Interstage Relationships in Erikson's Theory: Identity and Intimacy

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The purposes of this article are to introduce a notation system for representing the formal aspects of Erikson's theory of psychosocial development in adolescence, focusing in particular on the interstage relationships between the crises of identity and intimacy and subsequent crises, and to use this notation system to make explicit several questions that must be answered if Erikson's descriptions of identity and intimacy in adolescence are to be understood in the context of life-course development and not merely as descriptions of isolated crises. Among these questions are: Must one always be in a crisis? Can individuals continue to progress developmentally following unsuccessful resolution of a prior crisis? What are the developmental consequences of foreclosure? What characterizes a successful resolution of a crisis?

Erikson's (1959, 1963, 1968) theory of psychosocial development has provided an important framework for understanding the role of adolescence within the life cycle. During adolescence the individual is confronted with the need to resolve the crises of identity versus identity diffusion and intimacy versus isolation. Both of these constructs have received empirical support for their defining characteristics (Marcia 1980, Orlofsky, Marcia, & Lesser 1973), and there has been considerable research regarding their stability over time (Fischer 1981, Marcia 1980, Munro & Adams 1977, Raphael & Kelowski 1980, Waterman, Gey, & Waterman 1974) and their relationships with other developmental constructs (Adams 1976, Adams & Fitch 1981, Bernard 1981, Berzonsky & Barclay 1981, Bourne 1978a, 1978b, Donovan 1975, Leadbeater & Dione 1981, Meacham & Santilli 1981, Orlofsky 1976, Orlofsky & Ginsburg 1981, Podd 1972, Rowe & Marcia 1980, Santilli & Meacham 1982). In general, this body of research has provided a detailed description of the intrastage qualities of the crises of identity and intimacy and of the relationships between these crises and other developmental constructs. Still to be investigated, however, are the interstage or developmental relationships, that is, the transitions between one crisis and the next. This latter task is an essential one if Erikson's theory is to be utilized as a life-course developmental theory and not merely as a description of isolated crises. The purposes of this article are twofold: to introduce a notation system for representing the formal aspects of Erikson's theory of psychosocial development in adolescence, including relationships between adjacent crises or stages, and transitions from one stage to the next, and to use this notation system as a tool to raise and make explicit some searchable questions regarding Erikson's theory, in particular between the crises of identity and intimacy. The notation system might also be employed as an instructional device for presenting Erikson's theory and comparing it with other life-course developmental theories and as a guide for organizing the presentation of research data on interstage transitions in Erikson's theory.

The Notation System

The notation system employed in this article is described and introduced more fully in Meacham (1980), having been derived from earlier work by Van den Daele (1969, 1974, 1976) and Flavell (1972). Briefly, the letters A, B, C, etc., may be used to represent various social and psychological characteristics, with development proceeding through time from left to right. Sequences of characteristics may be categorized as simple or cumulative, depending on whether the individual is consid-

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Erikson's Theory

What description can be provided of the formal aspects of Erikson's (1959, 1963, 1968) theory of psychosocial development in adolescence? Previous writers, such as Van den Daele (1974, p. 20), have commented on the difficulty of providing such a formal description. This difficulty may reflect the lack of specification in Erikson's theory of the interstage or between-stage relationships. Wohlwill (1973) has described several developmental theories in terms of both their horizontal structure, that is, within-stage structure, and their vertical structure, the between-stage organization. Although these theories are similar to Piaget's in having a high degree of horizontal structure, it is more similar to Shirley's steps of motor development in its low degree of vertical structure (Wohlwill 1973, p. 194). The notation system will be applied to make explicit the potential vertical structure, that is, the interstage relationships, of Erikson's theory.

At first, it would appear that Erikson's theory is a simple, disjunctive sequence. However, this model does not adequately represent Erikson's suggestions that (a) the solutions to earlier crises are carried forward and affect the resolution of later crises, and (b) the themes of each of the eight crises exist in some form throughout the life cycle.

These two points are implicit, for example, in the familiar eight X eight matrix provided by Erikson (1963, p. 273) as a guide to understanding his theory. Unfortunately, the matrix itself is difficult to understand. One interpretation of the matrix is that development is represented by movement from one cell to the next, so that individuals may be in any of 64 different states. It seems more likely, however, that Erikson intended each of the rows to represent one of the eight stages, beginning with I (trust) at the bottom and ending with VIII (ego integrity) at the top. Thus development is represented by movement from one entire row, not cell, to the next. What, then, do the columns in the matrix represent? These are aspects of each crisis that may be related to each of the preceding and subsequent crises. Within each row, cells above the diagonal represent the integration of aspects of earlier, completed crises with each current crisis. Cells below the diagonal represent aspects of earlier crises that prepare the way for later crises.

