

Key characteristics of life-span development



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Erik Erikson suggests that development is a life-long continuous process in which gains and losses in development occur throughout the life cycle. This challenges the concept of “critical periods” in Freud’s theory.

Development is multidimensional:

Development occurs in the biological, cognitive, and social domains. The biological domain includes the physical changes an individual experiences throughout the course of their life. This would include growth and development in the body. An example of the biological aspect is hormonal changes during puberty. Puberty is the point in time where the development of sexual characteristics begins, and will allow these humans to become sexually active and be able to produce gametes for reproduction. The challenges an adolescence might face going through puberty is the need to adapt to changes occurring to the physical body, emotional changes such as feeling self-conscious about their changing body, and mental changes such as developing the capacity for abstract thought and problem-solving.

Development is multidirectional:

Some aspects of development may be increasing while others are declining or remains unchanged. For example, during late adulthood, older adults might become wiser with age but they perform more poorly than younger adults on tasks that require speed in processing information.

Development is plastic:

Development can be modified by life circumstances to some extent.

According to Paul Baltes, humans have the capacity of plasticity or positive change to environmental difficulties throughout life. For example, an

individual who grew up in a broken home environment with an abusive father may turn out fine and do well in adulthood as the issues get healed along the lifespan.

Development is dependent on history and context:

Development is influenced by historical conditions. The historical time period in which we grow up affects our development. For example, children in early, middle or late childhood who grew up amidst a war may experience a lack in moral development when compared to those who grew up in a safe and stable environment. The children may grow up having altered functioning in the cognitive, behavioral, social and emotional aspect of their development.

Development is multidisciplinary:

Development is studied by a number of disciplines, including psychology, sociology, anthropology, neuroscience, and medicine. For example in medicine, one area of biological research which has significant importance for development is looking into slowing down the aging process. Their focus is in anti-aging foods and drugs which can reverse the biological effects of aging and some already have shown significant effects in animal studies.

Development is contextual:

Development occurs in the context of a person's biological makeup, physical environment, and social, historical, and cultural contexts

normative age-graded influences: biological and environmental influences that are similar for individuals in a particular age group (e. g., puberty, beginning school)

normative history-graded influences: biological and environmental influences that are associated with history; influences that are common to people of a particular generation. An example is when the Singapore Government implemented the “ Stop at two” child policy in 1969 to help control the rapid population growth. It had succeeded in significantly reducing the population however, it had influenced women greatly as they started to pursue careers before having children and this gave rise to numerous University graduated women failing to marry and bear offspring.

non-normative life events: unusual occurrences that have a major impact on an individual’s life; the occurrence, pattern, and sequence of these events are not applicable to most individuals (e. g., death of a parent at a young age, getting a serious illness, winning a lottery)

Development Involves Growth, Maintenance, and Regulation of Loss

The mastery of life often involves conflicts and competition among three goals of human development: growth, maintenance, and regulation. Growth starts early on in life from infancy through late adulthood. Maintenance and regulation follows after that around middle and late adulthood as individual’s capacities take centre stage. This is the time of maintaining skills and minimizing deterioration.

Theme 2

Biological Processes

Biological processes involve changes in an individual’s physical nature.

Examples of biological processes includes, brain development, height and

weight gains, changes in motor skills, hormonal and changes occurring in puberty.

I will be focusing on the biological process of puberty which occurs during adolescence. Puberty is a time of maturation of the reproductive system and hormonal changes occurring in the brain. During puberty, in the case of males, a hormone called testosterone which are responsible for physical and behavioral masculinization, are released. Studies that use data on adolescents have generally found positive correlations between testosterone levels and aggressive or anti social behavior. Research on adolescents has also found that higher testosterone levels in adolescents is associated with increased sexual activity (Halpern, et al., 1998), age at first sexual intercourse (Dunne et al, 1997), increased criminal activity (Booth and Osgood, 1993), increased tobacco and alcohol use (Zitzmann and Nieschlag, 2001). In terms of criminal behavior, Dabbs et al. (1995) conducted a fascinating study of 692 male prison inmates, finding testosterone related to type of crime and to behavior in prison. Testosterone was highest among inmates convicted of child molestation, rape, homicide, and assault, and it was lowest among inmates convicted of burglary, theft, and drug offences.

In relation to Erikson's theory, in stage 5 of his Psychosocial theory which identifies the crisis of " identity vs. identity confusion, this is a time of trying out new things till the adolescence establishes a personal identity or fails doing so and ends up being confuse with his role in life.

