

Erikson's psychosocial theory: a qualitative study



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From the time of conception until death, humans undergo incessant changes. One would experience biological, psychological and cognitive changes as one progresses in life. It leads to a change in the way one thinks and behaves. Development is the systematic change that takes place in an individual over the course of life (Shaffer and Kipp 2009: 2). The development of a human being is influenced by factors of nature and nurture. Based on these factors, various psychologists have proposed theories pertaining to human development. Particularly, psychologists have been interested in how one's personality develops; whether personality is inherent or whether it is shaped by one's experiences and environment.

Among such psychologists was Erik Erikson who proposed the psychosocial theory of development. Erikson was a follower of Freud and accepted many of the ideas that Freud introduced, however Erikson made modifications to Freud's ideas and introduced the theory of psychosocial development (Erikson 1963, 1982 cited in Shaffer and Kipp 2009: 44). Freud believed that the stages of personality development was influenced by the maturation of sex instinct, this theory was termed psychosexual development (cite needed). Psychosexual theory of development focuses essentially on the unconscious mind. The id, ego and superego are the components of personality and these three components develop in accordance to the stages of psychosexual development. There are 5 stages of psychosexual development; the oral, anal, phallic, latency and finally the genital stage. The extent to which conflicts are resolved in each of these stages influence one's personality later in life. Erikson modified this theory by emphasizing more on social and cultural influences on development and personality, rather than

the influence of sex instinct and urges. The psychosocial theory of development constructs a series of 8 stages of psychosocial conflict that one would encounter at various stages of life. Each stage consists of a major crisis. The time at which each crisis emerges is dependent on factors of biological maturation and social demands that one would encounter during various phases of life. The extent to which an individual resolves each conflict affects the psychological development and personality of the individual (citation needed). Early life experiences, therefore, are assumed to have a significant impact on the way in which one would think about the world, the way one would form social relationships and on what one would think about oneself.

To determine how Erikson's psychosocial theory of development may contribute in explaining how interpersonal relationships, emotion and personality are shaped, particularly in individuals of the Sri Lankan context, a structured interview was formulated and 2 individuals were interviewed based on how he/she looks back on his/her life. The interview provides means of obtaining qualitative data about the participants' lives with respect to the psychosocial development that has and is taking place. The sample for the interview consisted of a 25 year old Sri Lankan male who was married and a 50 year old Sri Lankan female who was divorced, single and had 2 children. The occupation of the participant A (the male participant) was mechanical engineering and participant B (the female participant) worked as a confidential secretary. Before the interview was conducted, each participant was briefed on the purpose of the interview and the method in which the interview would take place, then were asked if he/she would like to

participate in the study. Information regarding the expected duration of the interview and the nature of the questions that would be asked was also given to the participants prior to the interview so that the participant would be fully aware of what the consequences of taking part in the study would be.

The interview was a structured interview; 38 open ended questions were devised and there was an average of 4 questions relating to each of the 8 stages of Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. After the participants agreed to participate in the study a face to face interview was conducted at each of the participants' homes. Before the interview began the participants were briefed on confidentiality being maintained, their rights to not answer questions that they wished not to answer and they were given the right to withdraw at any moment they wished. The participants then signed a consent form and the interview proceeded.

Stage 1: Trust versus mistrust

The first stage of psychosocial development is believed to take place during infancy (0 - 1 year). At this stage the relationship between the infant and mother is of importance. In order to cultivate a healthy balance between trust and mistrust the infant should not be overprotected and overindulged yet the infant should be cared for and not neglected. If the infant is abused or neglected at this stage the infant's basic trust will be destroyed and mistrust would be fostered. When one has mistrust one tends to expect that the world would bring more bad his/her way than good. One may find it difficult to trust friends and loved ones, even society. Mistrust may even

