

# **Fostering Tomorrow's Actions Today: An In-Depth Look at the Construct of Initiative in Adolescence**

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## **Abstract**

*This article examines the development of initiative in adolescence through the historical lens of Erik Erikson's (1950) theory "Eight Stages of Man," comparing Erikson's thinking to social cognitive theory, personality theory, learning theory, and symbolic action theory. Initiative affects every aspect of development, transformation, and change throughout the lifespan and is particularly essential in the complex world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Whether we believe that much of life is determined at birth or that we are active participants in our own growth and development, the life experiences of young people are at the heart of initiative development. This article posits that initiative is a dynamic, multidimensional phenomenon within the adolescent's psychological, social, cognitive, and cultural worlds and cannot be fully understood by theories that limit its context. Interdisciplinary insights, current trends and debates in the field, and implications for future research are discussed.*

Keywords: initiative, agency, action, adolescent development, positive youth development

## Introduction

*The being whose perception, memory, thinking, emotions, and motivations we analyze patiently in long series of experiments is also the one who invents electricity, nylons, atom bombs, who carries the names of Mozart, Picasso, Einstein, Churchill or Hitler, is the one who researches, nurtures, tortures, kills. (Boesch, 1991, p. 363)*

Whether for better or worse, individual and collective initiative is a key to changing the world. We talk about *empowerment* and creating a future for our kids that is full of potential. Yet, how can we empower young people to tackle the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century without paying close attention to how they develop the initiative to do so? As parents, educators, business leaders, legislators, and others adults with an interest in positive youth development, we must nurture agents of change, young people who will be energized into civic action and into solving the global challenges of poverty, oppression, and the environment. We can wish for a world of peace and compassion, a world that respects the planet, and one that gives birth to greater wisdom. But who will lead us on that path? It is today's youth who will initiate tomorrow's actions.

Initiative is important, not only to accomplish the tough tasks ahead for humankind, but also in whatever path a young person chooses in life, whether working in the corn fields of Iowa, as a scientist for NASA, or as a teacher to future generations of youth. The human journey requires initiative, to start projects, begin transitions, cope with adversity, and stick with the journey despite the obstacles over time. Unless the development of initiative in young people is considered a priority by the adults who influence youth development, many young adults will not acquire the inner and outer capacity to lead rich, fulfilling lives and to improve the world in which we live.

Empirical evidence links a lack of personal and social initiative to behavioral disorders, lower academic achievement, alcohol use, and general unhappiness. We seem to know much more about how things go wrong for adolescents than we know about how young people develop into motivated, directed, and productive adults. Studies of youth boredom, for instance, found that a random sampling of White, working and middle-class adolescents reported feeling bored 27% of the time and that both honor students and those involved in delinquent activities reported the highest level of boredom, many more than 50% of the time. Under normal circumstances, these high rates of boredom signal not psychopathology but a deficiency in development (Larson, 2000). Adolescents who experience initiative rather than boredom have greater potential to achieve their goals and turn unplanned events of life into opportunities for personal growth (Bandura, 2001).

How is initiative fostered in adolescents? Whether we believe that much of life is determined at birth or that we are active participants in our own growth and development, the life experiences of young people are at the heart of initiative development. Because initiative is a dynamic, multidimensional phenomenon within the adolescent's psychological, social, cognitive, and cultural worlds, it cannot be fully understood by theories that limit its context. Within these worlds, many variables play a significant role in nurturing the development of this important phenomenon, including the types of activities and experiences in which young people participate; relationships with parents, educators, and other adult role models and leaders; and identification with the cultural symbols of their time. Understanding the interconnectedness and importance of the factors that drive initiative can help us better understand how to foster its development in future generations.

IQ contributes only 20% to life success; emotional intelligence, including initiative, accounts for the rest, and, although one's IQ is thought to be genetically determined, emotional competencies can be learned by children and adolescents (Goleman, 1995). Understanding the construct and experience of initiative involves self-efficacy, agency, intrinsic motivation, intentionality, forethought, self-regulation, and self-reflection. While initiative can lead to good or evil, this discussion is biased toward the goal of developing ethical young people, able to become positive agents of change in their own lives and the lives of those around them. Although some comparisons between initiative development in young people from Western and non Western societies are provided, the focus here, on how initiative is fostered by adults and life experience, is intended to be applicable to more complex Western cultures.

The study of initiative has its roots in a number of fields, including psychology, sociology, learning theory, and child development. Erik Erikson's (1950) theory on the development of initiative lays the foundation for studying this phenomenon within the context of adolescence, as interrelated to other important developmental milestones during childhood. Building on this groundwork are theories of social cognition, personality, learning, and symbolic action, each demonstrating a key aspect related to Erikson's conception of initiative and how it is fostered in adolescence. Examination of these interdisciplinary insights is followed by a discussion of several current trends and debates in the field, concluding with implications for further research and a conclusion.

## Foundations in Human Development

In his groundbreaking book, *Childhood and Society*, Erik Erikson (1950) introduced his “Eight Stages of Man” (p. 247) beginning with an infant’s development of basic trust and mistrust. A brief introduction to Erikson’s theory is helpful in understanding his themes and why his theory provides an excellent foundation to understanding initiative development in adolescence. Although Erikson’s theory is clearly stage-oriented, with children unfolding based on their individual readiness to move forward, Erikson warned that charts and stage-like tools are designed as a guide, not a prescription. Each step in development presents a crisis to be resolved by the individual and reflects a “global form of thinking” (p. 273) in which to reflect on development. Each stage is not an achievement to be mastered, but rather a struggle for meaningful existence, in which we are engaged continuously, even as we approach death. Erikson developed what he called *basic virtues* for each stage: those essential qualities of the human spirit that must emerge from one generation to the next in order to sustain the human spirit. The recurrent theme in his book is that childhood and adolescence affect an individual’s later life and the life of society itself. He wisely argued that societies must do everything possible to “lighten the inescapable conflicts of childhood” (p. 277) and create the best conditions for human growth. Erikson did not necessarily believe that his stages of development represent specific age periods but envisioned that they would be revisited throughout life, particularly if they were not fully addressed. For example, if a person reaches middle age, what Erikson calls the period of *generativity*, and has not developed certain skills, like initiative, then this may present serious challenges to overcome later in life.

