

Psychotherapy Guidebook

ERIKSONIAN THERAPY

Paul Roazen

Eriksonian Therapy

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Eriksonian Therapy

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DEFINITION

Eriksonian Therapy is an approach that can be found in the ego psychology of Erik H. Erikson that, in contrast to the negativism of earlier Freudian thought, concentrates on the ego strengths appropriate to specific stages of the life cycle.

HISTORY

Erikson trained to become a child analyst at the Vienna Psychoanalytic Institute between 1927 and 1933. Unlike most of his colleagues at the time, who described the ego's functions in terms of warding off quantities of drives, Erikson wanted to go further and extend his reach beyond neurotic defensiveness to adaptation. Early on, Erikson was interested in the problem of what enriches and strengthens a child's ego, and not just in what may be constricting and endangering.

After emigrating to the United States, Erikson was willing to expand his clinical awareness through anthropological field work. He studied two

American Indian tribes, gaining a new appreciation of social forces. He compared how two so-called primitive cultures could differently synthesize configurations of ideals for living. Different cultural values, for instance, infused and gave meaning to particular elements in child training. Erikson concluded that any clinical concept of human nature demands historical self-awareness. Erikson's field work also gave him insight into the ways an observer necessarily participates in the lives of his subjects; what a field worker finds out is determined by the limitations of his personality as well as his methodology. Erikson believes that a clinician necessarily interacts with his evidence, thereby affecting it. The psychoanalyst influences what he observes, and therefore becomes a part of what he is studying. For Erikson, how data gets collected is a key component in evaluating the results of any research.

TECHNIQUE

Erikson has wanted to expand the scope of psychoanalysis to include an understanding of successful means of coping, in addition to the early Freudian emphasis on symptomatological failure. Clinically, Erikson is apt to perceive as fluidity what might once have been deemed pathology. In his interest in the recuperative capacities of the ego, Erikson has cited instances of individuals who recovered from psychic distress. To Erikson, the therapist's task is not just that of clarifying the patient's early history, or the

patterns of past drives. The present and future exert significant pulls in addition to any tendency toward regression. In behalf of the patient's need for ego identity, the therapist should support present developmental strengths. A symptom may represent a defense in behalf of identity formation. Erikson believes that nowadays even a periodic emphasis on dream life can be wasteful if not dangerous. Earlier psychoanalysts were too concerned with promoting rational, intellectual insight, and not sufficiently aware of the extent to which apparent regressions can be constructive. The psychoanalytic method can make people worse off than before, and Erikson has been wary of the psychoanalyst's illusory objectivity leading to a license for interpretive sadism.

As a child psychoanalyst Erikson used drawings with children, and relied on play constructions, as well as disruptions, in order to understand emotional conflicts. He believes the therapist should share a meal with the family before accepting a child as a patient. Adolescents in particular (who may be suffering from "identity crises") need ego bolstering; and Erikson proposes that therapy strengthen the resynthesis of the constituents of the ego identity of such patients. Young people in trouble are not, Erikson thinks, in need of the couch, but require a degree of support, sanction, and confirmation from the therapist. Therapy can in itself provide patients with a key period of delay in commitment, a "moratorium" for youth. Alongside his own positive therapeutic suggestions, Erikson has repeatedly warned against

the dangers implicit in the biases of the only apparently neutral, old-fashioned psychoanalytic situation. He has likened the use of a couch to a method of sensory deprivation.

APPLICATIONS

An affirmative mood pervades Erikson's writing, as he takes a more hopeful and less tragic stance than that of Sigmund Freud. The therapeutic model has limited uses for a general theory of human nature, since in the context of treatment the therapist confronts a disabled ego. Erikson may be best known as an early advocate of psychohistory; he sees a focus on historical greatness as a way of examining and emphasizing ego strength. He has insisted on the differences between a clinical case history and a life history. For patients are undermined by their neurotic conflicts, whereas in history such human problems add an essential ingredient to all extraordinary effort.

In his tolerance for the human need for legend, as in his respect for the idealizations of heroes, Erikson is at odds with Freud's own negative view of the function of illusions and, in particular, of religion. Erikson is undoubtedly right in believing that myths can be a means of mastering anxieties, and of finding external support for our aspirations. But it would have been better to have distinguished between myth and deception, for had Erikson

acknowledged the moral shock of a lie, he would have appreciated the limitations of fable. Unlike Freud's ideal of a relentless quest for scientific truth, Erikson has been content with a more elusive sort of artistic insight.

Erikson has also sought to spell out the moral implications implicit within psychoanalysis. He has tried to get away from the excessive egoism of the early Freudian concept of the mind. He has stressed a religious dimension to human experience, and his concept of "mutuality" serves to replace the older goal of genitality. In general, Erikson has tried to humanize the "biologism" of earlier psychoanalysis, yet his views on female psychology have largely restated Freud's theories on femininity within Eriksonian categories. But Erikson has been unwilling to define adulthood negatively as the absence of infantile conflict. He wants to measure normality not by the original psychoanalytic standard of what in a personality is denied or cut off, but rather define it by all the extremes an individual's ego is capable of unifying.