cause an individual to be more avoidant of exposure to risks because the individual feels that the world is dangerous and inconsistent. Contrastingly, if the infant is overprotected by the mother the infant may develop a false sense of trust. Insulation from any form of unexpectedness may amount to sensory distortion and the individual may become naive. Such individuals are generally optimistic. In the interview conducted, questions were asked to determine how trusting the participant was of the world. When asked about what the participant thinks the future holds, participant A stated that he was optimistic to a certain extent about the future and the responses that participant A provided revealed that he did not seem to have difficulty in trusting other individuals. Participant A believed that the world is good yet has its ugly when asked whether the participant thinks the world is a bad place. Using the psychosocial theory of development participant A appears to have a healthy balance between trust and mistrust. Therefore it can be inferred that as an infant the participant obtained sufficient affection and care without being overprotected. Participant B, however, was pessimistic about the future, failed to see any good in the world and did not seem to trust other individuals with ease. Mistrust seems to have fostered more in participant B and this may be as a result of neglect during infancy. However the degree to which this theory is effective can be of question. Participant B's mistrust may not be a result of experience during infancy, instead it may be an experience from later in life. The individual is divorced and the failed marriage may be a better explanation for why the individual is pessimistic and finds it difficult to trust others.

Stage 2: Autonomy versus shame and doubt

Between the age of 1 and 3, exerting independence becomes a key challenge for the child. The child begins to gain control over his/her body and is able to explore surroundings. If the child is ridiculed for his/her attempts at autonomy the child may become doubtful and ashamed of handling situations and problems on his/her own. Participant A's responses to the questions based on autonomy took no extremes but rather fell on middle ground. The responses revealed that the participant made decisions independently and did not rely on others for matters that needed to be handled himself, however would seek help occasionally when in doubt. Participant B, however, still relied on parents for assistance when making important decisions in life and would ask for assistance when facing difficulty or if doubtful about what to do. Therefore, it can be assumed that participant B is less autonomous than participant A. However in the Sri Lankan culture it is not common to find adults still seeking his/her parents for advice. Families in Sri Lankan culture are closely knit. Even as children grow into adults, the relationship with parents remain strong and it is quite common to find that elderly parents continue to live with their adult children and grandchildren. This closeness and confidence could be the reason why individuals still ask parents for advice even as an adult, not because of autonomy as a toddler. In this sense Erikson's theory may be ethnocentric and not quite applicable in Sri Lankan culture.

Stage 3: Initiative versus guilt

This stage takes place between the age of 3 and 6 years. In addition to autonomy, the child now learns qualities of planning and undertaking tasks for the sake of being active. Guilt is a result of being reprimanded for

adventure and experimentation. At this stage in a child's life Erikson highlights the importance of adventure and play no matter how puerile it may appear to the parent or supervisor. Preventing an individual from initiation at this stage may have an effect on the individual's confidence to initiate in later life and may instill fear that the individual is wrong or would be disapproved. However the child should still experience the consequence of mistakes and learn through trial and error so that the child does not turn out to be irresponsible so that the child's conscience develops and so that he/she does not become boastful in nature.

Stage 4: Industry versus inferiority

From the age of 7 to 12, the child's cognitive capabilities increase drastically. The competence of the child develops and the child begins to engage in meaningful activity. Involvement in extracurricular activities in school may help the child prepare to enter life and become industrious as an adult. Contrastingly if the child does not experience the satisfaction that achievement brings, experiences failure in school work and activities, or is denied the opportunity to develop his/her unique potential and participate in school activities, in later life the individual may feel useless, unable to contribute or work in teams. Moreover, a certain amount of failure is important too so that the child has a sense of modesty. The balance between modesty and competence is important. One develops the virtue purpose if successful in this stage.

