

## UNDERGRADUATE INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT: PERRY VS ERIKSON

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**INTRODUCTION** This study aims at understanding the thought processes of undergraduate college students, in order to help those engaged in teaching them. I will compare, contrast, and identify elements of synthesis in the work of William G. Perry and Erik H. Erikson. Both were professors at Harvard University for the full decade of the 1960's. Both are psychologists. Both are developmentalists. Perry's work (1968) concerns intellectual development among college undergraduates. Erikson's work concerns psychoanalytic factors too numerous to list here. Our concern will be with Erikson's position (1968) as the founder of a psychology of identity and crisis among youth.

## PERRY'S "COMMITMENT" VERSUS ERIKSON'S "IDENTITY"

Erikson sees a simplistic world view as a necessity for people who have left childhood behind and are searching for adulthood: "At no other time does he so need over-systematized thoughts and overvalued words to give a semblance of order to his inner world." (Erikson 1958 134) Erikson sees indoctrination from a benign and approving stance when mapping the path to identity for youth. Youth needs such a world view in order to maintain trust in the world. A view of the world that is well-formulated, and simpler than the world itself, is a powerful tool in the maturation process. Only by living an ideology can one find out how much of it is worth a mature investment. Erikson characterizes youth as a time of seeking something worthy of fidelity (1968 233).

There is a parallel between what Erikson means by ideology and what Perry means by dualistic thinking. Dualism is defined as a bifurcated structuring of the world between good and bad, right and wrong, we and others (Perry 1968). Erikson's ideology is a world view characterized by

dualism in Perry's sense. Perry's 10-year study of Harvard and Radcliffe undergraduates placed most first-year students somewhere on a scale of dualist thinking. By the time these students were seniors, they had advanced from dualist thinking to a more contextual and relativistic kind of thought, and beyond this, to a form of commitment (1968 153). Perry defines relativism as "a plurality of points of view, interpretations, frames of reference, value systems and contingencies in which the structural properties of contexts and forms allow of various sorts of analysis, comparison and evaluation in multiplicity." (1968 Glossary)

Perry's Harvard study pictures students arriving at Cambridge with a simplistic way of thinking. There, they are confronted by an educative process calculated to help them see that all disciplinary knowledge is contextual and situational, and that a good answer is always tentative, and never absolute. Most of the students slowly make such a point of view their own. Only after such a switch in thinking processes do they take a further step in their style of thinking. Perry labels this new thought process: "Commitment: An affirmation of personal values or choice in relativism. A conscious act or realization of identity in responsibility. A process of orientation of self in a relative world." (1968 Glossary)

The commitments discovered in Perry's interviews varied in object and intent, from career decisions to personal commitments in marriage. It is important to see that these commitments are made in the context of relativism. They do not have the simplistic stance of the dualist. Perry notes that relativistic thinking alone cannot narrow itself to commitment to any one thing. By its nature, it allows a myriad of answers to any intellectual problem of worth. Its very sophistication does not allow

one to settle on a single answer. Commitment involves identity, a leap of faith, and taking responsibility.

. To describe identity, Erikson (1968 19) quotes William James: "A man's character is discernible in the mental or moral attitude in which, when it came upon him, he felt most deeply active and alive. At such moments a voice inside says: 'This is the real me!'" The experience includes "an element of active tension, of holding my own, and trusting outward things to perform their part so as to make it a full harmony, but without any guaranty that they will. Make it a guaranty .. and the attitude becomes stagnant and stingless. Take away the guaranty and I feel .. a sort of deep enthusiastic bliss, of bitter willingness to do and suffer mood or emotion to which I can give no form in words, which authenticates itself to me as the deepest principle of all active and theoretic determination which I possess."

. What Perry called commitment dovetails with what Erikson called identity. There is no guarantee, and no description of the process. We have a sureness which is neither the sureness of the inflexible dualist answer nor the lack of certitude of the relativist. Such thinking does not rule out other thought processes and conclusions, but the very settling on a commitment is part of being able to say: "This is the real me!"

. If one cannot arrive at committed thinking without first embracing relativist thinking, as Perry's research indicates, the importance of academic work which insists on contextual thinking is obvious. The task of the teacher of college undergraduates is inevitably bound up with a student's search for identity.

#### MORATORIUM VERSUS ALTERNATIVE TO GROWTH

. Erikson's identity theory postulates and demands that a society must grant a period of delay for

those undergoing a crisis of identity. He notes that most societies provide a period of permissiveness to youth before the responsibilities of mature life begin. Such a period is characterized by a pause, a delay, a time set apart. It is a time of playfulness and provocation. Frequently it leads to a deep, if transitory, commitment. It ends in a ceremonial confirmation by society, such as presentation of a diploma.

