Family Myths, Beliefs, and Customs as a Research/Educational Tool to Explore Identity Formation

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Abstract

This paper outlines a qualitative research tool designed to explore personal identity formation as described by Erik Erikson and offers self-reflective and anonymous evaluative comments made by college students after completing this task. Subjects compiled a list of 200 myths, customs, fables, rituals, and beliefs from their family of origin and then reflected upon the relevance and meaning of such items. The research and instructional tool described in the paper should be of considerable interest to teachers who work to promote self-reflection amongst adolescents as well as case study researchers and therapists who wish to study identity formation and values.

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"Traditions, traditions. Without traditions our lives would be a shaky as a fiddler on the roof!" -- Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*

Oftentimes clinicians, researchers, and teachers have considerable interest in garnering a deeper and more personal understanding of how family traditions and identity formation operate in their clients, subjects, and students. The underlying goal is frequently to promote self-reflection and an understanding of the processes as well as end products that result in healthy and unhealthy identity formation. Closely related to such a goal has been an investigation of core values that will advance or limit personal development and our society as a whole. This paper outlines the theoretical development of identity formation, offers an attempt to develop a research/instructional tool to measure identity formation based upon such a theory while focusing upon family traditions, and provides anecdotal evidence regarding the effectiveness of such a tool in accomplishing these goals.

Theoretical Foundation

No single name more prominently stands out in the professional literature on identity formation and human development than that of Erik H. Erikson. If the reader was to randomly select three recently published textbooks on adolescent psychology to examine, the following points would be clear:

1) The topic of Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory that includes identity formation would be included in every book.
2) The term "Identity" would appear in the title of at least one chapter in each book.

3) The conceptual idea of identity formation and maintenance would be woven and referenced in several chapters in each book.
4) Erikson's theory has generated considerable scholarly research and professional interest over the nearly six decades since its conceptualization.
5) Erikson's notion of identity has deeply permeated our society as evidenced by references to this psychological concept throughout everyday American life in the form of books, newspapers, magazines, advertising, cartoons, and films.

Such findings indicate that the reader of this paper needs a solid foundation in Erikson's theoretical work on this topic in order to fully grasp the complexity of critical issues revolving around the measurement of identity formation. Caveats are in play here, since some scholars have suggested "Erikson's concept of ego identity has been widely misused and misunderstood" (Josselson, 1980, p. 202). Furthermore, Hoare (2007) talks about Erikson's annoyance with the overly simplistic understanding of identity as the answer to the question, "Who am I?" when she characterized Erikson's response being something like: "I can't think of a more corny interpretation; It is unsophisticated, superficial, and just plain wrong" (p. 13).

The author of this paper will only assume a working knowledge of psychology, Freud, and Erikson equivalent to content included in a typical introductory psychology class. Nevertheless, an in-depth and accurate review of Erikson's theory of identity formation is necessary and prudent before talking about the measurement of such a construct.

Erik Erikson (1902-1994) was a psychoanalyst who accepted many of the ideas proposed by Sigmund Freud, rejected or modified some of Freud's premises, and explored different areas of personality development as compared to Freud. For example, Erikson accepted the ideas of a dynamic interaction of the three parts of the personality proposed by Freud (id, ego, and

superego) and conscious/unconscious motivation for behaviors. Erikson advanced the study of personality by drawing upon much of Freud's work and reinventing a personality theory that both draws upon Freud's model and offers new insights. Readers are cautioned about conceptualizing Freud's psychosexual theory and Erikson's psychosocial theory as totally distinctive and unrelated perspectives. Oftentimes, it is what these two great thinkers shared in common that is most crucial for understanding this paper.

The formation of a person's identity is the centerpiece of Erikson's 5th stage of psychosocial development (identity versus identity diffusion). There are a total of 8 stages whereby human beings in an epigenetic fashion (step by step or stage by stage) traverse the human lifespan. Although identity formation is the central psychosocial task of adolescence, Erikson's developmental theory implies that the origins of identity lie in childhood experiences (earlier stages). Since building and maintaining an identity is closely linked to personality development, this is an ongoing process that allows for personality re-organization as an adaptive tool to respond to changes later in life. This theory attempts to understand human development across the entire lifespan.

Several theoretical features distinguish Erikson's theory from other theoretical approaches to personality development. First, this is an interactive description of how an individual develops within an influential psychological, sociological, historical, and cultural milieu. Second, this is a description of critical issues in normal human development over the entire lifespan (sometimes called the womb to tomb approach). Third, Erikson juxtaposes a relatively mental healthy ego state (eg., Stage 5: identity achieved) with a less mentally healthy state (eg., Stage 5: identity diffusion). Tension and conflict are created at different points in the lifespan regarding such healthy versus unhealthy decision points at each of the 8 stages. Healthy

resolution is never entirely achieved for long periods of time. This suggests that the potential for some neurotic or other unhealthy behavior exists within all human beings at any point in the lifespan. Mental health is therefore the carrot on the end of the stick that human beings continually chase.

