This paper will ‘critically evaluate the factors that affect the formation of identity in early childhood and adolescence’. However, firstly an outline of the meaning ‘identity’ will be discussed. According to Abdullah (2013) identities are split into two elements, primary and secondary. Primary identity is built through infancy and early childhood which includes things like gender, class, and ethnicity. Furthermore, as children participate in a wider range of social activities, they will begin to develop their secondary identity. A secondary identity includes things such as social positions and occupations.

Stets and Burke (2014) defined identity as…

> a set of meanings that defines individuals in terms of the roles they occupy, the social categories or groups they belong to, and the individual characteristics that define them as unique persons (Stets and Burke, 2014).

Griffiths and Mcltosh (2014) agree that a person’s identity will be ‘variable’ and will depend on social surroundings. Therefore, it is evident that identities are built by social situations.

It is important to address factors which may influence identity. Therefore, this essay will present a critical analysis on these different factors, such as gender, class, and ethnicity. According to Critical Media Project (2019) such factors are crucial and help how a person ‘understands and experiences the world, as well as shaping the types of opportunities and challenges we face’. To address the factors that may influence identity, this essay will consider the different theoretical perspectives.

Unconsciously, Identity formation takes place through socialisation in childhood and adolescence. Identities are built through social concepts, in the sense that when socialising with others we learn about our own identity and gain an understanding of the identities of those around us. Interaction with family, friends, peers, and the media are all factors when forming an identity (Critical Media Project, 2019). However, theoretical perspectives have mixed opinions on how identity formation develops. Firstly, the writer will explore Erikson’s point of view.

Erikson (1968) defined identity as the need for recognition in ‘social roles, values, and goals before making more firm commitments that provide the basis for a personal and societal sense of who the person is’ (Kaplan and Flum, 2010). Erikson (1968) highlighted that attaining an identity can be difficult. He focused on the impact of

emotional and social development. Therefore, he subsequently adopted Freud's controversial theory and developed his own eight stage psychosocial theory of development of life stages (Sprouts, 2017). Erikson argued that failing to meet the stages would result in a sense of 'inadequacy' (Lumen, 2018).

Erikson was sure that the main role of adolescents was to develop 'a sense of self' (Lumen, 2018). Stage five of Erikson's theory is crucial for creating an identity. This stage was labelled 'identity crisis' as young adults begin to explore their sense of self. Erikson stated that only those who were able to have freedom and explore who they are understood their purpose, whereas those who were restricted experienced role confusion. This implies that those who achieve an understanding of themselves will discover their place in society. Friendships are crucial in creating a positive identity, however, those who are socially excluded may struggle to discover their identity and experience role confusion (Weisz and Wood, 2005).

All stages of Erikson's theory contribute to identity formation. However, stage two seems to be important in childhood in preparation for adolescence. This is Autonomy Vs Shame doubt; Erikson argues that helping a child in a task that they can complete independently will cause barrier in their self-belief in adolescence. Bronfenbrenner's ecological system corresponds with this statement, he argues that environmental factors can cause self-deficiency later in development. Therefore, this will impact a child's identity formation due to lack of self-esteem and confidence (Oswalt, 2021). It is likely that finding a role in society will be difficult for an adolescent who has experienced shame in childhood (American Academy of Paediatrics, 2021).

In addition, theorist Marcia (1993) elaborates on Erikson's theory. However, Marcia focuses on adolescents and explored how their chosen surroundings impacted on identity. Marcia created an identity pathway which consisted of four stages (Paris, Ricardo, Raymond, and Johnson, 2021). Both, Marcia, and Erikson believe that identity formation is complete in adolescence. However, Grotevant and Cooper (1998, cited in Wright, 2015) would disagree with this statement and claim that identity formation is a 'lifelong process' and a person's identity will change over time due to social surroundings.

George Mead had a different view of identity formation. He believed that the meaning of 'me' and 'I' have different meanings when developing identity. Similarly, to primary

and secondary identities, Mead stated that in the stages of infancy individuals develop a sense of ‘Me’ through interaction with those around the person, a baby will begin to behave to the expectation and attitudes of their social surroundings (Best, 2018). Mead suggested that the development of ‘I’ continues to progress as social interactions differ through life stages (Best, 2018). Like Erikson, Mead states that infancy impacts who we become. George Mead made the statement ‘that people do not act on logic or rationality, but on their sense of understandings and meanings’ (Griffiths and Mcltosh, 2014). Mead’s theory allowed his students to coin together the ‘symbolic interactionism’ which essentially theorises that identity is formed through interaction with others (Cronk, 2021).

Furthermore, the author will discuss additional factors which affect identity formation. The term ‘Ethnicity’ is used to describe a group of people who share a culture (Griffiths and Mcltosh, 2014). Norms and values of an ethnic group are typically learned through socialisation in childhood (Thompson, 2017). Vygotsky (1934) claims that children learn best through socialisation, including understanding of their cultural values and beliefs (McLeod, 2020). In line with the nurture theory, children will copy the behaviours and attitudes of their ethnic group (Griffiths and Mcltosh, 2014).

