



The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child

ISSN: 0079-7308 (Print) 2474-3356 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/upsc20>

Reflections on the Last Stage—and the First

Erik H. Erikson

To cite this article: Erik H. Erikson (1984) Reflections on the Last Stage—and the First, The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child, 39:1, 155-165

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00797308.1984.11823424>



Published online: 07 Feb 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 2



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 10 View citing articles [↗](#)

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
<http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=upsc20>

Reflections on the Last Stage— and the First

ERIK H. ERIKSON

IN WISHING TO MAKE A CONTRIBUTION TO THIS VOLUME IN honor of Anna Freud, I find my thoughts somewhat dislocated by the fact that Joan Erikson's and my present studies do not concern childhood, but the very last stage of life: old age. To make the most of this I will attempt to restate and to reflect on an overall perspective of human development which promises to reveal some affinities between the end and the beginning of human life.¹ Such a perspective becomes possible in our day when scientific, clinical, and public interest has, over several decades, shown special interest in a series of life stages. There was the Mid-Century White House Conference which was—no doubt in partial response to discoveries of psychoanalysis—dedicated to “a healthy personality for every child.” There were the '60s when problems of identity so widely suggested themselves in the dramatic public behavior as well as in the psychopathology of youth and thus called for our psychosocial and historical considerations. And then, indeed, middle and early adulthood were discovered. Thus, the stages of life were highlighted by a historical relativity both in the ways in which they were experienced and in the methods used to conceptualize them at different times by observers of varying ages and interests. Indeed, historical

Professor of Human Development, Emeritus, Harvard University.

1. Some of these thoughts were presented in unpublished lectures as well as in *The Life Cycle Completed* (Norton, 1982) and in Concluding Remarks, *Frontiers of Infant Psychiatry*, ed. J. D. Call, E. Galenson, and R. Ryser (Basic Books, 1983).

changes have recently mobilized a general, and somewhat alarmed, awareness of the rapidly changing conditions of old age and an intense interest in the special nature of this last stage. Together, these factors will never again permit us to treat masses of survivors as an accidental embarrassment: old age must eventually find a meaningful place in the economic and cultural order—meaningful to the old and to the occupants of all other age groups, beginning with childhood. But this permits us to look at the facts observed and the theories developed and discussed with the new hope that we may all learn to view infancy and childhood as the “natural” foundation of a truly desirable long life. This also means—and has meant for quite a while now—that we can no longer base our developmental perspectives preponderantly on clinical reconstructions of the past, on a search for regressions to and fixations on ever earlier stages and their conflicts and disbalances. Even our clinical orientation can only gain systematically from the additional study at each stage of life of the potentials for developmental recovery and genuine growth—and this up to the very last stage. There, even “elderlies” (and not only “elders”), rather than sporting a new childishness, may fulfill some of the promises of childhood like those which seem to be contained in such sayings as the biblical “Unless you turn and become like children. . . .” And some of these oldest all-human sayings may gain new meaning in our time when history reveals so shockingly what some (and primarily masculine) values of adulthood have contributed to the chances of a self-destruction of our species.

The timeless sayings of the past also serve to remind us that it is difficult to make any meaningful observations of the developmental details of human life without implying more or less conscious, large-scale configurations which back in Freud’s time were still recognized and appreciated without much apology as part of a worker’s *Weltanschauung*—that is, his or her way of viewing the design of the world and of human life within it. To begin with a prominent example: if the basic scheme is that of “developmental lines” (A. Freud, 1965), the outline of their details will clarify a firm direction in the linear growth of capacities from “lower” to “higher” stages of development. This naturally reflects the ethos of maturation implicit in the theories of psy-

chosexuality and of the ego: and so the list ranges “from dependency to emotional self-reliance,” “from egocentricity to peer relationships,” or simply “from dependence to independence” and from “irrational to rational.” This scheme has, of course, led to a wealth of observations.

Joan Erikson and I, in turn, have been trying to make explicit an “epigenetic” scheme of psychosocial development—epigenesis being a term first used in embryology. In our vocabulary (E. H. and J. M. Erikson, 1950), the overall term “life *cycle*” forces on our configurations a rounding out of the whole course of life which relates the last stage to the first both in the course of individual lives and in that of generations. We have, somewhat simplistically, designed a chart of stages which (some readers surely saw it coming) I must “once more” briefly present in order to clarify the epigenetic connection between old age and infancy. However, I employ such repetitiousness with ever fewer apologies, because we have learned over the years how difficult it is even for highly trained individuals to keep in mind the logic of a contextual conceptualization of developmental matters. And it is such contextuality which keeps a theory together and helps to make the observations based on it “comprehensible” in Einstein’s sense, although they remain forever relative to the position of a single view within the viewpoints of its time and place.

