

Running Head: Project II

*Running Through the Years: Exploring Erikson's Model of  
Adult Development and the Motivation of the Long Distance  
Runner*

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Laurie Beland

At the core of my desire to become a counselor is the belief that people are capable of change throughout their entire life. This optimistic viewpoint is one grounded in the understanding that the process of transforming ourselves is in fact difficult, and sometimes painfully so. As children, it seems that change came easier, our brains and bodies more malleable and less prone to becoming “stuck” in past mistakes and failures. As the years progress, we become adults who have survived a host of challenges, insults and injuries-both physical and emotional. In order to remain healthy in both respects, we turn to a variety of remedies, including self-help books, counseling, spirituality, family and friends- just to name a few.

In our pursuit of wellness, most of us acknowledge a link between physical and emotional health. This interconnection has long been recognized by Eastern medicine practitioners and has been gaining increasing acceptance in the West. It is not uncommon for a counselor to recommend physical exercise as a way of alleviating depression, lightening anxiety, or bolstering self-esteem- and research supports its efficacy. As a long distance runner for the past 20 years, I have experienced first-hand the powerful interaction between physical and emotional health, and have used exercise-specifically running- as a means of coping with just about everything life has thrown at me- from more serious issues such as illness and divorce to more everyday challenges such as job-related stress.

Throughout my running years, I have often thought about the underlying reasons that drive a person to run long distances. The benefits described above can be gained from a program of regular physical activity with sessions lasting only thirty minutes or even less- a fact again upheld by many research studies (Netz & Wu, 2008; Penedo & Dahn, 2005, DiLorenzo et al., 2005). When examining my own as well as others’ reasons for participation in distance running, I have noticed that they sometimes seem to reflect chronological age. In other words, as runners age, the “why” behind their running seems to shift.

Throughout the lectures, readings and discussions in this course, we have looked at several theories of human development, seeking to understand the forces that shape us into the human beings we eventually become. I was particularly drawn to developmental psychologist Erik Erikson, since he supports my optimistic view that we can continue to grow throughout our adult years. Erikson’s theory is one of dynamic personality development comprised of eight stages, each roughly correlated to a chronological age range. Erikson’s later work, since 1960, focused more on three stages of adulthood: young (age 20-40), middle (age 40-65), and late (age 65 and older) (Zock, 2004). As I read about the concerns and tasks associated with each of these stages, I began to see a connection to the reasons underlying participation in distance running. I decided to investigate the possibility of a relationship between Erikson’s theory of adult development and the reasons why runners choose to participate in this sport that involves time-consuming training, a high level of commitment and physical discomfort. This is an important topic to me since it takes the concepts of a theorist who I admire and seeks to find connections

between his ideas and the everyday concerns and challenges of myself and people around me.

In order to provide a more solid foundation for my exploration of this relationship, I read more of Erikson's work specifically related to the three phases of adult development. Erikson believes that at each stage, an individual is faced with certain tasks, or challenges that must be dealt with and/or resolved before being capable of moving on to the next phase. During the first stage of adult development (Stage 6, referred to as *Intimacy vs. Isolation*) the challenges revolve around a concern with finding companionship and love. Here we seek mutually satisfying relationships, primarily through romantic partners and friends. Erikson asserts that it is only after a reasonable sense of identity is achieved that an individual is capable of having true intimacy with anyone, including oneself. When this sense of identity is obtained, the individual can become engaged in testing that identity through encounters with others. It is only when a person has a firm sense of his or her own self that it becomes possible to fuse with others through sexual partners, life partners, friends and colleagues. In essence, Erikson is simply saying that we need to know ourselves before we can truly bond with others. The capacity to love is acquired; the individual is capable of entering into intimate relationships without fear of losing his or her own identity. Additionally, the individual is able to be alone without feeling isolated-again due to a strong sense of self. (Zock, 2004).

