

APPLYING A COMPREHENSIVE-INTERNAL MODEL FOR
THE EVALUATION OF SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH
TO THE IDENTITY CRISIS STAGE OF ERIK
ERIKSON'S DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY

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APPLYING A COMPREHENSIVE-INTERNAL MODEL FOR THE EVALUATION OF SOCIAL-SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH TO THE IDENTITY CRISIS STAGE OF ERIK ERIKSON'S DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY

Teaching methods in the twentieth century changed and shifted in their focus to accommodate the principles derived from social science experiments.¹ Developmental psychology is one of many branches of psychology falling within the realm of the social sciences. Many different definitions of developmental psychology exist, yet all share some of the same tenets. First, a developmental issue is “a concern, tension, worry or crisis encountered by the self in the context of change. The source of change can be personal and internal—bodily, mentally, emotionally, socially—or external—relational, familial, communal, societal. Since internal and external change is continual and interactive, life is a process of facing one developmental issue after another.”² Educational psychologists generally agree that psychosocial development consists of “a progressive series of changes that occur in a predictable pattern as the result of interactions between biological and environmental factors.”³ Christian educators commonly employ the developmental theories of Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, Erik Erikson, Lawrence Kohlberg, and James Fowler. Though there are many different subsets of developmental psychology—cognitive, social, psychosocial, moral and

¹John Hughes, “Why Christian Education and Not Secular Indoctrination?” in *Think Biblically!*, ed. John MacArthur (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), 243.

²Jack O. Balswick, Pamela Ebstyn King, and Kevin S. Reimer, *The Reciprocating Self: Human Development in Theological Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2005), 297.

³Neil J. Salkind, *An Introduction to Theories of Human Development* (London: Sage Publications, 2004), 311.

spiritual respectively, this paper focuses on one aspect of one specific stage of one psychosocial developmental theory—the identity crisis in Erik Erikson’s fifth stage: identity versus role confusion.

Introduction

The purpose of the research is to question the validity of employing a social science theory for the purpose of discipleship. Erik Erikson’s eight stage theory of psychosocial development, specifically the fifth stage—identity versus role confusion—will be examined. The dissertation begins with a demonstration of how developmental psychology has come to be the assumed paradigm for Christian educational philosophy and practice, specifically how Erikson’s notion of identity crisis is often presumed as an implicit reality in discipleship. The dissertation then includes a framework for reading Erikson’s work based on David Powlison’s epistemological priorities.⁴ These priorities are then employed within a “comprehensive internal” approach to extract a Biblical-theological perspective on identity and identity crisis, expose any of Erikson’s notions of identity that are antithetical to the Bible, and determine what can be learned and used regarding identity to disciple others. Finally, the dissertation will end with concluding thoughts and a discussion of future research.

The Presence of Developmental Psychology in Christian Education

Though discipleship is as old as the church the religious education movement, as well as, developmental theory are relatively new in the history of education. In the

⁴David Powlison, “Questions at the Crossroads: The Care of Souls and the Modern Psychotherapies,” in *Care for the Soul* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 33.

course of the twentieth century, Christian educators began to employ developmental psychology to disciple and to train others to disciple in the church. Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development was only one of several developmental theories proposed by psychologists and adopted by Christian educators in the twentieth century. There seem to be four primary avenues by which developmental psychology made its way into Christian education.

The first avenue is historical. Thomas Aquinas most famously addressed the role of faith and reason in the spiritual life of the church long before the twentieth century. With the introduction of the religious education movement, the roles of faith and reason began to arise very practically in the discipleship of the church. "The religious education movement did not try to replace the Sunday school but rather attempted to bring to it a new approach to the teaching of religion."⁵ The emphasis on teaching methodology in the religious education movement changed the focus of the teacher from a Bible-centered lesson to a teacher-centered or student-centered lesson.⁶

The second avenue is cultural. A cultural shift toward psychology occurred in the twentieth century. The influence of psychology in the West methodologically created a false reality in which the individual was increasingly seen from a naturalistic and mechanistic standpoint. From this psychological perspective the mind was an empty self in need of therapy.⁷ Phillip Cushman argues that the loss of effective, alive "authoritative communities" such as the church, society in the West was left to one scientific voice after

⁵Michael Anthony and Warren Benson, *Exploring the History and Philosophy of Christian Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2003), 346.

⁶Ibid, 337.

⁷Phillip Cushman, *Constructing the Self, Constructing America: A Cultural History of Psychotherapy* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1995), 1, 9.

the next. In place of authoritative communities, self-realization became the guiding factor in the culture.⁸

The third avenue is practical. The sufficiency of Scripture ends up being the central debate in the argument of counseling and of teaching. “[A] sense of insufficiency arises from a series of faulty assumptions that operate almost unconsciously. For example, ‘spiritual’ matters are typically split off from ‘psychological, emotional, relational [and educational]’ matters.”⁹ Christian educators advocating for the integration of social science and theology believe in a fundamental need for some source other than Scripture to adequately inform all areas of the educational process. One reason Scripture seems inadequate to us is that we are not satisfied with “seeing as in a mirror dimly.”¹⁰ Where Scripture seems silent and sight is limited, faith is challenged. The temptation to demand sight and consult sources outside of Scripture can actually delay, even blind us from seeing the truth. Developmental psychology is the most common source to which Christian educators look to inform teaching methodology and the nature of human beings for discipleship in the church.

