

Erik Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development

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Erikson maintained that personality develops in a predetermined order through eight stages of psychosocial development, from infancy to adulthood. During each stage, the person experiences a psychosocial crisis that could positively or negatively affect personality development.

For Erikson (1958, 1963), these crises are psychosocial because they involve the psychological needs of the individual (i.e., psycho) conflicting with the needs of society (i.e., social).

According to the theory, successful completion of each stage results in a healthy personality and the acquisition of basic virtues. Basic virtues are characteristic strengths that the ego can use to resolve subsequent crises.

Failure to complete a stage can result in a reduced ability to complete further stages and, therefore, a more unhealthy personality and sense of self. These stages, however, can be resolved successfully at a later time.

Erikson's Psychosocial Stages

Stage	Basic Conflict	Virtue	Description
Infancy 0–1 year	Trust vs. mistrust	Hope	Trust (or mistrust) that basic needs, such as nourishment and affection, will be met
Early childhood 1–3 years	Autonomy vs. shame/doubt	Will	Develop a sense of independence in many tasks
Play age 3–6 years	Initiative vs. guilt	Purpose	Take initiative on some activities—may develop guilt when unsuccessful or boundaries overstepped
School age 7–11 years	Industry vs. inferiority	Competence	Develop self-confidence in abilities when competent or sense of inferiority when not
Adolescence 12–18 years	Identity vs. confusion	Fidelity	Experiment with and develop identity and roles
Early adulthood 19–29 years	Intimacy vs. isolation	Love	Establish intimacy and relationships with others
Middle age 30–64 years	Generativity vs. stagnation	Care	Contribute to society and be part of a family
Old age 65 onward	Integrity vs. despair	Wisdom	Assess and make sense of life and meaning of contributions

Erikson's theory outlines 8 stages of psychosocial development from infancy to late adulthood. At each stage, individuals face a conflict between two opposing states that shapes personality. Successfully resolving the conflicts leads to virtues like hope, will, purpose, and integrity. Failure leads to outcomes like mistrust, guilt, role confusion, and despair.

Stage 1. Trust vs. Mistrust

Trust vs. mistrust is the first stage in Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. This stage begins at birth continues to approximately 18 months of age. During this stage, the infant is uncertain about the world in which they live, and looks towards their primary caregiver for stability and consistency of care.

Here's the conflict:

- **Trust:** If the caregiver is reliable, consistent, and nurturing, the child will develop a sense of trust, believing that the world is safe and that people are dependable and affectionate.

This sense of trust allows the child to feel secure even when threatened and extends into their other relationships, maintaining their sense of security amidst potential threats.

- **Mistrust:** Conversely, if the caregiver fails to provide consistent, adequate care and affection, the child may develop a sense of mistrust and insecurity.

This could lead to a belief in an inconsistent and unpredictable world, fostering a sense of mistrust, suspicion, and anxiety.

Under such circumstances, the child may lack confidence in their ability to influence events, viewing the world with apprehension.

Infant Feeding

Feeding is a critical activity during this stage. It's one of infants' first and most basic ways to learn whether they can trust the world around them.

It sets the stage for their perspective on the world as being either a safe, dependable place or a place where their needs may not be met.

- **Trust:** When the caregiver consistently responds to the child's hunger cues, providing nourishment sensitively and reliably, the child learns that their needs will be met.

This consistent, dependable care helps the child feel a sense of security and trust in the caregiver and their environment.

They understand that when they have a need, such as hunger, someone will be there to provide for that need.

- **Mistrust:** If the caregiver is neglectful, inconsistent, or insensitive in feeding, the child may experience discomfort, distress, and hunger.

These negative experiences can lead to a sense of mistrust in their environment and caregivers.

They may start to believe that their needs may not be met, creating anxiety and insecurity.

Success and Failure In Stage One

Success in this stage will lead to the virtue of **hope**. By developing a sense of trust, the infant can have hope that as new crises arise, there is a real possibility that other people will be there as a source of support.

Failing to acquire the virtue of hope will lead to the development of fear. This infant will carry the basic sense of mistrust with them to other relationships. It may result in anxiety, heightened insecurities, and an over-feeling mistrust in the world around them.