According to Erikson, healthy identity achievement involves the experience of a psychosocial crisis (a personal reflective and reorganizational circumstance caused by a challenge in life with exploration components) that eventually results in commitment. Such a commitment might be to a career, educational goal, relationships with other people, marriage, religious beliefs, etc. This mentally healthy outcome leads to a life that is characterized by personally chosen values, the ability to take calculated risks and make good decisions under stress, and the capability to adapt to change without sacrificing individuality, fidelity, and integrity.

Erikson saw adolescence as a milestone that marked the end of childhood on the journey through life. For example, Erikson (1968) suggested that "identity formation…begins where the usefulness of identification ends" (p. 159). Such a transitional benchmark implies that a person takes what he or she has learned from childhood in order to prepare for a new station in life called adulthood that is filled with new responsibilities and obligations. Later, Erikson (1975) proposed that psychosocial identity depended upon three complementarities: "the personal coherence of the individual and role integration in his group; his guiding images and the ideologies of his time; his life history—and the historical moment" (p. 20). Adolescence changes the travel regulations along the pathway of life based upon changes in the biological domain (physical/sexual maturity), psychological domain (cognitive/emotional maturity), social domain (interactions with others), historical domain (events and attitudes at a given point in

history) and cultural domain (expectations for group membership, rules, and taboos). The study of psychosocial identity must be both interactive and interdisciplinary.

In order to fully grasp what Erikson had in mind, readers need to have a conceptual grasp of the psychoanalytic term identification. Young children consciously and unconsciously adopt beliefs espoused by their parents and significant others around them through the identification process. Modeling behavior is similar except for the fact that imitation or modeling is primarily a conscious process. It must be remembered that the powerful influence of unconscious processes such as those in childhood identifications continues to be the hallmark and unique contribution of psychoanalytic theory. Identifications offer a healthy learning tool during a period of development whereby children can reduce stress, please others, and survive in a complicated adult world. For example, children might deeply incorporate behaviors, values, and rituals observed in childhood into personal ways of doing things without being able to think critically about the origins, meanings, or implications of such processes or outcomes. Childhood identifications cannot be simply summed up collectively and constitute a mentally healthy adolescent or adult personality. Therefore, unexamined identifications are of limited usefulness during a healthy adolescence and a productive later adulthood.

Erikson (1950) stated that ego identity "is the accrued experience of the ego's ability to integrate these identifications with the vicissitudes of the libido, with aptitudes developed out of endowment and with opportunities offered in social roles" (p. 228). This highlights the need for a mentally healthy adolescent to reinvent his or her self. The ego strength of a personality holds the potential to integrate the bits and pieces of self already learned in childhood into a healthy and whole adult person. It is the conscious ego strength that allows a person to explore the legitimacy and personal importance of childhood identifications for possible inclusion in a newly

emerging adult personality. Ideally, some of these identifications can be maintained (if deemed personally valuable and relevant); others deleted (to the extent that this is possible, given that they are under the grip of powerful unconscious processes); and still others modified (in order to provide personal relevance and ownership as society changes over time). The human potential for modifying beliefs about the world that were deeply etched in childhood as identifications allows the personality to adapt to changes in society and within the person over the lifespan.

In this manner, children and young people grow into healthy adults who are, in certain ways, very much like their parents in values, beliefs, and behaviors. However, such people also can individuate or separate themselves from their parental influence by adopting some different values, beliefs, and behaviors in order to become unique individuals. Erikson's theory suggests that such a paradox is theoretically possible and desirable. People need to maintain a portion of their parent's views and historical legacy while at the same time establishing themselves as unique individuals that are separate from their parents and at odds with certain cultural stereotypes and expectations. This balancing act of the human personality becomes the crux of healthy identity development throughout adulthood.

In summary, identity formation is considered the crowning achievement of adolescence and not childhood. The childhood period of the lifespan in this paradigm is still viewed as absolutely critical in terms of identity formation. Childhood offers the necessary, but not sufficient, condition for a mentally healthy adolescence and adulthood. Erikson's theory proposes that a healthy person (adolescent or adult) depends upon the further development and refinement of values, beliefs, and behaviors transmitted through childhood identifications. Psychosocial development offers the built-in possibility that in later stages of development, the person may even be able to overcome or at least ameliorate some of the unhealthy experiences of

childhood such as traumas and forms of maltreatment. This offers at least a glimmer of hope for all of those who survived childhood, while not denigrating the importance or power of people's experiences during childhood.

Readers might be asking at this point, "What does all this theory look like in real-life behavior?" In order to shed light upon this important question we need only to return to the storyline and quotation offered at the onset of this paper from *Fiddler on the Roof* (Jewison, 1971). Since more readers are likely to be familiar with the movie version than the book or stage performances, the movie reference will be employed here. This strategy should help the greatest number of readers apply theoretical constructs and research findings on the topic of identity.