The relationships of these global stages illustrate how the concept of initiative development fits into the whole. In the first stage of infancy, Erikson (1950) stressed the importance of building trust between mother and child, much like current research in attachment theory affirms. He noted that this trust influences the development of drive and hope throughout life. In the second stage, the child struggles with autonomy and seeks to develop self-control and willpower. At the same time that we encourage children to stand on their own two feet and become autonomous, we must take care that these experiences do not create shame or self-doubt in their capabilities. Erikson posited this stage as important in the formation of cooperation and willfulness as well as the formation of freedom of expression.

Erikson’s (1950) third stage involves the formation of initiative, the basic virtues being inner and outer direction and purpose. Initiative is “miracle of vigorous unfolding” (p. 255), suggesting that initiative development may begin in the third stage of life but continues throughout all stages of life. And, while Erikson described initiative as the process of “undertaking, planning and attacking a task” (p. 255), he

also acknowledged that the undertaking involves an emotional “fumbling and fear” (p. 255) that needs to be resolved. He was quick to explain that initiative not be confused with industriousness or the competitiveness associated with Western capitalism. Instead, he insisted that initiative is needed in all aspects of life and work, from “fruit-gathering to a system of enterprise” (p. 255). Erikson discussed initiative within the context of moral responsibility, asserting the potential for transformation or destruction. Looking into adulthood, he pointed out that those who have not developed initiative often develop pathologies that lead to paralysis of action and inhibition. Psychosomatic disease can offer escape for those who fail to achieve their goals. The rage that develops in people who have not been able to realize their hopes often turns into intolerance and hatred of others. This intolerance actually prohibits the development of initiative and personal growth rather than fueling it. In pointing out the dangers to society of intolerance and hatred, Erikson affirmed the importance of looking to childhood as a time when we can guide the development of initiative. It is during childhood and adolescence that we learn to plan and construct things together, profit from teachers, and emulate role models.

In his fourth stage of development, Erikson (1950) said that children learn to get recognition by producing things; they develop a sense of industry. It is a time, whether in Western or tribal society, when children learn the tools of the trade and what is required by the adults of the society. In tribal culture, this may mean learning a simple trade or how to plant a field. But in Western societies, this involves formal education. Erikson pointed out that, the more complicated and complex the society, the greater is the challenge of developing both industry and initiative. Both involve doing things “beside and with others” (p. 260) and building relationships. This is a stage of development that first gives children a sense that there are differences in opportunity. Some can do the work better than others. Erikson pointed out the danger that affects all of society is when children feel that the color of their skin, the culture of their parents, or the kinds of clothes they wear is more important than their will to learn. Another danger is focus on work to the exclusion of other life goals, such as the importance of relationship, love, caring, and compassion.

The stage that is typically associated with adolescence is the fifth, when Erikson (1950) posited that identity is developed. Everything before this time prepares a young person for more expansive social roles and finding who they are within this psychosocial context. It is a time where one’s ideology is confronted and when one needs to be affirmed by one’s peers. Young people define for themselves the difference between good and evil. Emerging from the fifth stage, a good deal of strength has been acquired that enables young people to test themselves through the risk of intimacy in the sixth stage. They are able to make commitments and affiliations with other people, even though those relationships may demand

compromise. The avoidance of intimacy with others can lead to a deep sense of isolation and sometimes absorption in the self.

The last two stages of life are concerned with generativity and ego identity. Adults focus on guiding the next generation and develop a sense of understanding of the world. Erikson poetically completed his life cycle with the image of a circular journey from birth to death, saying that “healthy children will not fear life if their elders have integrity enough not to fear death” (p. 269). While children and adolescents experience Erikson’s (1950) first six phases, adults are engaged in the last two. Erikson was quick to point out that initiative has an inner and outer direction and purpose essential throughout all phases of the life cycle.

Theory and research that have emerged since Erikson’s (1950) eight stages expand our understanding of the construct of initiative and its development over time. To set the stage for synthesizing the literature, a definition of *initiative* is in order. Although the word has its root in *initiate*, it means much more than the ability to start projects or activities. Larson (2000) defined initiative as “the ability to be motivated from within to direct attention and effort toward a challenging goal” (p. 170). This concept is congruent with Erikson’s sense of an inner and outer direction and purpose that begins in preadolescence and helps facilitate all phases of life. This definition is broadened by Brandtstädter and Rothermund’s (2002) contention that initiative not only involves *assimilative* action toward a goal but also *accommodative* action to modify goals given new information. Interestingly, the idea that initiative may also require accommodative actions fits with what the adolescent experiences in Erikson’s fifth stage of identity development. As young people seek to answer the questions *Who am I?* and *What is my place in society?*, they also decide which interests will propel them to action and how to accommodate for errors in judgment or changes in the variables of a plan. This broader definition of initiative is particularly helpful in understanding how initiative is nurtured in adolescence.

While Erikson (1950) focused his approach on understanding child, adolescent, and adult development through a psychosocial model, he does not neglect the other important dimensions of human development, including cognition and culture. In fact, he provides many examples throughout his writing that emphasize the multidimensional nature of initiative and of development itself. At all times, he placed great importance on the role of parents, educators and others devoted to helping children. He recognized both the inner (psychological) and the outer (social) worlds of the developing child and the dialectic that occurs between the two at each stage. Because some scholars have attempted to associate age groups with Erikson’s stage theory (e.g., Berk, 2007), it may appear that Erikson placed the stage of initiative development much too early, well before adolescence. However, Erikson warned against associating his stages with specific ages and instead

recommended a broader approach. It is within that sense of the *gestalt* that initiative can best be understood.

## Major Theories Related to Initiative

Four theories associated with initiative development were chosen for their ability to complement Erikson's (1950) psychosocial stage theory and provide deeper insights into how initiative can be fostered in young people. These theories are compared and contrasted to one another and to Erikson to find complementary and contradictory thinking as well as areas for future research. While no comprehensive theory of initiative development exists in the literature, the theories included here comprise the major body of thinking that is most closely associated to the construct of initiative.

### *Social Cognitive Theory*

The social cognitive theory developed by Albert Bandura (2001) is best known for its focus on *self-efficacy*, which he posited as an essential component of initiative. Self-efficacy is a belief in one's capability to accomplish goals that influence the events in one's life. According to Bandura (1994), self-efficacy beliefs are a determining factor in how we feel, think, behave, and motivate ourselves in the world. Bandura maintained that self-efficacy affects our thinking processes, how we are activated to action, and how we regulate our emotional states. People with high self-efficacy approach life and work with enthusiasm and as a challenge to be mastered. This type of outlook fosters engagement and commitment to goal accomplishment. In the face of failure, such people sustain their efforts and recover quickly after setbacks. People with high self-efficacy see their own efforts as having some control in threatening situations. This type of outlook and belief system, according to Bandura, not only contributes to personal accomplishment but also reduces stress and lowers the risk of depression. Those with low self-efficacy may look at the road ahead with fear or as a threat to be avoided. When pursuing a difficult task, they may dwell on their deficiencies and the obstacles rather than the opportunities. Because they focus on adverse outcomes, Bandura posits that such people are quick to lose faith in themselves and their abilities, and hence more prone to stress and depression.