Consistent with Erikson's views on the importance of trust, research by Bowlby and Ainsworth has outlined how the quality of the early attachment experience can affect relationships with others in later life.

The balance between trust and mistrust allows the infant to learn that while there may be moments of discomfort or distress, they can rely on their caregiver to provide support.

This helps the infant to build resilience and the ability to cope with stress or adversity in the future.

Stage 2. Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt

Autonomy versus shame and doubt is the second stage of Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development. This stage occurs between the ages of 18 months to approximately 3 years. According to Erikson, children at this stage are focused on developing a sense of personal control over physical skills and a sense of independence.

Here's the conflict:

- **Autonomy:** If encouraged and supported in their increased independence, children will become more confident and secure in their ability to survive.

They will feel comfortable making decisions, explore their surroundings more freely, and have a sense of self-control. Achieving this autonomy helps them feel able and capable of leading their lives.

- **Shame and Doubt:** On the other hand, if children are overly controlled or criticized, they may begin to feel ashamed of their autonomy and doubt their abilities.

This can lead to a lack of confidence, fear of trying new things, and a sense of inadequacy about their self-control abilities.

What Happens During This Stage?

The child is developing physically and becoming more mobile, discovering that he or she has many skills and abilities, such as putting on clothes and shoes, playing with toys, etc.

Such skills illustrate the child's growing sense of independence and autonomy.

For example, during this stage, children begin to assert their independence, by walking away from their mother, picking which toy to play with, and making choices about what they like to wear, to eat, etc.

Toilet Training

This is when children start to exert their independence, taking control over their bodily functions, which can greatly influence their sense of autonomy or shame and doubt.

- **Autonomy:** When parents approach toilet training in a patient, supportive manner, allowing the child to learn at their own pace, the child may feel a sense of accomplishment and autonomy.

They understand they have control over their own bodies and can take responsibility for their actions. This boosts their confidence, instilling a sense of autonomy and a belief in their ability to manage personal tasks.

- **Shame and Doubt:** Conversely, if the process is rushed, if there's too much pressure, or if parents respond with anger or disappointment to accidents, the child may feel shame and start doubting their abilities.

They may feel bad about their mistakes, and this can lead to feelings of shame, self-doubt, and a lack of confidence in their autonomy.

Success and Failure In Stage Two

Erikson states parents must allow their children to explore the limits of their abilities within an encouraging environment that is tolerant of failure.

Success in this stage will lead to the virtue of **will**. If children in this stage are encouraged and supported in their increased independence, they become more confident and secure in their own ability to survive in the world.

The infant develops a sense of personal control over physical skills and a sense of independence.

Suppose children are criticized, overly controlled, or not given the opportunity to assert themselves. In that case, they begin to feel inadequate in their ability to survive, and may then become overly dependent upon others, lack self-esteem, and feel a sense of shame or doubt in their abilities.

How Can Parents Encourage a Sense of Control?

Success leads to feelings of autonomy, and failure results in shame and doubt.

Erikson states it is critical that parents allow their children to explore the limits of their abilities within an encouraging environment that is tolerant of failure.

For example, rather than put on a child's clothes, a supportive parent should have the patience to allow the child to try until they succeed or ask for assistance.

So, the parents need to encourage the child to become more independent while at the same time protecting the child so that constant failure is avoided.

A delicate balance is required from the parent. They must try not to do everything for the child, but if the child fails at a particular task, they must not criticize the child for failures and accidents (particularly when toilet training).

The aim has to be “self-control without a loss of self-esteem” (Gross, 1992).

The balance between autonomy and shame and doubt allows the child to understand that while they can't always control their environment, they can exercise control over their actions and decisions, thus developing self-confidence and resilience.

Stage 3. Initiative vs. Guilt

Initiative versus guilt is the third stage of Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. During the initiative versus guilt stage, children assert themselves more frequently through directing play and other social interaction.

Here's the conflict:

- **Initiative:** When caregivers encourage and support children to take the initiative, they can start planning activities, accomplish tasks, and face challenges.

The children will learn to take the initiative and assert control over their environment.