The fourth avenue is conceptual. The loud voice of science via psychology in the West and the human propensity to question the inerrancy of Scripture and its sufficiency for communicating God’s voice about all of life creates the breaches in the wall necessary for empiricism to enter. With increasingly professional social sciences on the rise Christian educators who opened their ear to psychology more and more gradually

⁸E. Brooks Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2005), 288, 313.

⁹David Powlison, ed., *Counsel the Word*, 2nd ed. (Glenside, PA: CCEF), 4

¹⁰1 Cor 13:12

found themselves committed to empiricism over Christ. Empiricism is capable of causing the final step toward social science by which Christian education is rendered barely recognizably Christian. At that point social science has taken priority over theology in Christian education.

The historical, cultural, practical and conceptual ways in which developmental psychology have entered Christian education are sustained primarily through the integration of faith and learning. The integration of faith and learning is fairly recent terminology of an old concept built on the adage reintroduced by Frank Gaebelein that “all truth is God’s truth.”¹¹

Developmental Psychology Foundational to Twentieth Century Christian Education

Developmental psychology is not only present in Christian education, it has become an assumed framework. Most Christian education literature includes the ready acceptance of the compatibility of the “truth” of developmental psychology with the Truth. Long-time leading Christian educator Ted Ward, retired Professor of Christian Education and Missions and Dean of International Studies, Mission and Education at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, describes a cultural acceptance of developmental theories among Christian educators.

As a field of academic study, Christian education has gradually come to accept developmentalism as its theoretical base. As the intellectual quality of literature and research in the field has increased, the importance of a sound theoretical base has increased. Judging by the surging mainstream of academic literature in the field of Christian education, the choice has settled on one variation or another of developmentalism, largely because of the compatibility and consistency between its presuppositions and the essential foundations for the field in Christian theology. Biblical studies and Christian theology set criteria for the conceptual and

¹¹Frank Gaebelein, *The Pattern of God’s Truth: Problems of Integration in Christian Education* (New York: Oxford UP, 1954), 22.

methodological shape of the field. Christian educators can pick and choose among the contending educational theories, but in order to be responsible to both the academic rubrics and the theological tenets, the choice of theory must be in harmony with the rudiments of Christian values and ideation...Developmentalism passes the test rather well, especially if Christian definitions and supernatural components of the person are recognized alongside the inherent naturalism from which developmentalism springs.¹²

Most recently, *A Theology for Christian Education*, by leading Christian educators James Estep and Michael Anthony with systematic theologian Gregg Allison includes evidence of the ongoing acceptance of a broad range of social science theory including developmental psychology. The authors make several arguments for the “integration of faith and learning,” also known as the integration of Christianity and the social sciences. Estep argues that though no one developmental theory can provide an adequate understanding of how a human develops, “developmental theories provide a conceptual framework through which the Christian educator can approach the subject of spiritual formation.”¹³

Models for the Integration of Theology and the Social Sciences

Many different models and explanations of the integration of theology with the social sciences exist. James Estep outlines five different perspectives on the integration of the social sciences and theology for the Christian educator.¹⁴ These five perspectives provide a comprehensive explanation to most, if not all, attempts to integrate the social sciences with theology for the purpose of ministry in the church. The first of the five

¹²James C. Wilhoit and John M. Dettoni, *Nurture that is Christian* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995), 7-8.

¹³James R. Estep, “Spiritual Formation as Social: Toward a Vygotskian Developmental Perspective,” *Journal of Religious Education*. 97 (Winter 2002): 142.

¹⁴James R. Estep, Michael J. Anthony and Gregg Allison, *A Theology for Christian Education* (Nashville: B&H, 2008), 37, Figure 2.2.

perspectives Estep identifies is the “disintegration” perspective where only the social sciences are used and Scripture is not seen as relevant or applicable. The second perspective is the “segregation” perspective where the Bible is the only resources used to inform the Christian education process and the social sciences are deemed man-made and unworthy. The third perspective is the “paradoxical” perspective where the social sciences inform the Christian education process separately and equally as the Bible does, but the two are not in cooperation. The fourth perspective is the “synthetic” perspective where the social sciences do most of the informing on the educational process while Scripture basically proof texts the claims of social science. The fifth perspective is the “paradigmatic” perspective which gives the social sciences and theology equal value, importance, and legitimacy.

Estep believes the paradigmatic perspective offers the proper integration of the social sciences and theology for use by the Christian educator. With this view, Estep argues that the social sciences (i.e. developmental psychology) and theology are to be used at the same time and in cooperation with the other.

Level 5: The student uses both Paul and Piaget in the formation of a conceived conceptualization of human nature. At this level both the form and substance of education are derived from theology and the social sciences. She endeavors to use Paul and Piaget simultaneously. All the advantages of the previous levels are present without the limitations or inadequacies. Hence, the student’s paper reflects Paul and Piaget together in terms of both analysis and application.¹⁵

In his model the student “uses both Paul and Piaget” in the formation of their concept of human nature, as well as, the overall form and substance of education.