Stage 5: Identity versus role confusion

Adolescence (age 12 to 18 years) is a major stage of development of an individual. One becomes increasingly independent, one begins to think of the future in terms of the career one wishes to occupy and the type of lifestyle one wishes to follow. In making such decisions one must learn the roles that one will occupy as an adult. What should happen at the end of this stage, according to Bee, is " a reintegrated sense of self, of what one wants to do or be, and of one's appropriate sex role" (Bee 1992 cited in McLeod 2013). Individuals begin to explore possibilities and based on the result of such explorations, one's identity is formed. Forcing an identity upon a youth would cause diffusion in which the individual lacks any form of commitment or passion. The youth would become rebellious or unhappy. In failing to form one's identity, one may experience foreclosure where the youth adopts an identity of convenience precipitately. The youth that is unable to form his/her own identity becomes confused about his/her role in society. Individuals would develop the virtue of fidelity if successful in this stage. Although Erikson's theory describes the development of fidelity the theory does not explain how the development takes place. It is difficult to test the theory in this area and it is not falsifiable. The relationship between exploration as a youth and development of identity is vague. Participant A in the interview had strict parents and was not allowed to explore and adventure as a teenager yet seems to have fidelity and a strong identity. This contradicts the psychosocial theory of development.

Stage 6: Intimacy versus isolation

In young adulthood (18 to 40 years), one starts to share oneself and one's space more intimately with another individual. It starts with exploring a

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relationship with an individual other than a family member, which in turn could lead toward a long term commitment to that individual. Avoidance of intimacy and commitment to a relationship could lead to isolation or even depression. If an individual succeeds in this stage the individual develops the virtue of love. However in a country that has arranged marriages it is difficult to see how willing one is to share one's personal space with another. It could just be that the individual is forced to be in a committed relationship with another individual. The obligation to remain in the relationship would be present without love. In this case determining the successfulness of an individual at this stage is difficult.

Stage 7: Generativity versus stagnation

This stage occurs during middle adulthood (between 40 and 65 years). The individual starts to feel more involved in the world and a part of a bigger picture. Moreover, one would become more productive in terms of one's career or in terms of raising one's children. Some may even become involved in community activities and organizations that would benefit society. Failure in being generative in these ways would cause an individual to feel unproductive and stagnant in society. This stage is important for the development of the virtue care.

Stage 8: Integrity versus despair

As one steps into old age (65 years and over), one becomes unable to be as productive as one use to be. Therefore at this stage one starts to reflect on one's life in terms of how satisfied one is with how he/she lived life. Integrity develops as a result of one seeing oneself as successful in life. According to <https://assignbuster.com/eriksons-psychosocial-theory-a-qualitative-study/>

Erikson, if one is disappointed and feels one did not accomplish the life goals one had, the individual would develop despair.

Whilst the psychosocial theory is an aid in capturing central development issues in the 8 stages, it is still difficult to use the theory as an explanation of as to how and why such development comes about and Erikson acknowledges this (Erikson 1964 cited in McLeod 2013). There is no explicit explanation for how the degree of development at one stage affects the degree of development at another stage. The psychosocial theory of development is claimed to be universal however it is difficult to apply in certain cultures. For the solution of crises there is no universal mechanism that can be applied. It may vary from culture to culture. Moreover, the psychosocial theory of development, similar to the psychosexual theory of development, is not falsifiable and is difficult to test empirically. The lack of empiricism is one reason why developmentalists prefer other viewpoints of development, typically the learning viewpoint, rather than the psychoanalytical viewpoint.

Despite the criticisms of the psychosocial theory of development, there is still support for Erikson's 8 stages of personality development (McAdams 2001). The emphasis on the fact that individuals undergo development actively rather than passively and that humans are not subject to irrational urges is a quality that Erikson introduced after improving Freud's psychosexual theory (Erikson 1963 cited in Shaffer and Kipp 2009: 44). Many find it easier to accept that humans are rational and there is interaction of both biology and social influences, with ego playing a greater role than id. The psychosocial theory indeed has provided understanding to the

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development that occurs through various stages of life. The impact that relationships with family, friends and peers has on development has been brought to light and this theory can be applied to the education setting, work setting and even help improve parenting methods. Therefore despite the limitations of the psychosocial theory, the contribution to the field of developmental psychology that Erikson has made, in terms of the psychosocial stages of development, is certainly valuable.

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