Middle Adulthood (Stage 7) is referred to as *Generativity versus Stagnation*. By "generativity", Erikson was referring to not only procreation, but also productivity and creativity. According to Erikson, every individual has the need to be generative in some sense: to *care* for something or someone. Without this, a feeling of stagnation and a rejective attitude towards the world will prevail (Erikson, 1980). In these middle adult years, Erikson observed that we tend to be occupied with finding creative and meaningful work as well as with issues surrounding the family. During this stage, adults often seek ways to transmit their values on to the next generation. We find outlets for this creative drive through tasks such as parenting, teaching, mentoring, coaching and leading (Sigelman & Rider, 2008). A study conducted by Vaillant (1977) provided support for the notion that those in their 40's become increasingly interested in passing on something of value, either to their own children or to younger people in the workplace or other environments. Vaillant's study revealed that individuals in this stage experience self-growth, becoming more caring and self-aware as they approach their 50's, with a few experiencing what could be labeled a "mid-life crisis" (Sigelman & Rider, 2008).

Adults in midlife may be asking the question, "Have I left my mark?", and tend to seek ways to express themselves actively and creatively in their search for a sense of meaning in their life. Adults who are achieving a sense of generativity tend to be caring people, committed parents, productive workers and mentors as well as leaders in their community (Erikson, 1980). In "Big Five" terms, generative adults tend to be more agreeable, open to new experiences, low in neuroticism, and in general more satisfied with their lives. This stage of life can be one of great

psychosocial growth for both men and women: a finding that again reflects Erikson's stand that we remain capable of change throughout life (Sigelman & Rider, 2008).

Late Adulthood (Stage 8) is described as *Integrity versus Despair*. Here, the individual must become convinced that life in general is worth living, and specifically that the life one has led, including all its negative aspects, has been good. The individual seeks to accept his or her life as the one and only meaningful life one could have led (Bradley, 1997). Through this acceptance of one's own life, one also acknowledges that the life styles of other people and cultures may be as good as one's own. This stage of life also brings with it a certain detachment: death is accepted as the natural ending of the life cycle, something that belongs to life itself, and therefore is not to be feared. The opposite of reaching this level is a feeling of despair: the sense that life has been without meaning. It has been shown that the fear expressed most by old people is that life has gone by without their getting conscious control over it, and that it is now too late to change. However when a sense of integrity is achieved, *wisdom* emerges (Zock, 2004).

My challenge in this project was to design a method of gaining insight into a runner's motivation in a way that elicited a possible connection to the stages described above. I decided to create a survey of items reflective of a range of motivating factors underlying participation in distance running, with the survey items worded in a way that also mirrored Erikson's ideas about adult development. To this end, I looked to several sources, including The Inventory of Psychosocial Balance (IPB). The IPB was developed by Constantinople (1969) as an effort to translate Erikson's theoretical observations into empirical operations suitable for research and clinical applications. Some representative items from this scale include: Intimacy (Stage 6)- "I have experienced some very close friendships"; Generativity (Stage 7)- "I derive pleasure in watching a child master a new skill" and "Planning for future generations is very important to me"; Ego Integrity (Stage 8)- "Life has been good to me". The IPB provided a framework as I began to conceptualize questions that would investigate a possible link between the runner's thoughts and actions and Erikson's theory.

Another valuable source in the making of the survey was the Psychosocial Task Development Inventory (PTDI) based upon the work of Don Hamachek (2011). Hamachek's work, described as an "adaptation of Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Developmental Tasks", is a self-help tool whose goal is to help a person discover their strengths and weaknesses in the areas of trust, autonomy, initiative, industry and identity (2011). The PTDI described the implicit attitude associated with each stage of development, providing me with more fuel for the creation of the survey. According to the PTDI, the underlying perspective of individuals in each of the three adult stages of development is as follows:

**Stage 6: Implicit Attitude:**

1. I'm okay and others are too.

2. Others can generally be trusted.
3. Life can be difficult, but through mutual interdependence we can make it.

**Stage 7: Implicit Attitude:**

1. What can I give to others?
2. How can I pass along what I have learned?
3. I enjoy being creative and productive.

**Stage 8: Implicit Attitude:**

1. I have much to be thankful for.
2. I am in control of my life.
3. I accept myself for who I am, and I accept others for who they are.