It is in this type of integration that the issues of the authority and the sufficiency of Scripture arise. For instance, using Estep’s paradigmatic perspective on integration to

¹⁵Estep, Anthony, and Allison, *A Theology for Christian Education*, 37.

apply Erikson's identity crisis for the purpose of discipleship raises the question of the authority of Erikson compared to Scripture in the life of the one being discipled.¹⁶

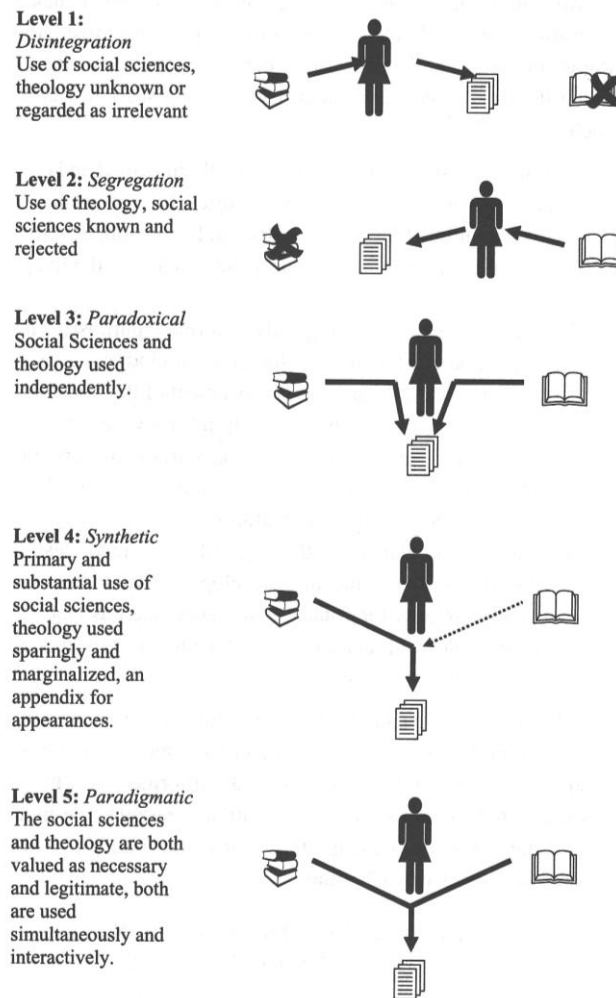


Figure 2.2: Student Integrative Endeavor

Whatever their view on the relationship between the social sciences and theology, leading Christian educators commonly agree that psychology offers a world-shaping narrative.

¹⁶Estep, Anthony, and Allison, *A Theology for Christian Education*, 37, Figure 2.2.

This word is the “logy” of the true psychology; it is the Word of the soul, which must be brought to the forefront and asserted once again, and thought through and placed in perspicuous comparison with the other psycho-logies that sound daily in our ears and bid to form us in their image.¹⁷

Robert Roberts warns of the dangers of wholly accepting psychological theories and ignoring their underlying presuppositions because of their ability to lead the Christian astray if left unchecked. Even in the church, he warns, their narratives are so strong that “our character and relationships are no longer Christian but are now Rogerian, or family-systemic, or Jungian, or rational-emotive” (and arguably, Piagetan or Vygotskan or Kohlbergian).¹⁸ The purpose of the reality shaping narrative of developmental psychology is the maintenance of a norm-referenced state or a life free from abnormality as the field of psychology defines abnormality.

Philosophical Support for Integration

Developmental psychology is not only present in Christian education, it has become Christian education’s foundational theoretical base. This has been accomplished through various integrative approaches. The philosophical support for using Erikson’s theory in Christian education is largely teleological. Developmental theory generally lacks a teleological function. The purpose or final cause for which or for whom a human develops remains open ended in most developmental theories. In other words, developmental theory cannot answer the question, “what is a person developing into?” Developmental psychologists recognize that no metatheory exists to unify the various developmental theories (cognitive, social, etc.) for developmental psychology as a whole.

¹⁷Robert Roberts, *Taking the Word to Heart: Self and Others in an Age of Therapies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), xi.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 2, 4.

The enormous scope of material on human development can serve as a barrier to the emergence of a metatheory explaining development in its entirety. Consequently, existing theories describe aspects and portions of the developmental process—whether cognition in infants, identity development in adolescents or generativity in adulthood. As a result developmental theory lacks an organizing principle through which to understand and evaluate these theories. Psychological and sociological contributions may offer insights into developmental processes, but they do not provide a framework for understanding the goals or ends of development.¹⁹

David Powlison states that not only is there no Grand Unified Theory for psychology, none is being pursued. “Microtheories and eclecticism are the order of the day.”²⁰

Advances in technology and statistical methods allow sociologists to move toward searching for answers to research questions in outliers of large, randomized experiments. This approach is considered more scientific because it is less attached to any pre-existing ideology. “There has been some shift away from grand frameworks to more focused empirical questions” regardless of whether grand frameworks are religious or not.²¹

Christian educators see this missing teleology in developmental theory not as a weakness or incompatibility between naturalistic assumptions and biblical presuppositions, rather an opportunity for the special revelation of Christianity to complete the general revelation of the social sciences.²²

Christian educators are “able” to accept developmental psychology as a theoretical base in large part because no meta-theory exists for developmental psychology. Christian educators generally believe that Christianity can provide what developmental theorists are lacking in their naturalistic assumptions. In other words,

¹⁹Balswick, King, and Reimer, *The Reciprocating Self*, 18.

²⁰Powlison, “Questions at the Crossroads,” 38.

²¹Patricia Cohen, “The 60’s Begin to Fade as Liberal Professors Retire,” *The New York Times*, 3 July 2008, sec. A, p.1.

²²Balswick, King, and Reimer, *The Reciprocating Self*, 17.