They can begin to think for themselves, formulate plans, and execute them, which helps foster a sense of purpose.

- **Guilt:** If caregivers discourage the pursuit of independent activities or dismiss or criticize their efforts, children may feel guilty about their desires and initiatives.

This could potentially lead to feelings of guilt, self-doubt, and lack of initiative.

What Happens During This Stage?

These are particularly lively, rapid-developing years in a child's life. According to Bee (1992), it is a "time of vigor of action and of behaviors that the parents may see as aggressive."

During this period, the primary feature involves the child regularly interacting with other children at school. Central to this stage is play, as it allows children to explore their interpersonal skills through initiating activities.

The child begins to assert control and power over their environment by planning activities, accomplishing tasks, and facing challenges.

Exploration

Here's why exploration is important:

- **Developing Initiative:** Exploration allows children to assert their power and control over their environment. Through exploration, children engage with their surroundings, ask questions, and discover new things.

This active engagement allows them to take the initiative and make independent choices, contributing to their autonomy and confidence.

- **Learning from Mistakes:** Exploration also means making mistakes, and these provide crucial learning opportunities. Even if a child's efforts lead to mistakes or failures, they learn to understand cause and effect and their role in influencing outcomes.

- **Building Self-Confidence:** When caregivers support and encourage a child's explorations and initiatives, it bolsters their self-confidence. They feel their actions are valuable and significant, which encourages them to take more initiative in the future.
- **Mitigating Guilt:** If caregivers respect the child's need for exploration and do not overly criticize their mistakes, it helps prevent feelings of guilt. Instead, the child learns it's okay to try new things and perfectly fine to make mistakes.

Success and Failure In Stage Three

Children begin to plan activities, make up games, and initiate activities with others. If given this opportunity, children develop a sense of initiative and feel secure in their ability to lead others and make decisions. Success at this stage leads to the virtue of **purpose**.

Conversely, if this tendency is squelched, either through criticism or control, children develop a sense of **guilt**. The child will often overstep the mark in his forcefulness, and the danger is that the parents will tend to punish the child and restrict his initiative too much.

It is at this stage that the child will begin to ask many questions as his thirst for knowledge grows. If the parents treat the child's questions as trivial, a nuisance, or embarrassing or other aspects of their behavior as threatening, the child may feel guilty for "being a nuisance".

Too much guilt can slow the child's interaction with others and may inhibit their creativity. Some guilt is, of course, necessary; otherwise the child would not know how to exercise self-control or have a conscience.

A healthy balance between initiative and guilt is important.

The balance between initiative and guilt during this stage can help children understand that it's acceptable to take charge and make their own decisions, but there will also be times when they must follow the rules or guidelines set by others. Successfully navigating this stage develops the virtue of purpose.

How Can Parents Encourage a Sense of Exploration?

In this stage, caregivers must provide a safe and supportive environment that allows children to explore freely. This nurtures their initiative, helps them develop problem-solving skills, and builds confidence and resilience.

By understanding the importance of exploration and providing the right support, caregivers can help children navigate this stage successfully and minimize feelings of guilt.

Stage 4. Industry vs. Inferiority

Erikson's fourth psychosocial crisis, involving industry (competence) vs. Inferiority occurs during childhood between the ages of five and twelve. In this stage, children start to compare themselves with their peers to gauge their abilities and worth.

Here's the conflict:

- **Industry:** If children are encouraged by parents and teachers to develop skills, they gain a sense of industry—a feeling of competence and belief in their skills.

They start learning to work and cooperate with others and begin to understand that they can use their skills to complete tasks. This leads to a sense of confidence in their ability to achieve goals.

- **Inferiority:** On the other hand, if children receive negative feedback or are not allowed to demonstrate their skills, they may develop a sense of inferiority.

They may start to feel that they aren't as good as their peers or that their efforts aren't valued, leading to a lack of self-confidence and a feeling of inadequacy.

What Happens During This Stage?

The child is coping with new learning and social demands.

Children are at the stage where they will be learning to read and write, to do sums, and to do things on their own. Teachers begin to take an important role in the child's life as they teach specific skills.

At this stage, the child's peer group will gain greater significance and become a major source of the child's self-esteem.

