Chapter Three: Ego Strength

The next key aspect of the present research is ego strength. Although there are other researchers, for example, Blos (1989) and Marcia (1966), who have made significant contributions to the study of the ego, the present research drew primarily on the work of Erik Erikson (1963; 1964; 1968), whose psychosocial theory focused on the adaptive function of the ego and the development of ego strength.

3.1 Orientation to Erik Erikson’s Approach

Erikson was an adherent to Freudian psychoanalysis and drew extensively on Freud’s insistence that psychological growth occurred through a long conflict-ridden process (Feist & Feist, 1999). However, while Freud located the individuals’ most significant developments in the first five to six years of development, Erikson emphasised the way in which development continued over the entire life-span (Hook, 2002a). Moreover, while Freud focused primarily on conflicts involving the unconscious agencies of the mind, and the way in which the ego acts as a mediator between the demands of the id, superego and external world, he was criticised for not sufficiently explaining how the ego developed (Hook, 2002b). In contrast, Erikson emphasised the social and cultural elements of development, and focused predominantly on the ego and the development of ego strength (Feist & Feist, 1999). The ego in Erikson’s theory is defined as the person’s “capacity to unify his experiences and his actions in an adaptive manner” (Erikson, 1963, p. 16). A primary function of the ego is that it “forms the basic building blocks for identity and represents the means by which we become a human subject” (Minsky, 1998, p. 25). For the purposes of the present research then, the ego is understood as a positive and adaptive force that plays a central role in establishing self-identity (Feist and Feist, 1999).

Erikson adopted an epigenetic approach to human development that holds growth and development to be sequential and orderly, and that each aspect of development has a specific time of ascendancy during which maturational growth must take place (Erikson, 1963; 1980). His account is also cumulative, meaning that the successful resolution of each stage is to a degree reliant on how well the previous stages were negotiated (Feist & Feist, 1999; Hook, 2002a). By maturing through and resolving the stages, the individual becomes increasingly autonomous and imbued with a wide and
integrative set of life skills and abilities (Crain, 1992). While inadequate resolution of a stage will inhibit development, Erikson theorised that there are unavoidable moments of both progression toward growth as well as regression. Erikson has an optimistic theory of development, however, as he believed that each challenge could be overcome (Hook, 2002a).

3.1.1 Erikson’s eight stage theory of development

In Erikson’s theory, there are eight developmental crises that a person needs to negotiate in order for healthy development and strength of ego to occur (Roazen, 1976). The notion of a crisis implies that normal development does not proceed smoothly, but rather that the ego can only develop through resolving a series of conflicts (Newman & Newman, 1997). While there are certain points in the life cycle where particular crises will be more significant than others, all the crises are present throughout the person’s life (Erikson, 1963). Importantly for Erikson, these conflicts are determined by the individual’s society and culture (Roazen, 1976). However, while these social challenges coincide with a particular aspect of physiological development, they are more correctly understood as emotional conflicts (Hook, 2002a, original emphasis).

If successfully negotiated, the conflicts will result in the attainment of particular ego strengths, which can be understood as prime adaptive qualities that lead to an increased sense of internal strength and coherence in healthy individuals (Markstrom, et al., 1997; Newman & Newman, 1997). If a crisis is not successfully negotiated, the antipathy of that ego strength will occur, and will be counterproductive to development. However, while a high level of the antipathy will create a lower degree of ego strength, some degree of antipathy is necessary for survival, as both positive and negative encounters together contribute to the total range of a person’s adaptive capacities (Newman & Newman, 1997). For example, in order to fully appreciate and understand love, one must also experience some rejection (Markstrom et al., 1997). Due to space constraints in this research report, only a brief overview of the first four developmental stages in Erikson’s theory will be provided, followed by a more detailed discussion of the most pertinent stage to the present research, namely the fifth stage.
3.1.2 The first four stages

The infant enters the world as a helpless, vulnerable being, and so needs to learn to trust the primary caregiver to develop a sense of the world as a safe place (Hook, 2002a). Through the negotiation of *basic trust versus basic mistrust*, the ego strength of *hope* is established, and forms the building block for a sense of anticipation in the future, as well as the foundation of all ego strengths that follow (Markstrom et al., 1997). By the second stage of *autonomy versus shame and doubt*, the baby has started to learn that it can be an agent in its own behaviour, and forms a primary sense of independence (Erikson, 1963). However, while the infant’s increased control and mastery over its own body will add to its freedom, the child will also face doubts about its capacities (Erikson, 1963). The path to autonomy lies in the weighing up of the choice of *holding on or letting go*, and consequently the ego strength at this stage is *will* (Erikson, 1964).