Christian educators will accept a developmental theory, such as Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development, and insert their own “Christian” end. It would seem that the lack of a unified goal or purpose in developmental psychology would render developmental theories useless in the secular world and in the church or at least weaken them in pragmatic terms. The missing goal or purpose or end within developmental psychology only seems to make it easier to generalize.²³

When the Christian educator accepts a developmental theory, he inevitably has to insert a teleology or final cause. There are many examples of this attempt to substitute a final cause. The authors of *The Reciprocating Self: Human Development in Theological Perspective* offer what they call the reciprocating self—“fully and securely related to others and to God”—as a final cause for human development.²⁴

The purpose of *The Reciprocating Self: Human Development in Theological Perspective* is to present an integrated view of human development that is based on social science research and biblical truths. We do this by drawing on a biblical model of relationality, where the created goal or purpose of human development is to be come a reciprocating self—fully and securely related to others and to God.²⁵

The author attempts to provide the missing overarching teleology by applying the relational aspects of the Trinity (as well as the greatest commandment) as an analogy for human living. In this example the reciprocating self will hold together the rest of their attempt at Christian developmentalism. In other words, the final cause that a Christian

²³Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), 96.

²⁴Balswick, *The Reciprocating Self*, 17.

²⁵Balswick, King, and Reimer, *The Reciprocating Self*, 9.

educator inserts into a theory shapes and defines the rest of the theory and what it produces when put into practice.

Just as Christians have a conviction to offer a teleology according to their faith, those in the field of psychotherapy have a conviction to offer a teleology according to their faith. Naturalistic assumptions disallow developmental theorists to name an agreed upon and specific ideal type. However, the psychologist typically would suggest a final cause related in some way to an ideal personality.²⁶ A well-informed personality such as can be found in Maslow's ideal type consists of these qualities: perception of reality, acceptance, spontaneity, autonomy, creativity, "peak" experiences, and democratic, egalitarian, and humanitarian decision making and relationships.²⁷

The lack of teleology in developmental psychology can make a developmental theory seem neutral. Before naturalistic thinking became a cultural mindset, empirical evidence was used to show evidence of order and design in the universe.²⁸ The Enlightenment era defined freedom as autonomy from religious restrictions and governmental compulsion. Freedom was thought to have come in the objectivity of empirical data and the scientific method. Empiricism and science became the reliable non-manipulative guide for everyday living.²⁹ Aristotle suggested that four causes produce change: "formal cause (what a thing is), material cause (out of which a thing is made), efficient cause, (by which a thing is made), final cause (for which a thing is

²⁶ Robert Roberts and Mark R. Talbot, eds., *Limning the Psyche* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 89.

²⁷ Paul Vitz, *Psychology as Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 10.

²⁸ R.C. Sproul, *The Consequences of Ideas: Understanding the Concepts That Shaped Our World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000), 50.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 280.

made).”³⁰ Without a final cause, developmental theorists are driven to leave unquantifiable intrinsic factors for more measurable, observable, controlled extrinsic factors to determine that which causes change.³¹ Developmental psychology, then, became an attempt to offer a “set of shared understandings about what it is to be human” by concentrating on the more measurable of Aristotle’s causes—the formal, material and efficient.³² Empirical data in the hands of developmental theorists furthers a naturalistic and/or materialistic framework.³³

Erik Erikson and Christian Education

Erik Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development appeals to Christian educators for three main reasons. First, Christian educators assume Erikson’s theory of

³⁰Ibid., 48.

³¹ The psychoanalysis hermeneutic with its humanistic tendencies unfortunately invades or displaces the Gospel-centered hermeneutic and proves that it cannot work harmoniously with it. For more information on the psychoanalysis hermeneutic see, Phillip Cushman, *Constructing the Self, Constructing America: A Cultural History of Psychotherapy* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1995), 297. “The feeling becomes felt after it is categorized, framed in a particular way by the shared understandings of our cultural frame of reference, which have been embodied by us. Then, finally, we experience and understand the feeling, because we have framed what it is. Because we can put it in a moral context, it can appear and be recognized. It is then available to be used by us as proof of the correctness or incorrectness of a particular behavior: as punctuation, if you will,” to everyday moral and political acts.” For more information on the Gospel-centered hermeneutic, please see Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006).

³²R. C. Sproul, *The Consequences of Ideas*, 282.

³³Balswick, King, and Reimer, *The Reciprocating Self*, 18. Renowned economist and student of human behavior, Max Weber, cautioned that empirical knowledge never includes all the facts. Rather empirical data must be carefully limited to narrow interests in narrow situations. Even then the data that is produced must still be seen in the realm of the abstract. Weber does not totally discount empirical research, rather he addresses the issue that when it comes to studying human beings from the empirical, only generalizations can be made. When using the empirical to attempt to get more specific it must be known that there are a lot of unknowns about how persons come about making their decisions (or actions) whether it be rational or irrational. This is true when attempting to come up with economic theory or developmental theory. For more information on Weber’s thoughts on empiricism see Weber, Max. *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), 9.

psychosocial development is valid because of his emphasis on the social aspect of development.