Thus the first model, suggested above, can be replaced with a simple, conjunctive model, *Abcdefgh* → *a'b'cdefgh* → *a'b'cdefgh*, where **A**, **B**, **C**, etc., represent the current crises. To be more precise, each letter could be provided with a subscript indicating the current dominant crisis, in order to distinguish, for example, trust during the crisis of identity, *a*ₐ, from trust during the crisis of intimacy, *a*ᵦ, and to represent the continual integration of historically resolved crises with current crises. This notation is not required for the purposes of the present article, however. This second model is still not entirely satisfactory.
However, since it seems to suggest that each successive crisis results in a successful outcome, Erikson's theory is commonly interpreted, however, as one in which the outcomes of each crisis may be successful (+) or unsuccessful (−), for example, trust versus mistrust, identity versus identity diffusion, etc. Thus a model such as that in figure 1 seems an improved description of the formal aspects of the theory. For simplicity, the first four crises are not shown in figure 1, and the primes have been deleted.

Two general comments may be made regarding the model shown in figure 1. First, at each stage, the interstage transitional probabilities, which must sum to one, can be derived from theoretical considerations and then tested empirically. This would certainly be an important step in the utilization of Erikson's theory as a life-course developmental theory. By late adulthood there are 2^8, or 256, possible types of individuals. It seems reasonable that the likelihood for some of these outcomes would be very low or zero. Second, in the area of adolescence many researchers fail to distinguish individuals whose identity is "diffuse" because they are premonoratorium and have not yet experienced the identity crisis (E) from individuals who have experienced this crisis but have failed to attain a successful resolution (identity diffusion). In the notation system, the distinction is between e during an earlier crisis such as industry, a+b+c+d+e+Fgh, and e as a resolution of the crisis of identity, a+b+c+d+e−Fgh. The failure to make this distinction reflects the current emphasis on the intrastage typology of Erikson's theory rather than the interstage developmental features. Clearly, making the distinction is essential if researchers hope to reliably measure identity diffusion and then establish relationships between identity diffusion and other developmental characteristics. This point applies as well to the other stages.

Questions about Interstage Relationships

The model of Erikson's theory in figure 1 serves to make explicit several assumptions, and so to raise several questions, regarding interstage relationships and transitions. First, the model is consistent with what appears to be a common assumption that one must always be in one of the eight crises described by Erikson. That is, it has not been thought necessary to introduce, between crises, a non-crisis stage, such as a+b+c+d+e+Fgh. Whether such a stage should be an important part of the model is an empirical question, although the answer will likely depend upon how crises are defined in terms of intensity, duration, etc.

Second, the model in figure 1 implies that one can experience an ensuing crisis without having successfully resolved a preceding crisis, as in e−Fgh. This seems implied by the assumption of the preceding paragraph and is also consistent with what appears accepted among current researchers, for example, that one might resolve the first crisis in the direction of mistrust, and still experience an identity crisis. Third, and most important, the model implies that one can resolve a crisis, that is, progress developmentally, without having successfully resolved a preceding crisis. For example, an individual might progress from identity diffusion, e−Fgh, to a positive or a negative resolution of the intimacy crisis (see lower part of fig 1).

Evidence against this model of progression following unsuccessful crisis resolution is provided by research indicating that levels of intimacy status are associated with the degree of resolution of prior psychosocial crises. Orlofsky (1978) interviewed college males and placed them into one of five intimacy statuses. These scores were then compared with scores on an Eriksonian measure of personality development assessing the five earlier stages. Those men scoring highest on intimacy status also scored highest on the earlier stages. Similar results were obtained by Kacergus and Adams (1980), who measured intimacy status of both male and female college students. For both sexes, high levels of intimacy status were associated with high levels of identity achievement. In summary, these two studies appear to suggest that failure to successfully resolve an earlier stage may be an impediment to experiencing and resolving later stages.

These same two studies also indicate that the degree of success in resolving earlier stages...
is predictive of success on later stages. Certainly through longitudinal research the probabilities for each of the developmental paths in figure 1 can be established, including the degree to which these are conditional upon the type of resolution of earlier crises and upon other developmental achievements, such as the acquisition of formal operations (Berzonsky & Barclay 1981, Rowe & Marcia 1980). Empirical efforts may establish that the probability for some paths, such as a successful resolution following an unsuccessful resolution of a preceding stage, as in \( e^{-f+Gh} \), is so low that the model in figure 1 could be simplified to three or perhaps two major paths.

