

# Six concepts of psychosocial theory essay



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Erik Erikson was born June 15, 1902 in Frankfurt, Germany. His father, a Danish man, abandoned the family before he was born, while his Jewish mother later married a physician, Dr. Theodor Homberger. In school, Erikson was teased by other children because he was tall, blonde and blue-eyed – he was considered Nordic – and at grammar class he was rejected because he was Jewish. It is from this – his own experiences in school during his early age, that he developed his interest in identity (Friedman, 1999).

Erik Erikson studied psychoanalysis from Anna Freud and earned a certificate from the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. Following this he moved to the United States in 1933 and was offered a teaching position at Harvard Medical School. Additionally, he ran private practice in child psychoanalysis. Later on, he also held teaching positions at University of California at Berkeley, Yale, San Francisco Psychoanalytic Institute, Austen Riggs Center, and Center for Advanced Studies of the Behavioral Sciences.

Erik Erikson spent time studying the cultural life of the Sioux of South Dakota and the Yurok of northern California. Fashioning after that of Freud's psychosexual theory, he later developed his own theory of development – Psychosocial Theory. Erikson based his Psychosocial Theory of Development on the knowledge he gained of cultural, environmental and social influences to further develop his psychoanalytic theory.

He later published a number of books on his theories and research, including *Childhood and Society* and *The Life Cycle Completed* and his book *Gandhi's Truth* was awarded a Pulitzer Prize and a national Book Award, (Coles, 1970). Like Freud, Erikson believed that personality develops in a series of

predetermined stages. Each looked at the human growth and development through a number of stages. Each shared the belief that one has to be successful at one stage before one can move on and endure the challenges of the next stage.

However, while he was influenced by Freud's ideas, Erikson's theory differed in a number of important ways. Unlike Freud's theory of psychosexual stages which exams personality development up to age six, Erikson developed the epigenetic principle that describes the impact of social experience as it relates to human growth and development across the whole lifespan – from birth to death, identifying and differentiating central issues from infancy to old age. Psychosocial theory recognises human development as a product of the interaction between individual needs and abilities and societal expectations and demands.

This theory also assumed that individuals have the capacity to contribute to their own psychological development, taking into consideration the active contribution of culture to individual growth. Within his psychosocial theory of development Erikson established six basic concepts which he used as a guide in his theory. These six basic concepts are (1) the stages of development; (2) developmental tasks; (3) psychosocial crisis; (4) the central process for resolving the psychosocial crisis; (5) a radiating network of significant relationships; and (6) coping behavior.

The first basic concept of the psychosocial theory is the stages of development. This concept of the stages of development is identified as a period of life that is characterised by a specific underlying structure of each

stage. Within this concept Erikson proposed that there are eight (8) stages of development, unlike Freud who proposed that there are just five (5) stages of development in his Psychoanalytical/Psychosexual Theory of development.

According to Erikson, these eight (8) stages of development are prenatal (conception to birth); infancy (0-2 years); toddlerhood (2-3 years); early childhood/early school age (4-6 years); middle childhood/play age (6-12 years); later childhood/late school age (12-18 years); early adolescence (12-18 years); later adolescence (18-24 years); early adulthood (24-34 years); middle adulthood (34-60 years); later adulthood (60-75 years); and very old age (75 till death), (Newman and Newman, 2006).

For other theories, the age group for each stage of development may vary but not significantly. At each life stage of development individuals are expected to undergo a number of changes or challenges which determine the outcome and lifestyle they end up into. This leads to another basic concept of Erikson's psychosocial theory. The second concept of Erikson's psychosocial theory is developmental tasks .

Developmental Tasks may be defined as a set of skills and competencies that contribute to increased mastery over one's environment and these in turn define healthy, normal development at each age in a particular society that may have age-graded expectations. Developmental tasks may reflect gains in intellectual, physical, cognitive, social, and/or emotional skills and may elaborate upon self-concept. Erikson proposed that successfully overcoming the developmental tasks at one stage helps prepare the

individual to be able to face the subsequent stage with confidence; the individual will be better equipped to do so.

Some developmental tasks, just to name a few for example, at the early stages of development include: maturation of sensory, perceptual and motor functions, attachment, emotional development and sensorimotor intelligence and early causal schemes all of which happen during infancy; elaboration of locomotion, language development, fantasy play and self-control, gender identity, early moral development, and self-play, which take place during toddlerhood and early school age/childhood; and, friendship, concrete operation, skill learning, self-evaluation, team play, and physical maturation, formal operation, emotional development, membership in peer group and sexual relationship which take place during the periods of middle childhood and early adolescence. These developmental tasks share similarity to tasks undergone at about the same age as speculated by Freud and Piaget in their stage theories.

Simultaneously with the developmental tasks, individuals are expected to undergo psychosocial crises at each life stage. These are reflected in the third concept of the psychosocial theory of psychosocial crises . Psychosocial crises are perceived as problems or crises, individuals are confronted with, which require the integration of personal needs, skills and social demands. In this aspect these crises are considered to be a normal set of stressors and coping strategies. These conflicts do not necessarily only occur once in a lifespan, but also they may reoccur in a different stage. A crisis may have a positive or a negative connotation depending on the way it is dealt with by the individual.

