

Psychosocial Stages of Development

Christopher L. Bishop

Trinity Washington University, USA

Erik Erikson's psychosocial development model has been a leading theory on the stages of human development since 1963. Erikson was a student of Anna Freud, studying to become a psychoanalyst. However, his view of psychosocial development diverged from psychoanalysis and he concluded that development is influenced not only by inner conflicts, but also by the social world (Psikolojisi, 2007). He challenged the field to examine how identity is formed and the extent of social and environmental influences in shaping individual development (Erikson, 1950, 1963). Erikson's theory revolutionized the field of development and identity, leading to pioneering work such as James Marcia's identity status model, which focused on adolescent development (Schwartz, Zamboianga, Wang, & Olthuis, 2009).

Overview

Erikson developed eight stages of development, each represented by an approximate age range. However, there is controversy concerning age ranges because of culture, social change, and various forms of development. In each stage, according to Erikson, there are psychosocial crises (*trust vs. mistrust; autonomy vs. shame and doubt; initiative vs. guilt; industry vs. inferiority; identity vs. role confusion; intimacy vs. isolation; generativity vs. stagnation; integrity vs. despair*) and the individual is challenged to achieve a psychosocial task. A psychosocial crisis is an innate conflict, with internal and external struggles prompted by physical and sexual growth and social changes. These struggles become a catalyst for shaping an individual's personality and determine how

the individual navigates the world, manages interpersonal interactions, and develops self-esteem over a lifetime. Erikson proposed that the experience of psychosocial crises and their resolution may lead to a healthy personality or to a fragmented and damaged personality.

Developmental psychologists and other social scientists have examined Erikson's theory from a cross-cultural perspective. Although Erikson's theory was not based on a cross-cultural perspective, the model represents aspects of the universal commonality of human development and personality style, and he made attempts to apply his model to other cultures, such as Native Americans (Schachter, 2005). Despite these attempts, the universality of Eriksonian developmental theory is not without challenges. For example, lifespans over various cultures are diverse and may limit the applicability of Erikson's stages; Afghanistan, for instance, has a shortened lifespan due to generations of war, lack of infrastructure, and poor healthcare, which may affect age-related challenges and expectations throughout life. Additionally, Wheeler, Ampadu, and Wangari (2002) argued that Erikson's theory is in conflict with African ideology as it relates to development. Erikson suggested that during development, psychologically healthy individuals will accomplish developmental milestones by becoming more independent and autonomous throughout their journey, whereas African philosophy emphasizes community, family, and spirituality, which are shared in a collective succession in order to accomplish developmental milestones. These aspects of African philosophy may also resemble those of other collective societies, such as Asian, Latin, and Middle Eastern cultures. The research base examining Erikson's theory from a cross-cultural perspective is not extensive, yet there appear to be variations in the experience of these stages across and within cultural,

subcultural, and ethnic groups. Erikson himself noted during his own aging process that as life expectancy increases, developmental theory should be reassessed.

In contrast, Schachter (2005) argued that Erikson's theory incorporates social, cultural and environmental factors as they relate to forming personality, and Schwartz (2001) posited that Erikson incorporated cognitive, moral, social, and cultural realms as a way to understand identity. Onchwari, Ariri-Onchwari, and Keengwe (2008) discussed the relevance of Erikson's model in the development of immigrant children, who successfully transition through stages with the support of their culture and parents. However, factors such as prejudice and racism may impair developing children's personalities even if they are naturally progressing with the encouragement of their culture. Furthermore, Sneed, Whitbourne, and Culang (2008) argued that Erikson's theory allows flexibility in accounting for individual differences and the interactions between person and environment. This notion implies that culture is also a variable that influences personality and development.

The Stages

Stage 1

Erikson's first stage is *trust vs. mistrust*, which occurs during infancy (birth to 18 months). The psychosocial task for the infant is to seek a level of trust from the primary caregiver(s), as well as to depend on the caregiver(s) to provide a sense of security (Psikolojisi, 2007). Suedfeld et al. (2005) suggested that a favorable outcome is for the infant to establish a sense of security and a positive approach to the world, which is seen as a healthy attachment. In addition, this stage leads to the foundation of a healthy personality. In contrast, failure to create these bonds leads the infant to an inability to trust, and to isolation, withdrawal, and a negative attitude about life. This initial stage appears likely to transcend a majority of cultures and also provides a foundation for the child's development and how the child develops

intimate relationships, which are a continuation of how individuals interpret and reinterpret the environment throughout their lifetime.