The child now feels the need to win approval by demonstrating specific competencies valued by society and develop a sense of pride in their accomplishments.

School

This stage typically occurs during the elementary school years, from approximately ages 6 to 11, and the experiences children have in school can significantly influence their development.

Here's why:

- **Development of Industry:** At school, children are given numerous opportunities to learn, achieve, and demonstrate their competencies. They work on various projects, participate in different activities, and collaborate with their peers.

These experiences allow children to develop a sense of industry, reinforcing their confidence in their abilities to accomplish tasks and contribute effectively.

- **Social Comparison:** School provides a context where children can compare themselves to their peers.

They gauge their abilities and achievements against those of their classmates, which can either help build their sense of industry or lead to feelings of inferiority, depending on their experiences and perceptions.

- **Feedback and Reinforcement:** Teachers play a crucial role during this stage. Their feedback can either reinforce the child's sense of industry or trigger feelings of inferiority.

Encouraging feedback enhances the child's belief in their skills, while persistent negative feedback can lead to a sense of inferiority.

- **Building Life Skills:** School also provides opportunities for children to develop crucial life skills, like problem-solving, teamwork, and time management. Successfully acquiring and utilizing these skills promotes a sense of industry.

- **Dealing with Failure:** School is where children may encounter academic difficulties or fail for the first time.

How they learn to cope with these situations— and how teachers and parents guide them through these challenges—can influence whether they develop a sense of industry or inferiority.

Success and Failure In Stage Four

Success leads to the virtue of **competence**, while failure results in feelings of **inferiority**.

If children are encouraged and reinforced for their initiative, they begin to feel industrious (competence) and confident in their ability to achieve goals.

If this initiative is not encouraged, if parents or teacher restricts it, then the child begins to feel inferior, doubting his own abilities, and therefore may not reach his or her potential.

If the child cannot develop the specific skill they feel society demands (e.g., being athletic), they may develop a sense of inferiority.

Some failure may be necessary so that the child can develop some modesty. Again, a balance between competence and modesty is necessary.

The balance between industry and inferiority allows children to recognize their skills and understand that they have the ability to work towards and achieve their goals, even if they face challenges along the way.

How Can Parents & Teachers Encourage a Sense of Exploration?

In this stage, teachers and parents need to provide consistent, constructive feedback and encourage effort, not just achievement.

This approach helps foster a sense of industry, competence, and confidence in children, reducing feelings of inferiority.

Stage 5. Identity vs. Role Confusion

The fifth stage of Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development is identity vs. role confusion, and it occurs during adolescence, from about 12-18 years. During this stage, adolescents search for a sense of self and personal identity, through an intense exploration of personal values, beliefs, and goals.

Here's the conflict:

- **Identity:** If adolescents are supported in their exploration and given the freedom to explore different roles, they are likely to emerge from this stage with a strong sense of self and a feeling of independence and control.

This process involves exploring their interests, values, and goals, which helps them form their own unique identity.

- **Role Confusion:** If adolescents are restricted and not given the space to explore or find the process too overwhelming or distressing, they may experience role confusion.

This could mean being unsure about one's place in the world, values, and future direction. They may struggle to identify their purpose or path, leading to confusion about their personal identity.

What Happens During This Stage?

During adolescence, the transition from childhood to adulthood is most important. Children are becoming more independent and looking at the future regarding careers, relationships, families, housing, etc.

The individual wants to belong to a society and fit in.

Teenagers explore who they are as individuals, seek to establish a sense of self, and may experiment with different roles, activities, and behaviors.

According to Erikson, this is important to forming a strong identity and developing a sense of direction in life.

The adolescent mind is essentially a mind or moratorium, a psychosocial stage between childhood and adulthood, between the morality learned by the child and the ethics to be developed by the adult (Erikson, 1963, p. 245).

This is a major stage of development where the child has to learn the roles he will occupy as an adult. During this stage, the adolescent will re-examine his identity and try to find out exactly who he or she is.

Erikson suggests that two identities are involved: the sexual and the occupational.

Social Relationships

Given the importance of social relationships during this stage, it's crucial for adolescents to have supportive social networks that encourage healthy exploration of identity.