An illustrative example of family conflicts involving family values, myths, beliefs, and customs comes from one of several themes in *Fiddler on the Roof.* The audience is introduced to Tevye who is the father of three daughters in a small Jewish town of Anatevka outside of Kiev during the 1905 revolution. Tevye and his wife, Golde, describe some of the Jewish customs that have helped them live coherent and productive lives for many, many years such as men wearing prayer shawls, celebrating the Sabbath, and the local matchmaker arranging marriages in the village. In Tevye's own words, through these traditions a person "knows who he is and what God expects us to do" and such Jewish customs guide members of the village in terms of "how to sleep, how to eat…how to work…how to wear clothes."

Tumultuous change is then thrust upon the village and all its inhabitants in the political, social, technological, and religious arenas. A pogrom is depicted and in the end of the story the entire village is disbanded and the Jewish inhabitants of Anatevka pack the few belongings they can carry or transport and go off to various parts of the world such as America, Israel, and Poland to start new chapters in their lives.

Readers of this paper are encouraged to carefully examine what has happened to the traditions that for so many years had held together families at one level and the Jewish community at another level in Anatevka. Startling new ways of doing things are introduced that question the validity and practicality of older traditions and eventually we see some of the time-honored patterns of behavior replaced. Examples of such "new" emerging traditions include men and women dancing together, choosing their own mates for marriage, making clothes with a sewing machine, and marrying outside the faith. It seems crucial to notice that while some of these traditions are changing rapidly (much to the chagrin and disdain of the older adults), members of the younger generation for the most part choose to adopt these changes, but not to give up all of their Jewish traditions. The process of changing traditions is more or less balanced and some customs are dropped, others modified, and new ones adopted. This personal and societal adjustment to change as depicted in the *Fiddler on the Roof* parallels the process of healthy identity formation described thus far in this paper.

It seems obvious, yet worth clarifying, that most of this paper thus far has discussed personal identity which emerges out of the construct of family identity. The family still stands as an initial gatekeeper and a powerful mechanism for the cultural transmission of values, beliefs, traditions, and customs. Some other obviously influential vehicles of transmission might include peers; schools; churches, mosques, and synagogues; law creation and enforcement efforts; advertising agencies; and media and entertainment industries, just to name a few. It is the family influence that offers the most powerful initial influence upon children in utero and immediately after birth. As the child develops, the contextual realm of influence shifts so that peers and social forces in the extended environment can now play a more powerful role. These external transmission forces to the family might offer synchronous, competing, or alternative values,

beliefs, and behavioral models. Any attempt to measure the impact of socialization on personality development should begin with the family and extend to other social agents.

Measurement Issues

The subjective, introspective, and personal nature of identity formation does not lend itself to easy psychometric tools to examine such a psychological construct. The probability that a good deal of identity could be unconscious further complicates the issue. Hoare (2007) offers several thoughtful reminders regarding the many unconscious elements involved with identity formation from its hidden nature to the role dreams might play. Furthermore, she also added the caveat that "Counter to Erikson's intention, stage crises had become an exact design, a precise script against which one could establish developmental parameters and departures from them" (p. 12).

Numerous attempts have been made to quantify and qualify psychosocial development and especially identity formation. Two such illustrative examples will be provided here. Marcia (1994) employed a narrative analysis form for determining ego identity statuses based upon Erikson's theory by using a semi-structured interview and a rating manual. Dellas and Jernigan (1981) developed a forced–choice, subjective scale based upon Marcia's operationalization of Erikson's writings known as the Dellas Identity Status Inventory Occupation-Religion-Politics (DISI-O-R-P). Many more examples of attempts to measure identity could be offered, but these two will offer the reader a sense of some of the problems here. In Marcia's approach, these difficulties include potential bias during the interview, comfort level of the respondent with the interviewer, coding problems of responses, and the expensive and often time consuming nature of actually performing the interviews. In the second example of Dellas and Jerngian (1981), we see an attempt to create a more easily useable instrument with improved psychometric qualities,

but this is done at the price of more narrowly examining aspects of identity that focus upon occupational, religious, and political elements. For some researchers, the identity areas of occupation/career, religious, and political commitments might be very relevant and such an instrument might fit their needs. For others, career, religious, and political identity may only be the tip of the iceberg—or the wrong conceptual iceberg for certain research investigations.

Even with Erikson's brilliant and time-honored psychosocial theoretical foundation, it seems hard to imagine a measurement instrument that could even begin to capture the ephemeral and nebulous construct of identity as the creator of this theory had intended. Erikson (1974) seemed to recognize this complexity when he stated: "What I am in space, changes in time; what I was is not now in me; and what I become is more than the sum of all that I have been." (p. 81).

What Erikson describes appears to be best captured by qualitative rather than quantitative research methodology. According to Patton (1990), qualitative research is best suited to naturalistic inquiry (real-world situations), inductive analyses (details and specifics lead to the most useful generalizations), holistic approaches (an entire system is more than the sum of its parts), and detailed and rich descriptions that offer insights to personal perspectives and experiences (see pp. 40-41). It is within this qualitative framework that the author of this paper has chosen to pursue the design of a self-reflective tool to measure identity formation.

Those devoted to advancing identity measurement have many crucial decisions to make while being faced with several serious dilemmas. A major issue that is crucial to the development of this paper is: How do we judge measurement attempts (quantitative and qualitative research) that purport to capture idea of identity as Erikson described this construct?