Second, Erikson differs from other developmental theorist because he accepts an underlying structure along which human beings develop. Erikson does not specify the end of a human being's development, only recognizes an underlying structure which he calls the epigenetic principle. Christian educators such as James Wilhoit and John Dettoni do not accept a developmental theory in its entirety. Rather they accept certain aspects of developmental theories. For example, Wilhoit and Dettoni agree that developmental stages are a series of "life structures" that change in the course of time. A life structure, according to the authors, is an underlying pattern or design of person's life in that particular life stage.³⁴ The authors say there is a pattern but they do not say what that pattern is. They are generally agreeing with Erik Erikson's, epigenetic principle. The epigenetic principle simply states that there is a basic developmental framework built into human beings—a biological telos.³⁵ In regard to teleology, Aristotle referred to the human teleological condition as 'entelechy'. "Humans display the attributes of humanity because they contain the form, the entelechy, of humanness. Entelechy is a teleological force principle that governs a thing's becoming what it becomes."³⁶ Erikson employs this concept for his eight psychosocial stages via his epigenetic principle.

³⁴Wilhoit and Dettoni, *Nurture that is Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995), 172.

³⁵Richard Stevens, *Erik Erikson: Shaper of Identity* (New York: Macmillan, 2008), 22.

³⁶R.C. Sproul, *The Consequences of Ideas: Understanding the Concepts That Shaped Our World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000), 37.

Third, Erikson's theory appeals to Christian educators because Erikson's theory leaves room for human subjectivity.³⁷ Social scientists often criticize Erikson's theory of psychosocial development for not being scientific enough or empirically investigable. Erikson's approach rather is to have a disciplined subjectivity or a series of "progressive approximations."³⁸ Erikson himself called his work simply a "conceptual itinerary" saying all he had to offer was "a way of looking at things."³⁹ His central purpose, then was not to provide "pat prescriptions or packaged formulae but what in his own words he [further] describes as 'tools to think with.'⁴⁰ Erikson's lack of dedication or dependence upon the empirical further draws Christian educators who value but see beyond the empirical.

Examples of Erikson in Christian Education

Christian educators employ Erikson's theory of psychosocial development in various ways though the viability of integrating theology and social science remains questionable. A typical example of the integration of Erikson's theory in Christian education can be found in article from the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* entitled "Using Erikson's Developmental Theory to Understand and Nurture Spiritual Development in Christians." Basically, the authors attempt to equate the term born again, referring to Christian salvation into the Kingdom of God by faith in Jesus Christ, with

³⁷Wilhoit and Dettoni, *Nurture that is Christian*, 94.

³⁸Stevens, *Erik Erikson: Shaper of Identity*, 20.

³⁹Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1950), 17.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 2.

Erikson's crises and stages.⁴¹ The authors define crises and stages as “new birth” issues (crises and stages of Erikson are trust v. mistrust, intimacy v. isolation, authority, etc.).

...it looks at those Christian traditions that emphasize being ‘born again’ as the beginning point of the spiritual journey and seeks to engage this imagery of spiritual development by juxtaposing this metaphor of new birth with Erikson's developmental stages.⁴²

Their conclusions are that understanding Erikson's stages will help the evangelical Christian to understand what people are “really” going through so that they can help them move forward to the next stage. The goal is “positive resolution of the various crises” that people go through. This is an example of the integration of developmental psychology with Christian education, specifically the use of Erikson's theory for the purpose of discipleship.

Eric Geiger in his recent popular level book, *Identity: Who you are in Christ*, refers directly to Erikson's theory. He refers to immaturity or a lack of growth in believers as spiritual adolescence. He goes on to explain the premise of his book in light of how Erikson defines identity in his fifth stage: role confusion versus identity.

In the 1960's a social psychologist named Erik Erikson developed a theory of development. He was not a biblical scholar or a theologian. He studied one aspect of God's general revelation: creation. He observed and studied people. In Erikson's model, teenagers reach a point of developmental crisis. Erikson calls the crisis role confusion versus identity. In other words, teenagers are searching for identity...I believe Erikson's model has some credence. Teenagers are searching for identity, a reputation...Erikson believed that if people do not establish a coherent sense of their own personal identity, they would struggle throughout their lives with relating to others and relating to the world around them. According to Erikson, if a teenager does not walk away from his adolescent years with a clear sense of who he is, he will never have a healthy personality. He will be stuck. He will be continually

⁴¹John 3:3 “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” See also John 1:13; John 3:5-8; 1 Pet 1:3, 23; 1 John 3:9, 5:1,4.

⁴²Yvonne Tate Bissonnette and Stephen Parker, “Using Erikson's Developmental Theory to Understand and Nurture Spiritual Development in Christians,” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 26 (2007), 218-26.

confused about who he is. He will live the rest of his life wavering back and forth still searching for an identity. He will live in perpetual adolescence for the rest of his life. Stuck as a teenager in an adult body. Sadly, many Christians are stuck in an adolescent faith.⁴³

Geiger uses Erikson's identity and identity crisis as a theoretical base. Geiger leaves psychological ideology such as determinism left unquestioned and assumed to be true. Christian educators, such as Geiger, accept Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development and use it for discipleship purposes in the church. Erikson's theory thus makes its way from a scholarly level into the every day lives of people in the church. Christian educators continue to write popular level books as well as scholarly level books from this integrated perspective.

On the academic level, editors James Wilhoit and John Dettoni devote an entire chapter to Erikson in their book, *Nurture that is Christian*—a textbook for Christian educators. Les Steele authored the chapter, "The Power of Erikson."⁴⁴ The purpose of this chapter is to introduce Erikson and his theory and "explore implications of Erikson's theory for Christian education."⁴⁵ After introducing Erikson and briefly explaining Erikson's eight stage theory of psychosocial development, Steele draws implications and insights from Erikson's theory for Christian education. Most pointedly, Steele likens 1 Corinthians 13:13, "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love" to three of Erikson's eight stages—hope to the first stage

⁴³Eric Geiger, *Identity: Who You Are in Christ* (Nashville: B&H, 2008), 6-7.