Birth is one of the first traumas that a human experiences, and infants use the caregiver as their barometer regarding the environment. In general, infants are provided with a caregiver(s), even if it is not the birth parents, to meet their basic needs. This stage of development is also more likely to be nurtured collectively (e.g., by family, friends) than by one individual. The reactions of the caregiver(s) to the infant's needs determine the successful development of the child mastering this crisis in a positive manner.

However, research has highlighted cross-cultural variations in the perception of infancy. Feldman and Masalha (2010, p. 456) found that mothers from an individualistic culture were likely to engage in social behaviors such as "frequent gaze, provide more objects frequently, and more direct face-to-face interaction". In contrast, mothers from a collectivistic culture approached interactions with their children by "placing the infant in physical proximity, keeping arousal at neutral levels, and maintaining continuous contact, but focusing less on active social behaviors in the vocal, gaze, or facial-affective modalities" (p.456). There are non-industrialized cultures which do not focus on the nurturing aspects of parent-child relationships, but rather on keeping evil spirits from possessing the child and attacking the family (Montgomery, 2009). This suggests that the infant is not the main objective, but the family as a unit is the most important entity.

Stage 2

Erikson's second stage is *autonomy vs. shame and doubt*, which occurs during toddlerhood (18 months to three years). Successful completion of this stage leads the toddler to feel confident and secure to explore the environment without permission of the caregiver. In addition, toddlers have a more independent stance and attempt to control the environment and their own bodily responses, such as toilet training. This stage

allows the child to explore relationships outside the primary caregiver's natural environment, and Psikolojisi (2007) suggested that the culture has to support this level of independence without punitive implications. Failure of this stage produces an outcome of fragile self-worth, dependence, and lack of confidence. An individualistic society encourages children to be more self-reliant, whereas collectivistic cultures such as the Japanese emphasize interdependence (Gardiner & Kosmitzki, 2011). In the latter cultures, the child sleeps in the same bed with the mother, which may be beyond the expectations of an individualistic society.

Stage 3

The third stage is *initiative vs. guilt*, which occurs during early childhood (3–5 years). Suedfeld et al. (2005) posited that in order to be successful during this stage, the child initiates goals and expresses needs to others. This may lead to feelings of competitiveness and produce leadership qualities. Psikolojisi (2007) stated that this is a time when the toddler seeks out individuals who represent various professions (e.g., police officer, firefighter, president) to be able to identify and imitate without feeling rejected. This stage nurtures a stronger bond between the child and the same-sex parent. Furthermore, this bond creates an established lasting relationship with the family, which in turn develops an individual who has connections to others. However, unsuccessful accomplishment would lead to feelings of dependency, poor self-concept, and poor judgment. During early childhood children also attempt to understand their role in society and begin to navigate a sense of belongingness and power within the context of their environment. This ideology conflicts with certain cultures in which there is a belief that individual power and assertion is not needed. And in some cultures, there are caste systems that either encourage or discourage these types of behaviors. Gardiner and Kosmitzki (2011) observed that this psychosocial crisis is resolved after the child has adopted the belief that assisting others first leads to personal leadership.

Erikson's second and third stages focus on early childhood independence and a separation of child and caregiver. This perspective does not transcend all cultures and may not fit in a developmental model that is universal. Weisner and Gallimore (2008) found that children five years old and younger among the Dusun of Malaysia begin to develop a supportive role to the caregiver such as caring for their younger sibling rather than seeking independence. In addition, children in this stage are encouraged to work in assisting the family. Gaskins (2008) found that Yucatec Mayan children are expected to work in order to support the family to the best of their developmental abilities. Gardiner and Kosmitzki (2011) found that this type of role can connect the child to the family and lead a child to seek out activities to support the greater need of the family.