**Foreclosure and Stage Skipping**

Let us now turn to a developmental outcome peculiar to the adolescent stages of Erikson’s theory, namely, foreclosure, the acquisition of an identity prior to the questioning and subsequent commitment that are associated with the period of moratorium or identity crisis. Since the foreclosed identity is unlikely to be viable in the long run, parentheses provide an appropriate representation \( e^{(+)} \). Although there has been considerable description of the characteristics of the foreclosed ego identity status (see, e.g., Marcia 1980), there has been little discussion of the point in development at which this particular alternative emerges, and how this alternative is different from the more usual course of development.

Certainly a prerequisite to foreclosure is the crisis of industry versus inferiority, \( Defgh \). Following the model in figure 1, a normal resolution would lead to \( d+Efgh \), by definition bypassing the possibility of foreclosure. Thus we are led to consider foreclosure as a solution of the crisis of industry in one of the following forms: (a) The representation \( d+e^{(+)}fg \) implies that the identity crisis has not been resolved, and that this crisis is the next to be experienced. However, this representation also implies that the individual is not currently in any crisis, the possibility for which is (as mentioned above) unclear in Erikson’s theory. (b) The second representation, \( d+e^{(+)}Fgh \), implies that the identity crisis has been skipped and that the individual is now experiencing (but not necessarily resolving) the crisis of intimacy.

Unfortunately, there seems to be no empirical evidence to assist in choosing between these two representations of foreclosure, since the research has been aimed primarily at distinguishing the foreclosure status from the other identity statuses, rather than relating foreclosure to the developmentally prior or subsequent Eriksonian crises (Orlofsky et al. [1973], however, relate foreclosure to low intimacy). One can note, however, that placing the origins of foreclosure within the crisis of industry is reasonable, given the strong role that work and occupation have been shown to play in the normal establishment of identity (Kacerguis & Adams 1980, Waterman et al. 1974). Of course, questions may also be raised regarding the relationships between resolutions of earlier stages, such as the oedipal stage, and the occurrence of foreclosure (see also Donovan 1975). One could hypothesize, for example, that a prior developmental pattern such as \( a+b+c^{-}d^{+} \) might make foreclosure more likely, and then test such a prediction empirically (more rigorous assessment methodology than currently available would likely be required).

What are the consequences of foreclosure? The second representation \( d+e^{(+)}Fgh \) provides the more interesting case, for here the identity crisis has been skipped and the individual has progressed to experiencing (but not necessarily resolving) the crisis of intimacy versus isolation. Logically, a number of possible developmental paths can be described. First, this new crisis may be incapable of resolution without the individual first returning to and successfully resolving the identity crisis (see fig 2, top). This sequence would be most consistent with Erikson’s hypothesized ordering of the crises, that is, the crises may be experienced out of order, but must be resolved in

![Fig 2 — Consequences of foreclosure](image)
a universal order. Second, the individual may resolve the intimacy crisis and then move forward to the crisis of generativity versus stagnation (fig 2, middle). Third, after resolving the intimacy crisis, the individual may return to the identity crisis (fig 2, bottom). The latter two developmental paths again raise the question of whether Erikson's theory permits resolution of a later crisis before an earlier crisis has been experienced or resolved. At present, there seem to be no developmental data to answer such a question. Nevertheless, the answer is certainly of great importance, for the three developmental paths represented in figure 2 are quite different in the number and sequence of Eriksonian crises that might be experienced during adolescence, youth, and adulthood. Intimacy (unresolved), identity, intimacy, and generativity in the first case (see fig 2), only intimacy and generativity in the second, and intimacy, identity, and generativity in the third.

