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### Recommended Citation

O'Brien, Cally. "Eriksonian Identity Theory in Counterterrorism." *Journal of Strategic Security* 3, no. 3 (2010) : 27-38.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.3.3.3>

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol3/iss3/3>

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### **Abstract**

Certain terrorists come from unexpected backgrounds. They give up comfortable lives and opportunities in order to wage jihad. Their existence has puzzled various theorists since they came to light. This article will explain how a theory of psychosocial identity formation created by Erik Erikson and his student James Marcia may explain this phenomenon. It will also explain how Erikson's theoretical legacy has contributed to current attempts at increasing moderation in the Middle East through education. Many of those attempts reflect ideas that are drawn from Eriksonian theory, although they are not typically described in Eriksonian terms. Meanwhile, while some theorists have considered the applications of various aspects of Eriksonian theory, especially negative identity, to terrorism few have focused on radical Islam or evaluated specific biographies against Marcia's additions to the framework.

# Eriksonian Identity Theory in Counterterrorism

By Cally O'Brien

## Introduction

Certain terrorists come from unexpected backgrounds. They give up comfortable lives and opportunities in order to wage jihad. Their existence has puzzled various theorists since they came to light. This article will explain how a theory of psychosocial identity formation created by Erik Erikson and his student James Marcia may explain this phenomenon. It will also explain how Erikson's theoretical legacy has contributed to current attempts at increasing moderation in the Middle East through education. Many of those attempts reflect ideas that are drawn from Eriksonian theory, although they are not typically described in Eriksonian terms. Meanwhile, while some theorists have considered the applications of various aspects of Eriksonian theory, especially negative identity, to terrorism few have focused on radical Islam or evaluated specific biographies against Marcia's additions to the framework.<sup>1, 2</sup>

## Eriksonian Identity Theory

Psychologists usually suffer from the problems they study. Like most good jokes, this saying contains a kernel of truth. The most famous psychologists often provide excellent evidence. In 1902, a blue-eyed, blond boy was born to Jewish parents, his appearance evidence of an extramarital affair. As such, he was raised in Germany between two cultures. His appearance caused him to stand out from his Jewish relatives and neighbors, while his German classmates taunted him for those same associations. With no one to relate to, it is no wonder that Erik Erikson went on to study identity. He eventually became one of its foremost theorists.<sup>3</sup>

While not every reader may be familiar with Erikson's work, many will have heard about the concept of an "identity crisis," which forms the core of his thesis. During Erikson's lifetime, he published a number of works on the topic, such as *Identity and the Life Cycle* (1959), and *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968). Since his death in 1994, his works have been reprinted and anthologized a number of times.<sup>4</sup> As his theory states, healthy development is composed of a series of identity crises, or points where an individual's intellectual, emotional, and social development

forces him or her to make an essential, usually unconscious, choice about how his or her personality will develop. These choices are binary and linked to age. Of most interest to this article is the main conflict of the adolescent, which is the contest between the formation of a strong identity and role confusion.<sup>5</sup> Erikson believed these two stages of development to be progressive, where previous crises provided essential fuel for the next, and inextricably age-linked.

Erikson's theory was investigated and supported by his student, James Marcia, who also refined the original framework. Marcia's main contribution was a series of four possible outcomes for each essential crisis:

- **Identity Diffusion:** the state of the individual who has yet to confront the relevant crisis. A person in this state is often entirely uninterested in the conflict in question.
- **Identity Moratorium:** the state of the individual in crisis, who has yet to make serious commitments.
- **Identity Achievement:** the state of the individual who has fully considered the options and made a healthy decision.
- **Identity Foreclosure:** the state of an individual who commits to a life choice without fully considering alternatives. A person who skips a crisis and moves ahead in foreclosure is likely to experience a more serious crisis later in life. This delayed crisis may or may not be disastrous. However, an individual who invests in a certain outcome only to have it challenged later may have more trouble than one who considers alternatives and reaches healthy achievement early on.<sup>6</sup>

Marcia also advanced the idea that people can fall into multiple states at once, in different areas of their lives. A child who fully accepts his family religion at a young age may become foreclosed, and be disturbed by exposure to other religious perspectives later in life. Meanwhile, the same person may have considered romantic possibilities more thoroughly, reached healthy achievement, and remain unperturbed when interacting with those who embrace other lifestyles. This is generally accepted by identity theorists in the current era, and can be seen in the assessment tool which Marcia developed at the same time, the Identity Status Interview, which assesses a subject's current outcomes in a number of areas.<sup>7</sup> These refinements created Eriksonian identity theory in its current form.