A thorough and adequate response to this question is obviously something that is far beyond the scope of this paper and would need a separate venue. An outline of what such a

response might look like is crucial to driving the creation of the measurement/instructional tool offered in this paper. Ideally, we might take all of the existing instruments that are purported to measure Erikson's identity construct and perform a systematic assessment according to the following criteria: (1) identify how closely these measured constructs match up with Erikson's own writings, (2) examine the strengths and weaknesses of each instrument in terms of contextual use, psychometric characteristics, and reliability/validity, and (3) outline the potential strengths and weaknesses of employing each instrument to measure identity. Obviously, such a grand undertaking would require considerable time and effort on the part of researchers as well as substantial resources. The author raises these issues to encourage readers to think about these issues for all identity instruments, including the development of the measurement tool presented in this paper.

Origins of a New Instrument

One of the origins of this device to help individuals reflect upon personal values, beliefs, and identity formation comes from the family relations field. Such efforts have focused more specifically on clinical work to help clients in alcoholism and drug abuse recovery programs grapple with how addictions are deeply embedded in the core of family identity (see Wolin, Bennet, & Noonan (1976)). Bennett, Wolin, and McAvity (1988) further reminded us that family themes can offer healthy/adaptive features and also dysfunctional features.

Erikson (1975) highlighted the complexity of the topic when he cautioned us that an identity crisis is concerned with psychological, social, cultural, and historical meaning and that:

1. It is a subjective sense as well as an observable quality of sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in the sameness and continuity of some shared world image.

2. It is a state of being and becoming that can have highly conscious (and, indeed, self-conscious) quality and yet remain, in its motivational aspects, quite unconscious and beset with the dynamics of conflict.
3. It is characteristic of a *developmental period*, before which it cannot come to a head, because the somatic, cognitive, and social preconditions are only then given; and beyond which it must not be unduly delayed, because the next and all future developments depend on it.
4. It is dependent on the *past* for the resource of strong identifications made in childhood, while it relies on new models encountered in youth, and depends for its conclusion on workable roles offered in young adulthood. (pp. 18-19)

Herman (1997, 2005) described how personal values acquisition can either depend upon the more direct transition approach (from parent and/or society to child) or the developmental approach (much more akin to Erikson's theory). Around adolescence it is possible, but not inevitable, to re-invent oneself by examining the values already transmitted and maintaining some values, discarding others, and modifying still others. The transmission approach to acquiring values includes modeling and the identification process as mentioned earlier in this paper. The essence of values development in contrast to transmission approaches arises out of what Erik Erikson described as a healthy identity formation. Erikson (1964) stated that "identity…is not the sum of childhood identifications, but rather a new combination of old and new identification fragments" (p. 90). It should be remembered that psychoanalytic theory described "identifications" as the idealistic values and standards promoted by society at the macro level and parents and other early care givers at the micro level.

What are the primary vehicles for developing a personal identity from a contextual base of a family identity? Perhaps brainstorming and listing several related terms might be provided as an overview for readers in order to capture the essence of the nebulous construct described as value lessons of childhood. We need to search for descriptive words that convey the processes and end products related to the topic. Although the following list is certainly neither totally exhaustive nor definitive, these terms should give the reader common terminology for what we need to highlight for closer examination. These vehicles of social transmission and elements of identity that must be unlocked from memory might be termed, myths, customs, values, habits, routines, fables, beliefs, rituals, familiar sayings, adages, celebrations, traditions, mores, attitudes, parables, proverbs, allegories, personal viewpoints, rites, maxims, rules, legends, ceremonies, and aphorisms. This list could be re-organized into the following three categories: (1) public/private behavioral orientation, (2) the ideological search for truth, and (3) vehicle for the perpetuation of the idea and behavior. These three categories are explained further in Table 1 and examples from the above list are grouped together as well. It should be noted that a few of the 24 terms listed earlier in this paragraph (rituals, habits, routines, customs, and traditions) fall under more than one heading, thus some items overlap in their utilitarian nature.

Bennet, Wolin, and McAvity (1988) suggested that family rituals best fit into the following three groupings: celebrations, traditions, and patterned routines. The same authors go on to explain that “whereas ritual transmits family identity via behavior, myth conveys it in narrative form” (p. 218). The descriptive details provided in Table 1 further explain why it might be possible to carry on a ritualistic behavior, but the motivational reasons for why the behavior was once done has become lost. It is important to recognize that family folktales and

legends can blend fact and fantasy and impart values and beliefs often along with the use of humor and/or drama.

The work of folklorists also clearly contributes to our understanding of the importance of tapping into topics outlined in Table 1. Jones (1990) showed how an examination of stories, metaphors, sayings, ceremonies, rituals, customs, and other forms of traditional, symbolic behavior might provide valuable information for the analysis of people's feelings and concerns and organizational climate processes, and functions. As a specific example of how to explore a childhood myth, Breen (2004) outlines the rite of passage for children regarding the disenchantment with Santa Clause through the provocative childhood question: "What if Santa died?" The contributions of folklorists cannot be overlooked, if we are to develop an instrument to measure identity formation in the vein of Erikson's intent.