. Perry's undergraduate students often spent a full year temporizing. This period occurs at various levels of development. It was not necessarily a time of alienation. It was a time of consolidation, spreading out, and a time of lateral growth. Although this hiatus in the process of the development of undergraduate thinking is strikingly similar to Erikson's moratorium, it is narrower in scope, and Perry reports that it often takes the shape of sheer competence. The pause for breath and consolidation seems as natural for one engaged in the process of making a quantum leap in thinking processes in the wider arena of seeking identity.

. Erikson's comment that this period of youthful moratorium often ends with a deep, if temporary, commitment relates closely to Perry's developmental line which ends with committed thinking. Nothing in Perry's study indicates how long the committed thinking of his young men and women would continue. Skeptics of Perry's work tend to forget that impermanence and deep commitment often go together. Few undergraduates of 10 years ago are still occupied with that for which their college specialty supposedly prepared them (Solomon 1977).

. Perry discovered three patterns of delay in his undergraduates. Some subjects demonstrated a pattern of retreat. The retreat pattern is rare. It generally involves a very hostile stance toward relativistic thinking, and a firm commitment to dualist thinking. Perry sees it as a retreat to authoritarian submissiveness in

thinking as a means of finding peace. The second delay pattern is escape. The escapist thinker often begins by taking a breather or a time of temporizing. The third delay pattern is characterized by depression. It is a time of irresponsibility, and relativistic thinking. It can be a period of opportunism and competency, yet it remains closed to ethical commitment.

. Erikson's moratorium theory does not absolutely promise growth any more than do Perry's alternatives. Erikson is fully aware that some people never really emerge from their moratoria, and those who do take the risk of emerging with a negative identity, which is the polar opposite of a constructive use of their talents and experience (Perry 1968 105). Both Erikson and Perry, in their study of youth, have seen a pattern of delay in the process of advancement to identity and commitment. Such a delay seems a necessary prelude to further growth, with no guarantee of growth.

#### THE HARVARD PARTY LINE & ERIKSON'S MONASTERY

. Perry stresses that the general tenor of undergraduate course work at Harvard in the 1960's strongly emphasized contextual and relativist thinking. The Harvard faculty were intent on showing their students what they themselves believed to be true, that all knowledge is situational, and contextual.

. Erikson has spoken persuasively of youth's need for ideology (1968 134). He sees youth as a time almost demanding indoctrination in order to preserve a sense of balance and trust previously coming from home. His sympathetic attitude to the monastic indoctrination of the young Martin Luther is the most famous of his examples. Young Luther needed an encompassing and simple world view as a base for his thinking process. In this light, the relativism of the Harvard faculty is certainly a world view appearing

ideological to the young student who lacks years, life experience, and knowledge. It smacks of indoctrination just as bluntly and as helpfully as the indoctrination of the monastery. The fact that the majority of Harvard students learned the stance of relativist thinking, and then went beyond it to some form of committed thinking gives us empirical evidence of a large number of young people growing toward the answer to Erikson's great question of identity - the question: "What do I have, and what am I going to do with it?" (1968 314)

#### STUDENTS AS TRUTH SEEKERS

. What can Perry and Erikson say to teachers of undergraduate college students? Erikson sees youth, whether at work, at home, or in college, as vitally and centrally concerned with finding the truth (1964 170 173). The path to mere competency, a life stance that ignores or refuses to deal with higher moral issues other than success is a basically relativist stance from a moral point of view. Success becomes truth. The educator who uses relativist thinking in the classroom promotes its use elsewhere. If one's schooling demands only memory work and simplistic thought, it is simply promoting dualist thinking in the wider areas of life. The teacher who demands relativist thinking in the classroom, but lacks commitment to the students promotes cynicism, gamesmanship, and mere competency among students.

#### SYNTHETIC THINKING

. Erikson gives us a picture of a young person embracing an ideology as something quite normal, and speaks of youth as pushing a chosen message to its logical extreme. In this process of testing, youth moves from a position of totality to a position of wholeness. This is a process of slow synthesis, of confrontation. The difference in the Erikson and the Perry way of looking at youth and ideology, is that Perry is

more explicit in treating relativism. Erikson does not describe youth as going through a period of contextual thinking without attachment to any form of personal commitment. Erikson sees the period of identity as an unattached time before commitment, and does not focus on relativist thought. The discovery of contextual, relativist thinking is not treated as a part of identity development. Erikson sees ideological thinking as a part of the development process, and Perry sees relativist thinking as equally important in the development of youth. The educator must demand relativist thinking while appreciating the feeling of rootlessness it engenders in the student. The student's loneliness in seeking commitment out of a stance of relativist thinking is a key point in Perry's analysis (1968 121).