The theory passes the usual tests for parsimony and common sense, and seems to give a coherent voice to something that many observers have

noticed in general terms. Most interestingly, it may have a particular application for understanding a subset of jihadists. Meanwhile, ideas that appear to stem from Eriksonian identity theory can be seen across a range of modern attempts at promoting moderation among Islamic youth via Western-style education.

## Application to Terrorist Biographies

For the past few decades, terrorists who leave outwardly comfortable lives for the cause of jihad have puzzled scholars. Several have put forth theories to explain them, but some of the more widely taught do not fit the facts. For instance, some theorists point to a lack of upward mobility even among the highly educated.<sup>8, 9</sup> This theory is flawed on two levels. For one, it could be said of almost any group of men in several modern Middle Eastern countries, where unemployment is high and a personal connection (Arabic: *wasta*) is a prerequisite for even menial jobs. For another, many prominent terrorists, such as the very famous case studies discussed below, left prestigious or lucrative careers for the cause of terrorism. However, this theory may still be worth considering for terrorists whose biographies warrant it. From the limited public data available, it seems more common for those at lower levels of terrorist groups.

A second common theory, which is also commonly taught but difficult to trace to an original theorist, is that terrorists are simply unable to express their anger or ambitions constructively through existing political mechanisms. While this theory is certainly worth examining in more repressive states, terrorists also come from more privileged classes with access to political influence in the Middle East. Therefore, there is more at play.

Rather than examining the economic and political environments that shaped the modern prominent terrorist masterminds, it may be worth examining their adolescent development and psychology instead. The model put forth by Erikson and Marcia fits the histories of several well-known terrorists remarkably well. Many were not exposed to the West in a positive context, whether by simple isolation or conservative family influence, until well after they had established a personal and social identity. Upon being exposed to Western ideals, they suddenly became more radical. It seems evident from their behavior and writings that they feel threatened. What is at risk? Eriksonian theory would suggest their own identity and mental health, in addition to their conception of the proper and morally correct order of society.

Once made, the decision to become a terrorist is hard to retract. One who wishes to stop fighting must give up an entire way of understanding the world and embrace a new, more constructive path. Along the way, to make the disassociation final, he may also have to forsake his friends, family, occupation, and everything else that has defined him. The rewards for this seem few. He can quietly give up radical Islam, and spend the rest of his life in hiding from former associates and various governments. He can also defect to the West or a local government, a process with its own psychological downfalls, as well as the risk of being executed or jailed. This option also requires the extra step of not only stopping the fight, but also coming to accept the former enemy as an ally. Meanwhile, true integration into a more moderate society as a fugitive or under government control may seem like a highly unrealistic goal to someone within a radical group.

It is worth noting that most of the research that seems applicable to both initial radicalization and disassociation from radical organizations has been performed on former cult and gang members. As may be seen from the existing documentation of these programs,<sup>10, 11</sup> programs for former terrorists may not be entirely comparable; some, such as Saudi Arabia's,<sup>12</sup> incorporate religious arguments which are specific to Islam. Meanwhile, they are still relatively new and more time will be needed before their efficacy can be fairly evaluated. Some case studies have emerged that raise concerns.<sup>13</sup>

## Case Study: Sayyid Qutb

In 1948, a young Egyptian ministry official came to America to learn about the American educational system. While attending college, he was horrified by the activities of American students, such as mixed-gender dancing and women exposing their arms.<sup>14</sup> He returned to Egypt, joined the Muslim Brotherhood, and grew increasingly radical. His name was Sayyid Qutb, and he became one of the Muslim Brotherhood's most influential thinkers, despite spending much of his writing career in jail. He is far from the only mastermind to follow this path, but his life is among the best documented.

The most salient Eriksonian crisis to adolescents and young adults is identity vs. role confusion. In this conflict, a person chooses whether to create or adopt an identity, or remain uncertain about his or her adult role. There are two important outcomes for the consideration of figures like Qutb: achievement and foreclosure. In theory, a person who has attained achievement should not be threatened by the existence of others

who deviate from his or her views. On the other hand, foreclosure is when a person settles on an outcome too early. Often, this is because they were not exposed to alternatives, or were raised to think of possible alternatives as evil from a young age. Later, when the deferred crisis resurfaces, one of a few things may happen. They may attempt to put the conflict aside entirely, and enter moratorium or diffusion. They may become clinically insane. They may reconsider and come to a healthy decision, even if they choose not to change. Or they may violently reject the alternatives.<sup>15</sup>