⁴⁴Wilhoit and Dettoni, *Nurture that is Christian* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995), 91-103.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 91.

trust versus mistrust, faith to the fifth stage identity versus role confusion, and love to the sixth stage intimacy versus isolation.⁴⁶

Erikson's work can give us insight as we articulate a philosophy of Christian education. One aspect of developing our approach is to consider the question of human nature; what does it mean to be a maturing Christian human being? Erikson gives us much to help develop a response to this question.⁴⁷

Steele then gives several examples of Christian educators' use of Erikson to develop applications for Christian education.⁴⁸ He concludes with the ways in which he believes Erikson can and should be used in the field.⁴⁹ Steele recommends Erikson as a source for helping Christian educators communicate an approach to Christian Education, "identify age-appropriate educational designs," and design individualized plans for discipleship.⁵⁰ The religious education movement welcomed psychological development theories such that theories such as Erikson's are now the assumed framework from which most seminaries train future ministers of the gospel toward Christian education, a term and field at the peak of its ambiguity.

⁴⁶Ibid., 98.

⁴⁷Ibid., 101.

⁴⁸Les Steele discusses how Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory is used by Christian educators John Gleason and Donald Capps, *Life Cycle Theory and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983); Lewis J. Sherrill, *Struggle of the Soul* (New York: MacMillan, 1954); Robert Havighurst, *The Educational Mission of the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), Iris V. Cully, *Christian Child Development* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979).

⁴⁹The term field is used here because of the increasingly professional nature of Christian education. Simultaneous to the professionalization of Christian education has been an increasing vagueness to what the term Christian education refers. Recently, an investigation was launched by the North American Professors of Christian Education (NAPCE) to determine what the term "Christian education" now means. The general consensus of the study was that there was no agreed upon understanding of what Christian education is or means.

⁵⁰Wilhoit and Dettoni, *Nurture that is Christian*, 101-02.

The Significance of Identity Crisis for Erikson's Theory

Developmental psychology has become the assumed framework for Christian education. Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development is one of many theories of developmental psychology employed by Christian educators via a paradigm of the integration of faith and learning. Because the purpose of this dissertation is to question the viability of Erikson's identity crisis for Christian discipleship, it is necessary to first investigate the importance of Erikson's notion of identity crisis to his own theory.

Erikson first introduced his eight stage theory of psychosocial development in *Childhood and Society* (1950). His thoughts on identity and development grew and changed throughout his life. He expanded his thoughts in *Identity and the Life Cycle* (1959), and even further in *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (1968). His notion of identity crisis remained central to his thoughts on identity throughout his life. He became somewhat disgruntled and perplexed about the common misuse and expansion of the terms identity and identity crisis.

'Identity' and 'identity crisis' have in popular and scientific usage become terms which alternately circumscribe something so large and so seemingly self-evident that to demand a definition would almost seem petty, while at other times they designate something made so narrow for purposes of measurement that the over-all meaning is lost, and it could just as well be called something else.⁵¹

Erikson often hesitated to offer clear definitions of his terms. However, the term identity crisis grew more ambiguous with its popularity. Erikson feared the misuse of the term subscribed to his name. As a result, Erikson clarified the term by agreeing that the term 'crisis' designates "a necessary turning point, a crucial moment, when development must move one way or another, marshalling resources of growth, recovery, and further

⁵¹Erik Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Horton, 1968), 15.

differentiation.”⁵² Identity crisis was first used to describe the perplexity and lack of sameness experienced by World War II veterans as they re-entered society.⁵³ The term began to connote a “war” experienced within a person or one experienced without via his society or environment. Given the hormonal nature of the pubescent years, the term identity crisis was quickly assigned and understood to be adolescence. In using the term, Erikson felt sure he was only describing something everyone had experienced at some point in their lives.⁵⁴ This common human element led to the spread, popularity, and acceptance of his ideas of person. Erikson exploited the common human question, “Who am I?”

Due to the epigenetic principle which necessitates that each stage builds on another, Erikson’s fifth stage sits at the crux of a person’s progression toward a healthy personality.

Whenever we try to understand growth, it is well to remember the *epigenetic principle* which is derived from the growth of organisms *in utero*. Somewhat generalized, this principle states that anything that grows has a *ground plan*, and that out of this ground plan the *parts* arise, each part having its *time* of special ascendancy, until all parts have arisen to form a *functioning whole*.⁵⁵

⁵²Ibid., 16.

⁵³Ibid., 17.

⁵⁴Ibid., 18.

