Identity/Identity formation
A person's mental representation of who he or she is.

Components of identity include a sense of personal continuity and of uniqueness from other people. In addition to carving out a personal identity based on the need for uniqueness, people also acquire a social identity based on their membership in various groups—familial, ethnic, occupational, and others. These group identities, in addition to satisfying the need for affiliation, help people define themselves in the eyes of both others and themselves.

Identity formation has been most extensively described by Erik Erikson in his theory of developmental stages, which extends from birth through adulthood. According to Erikson, identity formation, while beginning in childhood, gains prominence during adolescence. Faced with physical growth, sexual maturation, and impending career choices, adolescents must accomplish the task of integrating their prior experiences and characteristics into a stable identity. Erikson coined the phrase identity crisis to describe the temporary instability and confusion adolescents experience as they struggle with alternatives and choices. To cope with the uncertainties of this stage, adolescents may overidentify with heroes and mentors, fall in love, and bond together in cliques, excluding others on the basis of real or imagined differences.

According to Erikson, successful resolution of this crisis depends on one’s progress through previous developmental stages, centering on fundamental issues of trust, autonomy, and initiative. By the age of 21, about half of all adolescents are thought to have resolved their identity crises and are ready to move on to the adult challenges of love and work. Others, however, are unable to achieve an integrated adult identity, either because they have failed to resolve the identity crisis or because they have experienced no crisis. J. E. Marcia identified four common ways in which adolescents deal with the challenge of identity formation. Those who experience, confront, and resolve the identity crisis are referred to as “identity-achieved.” Others, termed “identity-fenced,” make commitments (often conventional ones, identical or similar to those of their parents) without questioning them or investigating alternatives. Those
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...shrink from making defining choices about their futures and remain arrested, unable to make whole-hearted commitments to careers, values, or another person. In contrast, those in the “moratorium” group, while unable to make such commitments, are struggling to do so and experience an ongoing though unresolved crisis as they try to “find themselves.”

Although the phrase “identity crisis” was initially popularized in connection with adolescence, it is not limited to this time frame: Erikson himself initially formulated the concept in connection with World War II veterans. A variety of changes that affect one’s work, status, or interpersonal relationships can bring on a crisis that forces one to redefine oneself in terms of values, priorities, and chosen activities or lifestyle. In Passages, Gail Sheehy proposed that there are actually “predictable crises of adult life” that generally challenge people’s conceptions of themselves and result either in personal growth or stagnation.

See also Personality development; Self-concept

Further Reading

Id

In psychoanalytic theory, the most primitive, unconscious element of human personality.

Sigmund Freud believed that human personality consisted of three components: the id, the ego, and the superego. The id is the part of the personality that includes such basic biological impulses or drives as eating, drinking, eliminating wastes, avoiding pain, attaining sexual pleasure, and aggression. The id operates on the “pleasure principle,” seeking to satisfy these basic urges immediately with no regard to consequences. Only when tempered through interaction with the ego (reality) and superego (conscience) does the id conform to what is considered socially acceptable behavior.

According to Freud, anxiety is caused by the conflict between the id’s powerful impulses and the modifying forces of the ego and superego. The more id-driven impulses are stifled through physical reality or societal norms, the greater the level of anxiety. People express their anxiety in various ways, including nervousness, displaced aggression, and serious anxiety disorders. Healthy personalities are those that have learned to balance the id, ego and superego forces.

Further Reading

Imagination

A complex cognitive process of forming a mental scene that includes elements which are not, at the moment, being perceived by the senses.

Imagination involves the synthetic combining of aspects of memories or experiences into a mental construction that differs from past or present perceived reality, and may anticipate future reality. Generally regarded as one of the “higher mental functions,” it is not thought to be present in animals. Imagination may be fantastic, fanciful, wishful, or problem-solving, and may differ from reality to a slight or great extent. Imagination is generally considered to be a foundation of artistic expression, and, within limits, to be a healthy, creative, higher mental function.

Observers as diverse as Plato and Samuel Taylor Coleridge have noted two contrasting types of imagination. One is largely imitative and concerned with mentally reconstructing past events or images. Among the imitative types of imagination is eidetic imagery, which consists of rich and vividly recalled images and is especially characteristic of children up to the age of six. Afterimages, such as the green image that appears after looking at the color red, are a type of imitative image and are produced by sense receptors. A synesthetic image is produced by the conjunction of two senses such as occurs when hearing a certain piece of music elicits a visual image with which it is associated in the mind of the listener. Hypnagogic images are unusually clear images produced in the state between sleep and waking. Hallucinations are vivid, detailed images produced in the absence of external stimuli and generally confused with real images. Dreams are images occurring in a sleeping state that are usually not confused with reality once the sleeper awakes.

In contrast to imitative images, creative imagination is associated with thought and involves the restructuring, rather than merely the retention, of sensory impressions. It was this faculty that Coleridge called “imagination” as...