Bandura (1994) discussed four ways to acquire self-efficacy. First, get firsthand experience in "overcoming obstacles through perseverant effort" (p. 2). These *mastery experiences* are the most effective way to create a strong sense of self-efficacy. Second, be exposed to positive social models who exemplify that a sustained effort to succeed has helped them achieve goals. Third, be persuaded by

others that we have the capability to succeed. This is often accomplished in a coaching role; yet, social persuasion can backfire when unrealistic goals are set that quickly lead to failure. Fourth, reduce stress and improve physiological states. Self-efficacy is developed, according to Bandura, through cognitive and social processes. Most actions that people choose are originated through cognitive thought. Those with higher self-efficacy will normally set high goals for themselves and maintain a commitment to achieving them. People with high self-efficacy cultivate relationships with others and seek out people who can be models in difficult situations.

Bandura (1994) maintained that adolescence is a particularly important time to develop self-efficacy. It is a time when young people must deal with many changes, both physical and emotional. They have a great deal of choice, which plays a key role in developing self-efficacy. As they confront what Erikson (1950) called *role confusion*, they choose activities that cultivate important competencies and social networks that support their interests. Bandura emphasized the role of peers, indicating that being isolated during this time can have adverse effects on self-efficacy. He also said that if adolescents are insulated from problem situations, they do not learn to navigate through problems, a necessary ingredient of initiative and self-efficacy. Like Erikson, Bandura saw adult role models as another key to developing self-efficacy; adult guides help children develop problem-solving and goal-setting skills.

Another feature of initiative is the capacity to make things happen through action. The idea that people can be agents gives us the ability to play an active role in our development and in the construction of our own lifeworlds. Agency, according to social cognitive theory, consists of our self-efficacy belief systems and self-regulatory abilities to act. The four core features of agency are intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness (Bandura, 2001). *Intentionality* involves a proactive behavior to bring about a desired outcome. The realization of goals, however, requires much more than intention, because intention itself is not causal in its effect. For example, one of the challenges in collaborating with others is to combine self-interests and intentions in the service of common goals. *Forethought* is a process of anticipating likely consequences of our actions and finding ways to avoid pitfalls. Forethought provides perspective that guides direction and meaning to action. This is a cognitive process that helps motivate behavior. *Self-reactiveness* is the ability to motivate and self-regulate the execution of our actions toward goal attainment. This process links thought to action, or cognition to behavior. Bandura (2001) claimed that distant goals are not enough to generate motivation, that sub-goals occurring here and now mobilize self-regulation. *Self-reflectiveness* is the ability to reflect on our own actions. Through reflective thought, we evaluate our motives and the meaning of our actions, address conflicts, and choose future actions.

Bandura (2001) substantiates his theory via the field of neuroscience, reinforcing the notion that agentic action plays an important role in shaping the neuronal and functional structure of the brain. Being exposed to stimulation alone does not shape the brain as does agentic action. It is when we explore, experience, and influence our world that our brain forms its functional substrate (Kolb & Whishaw, 1998). Bandura's social cognitive theory acknowledges that cognitive processes are emergent brain activities, which influence behavior. When Erikson (1950) spoke of "attacking a task" (p. 255) as a component of initiative, he, too, realized the importance of agentic action.

Although Bandura's (2001) thinking relies on a social cognitive model of understanding, and Erikson's (1950) on a psychosocial model, the two share some important commonalities. First, Bandura and Erikson both affirmed that initiative affects every aspect of development, transformation, and change. Bandura viewed Erikson's stage of identity development in adolescence as an important time for the development of self-efficacy. Although Erikson introduced the idea of initiative development in preadolescence, he maintained that initiative continues to develop in other stages and is not static. Adding the cognitive focus to Erikson's thinking not only adds validity to his concepts but expands them to a new dimension: how our thoughts affect agentic behavior. Many posit life as largely chance, over which we have little control. But, Bandura (2001) claimed that just because events are fortuitous does not mean they are uncontrollable. A person with initiative, or agency, will turn such events into meaningful, growth experiences. People we meet or information we gather by chance can have profound impacts on life if we take the initiative to create meaning from it. Proactive people use chance encounters for self-development. Erikson's belief in the importance of doing things "beside and with others" (p. 260) as key in the development of both industry and initiative was complementary to Bandura's thinking.

Social cognitive theory takes the idea of human agency beyond Erikson's (1950) focus on individual development, to pursue an understanding of agency at the proxy and collective levels. *Proxy agency* involves the many spheres, both social and institutional, that exert direct control over our lives. Proxy agents can be parents, teachers, social service agencies, legislators, and so on. Proxy agency, depending how it is utilized, can promote or be detrimental to our self-development. Children are more vulnerable to proxy control because it rests on the competency of others, many of whom they are not yet able to judge as being competent. Collective agency represents the power we have to achieve through social interaction. People's shared sense of efficacy in their collective power has the potential to produce desired results. Bandura's (2001) research shows that groups who have a strong perceived collective efficacy withstand setbacks and achieve higher performance (Bandura, 2001). A good deal of cross-cultural research shows the value of efficacy beliefs and

the contribution of initiative to collective, community-oriented as well as individual efforts. In a study of the relationship between self-efficacy and training efforts in multicultural groups, Earley (1994) demonstrated that there was no evidence to connect self-efficacy to one's ethnic background. He also found that self-efficacy was formed through multiple sources, including formal training and coaching of how one can perform more effectively.