By the third stage of *initiative versus guilt*, the child will have gained a primary sense of autonomy, and will begin to explore wider social spheres. “This is an optimistic period of growth for Erikson (1963) who remarked how children seem to be in possession of surplus energy that enables them to forget failures quickly and to approach new activities with undiminished enthusiasm” (Hook, 2002a, p. 273). However, this exploration must occur through either respecting or disdريبating parental boundaries, and so children need to balance their desire to try new things with the conflicts of parental control (Hook, 2002a). Given that this stage also coincides with the development of the superego (Erikson, 1963), the child needs to learn to weigh their thirst for initiative against their new capacity for guilt, responsibility and moral surveillance. In so doing the child will develop the ego strength of *purpose* (Erikson, 1964; Markstrom et al., 1997).

In the fourth stage of *industry versus inferiority*, a growing repertoire of abilities will be mastered in the face of expanding social networks, such as the school environment. As this involves the development and enhancement of skills in a group setting, the child will need to face comparisons with other peers, and deal with any feelings of inadequacy and inferiority that may result. This stage will hopefully encourage a sense of workmanship and if successfully resolved, will result in the ego strength of *competence* (Roazen, 1976).
3.1.3 Stage five: Identity versus role confusion

The fifth developmental stage of identity versus role confusion has received a large amount of attention, both academically and in popular press (Cameron, 2003). This stage occurs during adolescence, and is believed to be a turbulent time due to the dramatic physiological changes that occur. For example, girls experience the onset of menstruation and initial breast development, while the growth of the testes, penis and production of mature spermatozoa occurs in boys (Newman & Newman, 1997). The adolescent also experiences an intra-psychic reaction to these developments, as sexual and aggressive drives that were dormant in latency are now reawakened and create unconscious internal conflict (Crain, 1992). While these rapid body changes are disruptive, Erikson (1963) added that they are further compounded by a series of psychosocial conflicts that also need to be negotiated at this time. Indeed, the central task of this stage is the formation and synthesis of a unique identity, and the transition from the weak and pliable childhood ego, toward its stronger and more integrated form (Feist & Feist, 1999).

Erikson (1963) understood the term identity to be “the accrued experience of the ego’s ability to integrate all identifications with the vicissitudes of the libido, with the aptitudes developed out of endowment, and with the opportunities offered in social roles” (p 25). Psychosocial identity is then comprised of an ego identity that provides a sense of continuity and uniqueness to an individual (Cote, 1996), and unfolds through the integration of competencies and aspirations within a social context (Newman & Newman, 1997). Consequently, the resolution of the identity stage can be seen when “a relatively firm sense of ego identity is developed, when behaviour and character become stabilised, and when community roles are acquired” (Cote, 1996, p. 137). This implies that a stronger, more integrated sense of identity is inextricably linked to greater ego strength.

Empirical research has also suggested that there is an interrelationship between ego strength and identity, and that both constructs are associated with optimal psychological functioning (Grubb, 1993). For example, studies suggest that higher ego is positively correlated with various tests of identity consolidation, as well as tests of purpose in life and locus of control (Markstrom, Sabino, Turner & Berman, 1997; Waterman, 1992). In addition to being associated with clearer self-other boundaries,
higher ego strength is also associated with a strong health or adjustment factor, and with lower levels of anxiety and depression (Waterman, 1992). Similarly, higher scores on measures of identity have been related to higher self-esteem, while lower scores are associated with hopelessness and personal distress (Waterman, 1992). A stronger sense of identity is then also associated with favourable psychological functioning.

In order to consolidate a stable identity, the adolescent is required to select or discard different social roles and attributes available in society and integrate these with identifications, talents and skills from previous stages, so as to find a sense of self acceptable to society (Markstrom et al., 1997). The issues involved in resolving the crisis include choosing values, career paths, sex roles and sexual orientation, and so this stage is characterised by much upheaval, uncertainty and experimentation (Newman & Newman, 1997). Erikson (1968) did however emphasise that though this crisis is lengthy, it is also normative and that society provides a period of moratorium during which the adolescent is allowed to experiment with different social roles and identities drawn from the surrounding culture.