So here is the chart of psychosocial stages. In its horizontals, we designate the stages of life, and this from the bottom up, in consonance with the image of growth and development: Infancy and Early Childhood, the Play Age and the School Age, Adolescence and Young Adulthood, Adulthood and Old Age. Along the diagonal we designate the basic *psychosocial crises*, each of which dominates one stage, beginning in the lower left corner with Basic Trust vs. Basic Mistrust and ending with Integrity vs. Despair in the upper right corner. As can never be said too often, each stage is dominated both by a syntonic and a dystonic quality—that is: Mistrust as well as Trust and Despair as well as Integrity are essential developments, constituting together a “crisis” only in the sense that the syntonic should systematically outweigh or at least balance (but never dismiss) the dystonic. So the diagonal is not an “achievement” scale meant to show what we totally “overcome”—such a simplification comes all too easily in

Old Age								Integrity vs. Despair. WISDOM
Adulthood								Generativity vs. Stagnation. CARE
Young Adulthood								Intimacy vs. Isolation. LOVE
Adolescence								Identity vs. Confusion. FIDELITY
School Age								Industry vs. Inferiority. COMPETENCE
Play Age								Initiative vs. Guilt. PURPOSE
Early Childhood								Autonomy vs. Shame, Doubt. WILL
Infancy								Basic Trust vs. Basic Mistrust. HOPE

our optimistic culture—the dystonic part of each conflict. But, of course, the final balance of all stages of development must leave the syntonic elements dominant in order to secure a *basic strength* emerging from each overall crisis: at the beginning, it is Hope, and, at the end, what we are calling Wisdom.

Following the diagonal one step upward from the lower left corner we find the second psychosocial crisis to be that of Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt, from which the strength Will emerges. Every diagonal step, however, leaves some as yet empty squares beneath, beside, and above it. Beneath Will and beside Hope we must assume some early development in which the crisis of Will is anticipated, while to the left of the Will crisis and thus contemporaneously with it, there must be a Hope already experienced enough to take conflicts of Will into account. Thus begins a vertical development along which Hope can be renewed and mature at every further stage—all the way up to the last stage where we will call it Faith. Indeed, by that time, the individual will have joined the generational cycle and will (with the crisis of Generativity vs. Stagnation) have begun to transmit some forms of faith to coming generations. All these stage-wise connections, on study, prove to be overriding necessities, as they provide the developmental impetus stage for stage in the dominant conflicts of life. In sum, this means that while each basic conflict dominates a particular stage along the diagonal, each has been there in some rudimentary form below the diagonal; and each, once having fully developed during its own dominant stage, will continue (above the diagonal) to mature further during all the subsequent stages and under the dominance of each stage-appropriate crisis.

These, then, are some of the epigenetic principles as applied to psychosocial development. But such development is, of course, systematically intertwined throughout not only with physical growth but also with the *psychosexual stages* which obey corresponding laws. This we will not pursue in this presentation. But it is obvious that in the beginning Hope must be truly “fed” with the libido verified in oral-sensory enjoyment, while in the second stage, the training of Will is invigorated by the experience of anal-muscular mastery. Correspondingly, it must be clear that the psychosexual stages, in turn, could not be fully

actual without the contemporaneous maturation of the psychosocial strengths.

In our review, this leads us to the question of the psychosexual status of the last two stages of life—adulthood and old age. For both, I have found it necessary as well as plausible to suggest a maturation beyond a mere fulfillment of *genitality*. For adulthood to which we ascribe the psychosocial crisis of Generativity vs. Stagnation (which vitalizes procreativity and productivity as well as creativity) I have claimed (exploring once more the full meaning of the Oedipus saga) a *procreative libido* without the satisfaction or sublimation of which, in fact, genitality could not really mature (Erikson, 1980). For presenile old age, in turn, I have claimed a psychosexual stage which keeps a *generalized sensuality* alive even as strictly genital expression weakens.

And so, in returning to the psychosocial stages, we must now account for two of our somewhat grandiose designations of old-age strengths, namely, Integrity (if “vs. Despair”) and Wisdom. In comparison with these terms, the designation of Hope in the first stage makes sense enough: for how can one start living without a lot of ready trust, and how stay alive without some healthy mistrust? On the other hand (and in the other corner), despair certainly seems to be an almost too fitting dystonic “sense” for one who faces a general reduction of capacities as well as the very end of life. But the demand to develop Integrity and Wisdom in old age seems to be somewhat unfair, especially when made by middle-aged theorists—as, indeed, we then were. And we must ask: do the demands that “Integrity” suggests still hold when old age is represented by a fast-increasing, and only reasonably well-preserved group of mere long-lived “elderlies”?