Cognitive Processes

Cognitive processes involve changes in the individual's thought, intelligence, and language.

According to Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory, children actively construct their understanding of the world and go through 4 stages of cognitive development.

Sensorimotor Stage (Birth – 2 years)

The first stage of cognitive development is where infants are able to construct an understanding of the world by coordinating sensory experiences (such as seeing and hearing) with physical (motor) actions. For example, when an object is placed in the infant's hand and touches its palm, the fingers will then close and grasp it. This is known as the palmar grasps reflex.

Preoperational Stage(2 – 7 years)

The second stage is where thought becomes more symbolic, egocentric, and intuitive rather than logical, however, it is not operational. For example, the child is able to conduct symbolic play in which the children pretend that one object is another. To quote an example, little girls at this stage would conduct role play of a "tea party" in which they assign soft toys (symbols) roles representing their mother and father. To demonstrate egocentrism of the child at this stage, Piaget conducted the three mountains task in which children were asked to select a picture that showed the three mountains from their viewpoint. The children had little problems selecting the correct picture. However, when asked to select a picture from someone else's viewpoint, the children ended up selecting the same picture which showed

their own viewpoint. This showed the children's inability to understand things from another person's perspective.

Concrete Operational Stage (7 – 11 years)

This is the stage where logic begins to develop and thus the child is able to reason logically about concrete events and able to recognize the concept of conservation. For example, children in the concrete operational stage is able to distinguish that the volume of water in a tall and narrow cup is equivalent to that in the short and wide cup when equal amounts are poured from the same container. However, the child is unable to think hypothetically and have difficulty understanding abstract concepts.

Formal Operational Stage (11 years – adulthood)

In this stage, the child is able to reason in a more abstract, idealistic and logical manner. The child is able to think theoretically and hypothetically in which the latter is important in subjects such as mathematics and science. The child is less egocentric and thus is able to understand things in a different perspective. The child is also able to conduct deductive reasoning where he is able to reason from generalities to specifics.

Socioemotional Processes

Socioemotional processes involve changes in the individual's relationships with other people, changes in personality and emotions.

Erikson's Psychosocial Theory states that the primary motivation for human behavior is social and, reflects a desire to affiliate with other people. Erikson views development as a lifelong process consisting of a unique developmental task that confronts individual with a crisis that requires

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resolution. Failure to do so would result in possible negative outcomes in adulthood.

Erikson's 8 stages of human development:

Trust vs. Mistrust (0 – 1 year)

In this stage, the infant is learning to trust others and the world. Trust is established when babies are given adequate and consistent warmth, loving touch and physical care. However, mistrust can develop if inadequate, inconsistent care is given by cold, indifferent and rejecting parents.

Autonomy vs. Shame & Doubt (1-3 years)

Autonomy is the independence developed when toddlers are encouraged by their parents for doing things by themselves (e. g. putting on shoes) versus the shame and doubt if the caregiver were to reprimand the child for not being able to do the task promptly.

Initiative vs. Guilt (3- 5 years)

This is an extension of the second stage where, initiative develops when the pre-school-going child is encouraged to explore and take on new challenges versus the guilt that the child may experience if the parents criticize, prevent play or discourages asking questions.

Industry vs. Inferiority (6 – 12 years)

This is in the context of primary school where the child is supported or praised by teachers for doing for productive activities versus the inferiority that may occur if the child's efforts are regarded as inadequate or messy.

Identity vs. Role confusion (10 – 20 years)

The teenage years involve the need to establish a consistent personal identity versus role confusion where the adolescence is unsure of the direction he is heading.

Intimacy vs. Isolation (20s , 30s)

In this stage, intimacy develops when the individual begins establishing mature relationships with friends, family and eventually a lover or a spouse as he or she has the ability to care for others and sharing experiences with them. However, isolation develops when the individual is deemed as a loner and uncared for in his or her life. There is a relationship between this stage and the first stage which was trust vs. mistrust. For example, if an infant receives consistent tender loving care from the caregivers, trust would be developed and thus this would likely lead to the individual developing functional relationships in his adult life and vice versa, if the infant developed mistrust in his first year of life due to neglect from caregiver, there is a likelihood that the individual might end up being solitary in adulthood.

