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# Erikson's Psychosocial Stages and the Analysis of Political Entities

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**Abstract.** This article illustrates the potential of Erikson's psychosocial stage theory in analyzing political entities.

The political analyst knowingly and unknowingly applies interpretive models in the attempt to develop knowledge about political entities. Although these entities may vary from macromolecular to micromolecular--e.g., from nation-states to a labor union leader--an analyst of an analyst may note that a small group of interpretive models seems to be applied repeatedly. These models are consciously chosen or unconsciously relied on based on heuristics that in turn are activated by yet other heuristics that may have little to do with unique aspects of the entity to be analyzed--even when these aspects have significant predictive, concurrent, or construct validity for the matter at hand.

Erikson's psychosocial stage theory is one interpretive model that may be applied in seeking knowledge--e.g., understanding, explaining, or predicting a political entity. It posits that in that entity's life history there will be stages, each bringing with it a developmental task or challenge--in essence a crisis. The crisis is actually a threat or opportunity depending on whether the task or challenge can be successfully met. The eight stages described by Erikson have been--to some degree--cross-culturally validated in longitudinal and sequential studies as applied to individuals. In the present article the individual is being generalized to any political entity. An entity is assumed to feel or think in an aggregated fashion--nomothetically, idiographically, or idiothetically--as derived from its individual components.

The analyst through consideration of intelligence on the political entity may identify the corresponding Eriksonian and crisis. More importantly, the analyst may then posit that one must consider this crisis as a robust and salient factor in that entity's political functioning--e.g., developing policy, implementing programs.

Whether the political Issue is reduction of global warming, weapons proliferation, illicit drug trafficking, or state-sponsored terrorism, the analyst seeking knowledge of an entity's political functioning would first need to choose from the following crises: (1) Basic Trust versus Mistrust. The entity is newly established and is significantly in the throes of establishing whom to trust, who is reliable or unreliable, and the like. (2) Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt. The entity is a little farther along developmentally and is very sensitive about how confident it feels in its attempts at independence through will and self-control and how ashamed it feels in failing in these attempts. (3) Initiative versus Guilt. The entity has further matured and is now in conflict between the pleasure of successfully achieving goals and emerging guilt over some of the success. (For some entities this is admittedly not much of a conflict.) (4) Industry versus Inferiority. Here the entity is very sensitive to comparisons with other entities and is primed to avoid, if possible, feelings of incompetence and inferiority. (Some entities may develop a deeply ingrained learned helplessness if they significantly suffer through social comparisons.) (5) Identity versus Identity Confusion. The crisis here is to develop and maintain a coherent sense of being, of values, of ideals--as opposed to experiencing ontological ambiguity and drift. The analyst might expect the entity to exhibit significant external conflict as typified by erratic, defiant, rebellious, and even excessively compliant behavior (6) Intimacy versus Isolation. The entity is most sensitive to opportunities

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for establishing and maintaining enduring and committed relationships on the one hand, or avoiding or withdrawing from such relationships on the other hand. (7) Generativity versus Stagnation. The crisis here is to develop and maintain a deep concern for future generations and contributions of lasting social value as opposed to concluding that one's goals and dreams and hopes will never be met, that there is little continuity with past or future. (8) Integrity versus Despair. The entity recognizes that the greatest achievements are behind it, but there can be continued satisfaction in these achievements nevertheless. Opposed to this is the depressogenic stance of mourning for one's energetic and vibrant past in a political stasis.

As with applications of Eriksonian crises to the social development of individuals, the political analyst would be sensitive to a political entity (1) reverting to a previously experienced stage and crisis, (2) leaving one stage and crisis for another never previously experienced, (3) experiencing different stages and crises in the same temporal interval for different issues or sub-issues, and even (4) exhibiting reactance to being typecast by acting differently than it would otherwise via the intrusion of public expectations of those of some significant other(s).

In conclusion, there have been other developmental, stage, task, and crisis approaches to political psychology---e.g., to leadership, to personnel security and counterintelligence. The most significant benefit of such approaches is that they assume that politics is more than a game of rational, logical deliberations---viz., namely a very human journey. (See Erikson, E. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. New York: W.W. Norton; Erikson, E. (1963). *Childhood and society*. New York: W.W. Norton; Hutton, P.H. (1983). The psychohistory of Erik Erikson from the perspective of collective mentalities. *Psychohistory Review*, 12, 18-25; Lifton, R.J. (1996). *Entering history: Erik Erikson's new psychological landscape*. *Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Thought*, 19, 259-275; Post, J. M. (1980). The seasons of a leader's life: Influences of the life cycle on political behavior. *Political Psychology*, 2, 35-49; Seligman, S., & Shanok, R.S. (1995). Subjectivity, complexity, and the social world: Erikson's identity concept and contemporary relational theories. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 5, 537-565; The psychology of moral judgment: Applications for counterintelligence and personnel security. *IBPP*, 1(4).) (Keywords: Erikson, Intelligence Analysis, Psychosocial Stage)