

ERIKSON REVISITED: A CONTEMPORARY DESCRIPTION OF WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT

Lou Gramling, PhD, APRN, BC
University of South Carolina Aiken

Key words: developmental theory, women's health

Erikson's theory of psychosocial development has been used extensively in nursing. However, Erikson's theory is dated and gender insensitive and does not characterize the experiences of contemporary women.

The **purpose** of this presentation is to detail the developmental transitions of women age 35 to 55 years old and to compare critical concepts derived from their experiences with Erikson's tasks of young adulthood and adulthood.

Qualitative research **methods**, including focus groups, reflexive interviews, and a lifeline activity was used to study 47 women 35 to 55 years of age. Data was collected over 13 years (1989-2002) of fieldwork and proceeded in distinct phases, beginning with young adulthood (ages 25 to 35) and concluding with adulthood (ages 45-55). Data analysis was concurrent with data collection and included communication with the participants for rebuttal, acceptance, and/or expansion.

Findings indicate that women at the stage of young adulthood show more congruence with Erikson's theory than women at the level of adulthood. However, women in young adulthood are at high risk for sadness and depression while striving to achieve intimacy. Contemporary women show much divergence from Erikson's theory in adulthood when the concepts of generativity and self-absorption are applied to their life descriptions. By midlife, women have learned to care for themselves and could be described as self-absorbed. However, this term is not applicable, as what the women are describing is more self-care than absorption. Women in mid-adulthood can focus on self-care as the activities of generativity were accomplished in young adulthood when women cared for partners, children, and careers. Women in mid-adulthood reflect on their lives in a manner more consistent with the stage labeled by Erikson as old age (65 and above) when the psychosocial crisis is integrity versus despair. Integrity is demonstrated in comments such as "I've made some really bad choices but I don't regret them."

Discussion: It is time to take a critical look at the stage theory long utilized in nursing, Erikson. While the theory may be a helpful template for childhood, its applicability to adulthood is questionable as it does not appropriately detail the psychosocial development of women today. Critical links between developmental issues and health promotion, including stress and coping, will be explored.