So back to the chart and to the length and width of its four corners: how do they connect with each other? For the upper left corner, we have found a convincing syntonic term and concept: Faith. And here we can at last illustrate an experiential similarity in the chart’s uppermost right and lowest left corners. Faith has been given cosmic worldwide contexts by religions and ideologies which offered to true believers some sense of immortality in the form of some unification with a unique historical or cosmic power which in its personalized form we may call an *Ultimate Other*. We can certainly find an experiential basis for such hope

in the infant's meeting with the *maternal personage* faced "eye to eye" as what we may call the *Primal Other*. This basic visual mutuality as experienced at life's beginning and matured up through the stages may well continue to enliven in mature age the vision offered by more or less metaphysical vistas and vedas and of the countenances of prophets and great leaders in faiths and in ideologies, which (alas) confirm hopefulness as the most basic of all human strengths. The relation of (lower left corner) Hope and (upper left) Faith, then, contains a first example of an experiential similarity, namely, that of a mutual "meeting" with an all-important Other—which appears in some form on each stage of life, beginning with the maternal, but soon also the paternal Other confirmed by visual and, indeed, various sensual experiences of rich mutuality.

It is, in this context, an ironical fact, that psychoanalysis has come to attach to this very Other the cold term "Object," which originally meant, of course, the aim of libidinal energy. By the end of life (this Primal Other having become an Ultimate Other), such deeply experienced faith is richly realized not only in religion, but also in mythology and in the arts; and it is confirmed by the detailed rituals and ritualizations which mark the beginning and the end of life in varying cultures—ritualizations that, in our time, must find new ways of expressing an all-human sense of existence and an anticipation of dying. For all this, I assume, the overall term Wisdom may still serve.

The experience of the Other, of course, appears in various forms and with varying certainty throughout life: and here we can refer to the literary evidence of Freud's friendship to Fliess. Freud called him, indeed, "der Andere," meaning the Other;² and it is very clear that, for a time, they used each other in exchanges of wisdom well beyond professional conversation (Erikson, 1955). Thus, throughout development, a series of "others" will be encountered beginning with the fraternal and sororal others who are first and most ambivalently shared in childhood. Later, when identity is better defined, friends and comrades emerge. And then there is that territorial Other, the "Neighbor," who occupies his own (but often, alas, too close)

2. Although mistranslated as "other people" in Freud (1954, p. 298).

territory. When he becomes the inimical Other, he can turn into a totally estranged Other, almost a member of another species: and, indeed, I have come to call this process pseudospeciation, a development of truly mandatory importance as human survival comes to depend on the inventive cultivation of shared neighborhoods.

This finally brings us to another basic experience for which we, I think, lack the right word. To truly meet others with whom to share a "We," one must have a sense of "I." In fact, one must have it before one can have the now much advertised "self." Freud obviously was concerned with this, for he at times wrote of an "*Ich*," the English counterpart of which quite transparently is "I," although translation habitually turns it into "ego." This must be emphasized in these reflections because a sense of "I" becomes a most sensitive matter again in old age, as an individual's uniqueness gradually and often suddenly seems to have lost any leeway for further variations such as those which seemed to open themselves with each previous stage. Now non-Being must be faced "as is." But radically limited choices can make time appear forfeited and space depleted quite generally; while (to again follow the psychosocial strengths from left to right) the power of Will is weakened; Initiative and Purpose become uncertain; meaningful work is rare; and Identity restricted to what one has been. And if we follow the line to the adult stages and their bequest of Love (the fulfillment of a sense of "You") and of Care (which holds the generations together), we face that great inequality of fate which can limit the chances in old age of continued intimacy and of generative (and even "grand-generative") relationships. The resulting compulsive preoccupation with the repetition of meaningful memories, however, rather than being only symptomatic of mere helpless regression, may well represent a "regression in the service of development" in Peter Blos's (1980) term: for, in fact, there are now new age-specific conflicts for the sake of which the old person's sense of "I" must become free.