Qutb's family came from a long tradition of Islam, and reinforced this in their son as he was growing up.<sup>16</sup> It is unlikely that he was exposed to alternatives in depth. Because of his age and the earlier maturity expected in his society, one can imagine that he had faced the choice between role identity and confusion before he went to study in America, and, not being exposed to alternatives beforehand, had become foreclosed. This would explain his especially violent reaction to American customs. Upon his return, he seemed to see Westernized values everywhere in Egypt, which prompted further radicalization.<sup>17</sup> This had some grounding in reality; a truly secular government was relatively new in the history of Egypt. However, one speculates that there was a stronger reason why Qutb saw the West everywhere. His visit to America had shaken his identity, and he was attempting to purge his doubts in violent, self-affirming rhetoric. Regrettably, he appears to have never examined his attraction towards fundamental convictions in a self-critical light. This is common to the writings of radical masterminds; they can explain why "Moderate Islam is a Prostration to the West,"<sup>18</sup> or why some Muslims deserve loyalty while others deserve enmity at great length,<sup>19</sup> and attempt to convert others, but they rarely document any personal consideration of other paths. Although there is an image they must maintain, the lack of serious engagement with other faiths is notable. Together, they reinforce this mindset in one another and their recruits. The end result is a group that has foreclosed on a certain identity, with no tolerance for any external stimuli that might trigger second thoughts.

## Other Case Studies

In the interest of space, all of the other potential case studies that seem to fit this framework cannot be discussed here. However, certain figures cannot go without mention. The most famous terrorist, Usama bin Ladin, is another who seems to fit the Eriksonian framework, although certain public biographical information on him is somewhat contradictory and difficult to find. He was born into a well-connected and wealthy family in a society where connections mean a great deal. He was raised as a Saudi

Wahhabi, and is thought to have joined the Muslim Brotherhood during his adolescence. Because of his family's strictness, he is unlikely to have been encouraged to explore more liberal modes of living.<sup>20</sup>

Ayman al-Zawahiri, ibn Ladin's lieutenant, is another extremely important figure in al-Qaida. He is responsible for writing a great deal of the propaganda and essays that have filtered to the West. An Egyptian, he was also born into a well-off family, which was Muslim but not known to be radical. He joined the Muslim Brotherhood as a young teenager, and was barely in time to witness Qutb's execution as a member. This dramatically strengthened his commitment to radicalism. He grew more devout as his education progressed in a cosmopolitan university environment. Even after graduating as a medical doctor, he never got over his subsequent hatred for the West, and went on to devote his life to jihad.<sup>21</sup> Given how long he has been involved, and the energy he has invested in the movement, the psychological, social, and emotional consequences of considering other viewpoints seem likely to be particularly extreme. This helps explain the strength of his views and his prolific writing.

It is also worth considering that this theory may be applicable to certain foot soldiers as well as masterminds. Investigation of this is more difficult, as the lives of foot soldiers remain poorly documented, and they rarely produce the sort of writings that allow outsiders to analyze their experiences. However, one foot soldier has lately become very well-known, and his life seems to fit the general model. Umar Abdulmutallab, the Christmas Day bomber, came from an upper middle class Nigerian family, and did not appear to have experienced the sort of economic or social hardship that is common to other foot soldiers. On the contrary, his experiences seem closer to those of the masterminds discussed above. He was raised as a Muslim in Nigeria, chose a pious identity early on, and studied in the West before attempting his attack.<sup>22</sup> Did experiences during his university education prompt his radicalism? It may be too early to tell, but it would not be surprising.

## Educational Applications of Eriksonian Theory

Many of the most fundamental and influential theories in modern psychology seem fairly intuitive to modern observers. Erikson and Marcia's ideas fall into this category. Part of this is because of how they have influenced subsequent theorists.<sup>23</sup> Part is also because of how their ideas have filtered into popular psychology, which tends to take certain buzzwords and general concepts from psychology theories without considering the entire framework or finer details. Part is also likely due to the common

conceit that familiarity breeds liking, also known as the exposure effect.<sup>24</sup> The concept of critical ages is also a common element to many theories in the psychodynamic tradition, and one of the most widely adopted in popular belief. Because of all of these factors, modern Western ideas in education and cross-cultural psychology look remarkably familiar to those who have studied the work of Erikson and Marcia.

Many of the current campaigns to win hearts and minds among Middle Eastern Muslims stem from a sense that better education and exposure to Western ideals will lead to better relations. Some focus on building schools for young students, who are perceived as being at a critical crossroads in terms of their ideology, careers, and future lives. These ideas reflect Eriksonian ideals. Viewed from that lens, the purpose of such programs is to prevent foreclosure in adolescents who are choosing a social identity and, thereby, prevent mental illness or violent reactions against the Western world later in life. It will be interesting to see the outcome of such early intervention.