Social cognitive theory places mastery life experiences at the heart of initiative development, emphasizing that young people must be actively engaged in overcoming obstacles and persevering with projects over time. Adults foster this initiative by coaching adolescents rather than insulating them from problem-solving and decision-making. Young people benefit from adult role models whose behavior demonstrates that perseverance pays off with success and life satisfaction. A key element of self efficacy is the capacity to make things happen through action, or agency. The features of agency, including intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness is a cognitive process to which parents, educators, and other adults can help guide young people. Encouraging adolescents to identify their personal goals, anticipate the possible consequences of their actions, regulate the execution of their actions, and reflect on experiences will provide a roadmap that over time will become internalized and applicable to new situations. This process illustrates the dynamic aspect of initiative, a phenomenon that exists within all contexts of life. Synthesizing social-cognitive theory with Erikson's (1950) psychosocial theory helps us understand that a good deal of self-efficacy is achieved during Erikson's period of adolescent identity development. This provides grounds to support the idea that adolescence is interconnected with the development of initiative and that it can be fostered by adults during this timeframe. Additional support for this view emerges in personality theory, as well as evidence that specific types of mastery life experiences are keys to nurturing initiative.

### ***Personality Theory***

Deci (1985) offered a counter to Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory of development called *self-determination theory*. Deci's work is motivationally rather than cognitively oriented, and, although it tackles similar concepts, falls more into the realm of personality than developmental theory. Self-determination theory contends that intrinsic motivation and self-determination are vital to understanding our ability to accomplish life goals and that the energy to initiate action is intrinsic in our nature. This intrinsic energy is based on an organismic need to be competent and in charge of our lives.

Self-determination theory contends that not all human change can be explained in terms of development, and that the term *development* pertains to the

progressive accumulation of complex skills and structures that support life. Change that does not support this accrual of abilities cannot be considered developmental. Deci posited that developmental stage theorists do not adequately address the *energization* of development, wherein intrinsic motivation plays a major role. Intrinsic motivation does not require an impetus but naturally occurs in humans striving for self-determination. Personality theorists such as Deci posit that developmental psychology emphasizes the structural rather than energetic aspects of development, the *what* rather than the *why*. They point to theories of cognitive and moral development as failing to address the dynamics inherent in the changes that take place in development, and contend that intrinsic motivation is the primary energizer of development, which they posit as an organismic process. However, they admit that the process of internalizing the structures that produce effective action can be extrinsically motivated.

Deci (1985) supported Erikson's (1950) emphasis on developing trust in the first years of life and the relationship of that trust-building to later development of initiative. The latest research in attachment theory also emphasizes the importance of early bonding to the development of the social brain (Cozolino, 2006). Deci pointed out that early, established, and predictable affective bonding with a caregiver is needed for a child to develop anticipation and self-control, the seeds of initiative in later adolescence. Children who lack this affective bonding have more difficulty developing a high degree of intrinsic motivation and self-regulation. As children evolve into Erikson's stage of autonomy, Deci affirmed that environmental factors begin to have profound affects. For example, in a controlling environment, outcomes are delivered when the child is compliant. In contrast, an informational environment delivers outcomes when the child initiates. Deci hypothesized that because controlling environments foster a dependence on outcomes, they weaken intrinsic motivation. The most damaging environment for a child is when love and acceptance are administered only when a child performs well. These are amotivating experiences that strengthen an impersonal orientation to the world. Any event wherein a child experiences pressure to think, feel, or behave in specific ways is considered controlling. The detrimental effects of this type of situation were shown in a study in which subjects demonstrated a loss of intrinsic motivation when they felt they were doing well for the experimenter rather than themselves (Pittman, Davey, Alafat, Wetherill, & Kramer, 1980). When describing informational environments, Deci referred to the work of Carl Rogers (1951) which emphasized unconditional acceptance and love based on one's existence rather than one's behavior. Within this context of love and acceptance, Deci said that adults must be responsive to a child's initiations and agenda rather than imposing agendas upon the child. This responsiveness conveys a sense of choice to the child that is important to the development of autonomy described in Erikson's second stage.

The theoretical difference between Bandura's (1994, 2001) and Deci's (1985) theories seems to lie in the fact that Bandura posited self-efficacy as an extrinsic concept while Deci maintained the importance of its intrinsic nature. Bandura saw efficacy as key for the attainment of goals but did not discuss the intrinsic satisfaction that efficacy itself provides the individual. Another point of departure and disagreement is with Bandura's claim that proximal goals are more effective than distal goals in developing a sense of accomplishment and motivation in children. Deci saw this as situationally based and not the place for broad conclusions. He cited the work of Manderlink and Harackiewicz (1984) who found the opposite effect, that proximal goals diminished intrinsic motivation while distal goals increased it. Bandura did not address what Deci referred to as controlling versus informational responses to a child's behavior, a factor that Deci saw as highly important to the development of intrinsic motivation. However, Bandura did speak to the importance of not overprotecting children and that such protection diminishes self-efficacy. This environment of overprotection could certainly be considered an example of a *controlling* environment as described by Deci. Deci's theory posits that controlling responses motivating behavior, as do the external rewards of perceived goals; however, Deci said that neither of these situations develops a child with self-determination and initiative. An interesting point of agreement between Deci and Bandura is that neither saw traditional classrooms as environments that are conducive to developing intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, and initiative. Although Bandura spoke of agency and Deci of self-determination, they defined these concepts similarly and both focused their research on creating environmental conditions that facilitate developmental change.

Another important theorist whose work can be placed within the discipline of personality theory is Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1997). He theorized that if we don't take charge of life's direction, our lives will be controlled by external rather than internal forces. We may, for example, be used by a culture to promulgate its values, or by others to further their own agendas. While some people think that life evolves by chance or fate, Csikszentmihalyi posited that personal initiative makes a real difference in whether we end up with a life of content. In his book, *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) he uses the word *initiative* only once, but the psychic energy he describes is very similar to Deci's (1985) description of the organismic energy that sparks intrinsic motivation. Since life is filled with experiences, Csikszentmihalyi contended that those experiences will have an effect on how we develop *flow*.

Csikszentmihalyi (1997) introduced the word *autotelic*, defined from its two Greek roots: *auto* (self) and *telos* (goal). He talked about an autotelic individual as one who is less motivated by external rewards and more motivated by internal flow. People who are autotelic, he claimed, are more independent and autonomous because

they are not as easily influenced by threats or rewards from outside themselves. They are more involved with everything in life and they frequently report placing themselves in high rather than low challenging situations. A study by Adlai-Gail (1994) surveyed 200 very talented teenagers to determine how they arrayed in high or low autotelic groups. The study found that the teenagers who fell into the two groups used their time in very different ways. Teens in the high autotelic group spent 11% more time studying than did the teens rated as low autotelic. In addition, the first group spent twice as much time doing hobbies and sports than the latter. The low autotelic group watched TV twice as much as the high autotelic group. A longitudinal study by Hekmer (1996) showed similar results, and also found that the high autotelic group spent a significantly higher amount of time interacting with their families. Further, in this study, the high autotelic teen was found to have greater levels of concentration, and significantly higher self-esteem, when involved in productive work.

