

Can you can never leave the past behind? essay sample

[Technology](#), [Future](#)



To answer this question I will be considering the theories of Melanie Klein and Erik Erickson, as highlighted in module 2. I will be describing these stage theories of development in children, and how these theories suggest that successful or unsuccessful development of each stage may have an effect on a person in their adult life, thus supporting the notion that you can never leave the past behind you. I will then be looking at some of the other popular theories within psychotherapy and highlighting the basic assumptions of these theories and how these all seem to have grounding in suggesting that the past is affecting the present, which would seem to support the statement that “ you can never leave the past behind you”. However, as I will explore, I will argue why I think this statement isn’t entirely true, looking at the effect therapies and treatments can have on presenting issues that may be grounded in the past, and will conclude that although the past is bound to have an effect on our present, it is how we let it affect us that we have control over.

Freud was obviously a key figure in identifying past experiences affecting us in the adulthood..... and the power of the unconscious to repress these memories Melanie Klein was one of the first psychologists’ to study children using “ play observation”, which involves studying children whilst they play and using their interactions and any transference felt by the psychologists to help understand what was going on for the child. This technique is still widely used today. From her studies she became one of the main contributors to the Object Relations Theory. As Klein initially worked under Freud, her theory is based in psychoanalytical assumptions, although there are some distinct differences. The main difference with the Object Relations theory is that

people are “ relationship seeking organisms rather than...pleasure seeking ones” (Module 2 course notes), as proposed by Freud’s theory.

The theory goes on to suggest that the way we relate to people in our adult lives is based on our experiences of our family relationships when we were infants, a notion which later influenced Bowlby’s and Mary Ainsworth work on Attachment Theory. Our early relationships with objects which can both be other people in our lives, or objects which we develop an attachment to, (or part objects such as a mothers’ breast), and whether or not these objects are good or bad as perceived by the child, will affect how they later view their relationships subconsciously as an adult. So according to this theory, there is an assumption that we carry our past relationships into our adult life, as the theory suggests we repeat these relationships over and over, as we will “ seek out others who will reaffirm these early self-object relationships” (module 2 course notes) whether positive or negative.

Therefore this theory seems to support the statement “ We can never leave the past behind” as these early experiences provide the foundation on which all future relationships are built. However, although her theory works with Freud’s stages of development, she herself identifies “ positions”, which can be linked to Freud’s stages, she suggests the infant can move between the positions, rather than completing them in a sequence as a stage theory would expect (changing minds ref). Object Relation Therapists also believe that any dysfunctional or self-defeating behaviours that a client presents with are related to early relationship experiences, they see the client as being stuck in one of the positions the theory suggests an infant goes

through, and so there is an inherent assumption that a client can become “unstuck” and move through all the positions positively, thus leaving the past behind them.

Another theory which proposes that infants and children need to move successfully through each stage to not have any dysfunctional issues in adulthood is Erik Erickson’s Psychosocial Theory. Erikson outlines several distinct stages he felt a person went through, right from infancy to adulthood to complete their personality development and develop a sense of self. This development was related to social influences upon the child, which interacted with the Ego, causing a crisis which the ego will either successfully or unsuccessfully resolve. Successful resolution of crises will mean that the person will move into the next stage. The crisis arises from the conflicting demands of the person’s needs (Id) and external social demands and how the ego resolves this.

Erikson’s Theory of Psychosocial Development has eight distinct stages a person will move through in a predetermined order, each with two possible outcomes. These are:

1. Trust vs Mistrust (Age 0-18months). – successful resolution at this stage will lead to hope, and occurs in early infancy (Age 0-18months). Hope means that a child will develop the belief that if a crisis happens later on, they will receive support from others to help them.
2. Autonomy vs. shame (18months to 3years) – if allowed to safely test out their autonomy, successful resolution leads to will, which means a belief in

themselves to “ survive in the adult world”. The aim has to be “ self-control without a loss of self-esteem” (Gross, 1992)

3. Initiative vs guilt (3 to 5 years) – purpose
4. Industry vs. Inferiority (5-12years) – competency
5. Ego identity vs. Role confusion (12-18) – fidelity
6. Intimacy vs. Isolation (18-40years) – Love
7. Generativity vs. Stagnation (40-65 years) Care
8. Ego integrity vs. despair (65+) – Wisdom

Erikson proposed that failure to successfully complete a stage can result in a reduced ability to complete further stages and therefore a more unhealthy personality and sense of self. Therefore, this theory would suggest that if an early stage was uncompleted this would have a lasting impact on us into adulthood, and also develop problems in being able to successfully complete stages later to come. Therefore, again it would seem that this theory would support the idea that “ we can never leave the past behind” as it influences our future. However, Erikson felt that through having therapy a person can successfully resolve any stages which they appear to be stuck in. Both of these theories work on the basis that early childhood experiences affect our adult life, which I think most modern day therapists would support and is the foundation for other theories developed both prior to and since Klein and Erickson.

It isn't a new concept that our childhood experiences come with us into the future, whether we are conscious of these or not (Freud). Klein and Erickson may have formulated some ideas around at what stage various concepts or

personality traits may develop or not develop, and how this may determine how we respond as an adult, but from the founders of psychology, childhood experiences have always been considered significant. Therefore it would be difficult to suggest that anyone's early experiences, whether good or bad haven't had some impact on who we are, how we relate to people, and how we manage different situations?. It would be difficult to argue against the fact that our past does not affect our present or our future lives as our past experiences will have influenced our life choices that has led to the present moment. However, these theories can then appear to have a fatalistic feel to them.