⁵⁵Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle*, 37 Fig. 2.

| | | | | | | | | |
|--------------------------|---|--|--|---|---|---|---|--|
| I Infancy | Trust v. Mistrust | | | | Unipolarity v. Premature Self- differentiation | | | |
| II Early Childhood | | Autonomy v. Shame, Doubt | | | Bipolarity v. Autism | | | |
| III Play Age | | | Initiative v. Guilt | | Play Identification v. (Oedipal) Fantasy Identities | | | |
| IV School Age | | | | Industry v. Inferiority | Work Identification v. Identity Foreclosure | | | |
| V Adolescence | Time Perspective v. Time Diffusion | Self-certainty v. Identity Consciousness | Role Experimentation v. Negative Identity | Anticipation of Achievement v. Work Paralysis | Identity v. Identity Diffusion | Sexual Identity v. Bisexual Diffusion | Leadership Polarization v. Authority Diffusion | Ideological Polarization v. Diffusion of Ideals |
| VI Young Adult | | | | | Solidarity v. Social Isolation | Intimacy v. Isolation | | |
| VII Adulthood | | | | | | | Generativity v. Self- absorption | |
| VIII Mature Age | | | | | | | | Integrity v. Disgust, Despair |

Figure 2

Identity crisis articulates the dilemma of the fifth stage—identity versus identity diffusion. The term crisis also helps the student of Erikson to understand the tension to be resolved at each of the other stages as well. “Each comes to its ascendance, meets its crisis, and finds its lasting solution.”⁵⁶ Erikson argues that the indispensable concept for the formation of a healthy personality is the solid formation of the identity. The prerequisite stages preceding adolescence are crucial to the formation of identity and the stage of adolescence cannot be surpassed without it.

Ego identity is the “accrued confidence” in one’s ability to maintain sameness within through his adapted methods of mastering their experiences. These methods of

⁵⁶Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis*, 95.

adaptation or adjustment might differ somewhat from others. According to Erikson, what remains important is not necessarily how a person successfully navigates outer differences to maintain inner sameness but that he does so and is recognized and respected by others to have done so.

An environment that does not allow a person to adjust independently will result in the person radically fighting his or her environment in whatever means necessary to overcome it and successfully maintain his inner sameness.⁵⁷ In other words, Erikson's advocates that a person in the fifth stage of psychosocial development is believed to be his or her way to achieving a healthy personality when they are allowed and take advantage of every opportunity to maintain the life and reality they desire within themselves.⁵⁸ Likewise, a healthy society is one that allows room for and respects the right of any person in this stage to pursue his or her means of achieving inner sameness.⁵⁹

There is no objective standard to which the person or society must be held. Erikson presents human growth from the perspective of inner and outer conflicts, which the not just healthy but "vital" personality survives. A successful resolution to the identity crisis then, is when the person comes away from the crisis with "an increased sense of inner unity, with an increase of good judgment, and an increase in the capacity

⁵⁷Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle*, 95.

⁵⁸ The fruit of the Holy Spirit which includes self-control is, of course, not a factor of discussion in Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. Gal 5:22-24, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires."

⁵⁹Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle*, 94-95.

‘to do well’ according to his own standards and to the standards of those who are significant to him.”⁶⁰

Background

My interest in the involvement and integration of developmental psychology and Christian education is the result of many factors. First, as a young Christian college student at Texas A&M University in the field of education, I questioned the basic premises of educational theories in light of my faith. My minor as an undergraduate was educational psychology. Each of my classes in this area was steeped in the theories of developmental psychologists including Erik Erikson’s. These theories continued to be used in my graduate classes as I pursued my Master of Science in Educational Administration. Upon graduation I taught for six years in the public school system where these theories were not just talked about, but put into practice. As a special education teacher, theories on development were essential to the every day tasks of the job. Each student in my care was required to have an individual education plan based on state-appointed developmental goals and objectives. It became very apparent that the developmental theories we employed did not bring the results they claimed to bring.

When I came to Southern Seminary and began the Doctor of Philosophy in the School of Leadership and Church Ministry I was disappointed to find that the majority of my classes were spent pursuing these same developmental theories. Though the argument was that we needed to know them despite their inconsistency with the gospel, most of our time was spent trying to integrate them with our faith and practice. Rarely, if ever, were we encouraged to think Christianly about these theories. In so doing the

⁶⁰Erik Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis*, 92.

seminary's stated purpose of training in Christian education was very vague and became lost. In time I began to see that the push toward the integration of faith and learning was not unique to Southern Seminary but existed in each of the other six Southern Baptist seminaries and indeed permeated the ambiguous field of Christian education. It became apparent that perhaps my own time in research may be best spent thinking Christianly about these theories and pursuing an alternative for discipleship in the church.

Dr. Randy Stinson encouraged me to study the work of Dr. David Powlison and speak to Dr. Timothy Jones. Dr. Jones gave clarity to some of my concerns regarding the integration of the social sciences and theology for the purpose of discipleship in the church. Dr. Jones not only gave clarity to the underlying issues of the integration of faith and learning and for the first time in my program at Southern he has allowed and encouraged the questioning of such integration.

David Powlison suggests the social sciences repeatedly show that everyone who is thinking about the human life senses or knows that the human being faces hardships and trials, not the least of which seem to come from their own poor choices. The biblical theologian would have a much different answer than the social scientists as to what is "wrong" with people.⁶¹ The Christian educator must learn to think Christianly about the social sciences.

The fundamental debate of the sufficiency of Scripture leaves many Christian education integrationists advocating a fundamental need for some source other than Scripture to adequately inform him how to best disciple in the church. What has to be recognized, however, is that any social science source will always be working toward a

⁶¹David Powlison, "Questions at the Crossroads," 43.

different type of salvation than Christianity. Thomas Kuhn suggested that the “psychotherapeutic community is a ‘secular priesthood’ offering a means of ‘salvation.’”⁶² Developmental psychology cannot be taken in parts without understanding the overall trajectory of the whole. For a developmental theory to work optimally requires everyone involved, both teacher and student, to totally buy into the ideology.