It's also important for parents, teachers, and mentors to provide guidance as adolescents navigate their social relationships and roles.

Here's why:

- **Formation of Identity:** Social relationships provide a context within which adolescents explore different aspects of their identity.

They try on different roles within their peer groups, allowing them to discover their interests, beliefs, values, and goals. This exploration is key to forming their own unique identity.

- **Peer Influence:** Peer groups often become a significant influence during this stage. Adolescents often start to place more value on the opinions of their friends than their parents.

How an adolescent's peer group perceives them can impact their sense of self and identity formation.

- **Social Acceptance and Belonging:** Feeling accepted and fitting in with peers can significantly affect an adolescent's self-esteem and sense of identity.

They are more likely to develop a strong, positive identity if they feel accepted and valued. Feeling excluded or marginalized may lead to role confusion and a struggle with identity formation.

- **Experiencing Diversity:** Interacting with a diverse range of people allows adolescents to broaden their perspectives, challenge their beliefs, and shape their values.

This diversity of experiences can also influence the formation of their identity.

- **Conflict and Resolution:** Social relationships often involve conflict and the need for resolution, providing adolescents with opportunities to explore different roles and behaviors.

Learning to navigate these conflicts aids in the development of their identity and the social skills needed in adulthood.

Success and Failure In Stage Five

According to Bee (1992), what should happen at the end of this stage is “a reintegrated sense of self, of what one wants to do or be, and of one's appropriate sex role”. During this stage, the body image of the adolescent changes.

Erikson claims adolescents may feel uncomfortable about their bodies until they can adapt and “grow into” the changes. Success in this stage will lead to the virtue of **fidelity**.

Fidelity involves being able to commit one’s self to others on the basis of accepting others, even when there may be ideological differences.

During this period, they explore possibilities and begin to form their own identity based on the outcome of their explorations.

Adolescents who establish a strong sense of identity can maintain consistent loyalties and values, even amidst societal shifts and changes.

Erikson described 3 forms of identity crisis:

1. severe (identity confusion overwhelms personal identity)
2. prolonged (realignment of childhood identifications over an extended time)
3. aggravated (repeated unsuccessful attempts at resolution)

Failure to establish a sense of identity within society (“I don’t know what I want to be when I grow up”) can lead to role confusion.

However, if adolescents don’t have the support, time, or emotional capacity to explore their identity, they may be left with unresolved identity issues, feeling unsure about their roles and uncertain about their future.

This could potentially lead to a weak sense of self, role confusion, and lack of direction in adulthood.

Role confusion involves the individual not being sure about themselves or their place in society.

In response to role confusion or **identity crisis**, an adolescent may begin to experiment with different lifestyles (e.g., work, education, or political activities).

Also, pressuring someone into an identity can result in rebellion in the form of establishing a negative identity, and in addition to this feeling of unhappiness.

Stage 6. Intimacy vs. Isolation

Intimacy versus isolation is the sixth stage of Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. This stage takes place during young adulthood between the ages of approximately 18 to 40 yrs. During this stage, the major conflict centers on forming intimate, loving relationships with other people.

Here's the conflict:

- **Intimacy:** Individuals who successfully navigate this stage are able to form intimate, reciprocal relationships with others.

They can form close bonds and are comfortable with mutual dependency. Intimacy involves the ability to be open and share oneself with others, as well as the willingness to commit to relationships and make personal sacrifices for the sake of these relationships.

- **Isolation:** If individuals struggle to form these close relationships, perhaps due to earlier unresolved identity crises or fear of rejection, they may experience isolation.

Isolation refers to the inability to form meaningful, intimate relationships with others. This could lead to feelings of loneliness, alienation, and exclusion.

Success and Failure In Stage Six

Success leads to strong relationships, while failure results in loneliness and isolation.

Successfully navigating this stage develops the virtue of **love**. Individuals who develop this virtue have the ability to form deep and committed relationships based on mutual trust and respect.

During this stage, we begin to share ourselves more intimately with others. We explore relationships leading toward longer-term commitments with someone other than a family member.

