

Theories of lifespan and human growth



G Stanley Hall's Adolescence and his original theory will be outlined in some detail. More contemporary theories of psycho-sexual, psycho-social and behaviourist psychology will be compared to Hall's findings and comparisons and contrasts will be made. The period of "storm and stress", penned by Hall, will be defined and more recent arguments against it raised, using contemporary research statistics. Erikson's psycho-social theory on Adolescence and the idea of the 'identity crisis' will be further explained. This will be followed up by a description of Freud's "genital" stage of adolescence and a comparison between Freud and Erikson will be made, with additional reference to the Nature v Nurture conflict. Levenson et al.'s theory of 4 stages, or 'eras' will be explained and his theory of pre-adulthood explored further. Finally, details of biological research regarding brain function in adolescents will be described and comparisons will be made to other psychological theories.

The study of life span and its stages is an integral part of the process of psychological theory with regard to human growth and development. There are eight life stages, beginning with Conception, Pregnancy, Infancy (0-3yrs), Childhood (4-9yrs), Adolescence (10-18yrs), Adulthood (19-65yrs), Older Adulthood (65+yrs) and Final Stages of Life. Although these stages are split into specific age ranges, they are subject to change due to such factors as environmental or cultural differences. Adolescence in particular has changed in the past century from a brief period of 5-6 years to a much longer period. It is believed that this is due to puberty beginning much earlier and entry to adulthood being delayed.

These changes are crucial in understanding the movability of the stages within the life span. Subsequently, the concept of the life span itself becomes fluid and very much affected by social, societal and biological influences. This, in turn, makes some of the original theories on life span development appear outdated. This paves the way for the more contemporary psychologists to analyse and compare the original theories and devise their own.

The pioneer in psychology, Sigmund Freud, believed the child passes through five stages of development during the life span. His theory states that each stage carries with it conflict between the child's own needs and the requirements of their environment, particularly its parents. His psycho-sexual theory states that the child's growth and behaviour in adulthood are determined by how such conflict is resolved.

Erikson's theory similarly talks of the conflict between a child's needs and its social environment. In contrast to Freud, Erikson's stages are psycho-social and include developing trust as opposed to mistrust and autonomy as opposed to shame and doubt. According to Erikson, a person will successfully move through the stages as each is completed until he reaches a satisfactory old age. (Newman and Newman., 2009)

Freud's psycho-sexual theory is a contrast to Erikson's theory of completing each stage before progression can be successfully made toward the next. Freud's theory, which includes the oral and genital life stages, is much more flexible and allows for development to be layered one stage upon another.

Similar to both Freud and Erikson, Levinson's theory also has life stages, or 'eras' as he describes them. His theory also states that success at each 'era' leads to transition to the next.

In contrast, leading behaviourism theorist, B F Skinner, believes human development is about learning, where learning is defined as a lasting change in behaviour. Skinner's theory states that individuals learn from the way they resolve their own life challenges and conflicts. If resolution is a success, the behaviour is learned and development has been achieved successfully.

Adolescence is a time of great physiological as well as behavioural change. It is often referred to as a prelude to adulthood, a transition from immaturity to maturity. This stage is usually perceived as beginning during puberty, at the beginning of sexual maturity and, in the West, begins approximately 2 years later for boys as it does for girls. There are marked differences in growth trends in different cultures, largely attributed to improvements in diet and health care. (McIlveen and Gross., 1999)

Adolescence is a particularly flexible life stage and, as such, there are many contrasting theories. G Stanley Hall was influenced by Darwin's evolutionary theory when he wrote the book 'Adolescence' in 1904. This book is considered to be the pioneering work on psychological and scientific research into this particular life stage. Hall is most well known in psychological research for stating that adolescence is a time of "storm and stress". This "storm and stress" is translated as being a period of behavioural and emotional upheaval prior to stabilising in the adult life stage. (Arnett., 2006)

There is actually little evidence to support Hall's theory of "storm and stress" and many researchers on this subject, both in the UK and USA, have rejected it. Most adolescent difficulties picked up in research have been associated with an individual's stressful situation at the current time, such as parents' divorce. Siddique & D'Arcy (1984) found that more than a third of adolescents had no symptoms of psychological distress at all and there were 40 per cent who claimed only mild levels. This evidence suggests that Hall's period of "storm and stress" was indeed the case for a minority, but that the majority of adolescents adjust well to the changes at this life stage.

(McIlveen and Gross., 1999)

Many of the more recent theories have similarities with Hall's theory and, with reference to his research on depression in adolescence, it has been agreed that there is a "mid-adolescence peak" in depressed mood, rising in adolescence and then falling after the mid-teenage years. (Petersen et al., 1993).

