Nothing, to my mind, makes Luther more of a man of the future- the future which is our psychological present- than his utter integrity in reporting the steps which marked the emergence of his identity as a genuine home religiousus. I empha-
size this … because it makes is total experience a historical event far beyond its immediate sectarian significance, namely, a decisive step in human awareness and responsibility”.

Luther was a highly educated young man who entered college at 17, completed his masters degree by 21 and became a priest—despite his father’s strong objections— at 23. Entering monastic life was Luther’s way of attempting to resolve his identity crisis. Like all “late adolescent personalities of any group” he was one of “… the best subjects for indoctrination” because “… in adolescence an ideological realignment is by necessity in process and a number of ideological possibilities are waiting to be hierarchically ordered by opportunity, leadership, and friendship”.

Luther, Erikson tells us, was a very disturbed young man. “It seems entirely probable that Martin’s life at times approached what today we might call a borderline psychotic state in a young man with prolonged adolescence and reawakened infantile conflicts”.

He entered the Monastery in reaction to a frightening thunderstorm (somewhat akin to St. Paul’s conversion) and had a severe anxiety attack while celebrating his first Mass, which was begrudgingly attended by his father.

Since “Martin was a young great man, sickness and all” he struggled with the “characteristic of young great rebels: their inner split between the temptation to surrender and the need to dominate” and in the process produced a personal and revolutionary religious transformation.

This painful metamorphosis took place in Luther’s twenties because of an integration of infantile and young adult themes. In effect, Erikson related Luther’s resolution of his identity crises and religious transformation to the successful engagement of the developmental tasks of Young Adulthood.

“The characteristic of Luther’s theological advance can be compared to certain steps in psychological maturation which every man must take: the internalization of the father-son; the concomitant crystallization of conscience; the stage establishment of an identity as a coworker and a man; and the concomitant reaffirmation of basic trust”. Once again we observe Erikson providing the framework for what later became formalized in the work of Gould, Levinson and Nemiroff and myself as developmental tasks in the adult developmental phases.

By the time he was thirty Luther had forged a new relationship with his God, meeting him in what Erikson calls the tragic conscience, that inner ground where we and God have to live with each other as man and wife. Removing the middle man— the Church— between himself and God Luther was unwittingly “… preparing himself to do the dirty work of the Renaissance, by applying some of the individualistic principles immanent in the Renaissance to the Church’s still highly fortified home ground—the conscience of ordinary man”.

After completing what Levinson (1978) would call a period of transition and entering a period of stable structure, Luther was ready to publicly announce his newly crystallized emphasis on man’s inner conflict and his salvation through introspective perfection.

Fusing his father’s rejection of his priesthood with his own rejection of Catholic dogma, at age 30, he began lecturing and at age 34 he nailed his 95 these against indulgences on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. Three years later, at age 37, he publicly burned the Papal Bull which excommunicated him. In the midst of what Jacques (1965) might call a midlife crisis, in his 38th year, in the middle of the late thirties which Jaques described as the beginning of midlife, “… having defied emperor and Pope, and having become spokesman for God’s word,” Luther appealed to his natural gather, and his tenacious resistance to Luther’s priesthood as a justification for abandonment of his monastic vows.

As he entered Middle Adulthood Luther married (at age 42) and he became a father. A severe depression followed. Why should such an illness have occurred at the height of Luther’s personal and popular success? Erikson related it (the question of Manic-Depressive illness aside) to the midlife task of Generativity. Again, silently adhering to an adult developmental principle which he espoused many times, he did not explain Luther’s midlife depression in terms of infantile experience either exclusively or primarily. Instead he told us that Luther’s partially unsuccessful and fragmentary solution of the identity crises of youth aggravated “the crisis of manhood”. In other words, his engagement of the developmental tasks of midlife did not rest on a firm resolution of the developmental tasks of young Adulthood. More specifically, Luther was worried about the enormity of his success. What if he had been wrong? What if he had lead all those people astray?

In a passage which anticipated Robert Butler’s life review (1963) Erikson expanded his concept of generativity by suggesting that it is not enough to be generative in midlife. In addition the midlife superego must critically assess the fruits of the generative labor.

“The crisis of generativity occurs when a man looks a what he has generated, or helped to generate, and finds it good or wanting, when his life as part of the productivity of his time gives him some sense of being on the side of a few angels or makes him feel stagnant”. Apparently Luther was uncertain if his generativity had aligned him with angels, or their fallen counterpart, Lucifer, the devil.

Erikson elaborated his concept of generativity even further in his next famous psychoanalytic biography, Ghandi’s Truth.
Ghandi’s Truth

Nineteen years after he wrote Childhood and Society, Erikson published Ghandi’s Truth, his intense study of midlife. In 1969, he was himself a late middle age man struggling with many of the same issues he identified in his famous subject. “... it was time for me to write about the responsibilities of middle age ...”.

Erikson became fascinated with why Ghandi, a man of nearly 50, became involved in a rather mundane mill workers’ strike in Ahmedabad and used a fast for the first time to achieve a goal. “…that strike and that fast represented a demonstrable crisis in the middle age of a great man and was worthy of study as such”.

As he did in Childhood and Society and in Young Man Luther, Erikson never lost sight of the power of infantile influence on the adult personality. He traced Ghandi’s life through childhood and youth, providing intriguing data such as the fact that Ghandi’s father was a highly public figure, the prime minister of the small state of Porbandar. But he did not explain Ghandi’s metamorphosis, into a world renowned leader solely on the basis of an identification with his prominent father, or his “moratorium” in England from ages 20-23, or his identity crisis shortly thereafter in South Africa when he was not permitted to travel first class because he was a “coolee” or “colored.” Instead each phase of development from childhood and adulthood contributed to the developmental mix which did not transform Ghandi into the greatest of leaders, the Mahatma of all India, until he approached Late Adulthood.

