

Lecture5: Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development

This lesson addresses many facets of Erik Erikson's eight-stage psychosocial development theory, including an overview of the stages, assumptions, applications, and strengths and weaknesses.

What is Psychosocial Development Theory?

Psychosocial development theory is an expansion of Sigmund Freud's original five stages of development. Erikson, a 20th-century psychologist and psychoanalyst, formulated the eight-stage life cycle theory in 1959 on the supposition that the environment plays a critical role in self-awareness, adjustment, human development and identity.

Erik Erikson's 8 stages of psychosocial development

Erikson asserts in his psychosocial theory that ego identity is reached by facing goals and challenges throughout eight stages of development over the entire life cycle. Each of the psychosocial stages is distinguished by two opposing emotional forces, known as contrary dispositions, that result in a crisis that needs to be resolved. Each crisis must be mastered as swiftly as possible, otherwise, a person's psychology is in jeopardy. However, a successful resolution of the conflict results in a healthy personality and the attainment of a basic virtue. The ego uses these character strengths to resolve subsequent crises.

1. Trust vs. Mistrust

The first stage of Erikson's psychosocial development starts at birth and continues to approximately 18 months of age. The principal task is trust versus mistrust. Infants rely solely upon their caregivers; thus, if caregivers are responsive and sensitive to their infant's needs, it helps the infant develop a sense of trust. Apathetic caregivers who do not meet their baby's needs may cause the baby to develop feelings of anxiety, fear and mistrust and see the world as unpredictable. Basic virtue developed: hope.

2. Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt

The second stage occurs between the ages of 1½ and 3 years. If a child is allowed to develop at their own pace during this stage, they can acquire self-reliance and self-confidence. However, if parents are inconsistent, overcritical, or overprotective, the child may doubt their ability to control themselves and their world. Basic virtue developed: will.

3. Initiative vs. Guilt

The third of Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development arises during the preschool stage, 3-5 years of age. A child can develop initiative through social interactions, and by planning and commencing in play and other activities. If the child's pursuits fail or are criticized, feelings of self-doubt and guilt may arise. Basic virtue developed: purpose.

4. Industry vs. Inferiority

The fourth stage occurs from ages 5 to 12 years. During this period, a child begins to compare themselves with peers. The child learns to be productive and to accept the evaluation of his or her efforts, and in turn, can develop a sense of accomplishment and pride in their academic work, sports, social activities and home life. If a child feels they do not measure up, feelings of inferiority or incompetence may be established. Basic virtue developed: competency.

5. Identity vs. Role Confusion

The fifth stage of psychosocial development is marked by an adolescent identity crisis. Between the ages of 12-18, an individual develops a sense of self by experimenting with a variety of social roles. An adolescent who is successful at forming a cohesive, positive identity will have a strong sense of identity, whereas adolescents who do not search for an identity or are pressured into an identity may experience role confusion and develop a weak sense of self. Basic virtue developed: fidelity.

6. Intimacy vs. Isolation

The sixth stage extends from late adolescence to early middle age, 18 to 40. A strong sense of self must be developed in adolescence in order to create intimate relationships with others during this stage. Adults who lack a positive self-concept may experience emotional isolation or loneliness.

To avoid feeling isolated or alone, individuals must learn to not lose themselves when sharing or caring for others. Gaining a strong self-identity allows an individual to achieve true intimacy, whereas identity diffusion can be a challenge. Basic virtue developed: love.

7. Generativity vs. Stagnation

Also called generativity versus self-absorption, the seventh stage in Erikson's psychosocial development theory occurs during the ages of 40-65. During middle adulthood, individuals have a positive goal of generativity. In most cases, this results in procreation, along with the fulfillment of parental and social responsibilities. This is in strict contrast to interest in the self or self-absorption. Basic virtue developed: care.

8. Integrity vs. Despair

The final stage of psychosocial development theory during old age (65+) is a period when a person reflects on life. One can either develop a sense of satisfaction of their life and approach death with peace or develop a sense of despair over missed opportunities and wasted time, leaving the individual to approach death with dread. Basic virtue developed: wisdom.

Assumptions of psychosocial development theory

Although Erikson built his psychosocial development theory upon many years of field research and study, the theory maintains a foundation in a few assumptions.

- Social expectations in each stage are the same across all cultures.
- Parental influence exists throughout the stages of childhood and adolescence.
- Humans develop similarly across the eight stages.

Applications of Psychosocial Development Theory

The psychosocial development theory holds that individuals are shaped by and react to their environment. For this reason, the theory may prove to be a useful tool in many fields, including social work.

Psychosocial development theory can be utilized in the analysis of a client's symptomatic behavior in relation to past traumatic experiences and conflicts with current developmental tasks.

Social workers can use Erikson's "maturation timetable" to identify individual challenges and to determine what support and services would be best for addressing the challenges.

Strengths and weaknesses of psychosocial development theory

As with all theories, the [psychosocial development theory has strengths and weaknesses](#).

- A strength of Erikson's theory is its ability to connect important psychosocial development across a person's lifespan. This approach provides a pragmatic perspective on personality development.

- However, a major weakness of Erikson's psychosocial development theory is that Erikson himself concedes the theory falls short of explaining how and why development occurs.
- Another strength of psychosocial development theory is that it demonstrates middle and late adulthood are active and significant periods of personal growth, while other theories deem both stages irrelevant.
- Erikson does not clarify how the outcome of one psychosocial stage influences one's personality in a later stage.
- The theory does not provide a universal method for crisis resolution.
- Unlike Freud's psychoanalysis approach, that psychosocial development theory was built upon, Erikson offers a wider and more comprehensive view of humanity.

How Does Psychosocial Development Theory Apply to Social Work?

Erikson's theory postulates that people advance through the stages of development based on how they adjust to social crises throughout their lives. These social crises instruct how individuals react to the surrounding world.

Criticism of Psychosocial Development Theory

While empirical research supports Erikson's psychosocial development theory, that a positive resolution of crises throughout the stages correlates with self-worth, [critics suggest the theory has several shortcomings](#).

- Erikson lacks academic credentials.
- The theory fails to detail what types of experiences are necessary to resolve the conflicts in each stage.
- Erikson employed an ambiguous style of writing and used a variety of terms such as identity development, identity consolidation and identity foreclosure to define identity without offering an explanation for their use. This practice may leave readers or followers confused.
- Psychosocial development theory focused on crises and asserted the completion of one crisis was necessary for the next crisis in development.
- Social explanations used may not translate to other cultures besides the U.S. middle-class.
- Erikson does not accurately address the experience of women, as evidenced in the Generativity vs. Stagnation stage. Women are more likely to move away from child-bearing and refocus on the self.

Source

[What is Psychosocial Development Theory? - Social Work Theories & Approaches \(onlinemswprograms.com\)](#)