In addition, ethnicity also corresponds with the role of family socialisation. A child will begin to form their identity from birth, for example, a baby will copy the language that is used in their surroundings. However, Chomsky (1960) claimed that children have the capability to learn a new language. Therefore, if there is the opportunity, a child has the capacity to learn a different language which in turn will add to the formation of their identity.

The Social Identity Theory (SIT) was generated by theorist Henri Tajfel (1979). Tajfel’s theory claimed that identity formation was formed through groups people associate with. Therefore, ethnicity is important when shaping identities. Tajfel indicated that belonging to an ethnic group is positive for social identity (Mcleod, 2019). Additionally, a sense of belonging is important for self-esteem, allowing for a positive identity formation. This contrasts with gender-typing which creates a negative self-esteem for some adolescents.

The terms ‘Sex’ and ‘Gender’ are very similar, and definitions are usually confused. Tolland and Evans (2019) define ‘sex as being biologically defined, and gender as a

social construct that is an internal sense of self, whether an individual sees themselves as a man or a woman, or another gender identity'. This shows that although a person may be born a male or female, that does not define a gender identity. However, this is not always the case and gender-typing does persist.

Gender is one of the most important factors in shaping identity. Whether you are born a male or female, this stereotypically dictates cultural expectations. Gender roles are still present, although there have been significant improvements. Bronfenbrenner (1979) studied children and their environment. He created a four-layer theory known as the ecological system. Bronfenbrenner took time to explore what impact environmental factors had on a child and to what extent they influenced development. Factors such as social situation and family were observed. An example of Bronfenbrenner's theory and identity formation is what parents allow their child to play with. For example, gender-typed play, boys are encouraged to play with toy cars whereas girls will play with a doll.

By the age of two children begin to develop awareness of their differences, such as the idea of being a 'boy' or a 'girl' (Rafferty, 2021). Kohlberg's (1966) theory consists of a three-stage gender schema which began in infancy. Kohlberg claims that children develop an understanding of their gender in stages (Summons, n.d.). However, according to Bennet et al. (2020) early gender-typing can have long-term consequences. For instance, with reference to the nature theory, it is claimed that for biological reasons an attainment gap will be present between boys and girls. This sparks a negative outlook on education for young males (Griffiths and McIntosh, 2015).

Bennet et al. (2020) claims that deciding a child's gender may cause poor mental health in adolescence. Therefore, gender typing can have a negative impact on identity formation. With reference to Maslow's hierarchy of Needs, the top three levels of the visual pyramid are about love and belonging, esteem and finally self-actualisation. Therefore, if an adolescent has low self-esteem Maslow argues reaching their goals and the feeling of actualisation will not be achieved, consequently causing unhappiness for that individual (Changing Minds, 2021).

Butler (1990) argues that media is the most influential on gender roles. 73.5% of the UK are on some sort of social media, therefore, adolescents are under pressure to meet the norms of what is shown on social networks (Johnston, 2020). This could

include gender-typing outfits. This impacts identity formation during adolescence as young people aspire to dress according to current trends that they have viewed in the media.

Another factor that aids formation of identity is social class. Social class is defined as ‘a group of people within a society who possess the same socioeconomic status’ (Britannica, 2019). Savage (1992) contended ‘that middle-class and working-class experience education very differently’ (Griffiths and Mcltosh, 2014).

Children living in poverty would have been socialised into not expecting much from their education whereas, those from middle class will expect to attend university and gain a degree. Maria Montessori (1948) argued that sometimes a child’s environmental factors let them down however, this should not determine a child’s ambitions (Schilling, 2011).

Identity achievement is also related to attachment between a mother and child; separating a child from their caregiver is the first process of building an identity in infancy (Sheng, 2014). This is explained in Bowlby’s attachment theory. The attachment theory suggests that success in this separation allows for success in commitment levels as the individual grows (Benson, Harris, and Rogers, 2010). However, it has been suggested that those who have secure attachments are less likely to explore, implying that their lives will not face chance (Benson, Harris, and Rogers, 2010).

Bowlby’s theory does have a strong emphasis on the importance of parental provision and interaction. He suggests that a child who has a strong relationship with their parents will learn to trust. Additionally, this is the first stage of Erikson’s eight stage theory. Therefore, both Bowlby and Erikson agree that the impact parents have on building their child’s identity in early years is crucial. Those who do not learn how to trust in their early years will experience poor mental health and barriers in social situations, therefore, this is a key process to meet in identity formation (Learning Theories, 2020).

To conclude, factors do largely affect the development of identity formation, however, at different life stages. It is apparent throughout the essay that there are many different factors that affect the formation of identity in early childhood and adolescence, although some factors have more of an affect than others. Identities are formed

subconsciously from birth to adolescence. Predominantly in adolescents as young people begin to explore their surroundings and social values. However, childhood experiences do influence the development of identity. Both Erikson and Bowlby suggested that early psychological support from parents provide foundation for identity status.

It is evident that theorist have different viewpoints on the process of identity formation. Overall, the general agreement was that the impact of social situations contribute the most to forming a sense of self. Erikson's theory highlights that forming an identity is crucial to resolve the identity crisis. The writer concludes that ensuring this will decrease mental health and self-esteem challenges in adolescent as they will feel a sense of belonging in society.

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