Successful completion of this stage can result in happy relationships and a sense of commitment, safety, and care within a relationship.

However, if individuals struggle during this stage and are unable to form close relationships, they may feel isolated and alone. This could potentially lead to a sense of disconnection and estrangement in adulthood.

Avoiding intimacy, fearing commitment and relationships can lead to isolation, loneliness, and sometimes depression.

Stage 7. Generativity vs. Stagnation

Generativity versus stagnation is the seventh of eight stages of Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. This stage takes place during middle adulthood (ages 40 to 65 yrs). During this stage, individuals focus more on building our lives, primarily through our careers, families, and contributions to society.

Here's the conflict:

- **Generativity:** If individuals feel they are making valuable contributions to the world, for instance, through raising children or contributing to positive changes in society, they will feel a sense of generativity.

Generativity involves concern for others and the desire to contribute to future generations, often through parenting, mentoring, leadership roles, or creative output that adds value to society.

- **Stagnation:** If individuals feel they are not making a positive impact or are not involved in productive or creative tasks, they may experience stagnation.

Stagnation involves feeling unproductive and uninvolved, leading to self-absorption, lack of growth, and feelings of emptiness.

What Happens During This Stage?

Psychologically, generativity refers to “making your mark” on the world through creating or nurturing things that will outlast an individual.

During middle age, individuals experience a need to create or nurture things that will outlast them, often having mentees or creating positive changes that will benefit other people.

We give back to society by raising our children, being productive at work, and participating in community activities and organizations. We develop a sense of being a part of the bigger picture through generativity.

Work & Parenthood

Both work and parenthood are important in this stage as they provide opportunities for adults to extend their personal and societal influence.

- **Work:** In this stage, individuals often focus heavily on their careers. Meaningful work is a way that adults can feel productive and gain a sense of contributing to the world.

It allows them to feel that they are part of a larger community and that their efforts can benefit future generations. If they feel accomplished and valued in their work, they experience a sense of generativity.

However, if they're unsatisfied with their career or feel unproductive, they may face feelings of stagnation.

- **Parenthood:** Raising children is another significant aspect of this stage. Adults can derive a sense of generativity from nurturing the next generation, guiding their development, and imparting their values.

Through parenthood, adults can feel they're making a meaningful contribution to the future.

On the other hand, individuals who choose not to have children or those who cannot have children can also achieve generativity through other nurturing behaviors, such as mentoring or engaging in activities that positively impact the younger generation.

Success and Failure In Stage Seven

If adults can find satisfaction and a sense of contribution through these roles, they are more likely to develop a sense of generativity, leading to feelings of productivity and fulfillment.

Successfully navigating this stage develops the virtue of **care**. Individuals who develop this virtue feel a sense of contribution to the world, typically through family and work, and feel satisfied that they are making a difference.

Success leads to feelings of usefulness and accomplishment, while failure results in shallow involvement in the world.

We become stagnant and feel unproductive by failing to find a way to contribute. These individuals may feel disconnected or uninvolved with their community and with society as a whole.

This could potentially lead to feelings of restlessness and unproductiveness in later life.

Stage 8. Ego Integrity vs. Despair

Ego integrity versus despair is the eighth and final stage of Erik Erikson's stage theory of psychosocial development. This stage begins at approximately age 65 and ends at death. It is during this time that we contemplate our accomplishments and can develop integrity if we see ourselves as leading a successful life.

Here's the conflict:

- **Ego Integrity:** If individuals feel they have lived a fulfilling and meaningful life, they will experience ego integrity.

This is characterized by a sense of acceptance of their life as it was, the ability to find coherence and purpose in their experiences, and a sense of wisdom and fulfillment.

- **Despair:** On the other hand, if individuals feel regretful about their past, feel they have made poor decisions, or believe they've failed to achieve their life goals, they may experience despair.

Despair involves feelings of regret, bitterness, and disappointment with one's life, and a fear of impending death.

What Happens During This Stage?

This stage takes place after age 65 and involves reflecting on one's life and either moving into feeling satisfied and happy with one's life or feeling a deep sense of regret.

