

# Development theory related to the comedy drama shameless



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## Abstract

Main objective for this paper is to examine the effects of a person's development specific to child development using the analysis of a fictional character, Fiona Gallagher from Showtimes Shameless. To explore human development of Fiona, we will examine three different developmental theories at various stages through her life. This paper will focus on the character of choice without losing sight of the family structure as a whole. The creators of Shameless have used their show as a platform to accurately portray an American family in turmoil. The show's creators have taken societal topics (alcoholism, addiction, mental health, teen pregnancy, neglect, food insecurity) and created a realistic viewpoint for their audience.

Keywords: addiction, family system, resilience

Shameless is a comedy-drama on Showtime that depicts the life of the Gallagher's, a dysfunctional poverty-stricken family of eight living southside Chicago. The family is made up of six children and two parents whom have no steady parental involvement. The six siblings whom range in age from 2-23 years old are left to fend for themselves in every aspect of daily life. Parents, Frank and Monica both suffer from substance addiction with Monica, the mother also suffering from mental illness. When Monica deserts the family, Fiona at seventeen years old and the oldest of the six children is left to be caretaker of the younger siblings.

Gruber and Taylor (2006) argue the importance of analyzing how the family is affected by addiction. Looking at family addiction through a systems perspective, it is clear to see the adverse effects on the family through <https://assignbuster.com/development-theory-related-to-the-comedy-drama-shameless/>

distorted or missing family roles (Gruber & Taylor, 2006). A functional family has different roles than an addicted family. The addicted family follows the alcoholic family model through its different roles: the addict, enabler, hero, scapegoat, placate, mascot, and the lost child. In the case of the Gallagher children each one has a clear depicted role based on Gruber and Taylors description. Although Fiona Gallagher is the hero and caretaker of her 5 siblings she is also the clear enabler of her father's addiction by not only allowing a repetitive revolving door of Frank but, she is also consistently not recognizing the effect that he has on the family. It is almost as if he is ignored until he is needed for a specific action, example a school meeting of child services investigation.

Fiona is also portrayed throughout the seasons as a young woman struggling between the role of caretaker and her instinct to grow her own life independently from the family she has lead over. With a clear understanding from what is right and wrong, Fiona parents her siblings with a mix of authoritative and permissive forms. With addiction being the primary disabling agent for this family we begin to see a balance happen among the siblings within different roles that they have taken on over the years.

The maternal side of Fiona is very eminent in this scene as she expresses the concern about the lack of money with her no-nonsense belief that she will figure it all out and they do not need to worry. Fiona being the lead and continuing the pattern of being the adult in charge continues throughout the series. The siblings have an adapted sense of family loyalty that is reflected in the very first episode when we see all of them pulling their money together from their summer jobs to pay the bills.

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When analyzing and researching the different theories of development we begin to understand how a person evolves; morally, cognitively and analytically. According to Piaget, the formal operational stage, where logical thinking extends to abstract and “ formal” thinking, has an age range of twelve and older (Broderick and Blewitt, 2014, p. 13) The two theories that we will look at are Erik Erikson’s 8 stages of development theory which is a focus on psychosocial development. The second theory will be Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Theory that looks at the systems surrounding the person being studied.

The reason we will discuss these theories in respect to Fiona Gallagher is so that we can look at Fiona’s development morally while also allowing for an understanding of how the larger systems in our environments play a role in the formation of individual development. With addiction being the background issue through this television drama it is important to note that Research suggests that a risk for addiction may be inherited (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). Children of addicts and alcoholics are more likely to develop an addiction than children with parents who don’t suffer from addiction.

Erik Erikson’s theory breaks down life into multiple groups/stages to get a more accurate consensus on an individual’s development. Erikson states that our development is linked to the societal conflicts we face within each of the eight stages. An important aspect in Erikson’s theory is that each stage is marked by a conflict that helps the individual’s psychological development. When the person resolves each one of the conflicts/stages they experience a change in both their psychological and cognitive maturity. It is also <https://assignbuster.com/development-theory-related-to-the-comedy-drama-shameless/>

understood that each stage may have its own conflict the conflict does not need to be resolved to move into the next stage and it should also be noted that a person's development may be altered within one stage many times over. When looking specifically at the stages of development depicted by Erikson one can assume that the character Fiona Gallagher is relegated within Stage V; Identity v role confusion due to being conflicted on a consistent basis throughout all eight seasons with the internal battle of what her true role within her family is.

Below is a look at each stage and its relation to Fiona Gallagher.

#### Stage 1: *Trust vs Mistrust*

Fiona has developed a sense of mistrust. Because the parenting Fiona received when she was younger was inconsistent, unpredictable, and unreliable she has gained an untrusting belief for adults and those in authority. The mistrust is a reoccurring theme throughout the show and is very showing when Fiona or any of the Gallagher children are faced with state agencies. By failing in this stage, Fiona does not lead to hope and instead leads to the development of fear.