Erikson believed that it is "human nature to pass through a genetically determined sequence of psychological stages" (McIlveen and Gross., 1999). He also believed, however, that the social environment has a significant impact on our methods of thought and action. He proposed eight psychosocial stages, each of which has a conflict struggle between a positive and negative personality outcome. This theme runs throughout each life stage and the goal is for the child to find their real identity.

Adolescence appears at Stage Five and the conflict here is "Identity and Repudiation v Identity Diffusion" (Adolescence). At this stage in Erikson's life

stage model, the theme appears to reach an end and further development is now a culmination of the stages learned through childhood. The challenge for an adolescent is to integrate these identifications into a complete identity which will subsequently lead to becoming a whole adult. Without this new identity, adolescents face “ Identity Diffusion”, or a personality which isn’t whole. Erikson believes this can manifest itself in many forms. At its lowest form, this could show itself as an aimless drifting through adulthood with an inability to maintain relationships or employment. In more severe cases this could lead to dire consequences such as suicide or drug abuse. The desired outcome of this life stage is that the child finds it’s real identity and discovers who they really are. This would be what we today refer to as an identity crisis.

Many more modern theorists, although agreeing with Erikson’s theory, disagree with the timetable of his adolescent life stage. More contemporary research into the identity model is carried out much later in adolescence or even into early adulthood. As a result, research began to focus less on Erikson’s identity theory and more on self conception development.

(Steinberg and Morris., 2001)

Although Freud similarly believed that adolescents complete the majority of their individuality during childhood, he also believed that growth to come entirely from physical/sexual maturation, as opposed to Erikson’s theory of social development and maturity. Erikson’s theory comes mainly from the belief that Nurture, ie social and environmental influences, is what lies behind human growth. In contrast, Freud’s theory is Nature led, he believed that our development is purely physical and that each of our life stages

focuses around a particular area of our physical body. He consequently describes the adolescent stage as “genital” and focuses mainly around the physical awareness and development at this stage. Another contrast to Erikson is that Freud’s stages did not have to be fully completed before transition to the next. Layers are formed in Freud’s life stages and each stage is loosely integrated into the next. According to Freud, no stage is ever given up completely, they are simply layered on top of each other throughout the life span. (Miller., 2002)

Levinson et al. (1978 as cited in McIlveen and Gross 1999 p. 26) devised a life structure theory consisting of 4 phases, or ‘eras’ each lasting about 5 years. Each era overlaps the next, forming the end of the previous era. These phases are pre-adulthood (17-45yrs), middle adulthood (40-65yrs) and late adulthood (60 onwards). Levinson et al. believed in both nature and nurture as contributory factors in human development and, as such, each phase in this theory consists of social, psychological and biological changes, with work and family being central at any given time. Adolescence here is at the very beginning of the theory, being the bridge we cross to get to adulthood and our final stages of development. In this era an adolescent is making choices as an adult whilst still maintaining links to family and maintaining already established roots. At this stage, there is no commitment to any given course and putting down roots independently is not yet enforced. (McIlveen and Gross., 1999).

In contrast to theories involving social and environmental forces, biological research into different parts of the brain shows that changes in brain function in adolescents will determine development around this stage.

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A scientist from the University of Pittsburgh, Beatriz Luna, conducted a study on adolescents in 2001 to detect brain activity in the pre-frontal cortex, whilst undertaken specific tests. The pre-frontal cortex, the large area at the front of the brain, is mainly involved in planning, appropriate social behaviour and personality traits. These studies found that this area worked much harder in adolescents to carry out the voluntary behaviours that adults can achieve using different parts of the brain, thereby leaving this particular area to focus on the more “ higher level” functions. As a consequence, adolescents are over working this area of the brain and therefore are more likely to behave without thought and act on impulse.

It has also been discovered through research at University College London, by Sarah-Jayne Blakemore, that the area of the brain responsible for more understanding human qualities is underused at this life stage. Therefore, qualities such as empathy and guilt create individuals that are less likely to think how their actions will effect other people. What these experiments show is that the adolescent is different to the adult in many ways and some of this may be down to how our brains develop in a biological, rather than an environmental way.

The human life span and it’s eight life stages have been briefly outlined and the life span defined. Particular emphasis has been made toward the life stage of Adolescence and a brief description of this stages ha been given. Comparisons were made between Freud and Erikson’s theories of lifespan and human growth. Comparisons were given regarding their theories and their interpretations of Nature v Nurture. The book, Adolescence, by G Stanley Hall was outlined and other theories of behavioural, psycho-social

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and psycho-sexual were compared to his writings. Hall's theory of " storm and stress" was explained and modern research and arguments against it were raised. The psycho-social theory by Erikson of Adolescents in particular and the ' identity crisis' was examined and compared with Freud's psycho-sexual " genital" theory of the same life stage. Levenson et al.'s theory of four stages were explained, in particular the pre-adulthood era. Finally, details were provided of brain function research in adolescence and comparisons were made to other psychological theories.

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