Erikson described ego integrity as "the acceptance of one's one and only life cycle as something that had to be" (1950, p. 268) and later as "a sense of coherence and wholeness" (1982, p. 65).

As we grow older (65+ yrs) and become senior citizens, we tend to slow down our productivity and explore life as retired people.

Success and Failure In Stage Eight

Success in this stage will lead to the virtue of **wisdom**. Wisdom enables a person to look back on their life with a sense of closure and completeness, and also accept death without fear.

Individuals who reflect on their lives and regret not achieving their goals will experience bitterness and despair.

Erik Erikson believed if we see our lives as unproductive, feel guilt about our past, or feel that we did not accomplish our life goals, we become dissatisfied with life and develop despair, often leading to depression and hopelessness.

This could potentially lead to feelings of fear and dread about their mortality.

A continuous state of ego integrity does not characterize wise people, but they experience both ego integrity and despair. Thus, late life is characterized by integrity and despair as alternating states that must be balanced.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Erikson's Theory

Support

1. One of the strengths of Erikson's theory is its ability to tie together important psychosocial development across the entire lifespan.
By extending the notion of personality development across the lifespan, Erikson outlines a more realistic perspective of personality development, filling a major gap in Freud's emphasis on childhood. (McAdams, 2001).
2. Based on Erikson's ideas, psychology has reconceptualized how the later periods of life are viewed. Middle and late adulthood are no longer viewed as irrelevant, because of Erikson, they are now considered active and significant times of personal growth.
3. Erikson's theory has good face validity. Many people find they can relate to his theories about various life cycle stages through their own experiences.

Criticism

1. Erikson is rather vague about the causes of development. What kinds of experiences must people have to successfully resolve various psychosocial conflicts and move from one stage to another? The theory does not have a universal mechanism for crisis resolution.

Indeed, Erikson (1964) acknowledges his theory is more a descriptive overview of human social and emotional development that does not adequately explain how or why this development occurs.

For example, Erikson does not explicitly explain how the outcome of one psychosocial stage influences personality at a later stage.

Erikson also does not explain what propels the individual forward into the next stage once a crisis is resolved. His stage model implies strict sequential progression tied to age, but does not address variations in timing or the complexity of human development.

However, Erikson stressed his work was a 'tool to think with rather than a factual analysis.' Its purpose then is to provide a framework within which development can be considered rather than testable theory.

2. Although support for Erikson's stages of personality development exists (McAdams, 1999), critics of his theory provide evidence suggesting a lack of discrete stages of personality development (McCrae & Costa, 1997).

The lack of elucidation of the dynamics makes it challenging to test Erikson's stage progression hypotheses empirically. Contemporary researchers have struggled to operationalize the stages and validate their universal sequence and age ranges.

3. The stage theory may be biased towards Western, particularly American, culture. Stages may differ across cultures.

Erikson based his theory of psychosocial development primarily on observations of middle-class White children and families in the United States and Europe. This Western cultural perspective may limit the universality of the stages he proposed.

The conflicts emphasized in each stage reflect values like independence, autonomy, and productivity, which are deeply ingrained in Western individualistic cultures. However, the theory may not translate well to more collectivistic cultures that value interdependence, social harmony, and shared responsibility.

For example, the autonomy vs. shame and doubt crisis in early childhood may play out differently in cultures where obedience and conformity to elders is prioritized over individual choice. Likewise, the identity crisis of adolescence may be less pronounced in collectivist cultures.

4. Core conflicts are not exclusive to their originating stage but recurrent throughout the lifespan. Osborne (2009) argues that these crises extend beyond the stages in which they initially occur.

As an illustration, the identity crisis experienced in adolescence often resurfaces as adults transition into retirement (Logan, 1986). Although the context differs, managing similar emotional tensions promotes self-awareness and comprehension of lifelong developmental dynamics.

Applications

1. Erikson's model remains highly relevant in later life stages like retirement, as adults recurrently face crises first encountered in childhood and adolescence. Retirees can gain insight into retirement challenges by recognizing the parallels between current struggles and earlier psychosocial conflicts.

Retirees often revisit identity issues faced earlier in life when adjusting to retirement. Although the contexts differ, managing similar emotional tensions can increase self-awareness and understanding of lifelong psychodynamics.