Successfully overcoming a crisis may lead to a prime adaptive ego while on the other hand fail can bring about a core pathology. For instance, an individual at the stage of infancy would be undergoing the psychosocial crisis of trust versus mistrust. If this crisis is successfully resolved then the child achieves the prime adaptive ego quality of hope, if not then the child ends up on the adverse, with the core pathology of withdrawal. Experience with trust and mistrust lays the ground work for resolution of the psychosocial crises. Tension, conflict, and resolution are necessary elements for development throughout the lifespan and are a result of cultural pressures and expectations (Erikson, 1986).

Altogether, the psychosocial crises at each stage of the psychosocial theory are inclusive of: trust versus mistrust – the first task of the ego which happens at infancy; autonomy versus shame and doubt – which takes place in toddlerhood; initiative versus guilt – during early childhood/school age; industry versus inferiority at middle childhood; group identity versus role confusion during early adolescence; intimacy versus isolation at early adulthood stage; generativity versus stagnation during middle adulthood; and ego integrity versus despair at later adulthood; and finally immortality versus extinction which takes place at the stage of very old age. These crises do not happen in isolation by itself; they are determined by the next concept that follows in Erikson's psychosocial theory. This next and fourth concept of the psychosocial theory is the central processes for resolving psychosocial crises. Erikson identified the central processes for resolving the psychosocial crises as the social system that he equates to the demands exerted on a person by all elements that make-up the social world. The central processes

help link individual's needs with the requirements of the culture at each life stage.

For example, at infancy, a critical stage of development, the central process dealing with the psychosocial crisis of trust versus mistrust is depends upon the maturity of the caregiver. Another example would be in early adolescence the central process for resolving groups identity versus alienation is peer pressure. The central processes give aid to individuals in adjusting to or coping with the transitions of development throughout life provide both personal and societal mechanisms for taking in new information and reorganising existing information. It also indicates a revision of the psychological system so that the crisis of a particular stage may be resolved.

This may also require reorganisation of boundaries, values and images of oneself and others. The fifth concept of the psychosocial theory is the radius of significant relationships . In this stage society is organised in such a way that the age related demands on individuals are communicated through their significant social relationships. A person's network of relationship, at each life stage, will determine the demands that will be made of that person, the way he/she will be taken care of and the meaning that will be derived from that relationship. The relationship network varies from person to person, but each person has a network of significant relationships that carries them into more complex area of social life.

In childhood the circle of relationships is small; over the lifespan the radius of the circle expands; eventually in adulthood the radius condenses to a few significant relationships (Erikson, 1963). For example, in infancy and

childhood, individual's significant relationships are with parents. These relationships may later extend beyond immediate family to include neighbours, teachers, peers, co-workers and so on. Finally, the sixth concept of Erikson's psychosocial theory is coping. This concept of coping entails conscious, adaptive efforts to manage stressful events or situations, and the emotions associated with these stressors and/or to resolve stress and create new resolutions to the challenges of each new stage of development.

This coping concept comprises three components: the ability to gain and process information; the ability to maintain control over one's emotional state; and the ability to move freely within the environment. This concept helps the individual to actively cope with and resolve a psychosocial crisis which may arise in development of a virtue or prime adaptive ego qualities. The development of these virtues effect development of future virtues throughout the lifespan. On the contrary, Erikson proposed that maladaptive coping with psychosocial crises at each stage leads to the development of core pathologies. Similarly to virtues or prime adaptive ego qualities, core pathologies guide the individual's behaviour.

Development of core pathologies restricts further development in life due to the negative emphasis of the world and restriction of future behaviours. For example, at the developmental stage of middle childhood, successfully overcoming the psychosocial crisis of industry versus inferiority would lead to the prime adaptive ego quality of competencies and adversely to inertia (lethargy) if failure occurs. In conclusion, Erikson's psychosocial theory provides a useful theoretical framework that is utilised by many practitioners, guidance officers, counsellors, psychologists, social worker



and other caregivers, for understanding human development across the lifespan.

This theory reflects a number of strengths such as the theory provides a broad, integrative within which one can study the life span of human development; it provided insight into the directions of healthy development across the life span; many of the basic ideas of the theory have been operationalised using traditional and novel approaches to assessment; both positive and negative poles are reflected in the theory which offers a model for individual differences within a framework of normal development; and the theory is supported by a number of longitudinal studies. However, on the other hand, like every theory the psychosocial theory has a number of weaknesses.

It can be argued that the psychosocial theory mirrors a lack of development of the explanations for the mechanisms of crisis resolution and the process of moving from one stage to the next; the idea of a specific number of stages of life and their link to a genetic plan of development can be disputed; the theory and much of its supporting research have been dominated by a male leading to some bias in perspective and to a eurocentric perspective that gives too much emphasis to individuality and not enough attention to connection and social relatedness; and absence of clarity and elaboration as to the specific ways that culture encourages or inhibits development at each life stage.