The myths, beliefs, and customs device described in this paper was developed as an attempt to translate Erikson's theory into a qualitative measurement instrument. The end result is a list of 200 such myths, beliefs, traditions, and customs that describe the essence of one's family background and socialized upbringing. Each respondent generated a personal list based upon delving into the following arenas: household activities, religious preferences, major holidays, family ceremonies, community ties, leisure activities, relationships with relatives, gender roles, educational preferences, and work ties.

Stimulus generating questions were also given to respondents such as: Whose words and rules reigned supreme in the family? Were children allowed to question, doubt, or receive any explanations for family rules? What social connections outside your immediate family influenced your development? The exploration of family myths, beliefs, and customs was broadly defined here and open to personal framing. Although respondents were encouraged to

start this list by recalling their earliest family experiences, they were also told to include other lessons of life gleaned from peers and influences outside the home. The timeframe used in this analytical review of one's upbringing was also allowed to include influences up to the present time. In this way, the impact of friends, roommates, co-workers, spouses, etc. could be documented in order to make this task currently accurate and relevant. This strategy was useful for all students, but particularly relevant for students beyond the 18-23 age range who were already married and were parents.

At first, most respondents (students in class) felt that accumulating 200 of such myths, beliefs, and customs was far too daunting a task. The creation of such a large number of myths, beliefs, traditions, and customs is believed to be a key feature of the task. Subjects need to be encouraged to delve deep and discover forgotten or hard to remember childhood experiences. This is an overt attempt to tap into unconscious, subconscious, or pre-conscious content. The author settled upon 200 myths, beliefs, and customs as an ideal collection of family and other social influences to psychosocial development for a college classroom assignment over the course of a 15 week semester. There is no reason why such a list could not be extended to more than 200 entries under different contextual circumstances.

One warning emerged over the nearly three decades of the development of this tool. It is possible that such a task might uncover repressed material such as childhood maltreatment and trauma that could require the use of professional services. In an effort to be proactive and circumvent such unintended and threatening possibilities, students in the classroom were offered an alternative assignment at any point in the semester in case they encountered such a problem. After well over a decade of instructional use, I've only found where 1-2% of students have found this task threatening enough to request and opt for this alternative

assignment. The vast majority of the students found the task eye-opening and a perfect match for the class entitled: Psychology of Adolescence.

Table 2 offers some stimulus topical areas where respondents might generate their own personal list of 200 myths, customs, and beliefs. Obviously, readers will find some overlap in these categories, but the intent is to help respondents brainstorm and recall elements of their own upbringing. In-class teaching strategies such as group and whole-class brainstorming sessions have been used effectively in order to help students generate their lists. My only general suggestion for such in-class activities would be that students were encouraged only to share with other students what they felt comfortable to share in such a public forum. Oftentimes, if a respondent will hear how a particular issue like dating or a weekly allowance was handled in a different family, this will trigger how dating or a weekly allowance was regulated in his/her own family experience. Table 3 offers some leading questions and statements whereby respondents can answer the questions and fill-in the blanks in order to generate additional myths, beliefs, and customs. Students need considerable guidance and encouragement here. The class activity for some students served as a stimulus and provoked discussions outside of class on this topic with siblings and parents. Although such activity was encouraged, it was not required due to the fact that students held different relationships with family members and universal student access to family members was not available.

It might be noted that one area in particular—human sexuality, has not been included in Table 2. This has been purposefully done in order to lessen the pressure that students in this classroom situation might feel to document their own personal sexual development on paper for a graded assignment. Students sometimes do include some items related to sexuality in their list of 200, but delving into this deeply personal domain in this educational circumstance

is optional. My goal is to respect the privacy of each student here. If this tool was used in a different context and with different goals, consideration might be given to a greater focus upon sexuality during the completion of this task.

Some examples of the 200 myths, beliefs, and customs are offered below so the reader of this paper can grasp what these actually look like:

- It was more important for males to be successful in school than females because males needed to be good providers.
- Always vote for the political candidates of the Republican Party. The Democrats are all bleeding-heart liberals who want to destroy America.
- Sleeping too much is wasteful and lazy; there will be plenty of time to sleep when you are dead.
- Never litter. Make sure that you find a trash can or place trash in your pocket until a proper receptacle can be found.
- Always wash your hands before eating each meal. If you cannot wash your hands, use a germ-killing sanitizing lotion.
- Make sure you always wear your seatbelt while driving or riding in a vehicle. Not only is it the law, but seatbelts save lives and reduce insurance premiums.
- Attend the local Roman Catholic Church on a regular basis and make sure to bring your children up as Catholics to promote family unity, harmony and personal salvation.
- Whenever you have a job to do, make sure to remember that the job will likely take twice as long and/or cost twice as much as you originally anticipated. This reduces the many potential disappointments in life.
- Do your best to never lie, because: “A lie told often enough becomes the truth.”