Once my survey was complete (a copy is attached), I decided that the best way to administer it was through an online service called Survey Monkey. This would enable respondents to complete the questionnaire at their leisure, in the privacy of their own home and with total anonymity. Finding subjects was easy, as I belong to a running club comprised of adults representing a wide variety of ages. Since this is a local club, participants reflect the larger community in general: predominantly Caucasian, middle to upper-middle class professionals. The club (named the Amazing Feet Running Club) describes itself in the following way on its website:

“The club has evolved from primarily a "fitness" promoting organization, to one whose members have a fairly wide range of interests. While promoting fitness and maximizing quality of life is still the foundation of the Amazing Feet Running Club, many members are avid marathon runners, triathletes, as well as ultra marathoners.”

The website goes on to say that “the club has about 100 members that are pretty evenly split between men and woman. Almost all of the members reside in the Morris, Somerset and Union County area. Members range in age from the 20's with a fairly large contingent of masters runners (over 40)”.

The survey was sent through a mass email, with a introductory message explaining the reason for the survey and requesting voluntary participation. A copy of this email message is attached at the end of this paper. Results were received through the Survey Monkey website.

***Results***

A total of thirty-seven people responded to the survey. Of the respondents, twenty-one were female and sixteen were male. With regard to age groups, six were in the 20-40 age range; twenty-seven were in the 40-65 age range; with the fewest (four) participants in the 65 and older category. From the surveys selected for analysis, I tallied the total number of responses from each possible selection

(ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree”). A chart illustrating these results is attached.

In the Young Adult category, exactly half of the responses were indicative of a positive correlation to the underlying challenges and attitudes of this stage as described by Erikson. Results revealed that 31% of the responses were considered to be contrary to adults at this stage, while 19% of the responses were “neutral”.

Of the subjects in the 40-65 age range (Stage 7), 36% of the responses were in accordance with Erikson’s theory, while 38% were not. Neutral responses accounted for 22% of the total collected. Stage 8 subjects (those 65 and older) revealed the following results: 77% of their answers were indicative of Eriksonian theory, with only 8% indicating opposition to those concepts. Neutral responses made up 13% of the answers in this age grouping.

In general, the respondents in Stage 6 and Stage 8 revealed the strongest connection to Erikson’s concepts regarding adult development. Those in the younger group do appear to be driven by the social aspects of running; and also see the sport as one requiring mutual interdependence. For this group, competition is important; however most are accepting of others and seek opportunities to make connections with other runners. Answers from these individuals also reflect the notion that relationships are something that one gives to, and that this sometimes requires compromise and/or sacrifice. All of these concepts are indicative of having successfully dealt with the conflicts associated with this stage of adult development. For example, these individuals are comfortable running alone as well as with others, perhaps reflecting the comfort that goes along the emergence of the strong sense of self described by Erikson as so vital in this stage.

Runners in Stage 8 revealed the highest percentage of answers that jibe with Eriksonian concepts related to adults in this age range. It is interesting to note that they also gave the most definitive answers, exhibiting the least amount of neutral answers. Also, they gave the highest percentage of “Strongly Agree” responses. One possible explanation is that as we age, we not only have a clearer understanding of who we are, we also become more sure of our convictions and less hesitant to say exactly how we feel. The struggles associated with earlier years have been resolved; in essence we become comfortable in our own skin and less concerned with what others might think. This dovetails nicely with Erikson, who upholds that if we successfully resolve the issues associated with each stage of life, “the fruit of that struggle is wisdom” (Goleman, 1988).

Overall, Stage 8 participants seem to reflect the notion that they are satisfied with their lives, have control over what happens to them, and are not easily pushed around. These runners do not blame others or outside forces for their fate, and are very content with who they are as athletes. There is also joy taken in reminiscing over past experiences, which are seen as part of the natural unfolding of a life that has happened exactly as it should.

Those in their middle adult years (Stage 7) provided the most even distribution of responses, with almost the same percentage of answers reflecting classic Stage 7 concerns as those that were undemonstrative of these issues. When looking at specific content, I noticed that the biggest area of division was related to items reflecting generativity. There was a marked difference in this area, with some runners expressing the desire to coach others, or become involved in races for a special cause. However, there was also a fairly even percentage of runners whose motivation had little or nothing to do with either mentoring or social concerns. Perhaps for those with families running is not required as an avenue to care for other people, since this need is met through parenting. For this group of runners, participation in the sport may be an opportunity to address more personal needs, such as a chance for solitude or socialization with other people who share a similar passion.