Generativity vs Stagnation (40s , 50s)

Generativity refers to the interest in guiding the next generation in terms of passing on values and traditions versus stagnation where the individual is only concerned with their individual needs and thus values are lost.

Examples would be those who are single and/or married without children.

Integrity vs. despair (60s onwards)

Integrity occurs when the individual reflects upon life and has no regrets as they have lived a rich and responsible life versus despair where the individual views previous life events with regrets and experiences heartache and remorse.

Theme 3

Nature vs. Nurture

The nature-nurture controversy involves the debate about whether development is primarily influenced by nature or nurture. Nature is a product of genetic or prenatal environment where children are born with certain behaviors that are innate and are inborn biases. Nurture on the other hand, is the effects of certain experiences depending on the individual's perception. Genetically, some people are born with defects in their genes that can affect their brain function and emotions. Environmentally, severe cruel treatment of small children can create predispositions to becoming afflicted with no empathy and abnormal behaviors. Jean-Jacques Rousseau believes in “ noble savages” where children were naturally endowed with a sense of right and wrong and with an innate plan for orderly, healthy growth.

On the contrary, the tabula rasa view by John Locke states that “ Children are born as “ blank slates” and acquire characteristics through experience”. This theory favors the “ nurture” aspect of the debate with regards to one's personality, intelligence, social and emotional behavior.

I would like to highlight on Schizophrenic serial killers. Schizophrenia is a mental disorder characterized by disintegration of thought processes and of

emotional responsiveness. It most commonly manifests as auditory hallucinations, paranoid or bizarre delusions, or disorganized speech and thinking, and it is accompanied by significant social or occupational dysfunction. The disease is mostly genetically inherited as those having a first-degree relative with the disease are at a higher risk of developing it. An example of a notorious serial killer suffering from this disease is Ed Gein. He was not only known for brutally killing two women but for exhuming their corpses from local graveyards and fashioned trophies and keepsakes from their bones and skin. It was the horrific way of mutilation and the bizarre display of body parts in his home that raises questions as to why someone would do such a cruel act. Ed grew up in a strict and religious family with the presence of both parents in the household. A shy, effeminate boy, the younger Gein became a target for bullies. To make matters worse, his mother punished him whenever he tried to make friends. She also abused him and his brother. Despite his poor social development, he did fairly well in school, particularly in reading. Death in the family followed as firstly, his father died and then his brother and followed by his mother. All these environmental factors accounts for the abnormal behavioral patterns elicited by Ed. Therefore in this example, we can't safely determine that traits of a serial killer are purely genetic (nature) or purely environmental (nurture). However it is the interaction between these two traits that causes development of such a behavior.

Continuity vs. Discontinuity

This issue focuses on the extent to which development involves gradual, cumulative change (continuity) or distinct stages (discontinuity).

Developmentalists who emphasize nurture describe development as a gradual, continuous process whereas those who emphasize nature often describe development as a series of distinct stages.

For example, Freud's stage model of psychosexual development, theorized that children systematically move through distinct stages of oral, anal, phallic, and latency stages before reaching mature adult sexuality in the genital stage. Proponents of stage theories of development also suggest that individuals go through critical periods, which are times of increased and favored sensitivity to particular aspects of development. For example, early childhood (the first 5 years) is a critical period for language acquisition. Thus, most adults find it difficult or impossible to master a second language during their adult years while young children raised in bilingual homes normally learn second languages easily during childhood.

Theorist Erik Erikson expanded upon Freud's ideas by proposing a stage theory of psychosocial development. Erikson's theory focused on conflicts that arise at different stages of development and, unlike Freud's theory, Erikson described development throughout the lifespan..

Stability vs. Change

This issue involves the degree to which we become older renditions of our early experience or we develop into someone different from who we were at an early point in development. Many developmentalists who emphasize stability in development argue that stability is the result of heredity and possibly early experiences in life. Relating back to the above example of Ed Gein, he grew up socially introverted as he was discouraged making friends

by his mother. In this case, he has attained stability where his personal experiences early on in childhood became a catalyst for who he would turn out to be in adulthood – a serial killer.

On the contrary, developmentalists who emphasize change take the more optimistic view that later experiences can produce change. I would like to quote the example of Liz Murray better known for being “ Homeless to Harvard”. Murray grew up in the Bronx, New York to poor, drug addicted, and HIV-positive parents. She overcame hardships in her youth and struggled her way to achieve success and was accepted into Harvard University. Such, is an example of change that can occur later on in life and proves that early experiences can shape us in different ways.