- My father always used the following saying when things went wrong: "Man lives in hope and dies in despair."
- I would save everything when I was young and I continue much of this practice to the current day. For example, I still have drawings I made as a six-year-old on the back of paper given to me by my father at his office. As an adult, I collect antiques and have a hard time throwing any item out. My belief is: Someday in the future I'll find a use for each and every item I've saved.

Readers can find more examples in Table 4, but a point of clarification is needed here. Since I did not have permission from students to use myths, customs, and beliefs verbatim from their papers, what is depicted here is a composite or a collective collage of items from several different people (students, friends, and even the author of this paper). When the items depicted here as examples were written for the purposes of this paper, details were changed (such as family circumstance, name, geographical location, names of local establishments, etc.) in order to provide anonymity while still retaining the richness and authenticity of real life. In other words, none of these examples are word-for-word what others had written or told me, but the ideas were preserved while providing examples that looked very much like student responses.

A cursory analysis of these myths, beliefs, and customs offers some important insights. Most of these entries have two essential elements: (1) a specific description of what the tradition or behavior looked like and (2) a rationale or rationalization for why the tradition or behavior was followed. These dual elements (description and rationalization) seem to be crucial for reader clarification as well as further reflection for the person making the list. Sometimes the rational explanations for such traditions were more implicit than explicit, but respondents were encouraged to make these items both as descriptive and self-explanatory as possible.

One encouraging outcome seen in some students might be best captured by the following respondent/student question: "I have dramatically changed some of my beliefs from childhood. Do I include how I was raised or what I believe at the current time?" Erikson likely would have seen such a reflective signpost as a positive sign of movement toward healthy identity formation. When my students ask such a question, I tell them that they should feel free to incorporate both current and past beliefs in their list. My rationale is that if these beliefs from childhood still hold an unconscious grip on us (as in the form of childhood identifications), they can never be totally forgotten and never really lose all of their potential influence. My recommendation for students completing this task is that if they, for example, were raised with certain racial, ethnic, gender, and religious stereotypes in their family of origin that they now reject, these items still belong on the list of 200. Since a reader of the list might form the impression that the author of the list still harbors such views and this might be inaccurate or threatening, I suggest that respondents use an asterisk (*) next to the modified items. This asterisk use simply needs to be denoted in the interpretive key. The educational potential of employing a strategy like this for dealing with resistance to operating behaviorally according to such stereotypes or expectations seems to hold encouraging possibilities.

After the list of 200 myths, beliefs, traditions, and customs was created, respondents were asked to respond to questions like the following:

1) Describe the major difference between the concepts of identification and modeling. How would you attempt to determine if a behavior originated from identification or modeling?
2) How is Erikson's theory of identity formation related to the identification process and these myths, customs, and beliefs? Be sure to use theoretical definitions to build your case.

3) What would happen if you were to select a spouse from a very different set of myths, beliefs, and customs? Why might compromise not always be possible here?
4) How could the fact that your ancestors might have arrived in this country as immigrants possibly have influenced this list? Explain.
5) Are there perhaps some of these items that you would not choose to adopt in your own life or pass on to your children? Why? Offer examples here.
6) Which of the three elements of the psychoanalytic personality model (id, ego, or superego) best fits the sum of your 200 myths, customs, traditions, and beliefs? Use examples and support your claim with theoretical evidence.

Student/Participant Feedback

A few student responses in the anonymous course evaluation regarding this assignment at the end of the semester stated:

- "This paper forced me to look long and hard at the manner in which I was raised. I never realized how influential these childhood experiences were in my life."
- "I frequently as a young adult find myself doing these things and acting this way without thinking. Now I know where I got these ideas from."
- "As I think about this class assignment; however, I don't think it will be easy to change some of these beliefs."

Summary

A reader might ask: "What does the qualitative research/instructional tool designed to measure identity formation as outlined in this paper add to the literature that has been missing?" First, this instrument attempts to be more genuinely rooted in Erikson's theory as evidenced by the fact that this tool purports to:

1. be a subjective, reflective, and self-directed exploration of being and becoming.
2. allow for tapping into conscious and unconscious (preconscious) elements.
3. employ recollections of the past to understand the present and future.
4. capture the complex and interdisciplinary nature of identity in terms of psychological, sociological, historical, anthropological, and biological dimensions of development, etc.

Second, the instrument is flexible and adaptable to teaching, learning, and qualitative research purposes and priorities. Third, the instrument is ideally designed for personal reflection and self-exploration which makes it useful for clinical and personal applications.

Of course, the qualitative instrument outlined in this paper also possesses limitations in terms of the psychometric and quantitative domains; a lack of a speedy administration of the tool; and the interpretive, comparative, defensiveness, and self-disclosure domains. In the end, potential users must carefully examine the nature of the measurement tool, context in which such a tool is used, and the purposes for the administration of such an instrument. It is hoped that the details included here will guide teachers, clinicians, and researchers in the origins as well as the strengths and weakness of this instrument.