That as adults we have very little control over how we are in the present or future, because of something which may or may not have happened to us in the past. One criticism of Erikson's work in particular is that he " does not explicitly explain how the outcome of one psychosocial stages influence personality at a later stage" (ref-simple psychology). Although he describes the conflict each stage represents, and the " virtue" (Erickson) by this, he isn't clear how this may translate into behaviours as an adult. Although one can guess how mistrust may manifest itself in later life in terms of relationships and intimacy difficulties, Erikson himself doesn't give any explanation. Although his theory suggests a causal influence on our adult lives, the effect is left unclear. Of course, for each individual the effect is going to be different, and so some may suggest it would be impossible to predict how this may evidence itself in an adult life.

But I suppose it is the determining factors as to why each person will have different resulting behaviours that may present an argument against “ we can never leave the past behind”. Genetic make-up, subsequent counterbalancing experiences, influence of others are some of the reasons why two people may respond differently. Children who have grown up in similar environments will grow into adults with very different behaviours, despite having very similar early experiences (ref). Behaviourists who believe that behaviours are learned, and thus can be unlearned or replaced with new behaviours (ref), offer a belief that yes our learnt behaviours maybe carried forward from our past, up until a point where we decide that we want to stop or change them, and then as adults we can go about learning new ones through positive reinforcement or reward. Therefore, a behaviourist approach seems to very much see humans as adaptable, and not fixed down by their past experiences and so able to “ leave the past behind”.

However, as therapists we know that it isn't always that simple to learn a new way of being, and there can be many barriers or defences to making these changes, either consciously or unconsciously. Barriers which have come about because of our past and the experiences we had. We can be working for a long time with a client who although seems motivated to change their behaviours, but time and time again revert back to old ways. Using Cognitive Behavioural Therapy can help address some of this, as by examining a client's thought processes behind behaviour, and challenging and reframing these, this can often make a change in behaviour a lot more

likely and more likely to be maintained (ref). Therefore this approach believes that by changing our thoughts, we can “leave the past behind”. In fact, any form of therapy has a basic assumption that a person’s present and future can be changed, and by using their techniques or approach is the way in which this will be achieved.

Even Erikson and Klein’s theory have suggested methods or working to help a client become unstuck in a stage or position and thus move forward. The questions itself may need some exploring, as it is ambiguous. What does it mean by leave the past behind? We all have a past which has led us to the place we are today, both physically, but also mentally and emotionally. One would assume from this question that it is how the past is impacting on us in these ways is the element that we wish to leave behind. So by looking at thoughts and behaviours, and even our physical experiences is often what we wish to change. When participating in therapy, a key component of most therapeutic approaches is to explore the past with the client. By understanding the past the therapist and the client can then collaboratively explore how this may be impacting on the presenting issue the client has come to therapy with.

The work done in exploring the past can in some ways the most complex part of the process, as the client may have limited consciousness about how the past has affected them (ref?). They may feel past relationships or experiences have been insignificant as their defence mechanisms have protected them from having a connection with their past experiences (Freud) or even remembering them, such as with trauma a person has no

recollection of. Or they may not simply remember their early childhood and the early relationships which possibly have resulted in them having an attachment problem, as Bowlby suggests that the first two years of a person's life is the most formative of this (Bowlby). Possibly the person has low self-esteem and therefore cannot view a past experience without self-criticism and blame, making it too uncomfortable to explore objectively.

Therefore the exploration of a client's past can take a long time to collect this information of any significant experiences a person has had in relation to their presenting problem. However, then often the more time consuming work can be working with the client to view these past experiences in a different way, connecting the links between the problem they have in the present, and how the past has contributed to that. This doesn't just involve an analytical observation, but helping the client to explore the emotions of the past experiences and to own and express these. This is where work can be particularly difficult, especially if a client is resistant to this, finds expressing emotions difficult or simply does not want to view the experience in a new way that can make them feel uneasy (ref). Although a client is coming to therapy for help with a present problem, actually the majority of therapy may involve reframing and re-experiencing the past, especially with the more psychoanalytical approaches.

This may seem counterproductive to the client, especially as they may end up feeling worse through the process of reliving past experiences, the "therapeutic drop"? Solution focused therapies such as Cognitive behavioural therapy may wish to focus more on changing the present

thoughts, but they still require a basic understanding of the past. However by allowing a client to explore their past and expresses any grief, anger, sadness and loss that is impacting on them still, I think it will help the client to take the power out of that past experience that is having a negative impact and start to change how the past is affecting them. So interestingly, by actually revisiting the past in a therapeutic setting, and not trying to avoid it or “leave it behind” this it seems is how a client is going to be able to change how they think, feel and behave in the present and future. Maybe the trick isn't to try and leave the past behind, but to incorporate it into our lives and express it for what it was and wasn't. Only then are we able to move to control and move forward into a future that we want for ourselves.

So in answer to the question above, when we come as clients to counselling we are trying to leave the past behind as we no longer want it to be having the negative effect on our lives in the present, whether we know it is because of our past or not. However, by exploring our past, understanding how it has impacted on who we are and how we behave in the present, we can learn to change how the past affects us. So rather than a fatalistic future which we must just accept as our fate due to our past, we can learn to take the power back from the past, by understanding it and expressing it, and therefore change how it affects us in the future. So although we can never leave the past behind, actually we shouldn't be trying to do this. By viewing ourselves holistically, with our past and present experiences, and our future hopes and goals, this is how we are going to be able to successfully achieve the things we want for ourselves in the future.

Therefore, no it seems we can never leave the past behind, but we can choose how it affects us.