Perhaps the most famous educational program is the Fulbright Foreign Student Program, put forth by the Institute of International Education. In addition to offering programs for American students to study overseas and programs for older foreign scholars, it offers a program that brings foreign students to the United States for a period of study. On its website, it states that it "offers program participants insight into U.S. society and values,"<sup>25</sup> in the hope that they will take leadership positions in their home countries and foster these insights in their wider societies. The fact that the U.S. Department of State continues to sponsor this program suggests that they agree that this concept carries potential benefits.<sup>26</sup> However, as Qutb shows, study abroad in America is not a perfect vaccine against radicalism.<sup>27</sup> Erikson's concept of critical ages would seem to suggest that this is because these programs cater to older adolescents, who may have already become foreclosed.

## Limitations

Many of the criticisms advanced against other theories of terrorist identity development also seem applicable to this theory. For instance, many people in the Middle East are raised without much exposure to outside influences, and do not become terrorists. However, the argument could be made that many of them never consider alternative ways of living deeply enough to precipitate a crisis. It is also important to remember that sociological and mental health data from the Middle East, along with most of the non-Western and developing world, is difficult to gather and often

unreliable. Not surprisingly, most English-language work relates to immigrant populations. Meanwhile, attempting to apply Western definitions of mental illness to non-Western groups, especially in the developing world, has difficulties of its own.<sup>28</sup>

Humans rarely fit into neat boxes, psychological or otherwise. A theory that explains one group may not explain another. Like most social science frameworks, Eriksonian identity may be limited in its application. At first glance, it seems unlikely to cover types of terrorists beyond those discussed above. Many of the foot soldiers of organizations such as Hizbollah may be better served by theories regarding economics and social networking, while many in Europe can be explained by looking at the prejudice that surrounds them.<sup>29</sup> But other Western terrorists who grew up without such hardships, such as Azzam al-Amriki or Omar Hammami, do not fit even those explanations and must be considered further.<sup>30, 31</sup> There are not yet enough cases to determine what exactly is at play. It remains possible that they will not fit into this conceptual application of Eriksonian theory. However, there are some common parallels to Erikson's own biography in their lives, especially in the sense that they feel caught between two different communities and compelled to embrace a new identity of their own. This may be a coincidence, but the emergence of further cases will determine whether it bears further investigation.

Most important, this article covers only an early suspicion that has been rarely investigated in a qualitative manner; further rigorous analysis of biographies and terrorist writings against the framework of Erikson and Marcia will be required before the true value of their model in this field may be determined, as only preliminary work has been done. Given that public domain data is often sparse and contradictory, this venture will take a great deal of time and work. However, it could yield valuable insights, and seems worth undertaking at first glance.

## Directions for Further Study

It will be decades or more before historians can truly evaluate whether current campaigns in the Eriksonian spirit have worked. Familiarity between the Middle East and the West may lessen friction, or it may breed contempt. Whether educational attempts aimed at increasing exposure of Middle Eastern youth to Western culture have the desired effects may never be clear or easy to determine. Likewise, whether Erikson and Marcia's theory can be supported and extended to a point where it carries significant predictive or prescriptive value remains to be seen. As with any theory, it will only be as good as its supporting data. However, prelimi-

nary signs appear promising, if only for descriptive aims. The case studies discussed above create one avenue for further investigation. Another is the rate of mental illness among adult first-generation Muslim immigrants to the West, which appears strikingly high in immigrants to certain countries within the European Union,<sup>32</sup> and may bear out some of Marcia's suspicions regarding foreclosure. If the theory is borne out with broad investigation, it may further inform current educational attempts. If it manages to shed light on terrorist foreclosure, it may also be able to better inform programs that attempt to persuade terrorists to defect or rehabilitate captured terrorists to society,<sup>33</sup> which are currently experiencing some recidivism.<sup>34</sup> These possibilities are promising enough to warrant further investigation. Future vindication and utility aside, the ideas of Erikson and Marcia are already here to stay because of their influence on current theories and educational concepts.

## About the Author

Cally O'Brien recently graduated from Santa Clara University with majors in political science and psychology, as well as minors in Arabic, Islamic & Middle Eastern Studies, and International Studies. Her research interests include statistics, identity, violence, and the psychology of religion. She has also worked as a Henley-Putnam University staff member.

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