American parents have adopted the virtue of early independence for teenagers. However, Csikszentmihalyi (1997) contended that early autonomy does not promote high autotelic individuals. He claimed that, because today's world is much more complex than previous generations, it is important that parents provide guidance and support for their teens. The results of Hekmer's (1996) study seem to support the idea that autotelic teens spend more time with their parents. Geared toward making a correlation between self-efficacy and achievement, studies have also been conducted with talented and gifted adolescents, comparing such things as self-image and self-esteem to those in the average population of youth. One such study showed that gifted adolescents score similarly to their more average counterparts in this area and score lower on social initiative, often feeling more isolated and "different" from their peers (Whalen & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988). This would indicate that initiative development must be examined through more than a cognitive lens and that it is much broader in its construct.

Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) description of an autotelic individual seems remarkably similar to what Erikson (1950) described as individual initiative and what Bandura (2001) would describe as self-efficacy. Similar to Deci (1985), Csikszentmihalyi said that an autotelic individual has inexhaustible psychic energy, gets involved in projects, goes beyond the obstacles, and likes to problem-solve. Like Erikson, Bandura, and Deci, Csikszentmihalyi affirmed that the attitudes and experiences that are set in the early and adolescent years put us on a path for the rest of our lives and helps us thrive as individuals. Although personality theorists like Deci and Csikszentmihalyi aim to understand the intrinsic energy that ignites initiative, their work further supports the idea that initiative can be fostered through mastery experiences and through intentional support by adults who relate to young people. Deci's description of controlling environments versus informational

environments is readily applicable to an adolescent's daily life. When teenagers are rewarded by outcomes only, such as grades and high performance, they become dependent on those outcomes to motivate them throughout life. Instead, if they are rewarded when they initiate new projects, explore new ways of thinking, or reach out to those in need, they develop patterns of intrinsic motivation that support future independent actions throughout life. The research suggests that school and homework may not provide optimal environments for fostering initiative. This assertion places some urgency on discovering what types of mastery experiences are best environments for initiative development and how adults can help structure, guide, and support those experiences in and outside of schools. Looking at initiative as a multidimensional phenomenon helps us see the interconnectedness of the many contexts that influence its development. Insights from learning theory provide additional concern about traditional classroom environments and further confirmation of the importance of self-efficacy.

### ***Learning Theory***

The importance of personal initiative in learning has long been stressed in the field of education. Zimmerman (1990) defined this initiative as *self-regulated learning*. Zimmerman's research shows that self-regulated learners are usually resourceful, seeking out information and taking steps to master it. When they encounter obstacles, they figure out how to overcome them. They view the acquisition of knowledge as a controllable process and accept personal responsibility for the outcomes they achieve. The cognitive processes used by self-regulated learners include goal-setting, organizing, self-monitoring, and reflection (Corno, 1986). Zimmerman showed that these kinds of learners report high self-efficacy, self-esteem, and a genuine, intrinsic interest in the tasks that they undertake. A further key feature of self-regulated learners is their ability to monitor and react to feedback, altering their strategies when appropriate. Zimmerman asserted that all researchers, regardless of theoretical orientation, agree that self-regulation depends on one's ability to reflect upon and respond to feedback.

One question debated among learning theorists is what determines a student's choice to self-regulate in some situations and not others. Operant theorists claim that self-regulated responses are determined by external rewards or punishments (Mace, Belfiore, & Shea, 1989). Phenomenological theorists believe student learning is motivated by self-actualization (McCombs, 1989). Between these continuums, others, such as Bandura (2001), favor self-efficacy beliefs as a determining factor in self-regulation. Regardless of one's orientation, however, most theorists agree that self-regulation can be improved through positive life experiences.

Zimmerman (1990) pointed out that a great deal of research has been conducted on the role of self-regulated learning and that most studies found that teaching students to self-regulate is very complex and involves many strategies, including goal setting, planning, record keeping, rehearsing, and seeking assistance from others. Zimmerman's research with students from advanced and lower-achieving groups of young people, found that achievement could be predicted with 93% accuracy using student-reported information on their self-regulatory behaviors. One might conclude from this research that teaching lower-achieving children the strategies employed by advanced learners might increase achievement and self-regulation. But, Zimmerman reported that teaching children these strategies has been met with limited success, particularly in grade-school-age students. These children could not use the strategies that were taught, indicating that self-regulation may be a much more complex cognitive activity that requires higher-level reasoning. This certainly supports the neurobiological research indicating that the frontal cortex, the center for metacognitive processes, is not developed until sometime in adolescence (Cozolino, 2006). Following Zimmerman's research and thinking over a 10-year period shows that a theory of initiative requires much more than an understanding of cognition. Zimmerman (2000) came to believe that self-efficacy is the most highly effective predictor of student initiative and learning. He claimed that research on self-efficacy beliefs shows a correlation to academic motivation, and that the outcomes of personal experiences are the most influential for developing self-efficacy. This is highly supportive of social cognitive theory and the work of Bandura (1994, 2001).

If one assumes that formal education prepares students to successfully master the adult world, research on the impact of schoolwork and homework on the development of initiative may elicit great concern. Data indicates that attending school and doing homework, accounting for an average of 25-30% of an adolescent's waking hours, has limited potential for experiencing initiative (Larson, 2000). Although schoolwork provides high levels of concentration and challenge, because it is a mental effort that is within the control of others, it does not have a key ingredient of intrinsic motivation. Additional research has confirmed this dilemma, showing a pattern of concentration without the presence of intrinsic motivation during schoolwork (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993; Leone & Richards, 1989). Thus, it appears that the absence of intrinsic motivation during schoolwork does not facilitate the development of initiative. Yet, there may be exceptions to this conclusion. For example, could more creative curriculum development increase intrinsic motivation? What if students were given more input into the development of their own projects? Indeed, some researchers have suggested ways to make schoolwork more intrinsically motivating (Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1993) and this is certainly an area for additional study.

