



Erik Erikson – Lifespan Development

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German-American developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst Erik Erikson lived from 1902 to 1994. A student of Anna Freud, he studied psychoanalysis at Vienna Psychoanalytic Institute and is known for his work with children and adolescents. He was also interested in social psychology (the study of how we interact with the world socially).

Erikson had a particular interest in the development of identity, an issue that he himself struggled with and on which he wrote a book (1959). Credited for being the first to use the term 'identity crisis', he is also well known for his theory of lifespan development.

Influences

Erikson's theory of human development links strongly with John Bowlby's and Mary Ainsworth's attachment theory, and with Sigmund Freud's drive theory. Seligman (2006, p. 52) notes: 'Erikson's linking of personal and social development to Freud's concept of psychosexual development increased the importance and relevance of Freud's work.'

Erikson was also influenced by Margret Mahler; and he in turn influenced Eric Berne.

Lifespan Development

This theory describes the series of eight stages through which a healthy developing individual passes from the cradle to the grave:

- Stage 1: trust versus mistrust
- Stage 2: autonomy versus shame and doubt
- Stage 3: initiative versus guilt
- Stage 4: industry versus inferiority
- Stage 5: ego identity versus role confusion
- Stage 6: intimacy versus isolation
- Stage 7: generativity versus stagnation
- Stage 8: ego integrity versus despair.

Humans are subject to a ‘maturation timetable’ – in other words, a typical timetable for how they develop over the average lifespan. As people age, they experience a subconscious shift of priorities and desires, and have different experiences.

Stage 1: Trust versus Mistrust

Age: Birth to 18 months

Description: A baby has an innate sense of how safe they feel in the world, drawing on their caregiver for both consistency and a sense of trust. However, not all caregivers are able to provide this environment.

Possible problems: Developing or maintaining relationships in the future, feelings of emptiness, substance misuse and sexual problems.

Stage 2: Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt

Age: 18 months to three years

Description: As children experiment in their world, caregivers may be patient and understanding. But if caregivers are critical, children may grow up lacking confidence, being reluctant to try new things and feeling worthless.

Possible problems: Lack of self-esteem, low self-worth, shame, guilt and anger.

Stage 3: Initiative versus Guilt

Age: Three to five years

Description: At this stage, children assert themselves and interact with others. Success helps the person to feel part of society. However, if the caregiver quashes the youngster's sense of self, the child may feel that they are a nuisance, or may feel guilty for asking questions.

Possible problems: Indecision, unassertiveness, low motivation, shame and guilt

Stage 4: Industry versus Inferiority

Age: Five to 13 years

Description: As children learn new skills and are influenced by their peer group, they may feel competent – or they may feel inferior and doubt themselves.

Possible problems: Isolation from peers, inability to grasp social cues, anger, shame, incompetence and sadness.

Stage 5: Ego Identity versus Role Confusion

Age: 13 to 21 years

Description: Young people become sexually aware of themselves, and look to develop a sense of self. Ideally, they go on to develop clarity about who they are.

Possible problems: Conflict with parents or teachers, search for identity in different groups, lack of body confidence, uncertainty about leaving childhood and taking on adult roles, and questions about own sexuality.

Stage 6: Intimacy versus Isolation

Age: 21 to 39 years

Description: Young people now seek longer-term relationships with people other than family members. They may be able to express their sexual orientation or they may avoid intimacy.

Possible problems: Isolation, depression, inability to form relationships, feelings of frustration and loneliness, and issues of attachment or loss.

Stage 7: Generativity versus Stagnation

Age: 40 to 65 years

Description: In middle adulthood, people give back to society through raising children, being productive at work and becoming involved in community activities/organisations. If they achieve these things, they feel purposeful.

Possible problems: Feeling stagnant, unproductive, frustrated, pointless and unfulfilled.

Stage 8: Ego Integrity versus Despair

Age: 65+

Description: Older people tend to slow down and be less productive than in the past. They reflect on their lives and contemplate their accomplishments. Ideally, doing so brings up feelings of contentment and satisfaction.

Possible problems: Feelings of despair, regret, loss, missed opportunity and unworthiness.

Psychosocial Crisis

If development does not go smoothly at a particular stage, the person may experience arrested development – i.e. get stuck somehow and have problems.

We may see these in clients who present for counselling.

Being aware of the stages can help us as counsellors to understand issues that clients of different ages may bring. Some clients come to counselling while they are in a particular stage that they are struggling with, while others present years later with problems that have resulted from a stage not going well in the past.

Erikson believed that as we go through stages of development, we must negotiate aspects of ourselves, and we experience ‘psychosocial crises’. How we deal with each crisis forms our personality, which in turn informs our outlook on life.

References

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