

Morality and Identity Crises: Lawrence Kohlberg and Erik Erikson

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Congratulations!!! No, you didn't win the lottery or even Publisher's Clearing House Sweepstakes, but you have made it through the first several units of *Introduction to Psychology*. In the last unit, we began looking at **developmental psychology** and focused on the learning theories of **Jean Piaget** and **Lev Vygotsky**. In this unit, we will finish our study of developmental psychology and spotlight the theories of **Lawrence Kohlberg** and **Erik Erikson**.

Lawrence Kohlberg is known for his **Stages of Moral Development** or **Moral Reasoning**. Piaget did not emphasize moral judgment. He basically acknowledged children younger than 10 or 11 handle moral situations in a different manner than older children, and that was about all he had to say. Kohlberg expanded on this by interviewing children, teens and adults using a series of moral dilemmas. One of his most famous is the **"Heinz" Dilemma**. In this scenario, those being interviewed are told a story about a man named Heinz whose wife is dying of cancer. She might be able to be cured by a drug invented by a druggist. It costs the druggist \$200 to make, but he sells it for \$2,000. Heinz doesn't have the needed money. After asking everyone he knows for money, he can raise only \$1,000. He asks the druggist to sell it for less or to let him pay the rest later. The druggist says *no*. Heinz breaks into the druggist store to steal the drug for his dying wife. Kohlberg then asks the question, "Should Heinz have done that?" When Kohlberg listened to the responses, he was far more interested in the reasoning behind the answer, than the answer itself. Analyzing answers from moral dilemmas like the Heinz scenario, he was able to come up with six stages of morality summarized in three basic levels: **Preconventional Morality**, **Conventional Morality**, and **Postconventional Morality**.

In **Preconventional Morality**, children up to about the age of nine obey rules to avoid punishment or receive rewards from their parents, teachers, and other authority figures. When one of my daughters was around three years old, I left her for a very short time to return to find she had taken several of her markers and marked all over the wall. I saw her standing next to the wall with one of the markers in her hand. I immediately asked, "Did you mark all over the wall?" She answered me quickly with, "Did you see me?" Without thinking clearly, I answered, "No, I didn't." She gave me one of her sweetest smiles and said, "Then I didn't do it." My daughter's moral compass was based on whether or not I saw the incident and if my reaction would end up in punishment. If I didn't see it, then it didn't happen, and I wouldn't punish her for what she did.

In the **Conventional Morality** stage, the early adolescent's morality relies on not breaking the law or social values. They do not have morals of their own – but in order to stay out of jail or keep from being ostracized – they follow society's rules.

When morality is not based on parents, teachers, laws, or rules of society, a person has made it to the **Postconventional Morality** level. Morals are based more on doing what's best for society as a "whole." On which level do you see yourself? Are your moral values your own? Are they the values of what the

law says? Or are you still only trying to please your parents and teachers or others who have the power to punish or reward you?

I keep asking you questions, don't I? Oh no! Even that was a question. Well, I'm on a roll, so I'm not going to stop here. Are you or anyone you know going through an "identity crisis?" There was a man who barged into a psychiatrist's office dressed like Napoleon Bonaparte. He yelled, "Doctor, I need help right now." "I believe you," answered the doctor. "Why don't you lie down on my couch, and tell me all your problems." "I don't have any problems," the man snapped. "Because I am Napoleon Bonaparte, The Emperor of France, I have everything I could possibly want: money, women, and power – everything! But I'm afraid my wife, Josephine, is in deep mental trouble." "All right," said the psychiatrist, humoring his distraught patient. "What seems to be her main problem?" "For some strange reason," answered the unhappy man, "she thinks her name is Mrs. Schwartz instead of Mrs. Bonaparte." Maybe you've heard the expression, "You might be a redneck if... and then you fill in the blanks with something like, "You might be a redneck if – you mow your yard and find a car." Well, you might be having an identity crisis if – your name is Mr. Schwartz and you think you're Napoleon Bonaparte – or, as we say in Alabama where I was raised – you just might be plum near crazy..."

On a more serious note, though, **Teenagers** seem to be more prone to have an **Identity Crisis**, while adults have their **Midlife Crisis**. Teenagers have a hard time knowing and understanding who they are. Midlife adults sometimes have a crisis because they wake up one day and see who they are and don't like what they see. They try to compensate by doing things to keep from thinking about their lives like – buying a red sports car, having an affair with someone much younger, or taking on activities such as sky diving, motor cycling, or mountain climbing.

Identity Crisis and **Midlife Crisis** are terms that came from **Erik Erikson's** research on **Psychosocial Development**. In fact, **Erik Erikson** is known as the **Father of Psychosocial Development**. Piaget's theories of learning and development stopped when a child became an adult, while Erikson took a person from infancy all the way to death. In your reading, be sure to focus on the issues in each of **Erikson's Eight Stages of Development**. If an individual does not handle the issues in each stage properly, those problems accumulate and will probably be taken into the next stage. It's interesting to me that Erik Erikson came up with the term identity crisis. He never even knew the name of his biological father. At first, Erik's last name was *Salomonsen*, which was the last name of his mother's first husband. It's speculated Erik's biological father was married at the time he was conceived, and his mother was separated from her husband. It's also speculated his biological father's was Danish and his first name was Erik. When Erik was 9, he was adopted by his mother's second husband. So he took on the stepfather's name and was called *Erik Homberger*. Erik looked different from his fellow Jewish classmates; he was tall with blond hair and blue eyes. After psychoanalysis with Sigmund Freud's daughter, Anna, Erik decided to help others—especially children. After he moved to the United States he changed his name to Erik Erikson where he became a Danish-, German-, Jewish- American. He taught at prestigious colleges like Harvard and Yale without even having an advanced degree, but he did take a lot of classes and accumulate a lot of certificates. He was a champion for children, but he institutionalized his own disabled son and told the rest of his children their brother had died. If anyone had an identity crisis, it had to be Erik Erikson. If anyone could help others overcome an identity crisis, it would have to

be Erik Erikson – he died peacefully in his sleep one month short of his 92nd birthday. No wonder Erik Erikson created the term “identity crisis” since it described what he experienced for most of his life. That’s my story—and I’m sticking to it.

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