When youth develop initiative, they learn to develop goals and think strategically. They learn the type of language that helps them succeed, the interpersonal skills to work with others, and the emotional skills to overcome disappointments. Larson (2005) argued that strategic thinking is an important aspect of initiative and a necessary ingredient of exercising agency within human and institutional systems. He explored this type of strategic thinking in an after-school program in which adolescents were working for social change. Larson contended that for young people of today to become the leaders of tomorrow, they will need to negotiate the formal and informal systems that exist in the complex world. He particularly noted that these skills are needed for activists and social entrepreneurs, to address social injustices and environmental problems. Research shows that during the stage of adolescence, youth become able to think systemically (Mascolo, Fisher, & Neimeyer, 1999). It is theorized that, by mid-adolescence, young people are able to understand complex human and organizational systems, but that it is not until late adolescence that they can effectively coordinate their actions to affect those systems. During adolescence, youth develop new skills in understanding how other people think and feel differently from themselves and ways to influence others (Selman, 2003). This is consistent with Keating's (2004) research on adolescent cognitive brain development, showing a growth in executive functioning and maturing of the prefrontal cortex. It is as a result of this neurobiological development that adolescents are able to better reason, plan, respond to feedback, and self-regulate. However, an important learning from developmental research is that, despite an adolescent's maturing in the area of executive functioning, it is real life experiences that determine how well the young person will evolve as a strategic thinker (Friedman & Scholnick, 1997; Gauvain & Perez, 2005). In fact, the research in neurobiology has also linked experience as having a positive effect on brain development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Studies are beginning to show that initiative may best be fostered in young people who participate in specific types of learning environments outside of school (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1993; Larson & Kleiber, 1993; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997). In one study of youth involved in a community action program in Chicago, Larson (2000) found that a youth activism program can be a rich environment for the development of initiative and agency, and that those agentic skills carry over into other aspects of the adolescent's life. The data also showed that the program's structure and adult support provided essential components of the developmental experience.

An important aspect of some research suggests that language can be an important contributor to initiative development in these after-school programs as well. McLaughlin, Irby, and Langman (1994) studied youth in environments that had been structured to promote initiative. These organizations had numerous

commonalities. First, although the original visions for the organizations came from adults, the direction and goals for the activities came from the youth participants. The agency was placed with youth who held responsibility for setting goals, raising funds, solving problems, deciding schedules, etc. The organizations depended on the youth's intrinsic motivation; otherwise they would not succeed. Second, the organizations all had real-world constraints that demanded challenge and complexity. Third, they all involved a commitment over time. Therefore, stages of planning, practice, rehearsal, etc. were required. What evolved from observation of youth in these programs was a profound linguistic change. They began using conditional statements, like "If we use A or B, then we need to consider C." They increased their use of language that is typically engaged in problem-solving, such as the words *should*, *could*, and *would*. They sharpened their use of clarifying statements, which Larson (2000) called an *operating language for initiative*.

Linking the research from learning theory back to Erikson's (1950) stage theory of development yields some important, but not insurmountable, differences. It now seems clear that preadolescent children, in the stage of initiative described by Erikson, do not have the executive functions of their brains developed well enough to engage in the type of planning and strategic thinking necessary to experience initiative at a mature level of development. However, Erikson did not claim that the development of initiative ends before adolescence. In fact, he pointed out that the more complex the society, the longer and more challenging initiative development becomes (Erikson, 1950). It may be logical to surmise, through Erikson's model, that the unfolding that occurs throughout childhood culminates in adolescence through the challenge of identity development, at which time young people define and redefine themselves in many ways. This redefining would most certainly include the reemergence of both previous stages: seeking the virtues of direction and purpose as well as method and competence.

The evidence from learning theory and neurobiological studies clearly supports the argument that adolescence is an important timeframe in which young people develop initiative, strategic thinking skills, and the self-regulatory behaviors necessary for sustained success over the lifespan. It also becomes clear that merely teaching students the skills of self-regulated learning is not sufficient for success; they require the underlying self-efficacy beliefs to ignite the internal energy that motivates them to learn, problem-solve, and respond to life challenges. Learning theory further supports the contention that initiative is not simply related to cognitive ability or IQ, that all children have the potential for developing a belief in their capability to accomplish goals that influence events in their lives. Although adolescence is a period of brain maturation in the area of executive functioning, learning theorists, like those in previously discussed disciplines, point to the importance of real life mastery experiences that help adolescents gain a sense of

intrinsic motivation. Understanding an operating language of initiative may provide helpful ways for adults to guide and reinforce helpful ways of communicating with children, long before the adolescent years. An important confirmation from the research on self-regulated learning is that self-reflection skills are vital to initiative and self efficacy development. As adults seek to foster initiative in children and adolescents, it is important to help them engage in reflective practice, nurturing an internal ability to reassess goals, consider obstacles, and redirect action when appropriate. The self-reflective aspect of initiative is further explored within the context of culture, through symbolic action theory.

### ***Symbolic Action Theory***

Within the discipline of cultural psychology, Ernst Boesch's (1991, 1997) symbolic action theory adds deeper understanding to the construct of initiative. His concept of action was based on the belief that all action is symbolic and results from progressive integration of human experience. Rather than seeing initiative and action resulting from the need to determine our future, like Deci (1985), Boesch (1997) implied that a more philosophic reason exists: Individuals seek autonomy, creativity, and dignity. These types of goals, he said, lead to a more human life and, as such, can be viewed through art, music, and various cultural phenomenon. He claimed that many people use creativity to transform adversity in their lives, taking the individual responsibility for constructing their lives. In contrast, using a deterministic focus, if we initiate action based on perceived extrinsic reward of goal accomplishment, we can attribute extraneous factors on the failures of the systems around us. We can also claim our personal disappointments are the result of the circumstances of our upbringing or parentage, stress, money, etc and thereby shift the blame. Boesch believed that individuals want dignity and are motivated to act in ways that bring it to their lives. He saw human beings as creators and constructors of their own lives.

