

Erikson's theory of lifespan development



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Erik Erikson was born on June 15th, 1902 and died May 12th, 1994. Erikson was a developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst. He was known for his theory on social development of human beings and is famous for creating the phrase 'identity crisis'. Erikson is one of the only biggest followers and challengers of Freud. Over the years Erikson's clinical work and studies have been based either on children, students, victims of the World War two, civil rights workers, and American Indians. When Erikson started to look at these studies, he started to believe that Freud misjudged some important points of human development.

Throughout this essay, Erikson's theory of lifespan development will be explored, discussed, and evaluated. Erikson's work will also be compared to Freud's studies and research, to establish an understanding of where Erickson's ideas came from. Freud has, by largely influenced the psychosocial image that Erickson has. For example, both Erickson and Freud agree that every person is born with a number of basic instincts. These range from development which occurs through stages, and that the order of these stages is subjective by biological maturation (Sigelman, and Shaffer 1992). Erikson and Freud also believe that personality has three components: the id, the ego, and the superego. Although Erikson and Freud have some of the same ideas, Erikson does argue that social and cultural influences have a critical role in shaping a humans development, and that a human's development has less to do with the idea of sexual urges.

Erikson then discusses the 'nurture' side of the nature. Erikson argued against Freud that the nurture was as equally significant in lifespan development. This 'nurture' view, points out the stress on environmental

forces within Erikson's model. Experiences that we have in life, the things that we learn, the social changes that happen every day, and the culture changes that happen have a very big role in a human's lifespan development according to Erickson.

Erikson and Freud, both agree that there are five stages of development, but Erikson was the first to recognize and add the three stages of adults. Erikson (1950, 1968) argues against Freud's point that 'we develop in psychosocial stages, rather than in psychosexual stages'. From this quotation, we can see that Erikson believes that our lifespan development is due to the society and Freud believes that the human lifespan development was due to the human behaviour, which was sexual in nature. Erikson argued that humans develop and change throughout their entire life as Freud, argued that humans gain their personality in the first five years of them being born. Erikson shows that personality advances through a number of different confrontations you have in different stages of your life. In each different stage, Erikson believed people experience a disagreement point of their life that assists/makes a turning point in the lifespan development. In Erikson's view, these disputes are focused on either developing a psychological quality or failing to develop it. During the turning points in the lifespan development, the rate of personal growth is very high, but on the other hand, there is also potential for failure.

A key point of Erikson's psychosocial stage theory was the development of the ego identity. Ego identity is the sense of an individual's development through their social communication. Erikson's theory includes the whole of the human lifespan development. Erikson looks upon a person as an individual having responsibility during each stage of development. Erikson,
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therefore, puts less emphasis on the id and in its place, places more emphasis on the ego. In Erickson's view, human beings are logical people whose thoughts, feelings, and actions are largely controlled by the ego. According to Erikson, our ego changes all the time, due to new events that happen in our lives. Erikson believed that if a person was to come across a difficult part of their life, that it could change the point of development. This could be either developing a psychological quality early or not developing it at all. At these different times in people's lives the likelihood of person development is high, but on the other hand it could go terrible wrong and failure could arise. Erickson shows that a person's personality can change through what happens in their lives, but the effectiveness of Erickson's theory depends on the usefulness of a number of Freud's concepts upon which it is built. Like id, ego and super-ego. The part that makes a person's personality cannot be monitored. Therefore, some people may disagree with Erikson, that his theory is flawed because the concepts cannot be measured.

Over the years, a number of studies have been researched using the Marcia's scheme. Erickson's theory may be correct as through different stages of our life cycle physical changes occur, which could affect an individual's body image or sense of physical self-belief. However, Erickson's ideas show the fact that the research was not obtained via any large-scale surveys. It was in fact only based on his own observations, and his clinical practice. Therefore there is no evidence to support the findings of identity is actually achieved. James Marcia (1966), developed an interview technique to assess 'identity status'. This involved asking questions to different people about

occupation, religion, political belief, and attitudes to sexual areas. Depending on the answer that was given the person would be placed into one of four groups. These groups were confusion, where the individual has not yet started thinking about identity seriously, foreclosure, where a commitment has been made but without going through a crisis, moratorium, where the individual is going through a 'crisis', and finally achievement, where the individual has been through the 'crisis' and has reached a resolution. The most relevant piece of research Meilman (1979). The research conducted was a cross-sectional study on 12-24-year-old males. The results revealed that just over half of the subjects had reached identity achievement at 24 years. From these results, we can see that identity achievement must continue in the years of adulthood. Another research project was O'Connell (1976). O'Connell found parallel results when he carried retrospective interviews with married women who had school aged children. The women that were interviewed described how their 'identity' became more apparent to themselves as they became older and wiser. This was from married, to finding a job, to having children. These findings from both research projects conclude that 'identity' development plays quite a big part in people's lifespan development.

In evaluating the positive side of Erickson's work, there are some downsides to it. The explanations that both Freud and Erickson have put forward are all very good but the main concepts of psychoanalytic theories have been proven very difficult to test scientifically. This may be due to them; much of the information that was given was a reconstruction from the past, so there is no known amount of accuracy. In addition, the psychoanalytic theories present

a very cold and negative image of humans, portraying us as a staged book. The psychoanalytic theories are also very culture and gender based especially in Freud's theories. On the other hand, humans' personality can be developed and help in life if we all have a better understanding of the stages a person normally meets at a certain age. Early experiences in life have also seemed to play a big part in the lifespan development. Lastly, many people find that Erickson's theory on our rational, adaptive nature and social influences understands the individual a lot more through the lifespan development stages than Freud's, unconscious, irrational behaviour in biological needs. Erickson's eight stages have seemed to capture more life experiences that people have every day, which has a greater impact on adulthood.

In conclusion, Erickson's works is directly related to the work of Freud. Erickson does not try to make something different from the basics of psychoanalysis but instead, enhances them by adding more lifespan development stages. In the eight stages that Erickson researched and commented, he was also able to demonstrate the nature of their influence on individual identity. Erickson and Freud still have some overlapping problems that not all these stages can be scientifically proven, therefore some on the lifespan development stages can be very vague and difficult to test. Both Freud and Erickson provide us with an explanation of what show happen and how it should happen at each stage, but this does not provide a clear-cut picture and explanation about how this lifespan development happens. Erickson and Freud continue to this day to shape our understanding of how our lifespan development works and how we come

about it, but there are increasingly other theories that people are starting to believe in, as they can be test, so they are more accurate.