Stage 4

Personal power leads to Erickson's fourth stage, which is *industry vs. inferiority*, occurring during middle childhood (six–12 years). Suedfeld et al. (2005) viewed a favorable outcome as the child's ability to demonstrate mastery of tasks and abilities. During this period, school and athletic achievements are desired. An unfavorable outcome results in feelings of incompetency and lack of confidence. Erikson suggested that children are exposed to leaders and followers, and understand the norms of their environment and the expectations of their peers. Further, children are able to display their personal talents to separate themselves from their peer group. An individualistic society highly emphasizes this distinction through sports, academics, and within family units. This stage appears to center on the ecological connection between the individual and the environment. Competition and competence are encouraged by the immediate family, extended family, community, and society. In contrast, an interdependent society focuses more on how the strength of the individual supports the collective group.

Stage 5

The fifth stage is *identity vs. role confusion*, which occurs during adolescence (12–18 years). The adolescent seeks to establish uniqueness and to develop an identity that is personally acceptable and hopefully acceptable to society and/or a peer group. Failure to achieve this purpose leads the adolescent to a fragmented sense of self, with little hope of being accepted by others (Suedfeld et al., 2005). The concept of identity development from an Eriksonian perspective entails time necessary for the autonomous exploration of self. Two aspects of this definition challenge cross-cultural universality: latency and autonomy. Additionally, theorists have argued that Erikson's model neglected ethnic identity, which is a factor in forming identity and possibly personality. Ethnicity and culture are intertwined during this sensitive developmental period (Thom & Coetzee, 2004). This stage represents adolescents forming questions of their identity and how they relate to their family, peers, and society.

In Western society, adolescence is a time during which adolescents are in preparation to evolve from childhood to adulthood. Their ability to reintegrate their identity based on the previous stages is challenged. Thom and Coetzee (2004) noted that marginalized groups tend to define their identity through their cultural heritage. They also found that minority adolescents experienced an identity foreclosure when they were restricted by racism and social expectations. In contrast, their majority counterparts experienced a reintegration of self and stability, as they maneuvered through this stage without restriction.

However, from a cross-cultural perspective, the stage of identity vs. role confusion may be more defined by the culture's values, customs, beliefs, and ascribed roles from birth. The individual may not be given time to discover personal uniqueness, but rather only a short period of time to take on birthright roles. Various cultures have rites of passage for adolescents to follow in order to attain adulthood.

For example, a *bar mitzvah* is a time when a Jewish adolescent is recognized by his culture as a man. Certain cultures view these types of customs as an entry to manhood or womanhood, versus a substage of childhood. At the same time, adolescence may not exist in every culture; many individuals during this stage are spouses, parents, providers, and important members of society in various cultures. Autonomy is the second challenge to universality of this stage. For example, gender impacts the success of this stage to the extent that expectations of women and men differ in how individuals negotiate their development. In patriarchal cultures the needs of the family and the culture may supersede the needs of the individual. Thus, females may be more likely to develop an interdependent rather than an independent identity (Gilligan, 1982). Furthermore, adolescent females are often viewed as caregivers and wives; therefore their identity is foreclosed, as seen in Papua New Guinean (Montgomery, 2009). Adolescence is a period of variability in how roles are ascribed due to social, culture, and ethnic conditions.

Stage 6

The sixth stage, *intimacy vs. isolation*, encompasses young adulthood (18–35 years). Adults have to negotiate their own identity as they seek out intimate relationships. Generally, they are searching for similar qualities in others that will lead to healthy and long lasting relationships. Gardiner and Kosmitzki (2011) explained the vast differences in human development across cultures at this stage. In some cultures, adolescents are in committed relationships, rearing children at a younger age, and not exploring connections with others in the manner Erikson described. Specifically, Montgomery (2009) stated that child brides in India would achieve this stage, whereas in the Navajo society adulthood is not achieved until the age of 30. As with other stages in adulthood, differences in lifespan and family expectations can affect the experience of this stage, and negotiation of individual identity is sometimes shaped by

cultural values and beliefs rather than an individual's own wants and needs. Arranged marriages exemplify how cultural context can overshadow individual development in adulthood. In these marriages, women and men are expected to create meaningful relationships and form a level of intimacy with the expectation that these bonds are for a lifetime, regardless of one's own independent need or personality compatibility. Furthermore, development of a sense of intimacy may differ for males and females. Males are more likely to approach the world from an individualistic perspective, while females will likely base their sense of intimacy on the quality of their connections or sense of collectivism with others (Gilligan, 1982). Nevertheless, Erikson understood that to achieve a successful progression in this stage one would have to give up a portion of his or her own identity to create meaningful relationships (Busch & Hofer, 2011).