Boesch's (1991) basic premise was that any developmental theory must not only incorporate the affects of culture and historical context but must also be based on a theory of action. The reason that culture becomes an important consideration in the study of initiative is that individual intentions and actions alone cannot explain social phenomenon. At the same time, individual initiative is often affected by social and cultural experiences and, in turn, collective initiative. For a theory of initiative to be developed, it must look at the micro, meso, and macro theoretical aspects of initiative and the interdependence between them. Through an action-oriented approach to understanding goal attainments and adjustment to losses, Brandtstädter and Rothermund (2002) built upon Boesch's thinking, noting that we develop both *offensive* and *defensive* moves. On one hand, having goals seems to motivate us in life, and has been shown to be a significant predictor of satisfaction (Brunstein,

Schultheiss, & Maier, 1999). On the other hand, when obstacles get in the way of attaining goals or are simply unattainable, initiative can be a source of dissatisfaction. Brandtstädter and Rothermund saw this continual readjustment of goals and actions as one of the keys to resiliency throughout the lifespan. He proposed that our actions toward goal accomplishment are both assimilative and accommodative. Assimilative action comprises the intentionality to attain a closer fit with our goals, while accommodative action comprises the ability to modify our goals given new information. The balance between assimilative and accommodative action is affected, and in turn affects, an individual's self-efficacy (Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002). Brandtstädter's and Rothermund's research was primarily with adults, including those who reach old age. However, this is important work for the field of adolescent development, because any attempts to influence the development of initiative in young people should be informed by the implications through the lifespan. We should help young people develop the skills and assets that will benefit them through life. In some ways, Brandtstädter and Rothermund seemed to be integrating the concepts of free will and determinism, proposing that we have control over many aspects of our lives but must assert action to adapt to those aspects over which we have limited control. They would agree that initiative plays a major role in *assimilative* activities, which involve intentionality and agency. In contrast, *accommodative* processes involve the type of self-regulatory action described by Zimmerman (1990).

Although Erikson (1950) did not specifically speak to cultural influences on development, he certainly validated the idea that growth and development is dependent on culture and the historical context in which one lives. In fact, Erikson's (1950) discussion of Hitler, John Henry, and the children from American Indian tribes demonstrates concurrence with Boesch (1991) and Brandtstädter and Rothermund (2002), that culture plays a significant role in development. In linking of initiative with moral responsibility, Erikson also tied agency to culture. This thinking was also supported by Bandura (2001), as he discussed moral agency in relationship to self-directedness and argued that most theories of morality focus too heavily on cognitive moral reasoning rather than moral conduct. He believed that moral agency must link cognition to conduct. Bandura said that moral agency has two aspects: inhibitive and proactive. The inhibitive form of moral agency is the self-regulatory power to refrain from breaking rules and social norms. The proactive form is the power to behave morally. Thus, the construct of initiative takes shape as a complex cultural phenomenon as well as a psychological, social, and cognitive experience.

Cultural psychology and symbolic action theory has the potential to provide useful solutions to real-life problems in contemporary society, to answer the question *Where does our motivation to take initiative in the world originate?* The theory

contends that deep emotional processes lead people to act within their social worlds. So, in a real sense, Boesch (1991) suggested a dialectic explanation of development: a conflict between the inner self and the external world. This conflict energizes us and makes us act in certain ways. This is not dissimilar to Erikson's (1950) contention that each stage of development has a crisis to resolve, and that we constantly struggle, internally and externally, to find meaning in life. Symbolic action theory further supports self-reflection as an important skill of initiative, making clear that efforts to engage adolescents in reflective activities may contribute to fostering initiative as well as developing self-regulatory behaviors. Our ability to reflect on personal goals, life circumstances, and symbols of society itself can result in either assimilative or accommodative processes, both essential to the concept of initiative. By expanding the context of initiative to our cultural world, we begin to see further complexities of the phenomenon and its interconnectedness to moral responsibility. For moral agency to occur, those actions that contribute to making positive change in the world, we must pay attention to the interconnectedness of our psychological, social, cognitive, and cultural worlds. Providing young people with early experiences that build a sense of self-efficacy will foster the development of initiative and provide benefits throughout adulthood. Epistemological differences, combined with a complex set of theories and definitions of initiative, have presented challenges to the study of this construct; however some promising trends may provide additional insights for helping adolescents through this difficult period of identity development.

### **Debates, Challenges, and Trends**

Two distinct views of reality present challenges to the study and understanding of initiative. One view posits that we are born with an innate energy that determines our personality and drive in life; the other says that we are constructors of our own realities. This conflict has fueled the debate between determinism and free will in the field of psychology for many years. It is likely a debate that will continue: that we are simultaneously neurobiological systems subject to the laws of nature and also conscious actors who follow societal and cultural laws but often feel compelled and free to do otherwise. Researchers who adopt a deterministic stance might say that we are born with an attitude or develop it very early in life and that it is not easy to change to become autotelic or achieve flow (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Deci & Ryan, 1985). However, a longitudinal study of teenagers that measured the frequency of flow over a 1-week period and then again 2 years later showed that 20% of them significantly increased and 20% significantly decreased their autotelic behaviors (Hekmer, 1996). Those who increased flow were involved in more high-challenge, high-skill experiences like studying and

participation in active leisure activities. Even research in neurobiology emphasizes the role of human experience in the development of the brain (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Despite the ontological differences between determinism and free will, it appears an important point of agreement is that our life experiences do have impact on the development of initiative.

One significant challenge to the study of initiative is that no comprehensive theory of initiative currently exists. It is clear that initiative is related to self-efficacy and the capacity for agency that has been described by Bandura (1994), and to intrinsic motivation as illustrated by Deci and Ryan (1985). Numerous concepts of initiative, like autotelic and flow as portrayed by Csikszentmihalyi (1997), and symbolic action as explained by Boesch (1991), are important contributors to understanding the construct of initiative in Erikson's (1950) stage-development theory. It appears, too, that self-regulatory behaviors enable us to accommodate for changes in plans or for life's unexpected detours (Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002). These concepts provide a basis for belief that initiative may also be a key aspect of creativity, leadership, altruism, entrepreneurship and civic engagement (Larson, 2000).

Current research is beginning to merge the various epistemologies described in this paper in an effort to study initiative in ways that will help young people develop into active, productive, and engaging adults (e.g., Heath, 1997, April 21; Larson, 2000). Most researchers believe that initiative emerges partly from an adolescent's daily life experiences, through sports, hobbies, arts, organizations, and through the social interactions that support those experiences. Yet, finding the experiences that foster this development will require additional research. Several studies suggest that, with the exception of sports heroes, adolescents do not have many adult role models to which they aspire (Balswick & Ingoldsby, 1982; McCormack, 1984). Some ascribe this situation to the complexity and multitude of adult occupations today and that many poor youth have little contact with successful adults (Wilson, 1996). Larson (2000) suggested that images of adult careers do not have enough pull to motivate most adolescents to take initiative in their own lives. He posited that initiative needs to be propelled rather than pulled. In part, this better meets the needs of our changing global economy, wherein individuals change jobs frequently and the future is much more unstable than it once was. For this propulsion to happen, adolescents need the experiences and opportunities that build and develop initiative.

