

Psychosocial crises that shape personality



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Personality is a complex and enduring aspect of humans that govern all interactions. Of the many theories and models of personality, Erik Erikson has proposed a psychosocial theory which accounts for social influences on the development of an individual's personality. Of a psychoanalytic background, Erikson believed that childhood experiences are important in personality development, but not that development had a sexual focus and only occurred during childhood (Pressley & McCormick, 2007). Erikson's epigenetic theory describes eight psychosocial crises, occurring at an optimal time throughout the individual's lifespan, that cumulatively shape the ego, or personality. Each crisis presents an opportunity to develop a psychosocial strength or virtue, thereby shaping different aspects of an individual's personality. The surrounding environment and the cumulative outcomes of previous crises, also determine an individual's ability to resolve subsequent crises.

The first psychosocial crisis occurs from birth to age one, whereby the infant should “develop trust without completely eliminating the capacity for mistrust” (Boeree, 2006, p. 8). The infant learns to trust the world through consistent, quality parental care, thereby developing the psychosocial strength of hope. Contrastingly, a threatening or neglectful environment results in mistrust of the world. This is a vital element of an individual's personality that will influence future social interactions. For example, Erikson identified that the development of mistrust may lead to tendencies such as social detachment (Greene & Kropf, 2009).

The second psychosocial crisis occurs between ages one and three, and involves the development of autonomy, as opposed to shame and doubt.

While the toddler develops the necessary cognitive, motor and language skills to exercise basic independence, the degree of autonomy gained is very much dependent on the interactions and relationship with the parents.

Fostering independence, within limits, results in the psychosocial strength of willpower. Overly controlled individuals may experience shame over the inability to be autonomous, or doubt that autonomy is possible (Pressley & McCormick, 2007). The ego may also compensate through adoption of compulsive behaviours (Parker & Thomas, 2009). Lenient parenting, in contrast, may result in impulsiveness (Boeree, 2006).

The third psychosocial crisis occurs between ages three and six, whereby the child should develop initiative, as opposed to guilt. Concurrent refinement of cognitive, language and motor abilities allows the child to establish personal goals and attempt to achieve said goals. Parents should provide the child with a conducive and encouraging environment, the lack of which may result in a sense of guilt whenever the child attempts to 'take the initiative'.

Successful resolution leads to the psychosocial strength of purpose, which significantly influences the development of industry in the child.

The fourth psychosocial crisis occurs between ages six and eleven, during the commencement of formal education. During this period, teachers may instill a sense of industry by rewarding the child and establishing, within the child, a sense of accomplishment over successes in school, leading to the psychosocial strength of competency. Parents may facilitate this by providing the encouragement and support required for success. A child who does not achieve much success, may instead develop a sense of inferiority, and may not be motivated to apply himself in future tasks.

The fifth psychosocial crisis occurs between ages eleven and nineteen, in a time of significant physical maturation. The adolescent years are also a period of social transformation, and the adolescent explores various ego identities, in an effort to establish a future societal role for himself. Pressley & McCormick (2007) state that exploration may occur in aspects such as sexual orientation, religion, life philosophy and intellectual interests, amongst others. Exploration is facilitated by the presence and influence of role models, parents and peers. Establishing an ego identity leads to the virtue of fidelity, as opposed to role confusion. This crisis is crucial as future interactions and decisions are highly dependent on a clear sense of ego identity.

The sixth psychosocial crisis is the first of adulthood, between ages nineteen and thirty, during which the young adult is faced with exploring intimacy, as opposed to remaining in isolation. Erikson included friendships in his definition of intimacy. Whereas adolescent relationships presented an avenue for identity exploration, adult relationships require established identities and the ability for either party to compromise with and accommodate the other. Influential factors on resolution of this crisis include parents, friends, partners, and peers. With a stable ego identity and successful management of intimacy, Erikson states that the adult will gain the psychosocial strength of love.

The seventh psychosocial crisis occurs during middle adulthood, between ages thirty and sixty-five. Erikson proposed that individuals should strive for generativity, as opposed to stagnation. Generativity is accomplished by contributing to the betterment of society, through raising children, teaching,
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and cultural activities. Contrastingly, individuals not contributing to society will become stagnant. Resolution of this crisis leads to the psychosocial strength of care.

The final psychosocial crisis occurs from age sixty-five to death and, for many, is a period of reflection on their life. Successful resolution of previous crises will have contributed to a positive life, and result in a sense of ego integrity, as the individual comes to terms with past decisions, as well as the end of life. Resolution of this crisis leads to the virtue of wisdom. Those that did not resolve crises as successfully may begin to regret decisions made in life, and the inability to correct them. They may begin to fear the end of life or experience depression.

Erikson's psychosocial theory has been described as an extension of Freud's psychosexual development theory (Boeree, 2006). Unlike Freud, however, Erikson believed that social interactions greatly influenced human behaviour, akin to phenotypes of the human form. In addition, Erikson's theory recognises that ego development is life-long, as opposed to stabilisation during adolescence. Erikson also recognised that outcomes of previous stages will influence the outcomes of future stages, and that there is mutuality in adults' influence on child development and vice versa.

Erikson's theory has been criticised as being " a descriptive overview of human social and emotional development that does not adequately explain how or why this development takes place" (Shaffer, 2008, p. 43). In addition, stage theories generally describe a normative development that does not account for individual variations (Fisher & Lerner, 2005). A significant

criticism of Erikson's theory is that his research was performed mostly on males and this perceived gender-bias led to the formation of alternative theories, such as Bingham and Stryker's socioemotional development for females (Huitt, 2008). Gilligan (as cited in Greene & Kropf, 2009) has also contended that the stages of identity and intimacy may be reversed in the case of women, with intimacy serving as a catalyst for identity formation. Despite these criticisms, recent studies, such as that of Bergh and Erling (2005), as well as Beyers and Seiffge-Krenke (2010) have produced evidence to support Erikson's theory.

Erikson's psychosocial development theory demonstrates, through its series of crises, that an individual's personality is greatly influenced by interactions and relationships throughout all stages of life. Upon review of Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, one may realise that the outcomes of previous stages do indeed have a significant influence on later stages. Erikson's theory has further demonstrated that psychosocial strengths and weaknesses gained as a result of each stage are evident in various aspects of an individual's personality. Erikson's theory therefore possesses strong relevance to the development of the human ego, and is a useful description of stages all individuals will progress through, from birth to death.