#### Stage 2: *Autonomy vs Shame*

Due to a childhood with minimal parental involvement, Fiona succeeds in autonomy. Lack of parenting allowed for Fiona to not be criticized or overly controlled, which did not allow for a sense of shame to develop. This is an ever-present issue with those growing up in poverty and families of addiction.

### Stage 3: Initiative vs Guilt

In this stage, Fiona succeeds in initiative, which leads her to a sense of purpose. This stage is typically where a child will try to assume adult tasks. Because her parents are not available to stop Fiona from initiative activities, she doesn't develop the sense of guilt or annoyance which could for a child transcend into guilt.

### Stage 4: Industry vs Inferiority

Fiona fails in this stage and goes to inferiority. With no one to encourage or reinforce her to do well at home, as well as not having much luck with teachers, due to a poor school system, she is not led to the virtue of competence. Examples of this are the menial jobs and lack of self-care.

### Stage 5: Identity vs Role Confusion

This is the stage of development that is a continuous struggle for Fiona. Although she technically succeeds in this stage, by acknowledging the two identities involved (sexual and occupational) she is unable to distinguish her role as a sister vs. her maternal instinct. Fiona identifies her gender as female and drops out of school to be the primary caregiver of her siblings.

### Stage 6: Young Adulthood, Intimacy vs. Isolation

Fiona fails at this stage, due mainly to the mistrust developed in Stage 1. This developed sense of mistrust with adults has made it difficult for Fiona to develop intimate, committed relationships with others. We also see that as Fiona is maturing she is beginning to develop a sense of isolation; Staying away from the familial home, relinquishing control to others in the family.

*Because we are looking at a fictional character who is currently mid-twenties in age the following two views are based solely on what has already been stated.*

#### Stage 7: Middle Adulthood, Care or Self Absorption

Fiona will succeed at the care aspect. With the recent reconnection with her best friend and her willingness to help her younger sister with her child we can begin to see Fiona becoming more well-rounded. With the purchase of an apartment building and a possible shift in the idea of living completely alone, we can assume that the positive outcome of this stage will take precedent.

#### Stage 8: Old Adulthood, Wisdom or Regret

We can presume that Fiona will be able to impart some wisdom on the younger generations of her family along with allowing herself grace in her own flaws. Erikson states that in Stage 8, one can realize the dignity of their own life. With the amount of time, love and compassion that Fiona has given her family along with the selflessness she has shown over the years it is safe to say that she will meet this stage of life.

One of the moral dilemmas for Fiona is the one many of our current elders are facing due to the opioid epidemic we currently face in our nation. Who will take care of my family? While the show depicts a young 20something choosing to put her life aside to take custody of her five siblings, we are witnessing multi-generational living and caretaking of our youth by their grandparents. Our systems that are put in place to protect and care for children are at max capacity. The Gallagher children have also gained a <https://assignbuster.com/development-theory-related-to-the-comedy-drama-shameless/>

sense of mistrust with the government systems put in place to help them which increases the stress within the family.

## References

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Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory stresses an importance of studying a child within the multiple environments that surround them to gain a clearer understanding of the individuals' development. The Bioecological theory consists of four different systems; microsystem, mesosystem, ecosystem and macrosystem. With the Gallagher family, it is important to emphasize that addiction plays a large role in their development as individuals and as a family.

The *microsystem* is the smallest and is comprised of the family, daycare, neighborhood, school, etc. The Gallagher children live together in a single-family row house. The father, comes and goes freely. Extended family is non-



existent. None of the children go to daycare. School is a consistent with the children, facilitated by Fiona.

The *mesosystem* and it is still comprised of those listed in the microsystem but on a larger scale. The Gallagher's live below poverty level within the inner city of Chicago. The neighborhood is frequented with crime. The neighborhood schools are rampant with drug use both by staff and students. Daycare is done by neighbors (Debbie Gallagher, age 11 was the prime summer spot while Fiona slept) and at an overwhelming number of children at one time. The neighborhood bar is where we can find Frank most often and the local police are continuously shown bringing Frank home usually unconscious.

The *exosystem* is about what influences the child even though he may not interact directly within it. Examples can include neighbors, influences at school, home life, social media, peer groups, etc.

The *macrosystem* is the largest environment that shapes all the other microsystems. This includes attitudes and ideologies of the culture (laws, rules in a school, etc). Fiona has grown up on a culture of drugs, alcohol and a consistent belief that this is the way life is. Fiona struggles with the battle of doing what is right for her family and what is acceptable by the laws set forth. We see the continued effects of her environment throughout, specifically the consistent presence of drugs and law enforcement.

The community system plays a large role in the way each family member establishes themselves within their inner and outer circles. The Gallagher children are consistently in fight or flight mode of living. The systems put in <https://assignbuster.com/development-theory-related-to-the-comedy-drama-shameless/>

place for protecting children is an actual nemesis for them based on the history of them being split up and placed in different living alternatives.

Although, we see them thrive in the culture they are being raised we should continue to look at ways we could improve the macrosystems.