

# Adolescent Development: Erikson



***This activity will help you to:***

- Understand and recall Erikson's theory of adolescent development*
- Analyse data in terms of Erikson's theory*
- Research information and evidence to help you evaluate Erikson's theory*
- Reflect on your own personal response to Erikson*

Erikson believed that adolescence is a time of 'storm and stress'. He believed that there is nothing abnormal about this; it is a natural stage in the development of the adult personality. He thought that adolescents were subject to three sets of forces:

- Changes in the body
- Changes in social role and status
- Pressure to make important decisions

The combined effect of these is to induce a sense of **identity diffusion**. In other words, adolescents find it difficult to have a fully developed sense of who they are until they have resolved the conflicts that result from these forces.

Erikson identified four components of the adolescent identity crisis. These are:

- **Intimacy** – a fear of commitment to others, because it may result in a loss of individual identity.
- **Diffusion of time** – one the one hand, an inability to accept the possibility of change, on the other, a fear of the changes that time will bring.
- **Diffusion of industry** – an inability to concentrate for sustained periods on a single activity.
- **Negative identity** – a sense of self based on rejection of the roles offered, rather than a positive identification with a particular role or position in society.

Here are some extracts from interview data gathered from people between 14 and 18 years old. Choose three of the extracts and suggest which aspect(s) of the adolescent identity crisis is reflected in what the person says. Some of these respondents may not show any evidence of an adolescent identity crisis, so be careful.

## **Extract A**

I don't know what I'm going to do when I'm older, but you can bet it won't involve wearing a suit. I'm not going to be like my mum and dad and spend my life being told what to do by other people. That's really sad.

## **Extract B**

I've got my A – Levels coming up next year. It's not really a big deal. I'll do some work before the exams and it'll probably turn out OK. That's how it went with my GCSEs. Teachers talk up how hard the exams are and anyway, I've got loads of other stuff I want to concentrate on, like my job and enjoying myself.

### **Extract C**

I'm not going to get married, I don't think. I can't see the point in letting someone else own you. And you only end up getting divorced. I'd rather be myself than get involved in all that.

### **Extract D**

Sometime I worry about the future, you know, whether I'll get to the university I want to go to and get the job I want – whatever that turns out to be. I don't even really know what I want to do next week, let alone in ten years time. I think it's really unfair that they make you decide on your future when you choose your GCSEs. What if you change your mind? I try not to think about it too much.

### **Extract E**

Boyfriend? Get lost. Settle down with some nice bloke who your parents like and start picking wallpaper for your nice little flat? How tragic. I'm having way too much fun to ruin it all by getting a boyfriend. That's for those dead-head mummy's girls that always do their homework and want a job in marketing.

### **Extract F**

I hate it when my parents get on my back about college. I came here because I was sick of school. They say you're treated like an adult but it's just like school really...have you done your *homework*? Where were you on *Tuesday*?

### **And when you've finished that...**

1. What evidence is offered by Erikson in support of his claims? Find a study and explain the ways in which it supports Erikson's ideas.
2. Erikson gathered his original data from adolescents he worked with at a guidance clinic. Is this a valid source of data? Explain your answer.
3. Erikson suggested that female adolescents' crisis occurred later than males because their future identity was in many ways determined by the kind of man they settled down with. What is your reaction to this suggestion?
4. All of Erikson's ideas are supposed to relate to things that you are experiencing or have recently experienced. What is your personal response to the claims he makes?