In this book Erikson produced a major theoretical advance by recognizing the centrality of the awareness of time limitation and personal death to midlife development and relating it to his organizing principle for middle adulthood, generativity.

Religiosity, he tells us, is the consciousness of death. All men are loved as equally mortal, and hated in the hope of gaining a sense of immortality out of the vaingloriousness of their own pseudospecies.

However, if this recognition of a personal end becomes an obsession, it will seriously impair the achievement of generativity, as illustrated by this comment on the Hindu life cycle.

“The Hindu concept of the life cycle, as we saw, allots a time for the learning of eternal concerns in youth, and for the experience of near-nothingness at the end of life, while it reserves for the middle of life a time dedicated to ‘the maintenance of the world’. that is, a time for the most intense actualization of erotic, procreative, and communal bonds: in this period of life, adult man must forget death for the sake of the newborn individual and the coming generations”.

Contemporary adult developmentalists would differ with Erikson on the need to “forget death.” Instead they world suggest that generativity, and all other important developmental tasks of midlife, can only be achieved by facing, struggling with, and gradually mastering the realization of personal death; sublimating the anger and frustration stimulated by such into generativity.

The acceptance of personal death and the realization that all men die is the catalyst which makes it possible for individual man to care for all of mankind while paradoxically remaining cognizant of his own time, place and culture. Near the end of his consideration of Ghandi’s life Erikson tells us why Ghandi’s Truth is so important. “Truth in Ghandi’s sense points to the next step in man’s realization of man as one all-human species, and thus to our only chance to transcend what we are”.

Adulthood

In the nine years between Ghandi’s Truth and Adulthood (1978) Erikson continued to expand his thoughts on the adult years. Increasingly, as he moved into the latter years of his life, he was drawn toward an understanding and appreciation of those human characteristics which transcend individual experience and culture; and the fragility of human existence.

“To be grown up, in any language and vision, has a particular quality of standing tall, so proudly and yet so precariously that there is a universal need to attest and to protest that one knows where one stands and that one has some status in the center of a vision of a new, or, at any rate, forever renewed human type”.

Formulating a “world view”, a place in the greater scheme of things which is universal and at the same time culturally and individually unique is at the core of Erikson’s theory of adulthood.

“For all world views must come to terms with the irreversible ambiguities and contradictions arising from the fact that the human species (besides other extreme specializations) must undergo a protracted period in which to grow up and to grow into the specifications of a given group in a given place on earth in a given period of history”.

Wisdom-the Distilate of Developmental Experience

In his own chapter in Adulthood Erikson took a philosophical view of human existence and provided us with an additional framework within which to consider the sweep of development from childhood to the end of life through his examination of the virtues of hope, faith and wisdom.

Hope, the first and most basic human strength, emerges from infancy and early childhood. It is “…the enduring belief in the attainability of primal wishes in spite of the dark
urges and rages which mark the beginnings of existence and leave a lasting residue of threatening Estrangement. Hope, then, is the ontogenetic basis of what in adulthood becomes faith: it is nourished in childhood by the parental faith which pervades patterns of care”.

Wisdom, on the other hand, belongs to adulthood, the quintessential distillate of having lived, experienced what life has to offer, endured through the full range of experience which life presented. It is the celebration of life in the face of the full awareness of the inevitability of death. More than any other realization, it is what defines us as adults.

Erikson’s thought on wisdom, like Strauss’s “Four Last Songs,” represent his most mature comment on human existence, coming as they did at the end of decades of thought, contemplation and experience.

Wisdom “… is the detached and yet active concern with life itself in the face of death itself, in that it maintains and conveys the integrity of experience in spite of the Distain over human failings and the Dread of ultimate non-being”.

**Conclusion:**

**Should There Have Been More?**

Erikson laid out his model of the lifecycle in Childhood and Society and spent the remainder of his professional life elaborating on it. In focusing his attention in his subsequent writings almost exclusively on this model he provided us with an enormous repository of developmental theory. I cannot help but wish, however, that he had chosen to broaden his scope and incorporate the rich and varied theories of adulthood which were emerging around him, in no small measure due to his inspiration.

No matter how illuminating his polarities for each developmental phase may be, they are no substitute for a more encompassing list of developmental tasks. For example, I would have enjoyed hearing his thoughts on sexual and emotional intimacy in middle and late adulthood; or his ideas on the effect of play on development in adulthood.

Although he defined the developmental stages for adulthood in Childhood and Society he paid little attention to them in subsequent writings, other than through his polarities. What did he think of Gould’s (1978) adult stages or Levinson’s (1978) mid and late life transitions?

In the evolution of his ideas he eventually came to recognize the enormous developmental impact of the awareness of time limitation and personal death but did not extensively address the aging process which underlies it. the biological influence on adult development is not considered.

Undoubtedly I ask for too much because another aspect of wisdom is the realization that an individual can only do so much, leaving a legacy which can only be furthered by subsequent generations. One hundred years from now Freud’s theory of the unconscious, of the Oedipal Complex and infantile sexuality, and the influence of childhood experience on adulthood will still be providing a stimulus to scholarly research and multidisciplinary discussion. So will Erikson’s concept of a culturally influenced, lifelong developmental process. Quite a contribution by any standard. I can pay him not great complement than that. I can pay him not greater complement than that.

**Acknowledgments**

A shorter version of this paper was presented in December, 1994 at the Winter meeting of the American Psychoanalytic Association in New York as part of a “classics revisited” panel focused on Childhood and Society.

**Conflicts of Interest**

The author has no financial conflicts of interest.

**REFERENCES**