In view of the aims of the present research, a pertinent aspect of identity being negotiated at Erikson’s fifth stage is gender identity. While its formation began in the Oedipal complex, the image of oneself as masculine or feminine becomes a more overt source of conflict in adolescence due to increased physical and sexual maturity (Laufer & Laufer, 1984). While the attainment of gender identity is a lengthy and complex process, some authors have asserted that a masculine identity is more difficult and unstable to accomplish than a feminine identity (e.g. Chodorow, 1978; Frosh, 1994). This is in contrast to the widespread perception that Freud and others have held regarding the enigmatic nature of femininity mentioned in section 2.2.2, and is explained in at least two ways. Firstly, masculinity, unlike femininity, is understood as “a prize to be won or wrested through struggle” and is achieved through “physical rituals, bearing of extreme pain or trials of skill and endurance” (Gilmore, 1990, p. 1). While it cannot be assumed that all cultures require painful or potentially life threatening acts to be performed, Gilmore’s (1990) cross cultural research of masculinity in adolescent boys emphasises that in many cultures, a masculine identity needs to be earned, typically by overcoming difficult odds.
Secondly, while women are argued to be encouraged to develop open and flexible versions of femininity (Patterson, Sochting, & Marcia, 1992), men are believed to require a more distinctive masculine identity that is specifically separate from femininity. In Freud’s theory, for example, masculinity can only be achieved by the rejection of femininity (Seidler, 1989), and so there appears to be a greater emphasis on the need for differentiation in men rather than women (Frosh, 1994). However, while the surrounding culture will provide indication of the hegemonic versions of masculinity at any given time (Connell, 1995), the realisation of this masculinity is still precarious as these are typically unattainable “ideals” of masculinity, and so the attainment of a stable sense of masculinity is further complicated (Frosh, 1994).

Successful resolution of the identity stage will encourage the ego strength of *fidelity* to emerge, which Erikson (1964) defined as “the ability to sustain loyalties freely pledged in spite of the inevitable contradictions of value systems” (p. 125). For Newman and Newman (1997), this quality fosters a necessary motivation to preserve small groups and plays a large role in ensuring long-term faithfulness to friends and partners. Importantly as well, “this resolution functions as an integrating force regarding issues of the concept of self, body image changes, sexuality, intimacy, [and] other psychosocial features” (Adams, Montemeyor & Gullotta, 1996, p. 6). However, if this moratorium does not result in a firm choice of identity, ego diffusion may occur, leaving the person with an unstable sense of self (Hook, 2002a). Indeed, the antipathy of fidelity is role repudiation, which is observed in *diffidence* and *defiance* (Hook, 2002a). Diffidence is understood as reluctance to commit to an identity or lacking in self-confidence, while defiance can be understood as a preference toward a negative identity in societal standards (Erikson, 1985).

### 3.2 Resolving the Identity Crisis

Having drawn the conflictual process of identity formation to a close, Erikson (1964) suggested that around the age of 19, the individual will start to search for a person to forge a romantic relationship with and develop the ego strength of *love*. While Erikson’s theory would predict that the sample for the present research would be in the young adulthood stage of *intimacy versus isolation* rather than at the adolescent stage of *identity versus role confusion*, there is a wide assertion that one’s identity moulds and changes over the lifespan, and so it is still valid to look at questions of
identity development post adolescence (Crain, 1992; Zinn et al, 2003). Indeed, “ego identity is not achieved once and for all in adolescence, even though that is the phase when, as Erikson says, one’s identity is ‘in crisis’ ” (Polansky, 1991, p. 160). Moreover, Hendry et al. (1993) submit that children today mature earlier than previous generations, but that they tend to have an extended period of learning and identity development due to the pressure to become more skilled and knowledgeable. In this light, while the sample for the present research was between 18-22 years, it was likely that respondents had an increasingly clear sense of their identity, but that it has not yet been fully negotiated.

3.3 Measuring Ego Strength

Given that the present research based its understanding of ego strength on Erikson’s theory, it was considered appropriate to use a measure of ego strength that drew specifically on his theory. In this regard, Markstrom et al. (1997) developed the Psychosocial Inventory of Ego Strength (PIES) to measure a person’s specific ego strength relative to their stage of development in accordance with Erikson’s theory. It also measures the person’s overall level of ego strength, where “the most psychologically mature and adjusted individuals” are those scoring high on ego strength (Markstrom et al., 1997, p.727). For reasons clearly discussed in the measures section, only the respondents overall ego strength was calculated for the present research, making the operational definition of ego strength the scores on the PIES, where higher scores denote higher levels of ego strength.

It is interesting to note that Markstrom et al. (1997) attempted to assess empirical links between versions of gender identity and the various ego strengths suggested by Erikson using the PIES. They found that some ego strengths were more orientated to femininity, such as care and love, while will, purpose and competence tied in with stereotypical masculine traits. Androgynous and masculine participants scored significantly better than the undifferentiated in the ego strengths of will, purpose, competence, fidelity and wisdom. With regard to overall ego strength, however, highly masculine, highly feminine, and androgynous individuals showed high overall ego strength, while the undifferentiated showed the poorest level of ego strength (Markstrom et al., 1997). As higher ego strength is intricately linked with stronger identity consolidation, the present research anticipated that a stronger endorsement of
a masculine, feminine or androgynous gender identity would be associated with higher ego strength.