Stage 7

Erikson's seventh stage is *generativity vs. stagnation* (self-absorption), which occurs during middle adulthood (35–55 or 65). Suedfeld et al. (2005) stated that a successful outcome of this stage occurs when the individual engages in activities that promote a level of good will and moral judgment for the betterment of society and the next generation. An unfavorable outcome is when an individual becomes self-centered and lacks social connectedness. When this psychosocial task is not achieved, an individual becomes isolated, leading to a narrow point of view. There is less research on this stage than the others as it relates to cross-cultural concerns or benefits. However, this stage does imply a sense of collective spirit in which the individual strives to make life better for the community and is less self-indulged, encouraging culture and tradition (Busch & Hofer, 2011).

Stage 8

The eighth Eriksonian stage is *integrity vs. despair*, occurring in late adulthood (55–65 to death). The psychosocial task here builds on

the previous stage of enriching the next generation and becoming a key member and leader of one's family and community. Individuals examine their choices over a lifetime, with the hope of achieving a meaningful life. Suedfeld et al. (2005) stated that the individual is accepting of his or her choices over a lifetime, has established sustainable relationships over many generations, and is prepared to transition without regret. A failure to achieve at this stage leads to a life of regret about decision making, unfulfilled dreams, and a lack of altruism toward society.

The success of this stage is also dependent on how society views members. If an individual is valued by society, the end of life may reflect different perceptions and expectations compared to societies that do not hold the same values in relation to the elderly. Collective societies tend to have a high regard and level of respect for their elderly. Older people are perceived as wise and the culture values and obeys the knowledge they impart to younger generations. It is common in collectivist cultures that elders are leaders, advisors to leaders, and family decision makers. Gardiner and Kosmitzki (2011) noted that individualistic societies are more likely to view the elderly as burdensome and lacking in value compared to collectivistic cultures. Individualistic cultures are less likely to regard the care of the elderly as a personal responsibility, and more likely to leave it to society to care for them until their death. The younger generation is valued, which diminishes the contributions of older generations. This perspective is also seen in forced retirements, poor healthcare, and an increase of nursing homes.

Chan and Yau (2009) argued that Erikson's model lacks the social and cultural experience of one approaching the end of life. They perceived death as not merely a personal experience, but also a social event. They too noted that it is more common for individualistic cultures not to hold their elderly as much as in high regard as collective societies. Gardiner and Kosmitzki (2011) further stated that elderly members of an individualistic culture are tradi-

tionally focused on career status, wealth and accomplishments; therefore as they approach the end of life, their focus is on leaving financial inheritance and burial arrangements. Individuals in collectivistic cultures, on the other hand, have extended responsibilities to their family and society as they prepare for transition. For example, Chan and Yau (2009, p. 236) noted that Chinese cultural practices include “core filial obligations, such as ancestral worship and repaying indebtedness to parents” to ensure the longevity of the next generation.

Conclusion

In summary, Erikson’s psychosocial stages continue to be controversial and may be difficult to adapt in various cultures and subcultures. In analyzing his theory, it appears that his initial stage may be more universal than the rest of the model. Erikson’s ideas have allowed for latitude in how the theory explains the formation of personality as sensitive to culture, individual differences, social influences, and environment. Logan (1986) argued that an individual will revisit selected stages due to stability and completeness (Stage 1 to Stage 5 and Stage 5 to Stage 8). He asserted Stage 1 (trust vs. mistrust) and Stage 5 (identity vs. role confusion) cycles because Stage 1 represents identity of one’s self and how one relates to others, and Stage 5 represents one’s self and how one relates to self and society. This process reoccurs from Stage 5 (identity vs. role confusion) to Stage 8 (ego integrity vs. despair) because it represents stability and completeness in the final phase of life. The individual has a yearning to have meaning in life and to make a final contribution to society. Although Erikson’s approach to development and personality has validity in some cultures, the reliability of his model is inconsistent and needs to be reconceptualized to be considered universal to identity development in a cross-cultural context.

SEE ALSO: Culture; Erikson, Erik; Identity; Individualism-Collectivism; Lifespan Development; Personality

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