In conclusion, the research/instructional tool presented in this paper could be very useful for those researching adolescence and the transmission of values as well as others who work with adolescents or teach about adolescence. The insight offered by Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* seems a fitting and healthy way to wrestle with changing traditions when he reflectively stated: “On the other hand, our old ways were once new, weren’t they?” But as Tevye teaches us, intellectual insight regarding the transmission process of values and traditions does not always make it easier to adjust to change. Acceptance of new ways can be painful and difficult.

Just as the sun rises to welcome each new day, the sun also sets each day making what was the present now part of our recent past. The end of one day becomes the beginning of the next day. The world is predictable in some senses and yet unpredictable in other senses. Some changes are openly welcomed and other changes are stubbornly rejected. We like predictability in life, yet we also enjoy and need change. An exploration of the many paradoxes in life offers the greatest single key ingredient to a thoughtful human existence in a complex and rapidly changing world. Identity formation offers a related paradox whereby the individual strives to be a unique human being that is also like others as well as connected to a community and a historical past (tradition). Erik Erikson deeply comprehended this challenge to a healthy human existence. As we reflect upon our own myths, beliefs, traditions, and customs derived from our family of origin and other societal influences, let us from sunrise until sunset and from birth until death seek meaning and purpose as a lifelong tradition.

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Table 1
Categorization of Some Descriptive Terms to Capture the Notion of Myths, Traditions, Customs, and Beliefs

Public/Private Behavioral Orientation:

This category has to do with what we routinely do. In other words, no logical reasoning or understanding is needed to carry on such behavior. Sometimes social reward systems and pressure to conform might motivate behavior. A behavior might be driven by habit. On the other hand, sometimes there might be a logical and rational reason for the behavior.

Descriptive Terms: customs, rituals, traditions, rites, ceremonies, habits, routines, celebrations, rules

Ideological Search for Truth:

This category has to do with the nuts and bolts of exactly what we believe. The idea behind the basis for truth can be logical or illogical, conscious or unconscious, and personal or shared by others. These ideas can be used to motivate behavior and explain behavior.

Descriptive Terms: beliefs, personal viewpoints, maxims, aphorisms, familiar sayings, adages, proverbs, mores, attitudes, values

Vehicle for the Perpetuation of the Idea and Behavior:

Any idea, behavior, or story that proves useful to the human personality must have a potential mechanism for the transmission to future generations. Without such a mechanism our ideas and behaviors would die with each individual and our culture would not become more advanced and values could not be passed on to future generations.

Descriptive Terms: myths, fables, habits, routines, legends, stories, rituals, customs, traditions, parables, allegories

Table 2
Some Possible Areas to Search for Family Myths, Customs, and Beliefs

1. **Household Activities:** tv/radio (watching/listening patterns); learning to drive a vehicle experience; private/sharing of bedrooms; telephone privileges; access to a car; individual chores around the house; handling the finances; use of family meetings; family structure (single parent, extended family, both parents working, working at home or away from home etc.); mail privacy; computer usage patterns; a designated time or age to move out of the house; paying rent; taking care of and driving a vehicle
2. **Parenting Situation:** authoritarian, authoritative, neglectful, or indulgent; age of parents similar or dissimilar to that of peers; number of siblings (only child, only brothers, only sisters, mixed genders amongst siblings, many siblings); birth order issues; influence of separation and divorce; influence of the extended family
3. **Religious Preferences:** parochial, private, or public schools; prayer patterns; attendance patterns at a church, mosque, or synagogue; Chr-easters (attendance only at Christmas and Easter); involvement in congregational activities; belief system; religious rituals such a baptism, confirmation, tithing (giving habits), barmitzvah, basmitzvah, etc.; choir
4. **Major Holiday Activities:** religious events; Thanksgiving meal; Easter Egg Hunt & ham; Christmas traditions; Fourth of July cookouts and fireworks; Kwanza events; New Year's Eve celebrations; New Year's Day watching parades and football bowl games; Labor Day; Valentine's Day; St. Patrick's Day; certain ethnic dishes are often served at specific holiday events; eating out on Mother's Day; cookout on Father's Day; Ramadan
5. **Family Ceremonies:** wedding traditions; funeral traditions; birthday dinners and gatherings; gift giving habits; family reunions; dinner routines; specific table seating
6. **Community Ties:** visitors and strangers visits to the home; voting habits; volunteer work; attitudes toward those of different ethnic, racial, and religious groups; stereotypes based upon gender, age, handicap condition, etc.
7. **Leisure Activities:** vacations (location, separate versus entire family, planning strategies, one person makes decisions versus a group decision making plan, work versus fun; etc.); exercise routines; weekend patterns; favorite activities (card playing, sporting events, plays, theater (movies), concerts, reading, etc.); seasonal pilgrimages (fun parks in summer, cider mill in fall, skiing or skating in winter, kite flying in spring);
8. **Generational Issues:** geographical proximity of relatives; frequency of visits; family heroes or villains; old wive's tales; reunions; professional career traditions; letter writing/E-Mailing patterns; phone calling expectations; traditions for meeting and saying goodbye (handshakes, hugging, etc.); gift giving patterns; impact of historical events
9. **Educational Expectations:** type of school attended (parochial, public, private, urban, rural, etc.); early contact with others from different racial, ethnic, and religious groups; gender issues (composition of classes, all male, all female), rewards/punishments given for grades; level of expectations; consequences for skipping school; curriculum (college prep, business, Regents diploma, etc.); involvement in sports or extracurricular activities
10. **Work Ties:** working patterns of parents (status of work, salary versus hourly; full-time versus part-time, etc.); age at which work expected in and outside the home; fulfillment issues versus monetary rewards; punctuality; distance factors (distance to travel to work)