Reed Larson (2000), a professor at the University of Chicago, is one of several current researchers whose work has focused on initiative development in adolescents. In a commentary on the sociology of adolescence in the 1990s, Furstenberg (2000) referred to Larson's work as one of the most important of the

decade. Combining many of the concepts outlined in this paper, Larson (2000) identified three elements of initiative and intrinsic motivation:

- a deep, voluntary desire to be invested in an activity or experience;
- experienced in an environment that contains the types of rules, challenges, and complexities inherent in the real world; and
- occurring over a period of time, which ensures that the activity or experience includes obstacles that are overcome and adjustments of strategies.

Larson argued that all three elements must be experienced together in order for initiative to be developed. Larson's concept of initiative draws from multiple disciplines and epistemologies, an approach that is likely to contribute to the research in valuable ways. Like others, Larson agreed that adolescence is a particularly good time to develop initiative because of the acquisition of more formal operational reasoning and strategies for self-regulation. To date, Larson's research has focused on structured after-school programs, certainly one excellent environment to explore the construct of initiative development. However, to fully understand how adults can foster initiative during childhood and adolescence, many other contexts must be explored, including parenting practices, school curriculum, and the many other creative endeavors in which youth are involved.

### **Implications for Further Research**

Clearly, the construct of initiative and how it is fostered in adolescents need further theoretical exploration and additional studies. Furstenberg (2000) noted accurately that researchers have spent far too much time looking at adolescence in single rather than multiple contexts, and that future studies should focus on multiple contexts simultaneously. For example, we should be looking at the influence of parents, educators, after school programs, etc., all within the same study. He also said researchers have not conducted enough qualitative studies of how youth and their parents, mentors, and teachers "construct the world and negotiate the processes that lead to success and failure" (p. 905). The social construction of success should receive more attention. And "cognitive, affective, and social arenas" (p. 905) should be studied together. Larson (2000) said that qualitative and longitudinal action research are needed to help understand the process of initiative development. One suggested strategy is to identify individuals and/or groups who show exemplary initiative, and then look backward to the longitudinal data to see how their processes differed from those who were less successful. Larson also urged that researchers must study the possible negative effects of youth activities, including competitive sports.

Numerous gaps in the literature on initiative development require further study. While the importance of experiences and activities that foster initiative have been shown through numerous studies, what is not as clear is how parents, educators, and other adults help nurture the formation of initiative through relational efforts. The suggestion by one study (McLaughlin et al., 1994) that a *language of agency* develops in young people who are engaged in a social action project provides a basis to explore how parents and educators might use language to facilitate strategic thinking and agency in teenagers. Studied within the context of the workplace, Kegan and Lahey (2001) explored the *language of transformation* used by adults who successfully facilitate change. A similar examination of the types of internal and social languages used in the development of initiative could lead to helpful insights for parents, educators, and other adults involved in positive youth development. While mastery life experiences seem to be a key in the development of initiative, few researchers have studied the lived experience of adolescents who clearly demonstrate initiative in their daily lives. Qualitative studies that explore the psychological, social, cognitive, and cultural contexts of initiative would add greatly to the literature. This could be accomplished through qualitative studies of how exemplary adolescents view their own development of initiative, using questions that delve into multiple arenas such as after-school activities, life experiences, school, parents, teachers, peers, community, and so on.

Greatly important is the idea that culture contributes to the understanding of initiative, from both individual and societal perspectives. If we look at initiative as being able to achieve good or evil, we must examine the cultural tools and symbols that cause young people to act in certain ways. Valsiner (2004) demonstrates how individual initiative can be sparked by ideologies, social institutions and leaders and provided numerous examples of social practices that impact the initiative of many people. One such example showed how the Chinese Cultural Revolution directly bypassed all other environmental and social influences on the child and adolescent, helping these young people initiate changes to society based on the wishes of a government. Cultural psychology assumes a systems approach to understanding the phenomenon of initiative, insisting that all individual motivation and action are connected to a web of variables. Within the world of today's adolescent, it is probable that culture of a different type may influence the development of initiative: that of the media, information technology or the unique cultural bubble of adolescence itself. Although this appears to be a social arena that could spark initiative toward good or evil, it does not appear in the research related to initiative, agency, or self-efficacy. Returning to Erikson (1950), although he emphasized the dialectical conflicts at each stage of individual development, he did not ignore the social and cultural contexts that affect development at each stage. In looking at terrorism or youth violence, for example, what sparks a young person's initiative to

join forces with Osama Bin Laden or plan and execute an attack on fellow school students, cannot be explained through simply defined phenomena. Whether such young people were intrinsically motivated, as defined by Deci (1985), or extrinsically motivated according to Bandura (1994), the overriding cultural variables may have played a major role in shaping these young people's motivation to act. It is unlikely that scientists will find a gene or trait for violence, or a link to a parenting style, early attachment, or a particular life experience. Clearly, more studies examining cultural influences on initiative are needed to help explain both its impact on the individual and society.

## Conclusion

Erikson's (1950) model, which shows how young people unfold through six stages of development, is a helpful foundation on which to build an understanding of initiative. Although this psychosocial model focuses on the inner and outer resolution of crisis at each stage of development, it also recognizes the impact of cognition and culture. This stage theory, posited as a *global form of thinking*, enables us to build upon it using new models of understanding in different historical contexts. Erikson's recurrent theme, that childhood and adolescence affect our later life and the life of society itself, has been born out in the research on initiative, agency, intrinsic motivation, and self-efficacy from multiple disciplines of study (e.g., Bandura, 1994; Boesch, 2001; Brandtstädter & Rothermund, 2002; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Zimmerman, 1990, 2000).

Whether initiative is determined at birth or actively constructed through the developmental process, the period of adolescence is a particularly important time in which to foster its development. To determine how learning curriculum, activities, life experiences, relationships with adults, and other variables influence a young person's ability to develop the self-efficacy and agency required to become productive adults is complex and multidimensional. An understanding cannot be reached by looking at cognitive, social, psychological, or cultural processes alone, but must be examined through a multidisciplinary effort. Research on initiative must also be integrated with research on resiliency, self-regulation, identity development, and moral development. Given the data and theoretical models that have informed the study of initiative, it may be concluded that development is formed through initiative, and initiative is also formed by development. For better or worse, the youth of today will initiate tomorrow's actions. Adults have the opportunity to nurture these actions, helping create young people who believe in their ability to influence their lives and the world. To turn our backs on this opportunity would be contrary to everything Erikson (1950) expected of a society, to "lighten the

inescapable conflicts of childhood” (p. 277) and create the best conditions for human growth and development.

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