Those in this age range (40-65) may also be grappling with such mid-life issues as divorce, loss of parents, an "empty nest", or matters related to the loss of youth. Runners experiencing these concerns may be looking to their sport as a source of strength as they manage through challenges. In these cases, the individual's motivation may be more reflective of such Stage 6 issues as discovering a positive sense of self, finding opportunities for socialization or finding a life partner.

I believe that the ideas being investigated through this survey are important for a variety of reasons. As a future counselor who is specifically interested in working with adults, it provides insight into the motivating forces that drive the actions of individuals at different stages of adulthood. The survey is an attempt to take Erikson's theory out of the textbook and see how it "walks and talks" in the everyday behaviors of a select group of people. Clearly, my choice of long distance runners stems from my own personal experience and lifestyle. However, I believe that the results show how a person can take an activity (running or any other) and use it as a tool in the effort to resolve the conflicts we face as adults and described by Erikson.

Discovering a possible link between a specific endeavor such as long distance running and broader developmental tasks opens up opportunities for more client-focused, individualized treatment strategies. For example, a client dealing with Stage 6 concerns can be encouraged to find opportunities for socialization and close friendships through running clubs and race organizations. A client grappling with a sense of identity (a foundation needed before resolving conflicts in any other stage) might be encouraged to use running as time alone for reflection and/or meditation. A client dealing with issues of generativity vs. stagnation (Stage 7) could be steered towards coaching/mentoring, or becoming involved in organizing a race for a cause that has a personal meaning. A client dealing with Stage 8 issues can use their running experiences as a means of integrating their past with current realities, and in this way work towards self-acceptance and gratitude for the life they have lived. Runners *love* to reminisce over past races and training days, sharing stories of both success and failure. I have often noticed in my conversations with other runners that

as time goes on, a sincere appreciation for both the positive and negative aspects of those events does emerge. Although this is most reflective of Stage 8, this particular quality seems to transcend age groups (another finding from this survey), and is not specific to only those in their later adult years.

Creating, implementing and analyzing the *Running Through the Years* survey was thought provoking and did reveal some distinctions among the age groups. However, the problem I see is that Erikson's stages of human development are not exactly clear-cut, with distinct beginnings and endings. It would be a misinterpretation of Erikson's model to say that each specific psychosocial issue plays a role in only one stage. It must be kept in mind that every psychosocial issue plays a role in every stage. The schema described by Erikson is "an aid to distinguish the various basic human situations and problems" (Zock, 2004). Therefore, a person may not resolve a specific conflict associated with their stage during a particular time period; but rather re-visit it at some point down the road. For this reason, designing a tool to assess a relationship between a certain psychosocial issue and an age group is inherently complex.

In summary, I found this project to be very thought-provoking, and sparked my interest for investigation of other related topics. Some other ideas that came to mind include running as a spiritual endeavor; comparing pre and post run psychological states related to depression and/or anxiety; or the carry-over of skills learned through running into a person's daily life including family, work and relationships.

On a personal note, running has always been an opportunity to discover more about myself and those around me, to form connections with others and to rejoice in the simplicity of this most basic human movement. Running has taken me on some wonderful adventures, both alone and with others, and has allowed me to experience the peace of countless tranquil mornings as I head out for my early run. I was thinking about this project as I was running a 5 mile race in Central Park this past Sunday. This event was to raise awareness for individuals who have had brain cancer. Some participants were wearing small signs on the back of their shirts, noting a person for whom they were running in honor or memory. About 2 miles into the race, I looked ahead to see a young woman whose sign said, "*I'm running for me. Recovering from brain surgery, April 2011*". As I passed her I tapped her on the shoulder, smiled and gave her a "thumbs up" sign. She smiled back, and I can only say that it was one of those "moments" that I will remember for a long time. It is experiences such as this that will keep me running well into my Stage 8 years.

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