#### THE PROFESSOR AS MENTOR

Erikson's psycho-historical study of Martin Luther gives a penetrating look at the role of mentor in the person of an understanding monk named Staupitz. He was Luther's religious superior when Luther was a young monk trying to find himself. Staupitz recognized this troubled young man's genius. He recognized Luther's potential, and continually put him to work as lecturer, exegete, and preacher. Recognition and encouragement at just the time when they were needed put this otherwise undistinguished Augustinian monk in the role of midwife to one of the towering figures of the Reformation Era. Perry sees a similar need for recognition and confirmation among his Harvard undergraduates. He pinpoints this need in a population with its own peculiar character, for the young student in the relativist world of knowledge in the contemporary United States. He sees the radical nature of the process of moving from dualist thinking to relativist thought. It is precisely the period of unattached relativism that elicits a teacher's demand for mentorship.

Perry calls on the professor to recognize the student in that student's lonely courage, and to confirm that lonely student in his/her developing thought.

He sees a need for a certain community between student and teacher that is not merely the bond between authority figure and subservient student. It is a bond based on the fellowship of mutual searching which engages teacher and student alike. Granted that the professor has more experience and expertise in groping, yet the relation is basically horizontal, with dignity and respect offered the student reciprocally by the professor. In this framework, when the student asks for help from the professor, it is seen by Perry as communitarian and egalitarian help. It provides the support of what we call the mentor and a time of development when the student seriously needs such support and recognition.

Erikson notes that a mentor is not a friend or parent, but part of a disciplined outlook and method (1964 174). There is a common way of looking at things for both mentor and student. At the same time, the mentor must have the ability to perceive, to notice, to recognize the advancing thinking processes of the student. He must reflect them back to the student, and provide work opportunities for the student in which the student will continue to grow through relativism to a hoped-for commitment unknown to both mentor and student. Staupitz had no notion that he was cultivating the great reformer whose fiery oratory would dismantle the very system which supported them both. Likewise, the professor and mentor cannot know how the student will eventually form his/her career path.

#### MENTORSHIP & MASS EDUCATION

A professor cannot recognize or confirm those whom s/he does not know. The problem of vast numbers is real. How can the teacher act as mentor when processing 200 students per year? If classes are

large, how can the teacher devise learning situations which demand contextual and synthetic thought? It is a commonplace in "higher" education that one tests large numbers by what we call objective tests. That is a bit of laughter for a person whose bias as an educator is to demonstrate that there is really no such thing as objective knowledge, and that all knowledge is contextual and relative. Even so, we do evaluate it by objective testing which merely requires dualist thought processes from students. The irony would be comical if objective testing were not so pervasive an evaluation tool in mass education.

. The mentor role has a second problem. The white male teacher is still the dominant force in academe. The egalitarianism of the notion of mentorship becomes clouded when female students primarily encounter male teachers. To be recognized, you have to have someone who knows from whence you come, what costs you have paid, what bridges you have crossed. Perceptive mentors often cut across sexual lines, racial lines, and cultural lines. Perceptive mentors who can transcend cultural and sexual differences are rare. Recent data on the number of male mentors who have sexual relations with their female proteges suggests that the female student sometimes pays an incongruous price for professional guidance (Sheehy 1974 189).

. If the 1960's taught teachers anything about race relations, they taught us that an all-white teacher corps working with black students facilitates condescension and racism. The position of mentor is so loaded with the overtones of role modelling that it may demand a high ratio of mentors who can share the same sex, cultural background and race with students. Exceptional mentors can cross these lines, but many cannot. The need remains for most of these primary characteristics to be shared by mentor and student, but this path is almost hopelessly blocked for female and minority

students.

CONCLUSION Erikson saw the importance of dualist thinking as a necessary launch pad for mature living and thinking. Perry studied the relativist thinking process whereby ideologies slowly become humanized and mature. Such thinking is a stepping stone to committed thinking. Such contextual thinking carries a great burden of loneliness. Erikson has identified the loneliness of the young ideologue, and saw the need for a mentor to support the development process. Perry saw the same need in a more focused framework, in the world of the contemporary undergraduate college student. Perry's sketch of the necessary qualities of such a professor-mentor illuminates the work of Erikson. The professor who creates the ambience in which relativist thought can flourish does so in the heated environment of the student's identity formation. The need for such catalytic personalities is obvious. What is not obvious is whether there exists a sufficiently pervasive framework in public-supported undergraduate education for mentors to flourish and succeed with the task of achieving what an effective mentor must achieve.

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