For these conflicts I can for the moment find only existential terms in contrast to strictly psychoanalytic ones. There is, on the border of Being and Not-Being, a sense of Dread in Kierkegaard's meaning, which is not explained by our present theories

concerning anxiety; there is a sense of Evil which no classical sense of guilt necessarily covers; and there is, as we have just pointed out, a sense, or a lack of sense, of "I" or Existential Identity which our identity theories cannot fathom: these are all problems of Being, the open or disguised presence of which we must learn to discern in the everyday involvements of old people.

If we now have begun to connect (in an admittedly sweeping way) the first stage with the last, and both with a major collective institution—here belief systems—we could now assign major institutional trends to all the succeeding stages. To give just one more example—for I really promised only to clarify what I can in the relation of the last stage and the first—the basic need for Autonomy remains related throughout life to the universal human institution of the Law, which defines the leeway and the limits of individual Will, and with its punishments assigns *Self-Doubt and Shame* to transgressors—all of which, of course, influence the way in which right and wrong are taught to children in a given culture.

Epigenetically speaking, then, we can say that all the later age-specific developments are grounded or rooted in (and in fact dependent on) the strengths developed in infancy, childhood, and adolescence. And if the sense of autonomy "naturally" suffers grievously in old age, as the leeway of independence is constricted, there can also mature an active acceptance of appropriate limitations and a "wise" choice of involvements in vital engagements of a kind not possible earlier in life—and possibly (this we must find out) of potential value to a society of the future. Finally, just because I have been so active in outlining the development of Identity in adolescence, I may repeat that (a few squares to the right) the new and final sense of existential identity can convey a certain freedom from the despair associated with un-lived or mis-lived—or, indeed, overdone—identity potentials.

So we return to what we claimed to be the dominant syntonic trait in the last stage, namely, Integrity. This in its simplest meaning is, of course, a sense of coherence and wholeness which is no doubt at risk under such terminal conditions of a loss of linkages in somatic, psychic, and social organization. What is demanded here could be simply called "Integrality," a readiness

to “keep things together,” the best wording of which I owe to a little boy who had asked his mother what was going to happen when he died. “Your soul will go to heaven,” she said, “and your body into the ground.” “Mommy,” he said, “if you don’t mind, I’d like to keep my stuff together.” Throughout life, then, we must allow for a human being’s potential capacity under favorable conditions to let the integrative experience of earlier stages come to fruition; and so our chart allows along the right-most vertical, from infancy up, the gradual maturation of a quality of being, for which integrity does seem to be the right word.

Our anchor point in earliest childhood, however, remains the newborn’s and the infant’s developmental readiness for *mutuality*, which today is being demonstrated in all detail by the best workers in the area of child development and pediatrics: by which we mean the surprising power of potential unfolding born with this vulnerable creature, if only it is met in its readiness for energizing as well as instructive interplay, as it and its caretakers (literally) face each other. Only when such potentialities are studied exhaustively can clinical observers know what potentials are endangered in early situations at risk or where mutuality was, in fact, broken in misdevelopment.

We have circumscribed a lifetime, then. But the mere mention of mutuality will remind us of what is missing in this presentation, namely, a detailed discussion of Young Adulthood and its crisis of Intimacy and Isolation which is decisive in mobilizing the lifelong power of Love; and of Adulthood itself with its crisis of Generativity vs. Stagnation, which brings to maturation the adult strength of Care—and its demands for generational mutuality. This second-to-the-last stage on our diagonal bequeaths to the last what we called a grand-generative aspect of old age: a general grandparenthood, then, which must demand a useful and mutual place in the life of children, offering to the growing as well as to the old individuals an energizing as well as disciplined interaction according to the mores of technology and culture. As we reveal the potentials of early interplay, perhaps we will at last recognize what, in spite of such historical and cultural relativities, is invariantly human—that is, true for the whole human species and thus part of an indivisible specieshood which mankind can no longer afford to ignore.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BLOS, P. (1980). The life cycle as indicated by the nature of the transference in the psychoanalysis of children. *Int. J. Psychoanal.*, 61:146–151.
- ERIKSON, E. H. (1955). Freud's 'The Origins of Psycho-Analysis.' *Int. J. Psychoanal.*, 36:1–15.
- (1980). On the generational cycle. *Int. J. Psychoanal.*, 61:213–223.
- (1982). *The Life Cycle Completed*. New York: Norton.
- & ERIKSON, J. M. (1950). Growth and crisis of the "healthy personality." In *Symposium on the Healthy Personality*, ed. M. J. E. Senn. New York: Josiah Macy, Jr. Foundation, pp. 91–146.
- FREUD, A. (1965). Normality and pathology in childhood. *W.*, 6.
- FREUD, S. (1954). *The Origins of Psychoanalysis*. New York: Basic Books.