Theme 4

With regards to my friend’s extreme view that Erikson’s psychosocial perspective was sufficient in describing human life span development, I disagree to that statement as there are many other theories to consider before making a conclusion as to which was sufficient.

Psychoanalytic theories:

The basis of Erikson’s psychosocial theory is influenced by Freud’s psychosexual theory. Erikson’s works on extending Freud’s theory as he found that Freud’s ideas lacked vital social dimensions, and through his research and findings, it provided a key for his ‘ biopsychosocial’ perspective. Erikson’s view of human development was life-long through his 8 stages which occur throughout life whereas; Freud’s view of development was through critical periods which consist of the 5 stages at adolescent.

Freud proposed that in the first stage, if the nursing child's appetite were thwarted during any libidinal development stage, the anxiety would persist into adulthood as a neurosis (functional mental disorder). If an infant is not fed enough (neglected) or fed too much (over-protected) in the course of being nursed, it may result in the child growing up as an orally fixated adult. Oral-stage fixation may have one of two effects: (i) the underfed or neglected child might become a psychologically dependent adult continually seeking the oral stimulation denied in infancy, thereby becoming a manipulative person in fulfilling his or her needs, rather than maturing to independence; (ii) the over-protected or over-fed child might resist growing up and return to being dependent upon others. Example of the former would be an individual who grows up to be an orally fixated adult who is an over-eater or a smoking addict to compensate for the insufficient oral stimulation as an infant. On the contrary, the latter is an individual who grows up to be dependent on others and demanding satisfaction through acting helpless, crying and being "needy". Therefore this highlights the importance of critical periods in Freud's stage theory.

In Erikson's theory on the other hand, it presented individuals with a crisis at each stage where, depending on how one handle the challenge, it will result in positive or negative outcomes which can significantly affect one's personality and development.

The benefits of this theory is that it emphasizes on the eight character-forming crisis stages, the concept also asserts that humans continue to change and develop throughout their lives, and that personality is not exclusively formed during early childhood years. It is certainly a view that

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greatly assists encouraging oneself and others to see the future as an opportunity for positive change and development, instead of looking back with blame and regret. The better that people come through each crisis, the better they will tend to deal with what lies ahead, but this is not to say that all is lost and never to be recovered if a person has had a negative experience during any particular crisis stage.

However with every theory, there are limitations and this includes Erikson's theory. One of which is its ambiguous terms and concepts which can have several interpretations. Another reason is its lack of precision as some terms cannot be easily measure empirically. The experiences in some stages may only apply to males and not females.

Cognitive theories:

Piaget's cognitive development theory presented cognitive development through 4 stages focusing on sensory experiences and physical actions (sensorimotor skills) and this provided the importance of examining developmental changes in children's thinking.

Vygotsky on the other hand, added a social and cultural aspect to his cognitive theory naming it the " Sociocultural cognitive theory". He gave emphasize on social interaction and culture in shaping a child's cognitive process. He stresses that knowledge is not generated from within, but rather constructed through interaction with persons and cultural objects (such as books, computers).

Bandura's social cognitive theory focuses on the importance of environment to an individual's behavior. He emphasized the process of observational

learning through imitation or modeling where people cognitively represent the behavior of others and adopt this behavior themselves.

Information -processing theory emphasizes that human beings are active information processors that bring forth the process of thinking and thus learning good strategies for processing information is crucial.

There are many factors that can affect human life span development and this includes the developmental processes in 3 key areas namely biological, cognitive and socioemotional. These three processes work hand in hand in the development of an integrated individual with a mind and body that are interdependent. The different theories address the different aspects of development and thus we can't conclude that only the Erikson theory best describes human development. Instead, adopting an eclectic approach is more accurate as it selects the best features from each theory. For example, Freud's theory best explains the unconscious mind while Erikson's theory best describes development being a life-long process and highlights the changes occurring in each stage. Piaget's theory views cognitive development through sensorimotor and operational stages. Vygotsky added a social and cultural aspect to it and information-processing theory views humans as being capable to actively process information. Combining the three cognitive theories provided a holistic approach to cognitive development.

Behavioral and social cognitive theories such as Bandura's, provided environmental influences on development.

In conclusion, there is not one theory that can adequately explain human development but rather adopting an eclectic approach provided the best solution in holistically understanding human development.