The range of developmental paths in figure 2 can be enriched by considering that, following foreclosure \((d + e^+ Fgh)\), the crisis of intimacy may very likely be resolved only in the negative sense of isolation, \(d + f^{-} Egh\). In turn, the identity crisis may be resolved either positively, \(d + f^{-} - e + G_{gh}\), or negatively, \(d + f^{-} - e - G_{gh}\) (Additional paths may be constructed following foreclosure and added to fig 2. However, the ones already under consideration threaten to advance too far beyond the capability of our data to differentiate, and so it seems wiser not to add more.) The third path in figure 2 plus these two new ones correspond with data gathered by Douvan and Adelson (1966), and more recently by Hodgson and Fischer (1979) and Fischer (1981), suggesting that for some women the crisis of intimacy precedes the crisis of identity. It would be premature to attempt to explain this sex difference entirely as a consequence of foreclosure. Instead, it may be more fair, and also of greater developmental importance, to note that both these descriptions of generativity following resolution of intimacy and identity—\(d + f^{-} - e + G_{gh}\) and \(d + f^{-} - e - G_{gh}\)—as well as the middle path of figure 2—\(d + e^+ f^+ G_{gh}\)—correspond with data describing both men and women in mid-life transition (e.g., Levinson 1978, Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee 1978). From a developmental perspective, the key to understanding mid-life transition may be found in a better understanding of the adolescent crises of identity and intimacy and their long-term consequences.

### Describing Resolutions

Do data suggesting that the crisis of intimacy is resolved prior to the crisis of identity pose a problem for the claim of Erikson's theory that the sequence of crises is universal? Yes, if the data are sufficiently strong to affirm this particular developmental path and to exclude, for example, the first and second paths in figure 2. Unfortunately, it seems that more rigorous definition and assessment of whether a particular crisis is being experienced or not, and of the distinction between foreclosure and successful resolution, are required in order to choose among these alternative developmental paths.

The question of how to describe successful resolutions is particularly important, for the models of Erikson's theory presented in both figures 1 and 2 are based on the assumption that individuals can continue to progress developmentally without having successfully resolved a particular crisis. Nevertheless, it seems that Erikson himself considers that individuals do not move forward without successfully resolving each crisis in turn, so that a simple, conjunctive model such as the top sequence in figure 1 becomes a complete representation of the theory. At issue is what is meant by a successful resolution of a crisis. According to Erikson, this is not a choice by the individual of the positive characteristics of each stage over the negative. Instead, "What the individual acquires at a given stage is a certain ratio between the positive and the negative which, if the balance is toward the positive, will help him to meet later crises with a better chance for unimpaired total development" (Erikson 1959, p. 61, emphasis added). Presumably, if the balance is negative, the individual's development remains stalled until the balance becomes positive, as a result of confronting the crisis again \(e^{-} F_{gh} \rightarrow E_{fg} \rightarrow e^+ F_{gh}\). (Note that here the superscripts imply the relative balance of all characteristics rather than the choice of either successful or unsuccessful characteristics.)

Keller (1979) has advanced an interpretation of one of the crises—ego integrity versus despair—that is quite different from traditional interpretations but consistent with Erikson's interpretation of crisis resolution. Ego integrity is considered as the construction of a synthesis of opposing issues and attitudes. Erikson (1963) provides support for such an interpretation: "Some writers are so intent on making an achievement scale out of these stages that..."
they blithely omit all the 'negative' senses (basic mistrust, etc.) which are and remain the dynamic counterpoint of the 'positive' ones throughout life" (p. 273) Keller's research procedure permitted older people to either choose one of two opposing statements or choose both (the latter would not be permitted in a procedure based on the traditional, dichotomous interpretation). For example, given the two statements "There have been many good things in life, there have been many bad things in life," one person responded "Both are true, but from bad things we often learn much leading to good. And if all things were pleasant, that might lead to complacency, or we wouldn't experience good as such anymore. So all good isn't good." It is possible that the resolution of crises through the syntheses of opposing viewpoints is more typical of mature adults than of adolescents, Basseches (1980), for example, has provided data consistent with this. Nevertheless, if Erikson's statements are taken seriously, and the resolutions of the crises of identity and intimacy are to be understood in terms of ratios, balances, and syntheses, then models quite different from those of figures 1 and 2 may be required in order to relate the crises of adolescence to those arising earlier and later in the life course.

In summary, a number of questions have been raised regarding the relationships between the crises of identity and intimacy in Erikson's theory, and between these and subsequent crises. Must one always be in crisis? Can individuals continue to progress developmentally following unsuccessful resolution of a prior crisis? What are the developmental consequences of foreclosure? What characterizes a successful resolution of a crisis? It has not been the intention in this article to answer these questions but rather to show, by constructing models, that these questions must be answered if Erikson's descriptions of identity and intimacy in adolescence are to be understood in the context of life-course development, and not merely as descriptions of isolated crises. Although there will likely be disagreement with many of the details of the models presented, the notation system provides a means of making explicit the nature of these disagreements, as well as for exploring the implications of newer, more sophisticated models. If necessary, more powerful notation systems are already available (Flavell 1972, Van den Daele 1969, 1974, 1976).

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