“However, it’s my belief that psychotherapy, the secular church, follows a similar pattern. First, you were converted. Then, you studied the doctrines of your church. Finally you began to preach to others, hoping for conversions....Isn’t successful therapy defined, in part, by your client working comfortably with your beliefs? Have people ever had ‘aha’ conversion experiences during therapy sessions?”⁶³

Many inside and outside the church have come to regard all psychology as a religion.

Even the armchair psychologist can come to an intensely held worldview or ideology.⁶⁴

The narrative of the gospel serves as the overarching narrative in every disciple of Christ. Graeme Goldsworthy suggests there are two questions that the Christian educator must keep before him, “What shall we do with the Bible and what do you think of the Christ: whose Son is he?”⁶⁵ He goes on to say that contrary to what the evangelical Christian is accustomed to thinking, the Christian does not believe the Gospel for salvation then move on to Christian living. Rather, the “gospel is the power of God for all of salvation, and this means that it is also the matrix for sanctification.” It is my hope that this dissertation will be a part of the movement toward thinking Christianly about the

⁶²Powlison, *Counsel the Word*, 94.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 98.

⁶⁴Paul Vitz, *Psychology as religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), xii.

⁶⁵Graeme Goldsworthy, “Biblical Theology in the Seminary and Bible College” (Gheens Lectures, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 19 March 2008).

social sciences and redefining Christian education to mean the individual and corporate discipleship of the church.

Methodology

This dissertation is primarily polemical, to engage the current discussion of the integration faith and learning to the extent that it deals with developmental psychology—specifically, Erik Erikson’s theory of identity and identity crisis—in Christian education. This dissertation is secondarily constructive in that it will include a proposed biblical-theological perspective on identity with a focus on identity crisis as an alternative to what Erikson proposes.

David Powlison’s three epistemological priorities will be used to refute principles anti-thetical to the Bible within Erikson’s theory and decipher a biblical theological perspective. These epistemological priorities fall within Powlison’s “comprehensive internal” approach to the social sciences. The three epistemological priorities that will be used are: 1) “to articulate positive biblical truth, a systematic practical theology of those things that our culture labels [developmental] issues,” 2) “to expose, debunk and reinterpret alternative models to biblical discipleship,” 3) “to learn what we can from defective models.”⁶⁶ Powlison applies these priorities to the field of counseling and soul care. Because Powlison defines biblical counseling as intense discipleship, it is believed these accepted priorities can be applied to the field of Christian education.⁶⁷

⁶⁶David Powlison, “Questions at the Crossroads,” 35.

⁶⁷Stuart W. Scott, “What Biblical Counseling Is and Isn’t” (classroom lecture, 34300—*Introduction to Biblical Counseling*, Class 1, 14 August 2007).

A verification method known as “critical realism” will be used to verify the constructive component of this dissertation, a brief biblical theological perspective of identity crisis. Critical realism is a term that describes a way of making a confident assertion of the “way things are” without suggesting that the assertion is an exact delineation of God’s special revelation.⁶⁸

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⁶⁸Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1991), 310. “Thus critical realists never assume that they have achieved the ‘final’ statement of theological truth; the process of validation and improvement never ceases, for there can be no facile assumption that they have ‘arrived’ though of course one can verify that a particular statement is an accurate depiction of the biblical norm.”

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Chapter one will introduce the subject of the dissertation. In order to lay the foundation for the discussion of the viability of Erik Erikson's identity crisis for Christian discipleship, chapter one will first include evidence of the presence of developmental psychology in Christian education. Once it is established that developmental psychology is readily used by Christian educators, I will report the presence of Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development in Christian Education specifically. I will then discuss the significance of Erikson's notion of identity crisis to his own theory.

Chapter two will be an explanation of David Powlison's Comprehensive Internal (CompIn) approach as a biblical framework for Christians to mine the field of psychology for biblical counseling. Once Powlison's CompIn framework is explained, this chapter will then include a discussion of how and why Christian educators can employ this framework, previously only used in the field of biblical counseling, to determine a biblical and theological framework of identity for discipleship purposes.

Chapter three will focus on the use of Powlison's three epistemological priorities to offer a biblical and theological framework for reading Erikson. A biblical and theological explanation of Erikson's identity crisis will be offered. In addition, this chapter will include Erikson's beliefs regarding how religion impacts identity, especially socially or in terms of community. I will compile and organize statements from primary sources where Erikson discloses his religious beliefs as they relate to the formation of identity or influence the outcome of what he calls an identity crisis.

Chapter four will focus on the influence and relationship of Sigmund Freud on Erikson's identity crisis. This chapter will report Freudian foundations, if any, of

Erikson's fifth stage. In this chapter I will recount any Freudian assumptions used by Erikson and necessary for his theory of psychosocial development that are antithetical to Christian faith.

Chapter five will be an explanation of how Christians can use Erikson's notion of identity and identity crisis to inform the discipleship process. An explanation of Karl Barth's *krisis* theology will be used to compare and contrast not only Erikson's idea of identity crisis but specifically what connotes a crisis. What will be investigated is whether or not a Christian is or can be in agreement with Erikson regarding what connotes a crisis in light of the gospel.

Chapter six will provide a summary of research findings. A brief discussion of the difficulty of integration of any two fields into one will be included. The paper will end with suggestions for further research.

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