Table 3
Some Possible Additional Strategies to Search for Family Myths, Customs, and Beliefs

1. Imagine in your mind going from room to room in the house where you were raised or even your current domicile to search for traditions and patterned routines.
   Kitchen: Who cooked the meals, did the dishes, set the table, carried out the trash?
   Was television allowed to be on during the meal?
   What if someone was late for dinner? Were there specific times for meals?
   Living Room: Were there designated "favorite" chairs for individual family members?
   Who did the dusting and vacuuming? Who controlled the remote?
   Bedrooms: Were beds to be made every day or not? Where the curtains/drapes drawn?
   Did beds need to be made with hospital corners?
   Were sheets changed every week? Were there night lights?
   Bathroom: How many towels were used for showers or baths?
   Did the toilet paper roll go over the top or under the bottom?
   Garage: Was the garage used to store vehicles or did "stuff" clutter the garage so there was no room any longer for a vehicle? Were trash cans stored in the garage?

2. Try completing the following blanks with words that make sense from your upbringing.
   Only members of our family could _____.
   We would only invite _____ for _____.
   Dating was not allowed until the age of _____.
   Females were not allowed to wear makeup until the age of _____.
   There was a particular way we did _____. Explain.
   It just would not seem "right" if I didn't _____ when _____ happened.
   The proper way to _____ is _____.
   Other people do it wrong when they _____.
   Drinking alcohol was not allowed in the home until age _____ or at special occasions like _____.
   My parents do _____ just like my grandparents did.
   I can still recall the story about _____.
   Some people were heroes or rogues in my family because they_____.
   As a daily routine, I would always _____.
   The most important historical event I can remember was when _____.
   Men/Women would always_____.
   I always remember my parents saying, "_____."
   When _____ happened, we would always _____.
   When we moved to a new neighborhood, we _____.
   You should never _____.
   I can still recall the old saying: "_____."
   Whenever I did something like _____,_____ would happen.
   At weddings/funerals, people would always or never_____.
   Mom/Dad would always decide _____.
   If pets were a part of your upbringing, was there a preference for _____ .?
   (eg., dogs over cats, cats over dogs?) If no pets were in the home, what was the rationale?

Table 4
Some Additional Examples of Family Myths, Customs, and Beliefs from College Students and Others

- We were never to swim alone for safety reasons.
- We could not leave the dinner table unless we were "excused." This had to be verbally requested and approved before we left the table.
- No swearing was allowed in the home environment (except for Dad and Grandpa).
- Even as a child, the materials that arrived in the U.S. Mail were considered private and no one else was to open your mail.
- My Mom would always sign my father's paycheck and take it to the bank because he was too busy. Mom did all the banking and bill paying.
- Mom and Dad frowned on me or my brothers/sisters dating a non-Catholic. We were expected to marry within the faith.
- My parents did not use credit cards for store purchases, except in rare emergency situations. They always used cash in order to avoid going into debt. The adage was: "If you don't have the money in your hand, you can't afford the item."
- Our religion dictated that we could not eat meat on Friday.
- My father has tried to quit smoking (without success) during every Lenten season.
- Both of my parents would attend school open house activities during the academic year.
- We always had a garden and enjoyed the planting, weeding, and harvest.
- Every winter we would build our own backyard ice rink and friends would come over.
- Each Thanksgiving, the two oldest children present were given the honor of making a wish and pulling apart the wishbone from the cooked turkey on the table.
- If we ever had a sore throat, we would gargle with warm saltwater.
- Whenever a child was born into our family, my parents would plant a tree in the yard.
- Since my father was born in Italy, he still carries on his childhood tradition of having a glass of wine with his dinner meal.
- We could only get out the "good" china and "real" silver, if we had guests for dinner.
- My mother would "can" the tomatoes and pickles from our garden every fall.
- It used to be a tradition to throw rice at the bride and groom as they left the church. We now only throw birdseed in order to celebrate this event and provide food for the birds.
- During the winter, we never let the vehicle gas tank get lower than half-a-tank in order to reduce the chance of the gas line freezing.
- I believe in the saying: "Only the good die young." Family evidence comes from various points in history: Grandparents: Pearl Harbor; My Parents: Vietnam War; I use 9-11-01.
- The last person to leave the room was expected to turn off any appliance like the television and the lights. It was considered impolite to turn the lights out on someone else when such a person was present, unless you asked them first.
- It was considered polite to hold the door open for someone else no matter what the gender of each person happened to be.
- I always slept with a nightlight on just in case I had to get up in the night and find my way safely around the house in the dark.