2. Erikson's stages of psychosocial development provide a useful framework for mental health providers treating patients facing major life adjustments or developmental turning points.

Cultural sensitivity can increase patient self-awareness during counseling. For example, nurses could use the model to help adolescents tackle identity exploration or guide older adults in finding purpose and integrity.

Recent research shows the ongoing relevance of Erikson's theory across the lifespan. A [2016 study](#) found a correlation between middle-aged adults' sense of generativity and their cognitive health, emotional resilience, and executive function.

Interprofessional teams could collaborate to create stage-appropriate, strengths-based care plans. For instance, occupational therapists could engage nursery home residents in reminiscence therapy to increase ego integrity.

Specific tools allow clinicians to identify patients' current psychosocial stage. Nurses might use Erikson's [Psychosocial Stage Inventory](#) (EPSI) to reveal trust, autonomy, purpose, or despair struggles.

With this insight, providers can deliver targeted interventions to resolve conflicts and support developmental advancement. For example, building autonomy after a major health crisis or fostering generativity by teaching parenting skills.

Erikson vs Maslow

How does Maslow's hierarchy of needs differ from Erikson's stages of psychosocial development?

Maslow	Erikson
<u>Maslow</u> proposed a series of motivational stages, each building on the previous one (i.e., cannot progress without satisfying the previous stage).	Erikson proposed a series of predetermined stages related to personality development. The stages are time related.
Progression through the stages is based on life circumstances and achievement (i.e., it is flexible).	Progression through the stages is based a person's age (i.e., rigid). During each stage an individual attains personality traits, either beneficial or pathological.
There is only one goal of achievement, although not everyone achieves it.	The goal of achievement vary from stage to stage and involve overcoming a psychosocial crisis.

Maslow	Erikson
Individuals move up the motivational stages / pyramid in order to reach self-actualisation. The first four stages are like stepping stones.	Successful completion of each stage results in a healthy personality and the acquisition of basic virtues. Basic virtues are characteristic strengths used to resolve subsequent crises.

Erikson vs Freud

Freud (1905) proposed a five-stage model of psychosexual development spanning infancy to puberty, focused on the maturation of sexual drives. While groundbreaking, Freud's theory had limitations Erikson (1958, 1963) aimed to overcome.

1. Erikson expanded the timeline through the full lifespan, while Freud focused only on the first few years of life. This more holistic perspective reflected the ongoing social challenges confronted into adulthood and old age.
2. Whereas Freud highlighted biological, pleasure-seeking drives, Erikson incorporated the influence of social relationships, culture, and identity formation on personality growth. This broader psychosocial view enhanced realism.
3. Erikson focused on the ego's growth rather than the primacy of the id. He saw personality developing through negotiation of social conflicts rather than only frustration/gratification of innate drives.
4. Erikson organized the stages around psychosocial crises tied to ego maturation rather than psychosexual erogenous zones. This reformulation felt more relevant to personal experiences many could identify with.
5. Finally, Erikson emphasized healthy progression through the stages rather than psychopathology stemming from fixation. He took a strengths-based perspective focused on human potential.

Summary Table

Like Freud and many others, Erik Erikson maintained that personality develops in a predetermined order, and builds upon each previous stage. This is called the epigenetic principle.

Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development include:

Stage	Age	Developmental Task	Description
1	0–1	Trust vs. mistrust	Trust (or mistrust) that basic needs, such as nourishment and affection, will be met

2	1–3	Autonomy vs. shame/doubt	Develop a sense of independence in many tasks
3	3–6	Initiative vs. guilt	Take initiative on some activities—may develop guilt when unsuccessful or boundaries overstepped
4	7–11	Industry vs. inferiority	Develop self-confidence in abilities when competent or sense of inferiority when not
5	12–18	Identity vs. confusion	Experiment with and develop identity and roles
6	19–29	Intimacy vs. isolation	Establish intimacy and relationships with others
7	30–64	Generativity vs. stagnation	Contribute to society and be part of a family
8	65–	Integrity vs. despair	Assess and make sense of life and meaning of contributions

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What is Erikson's main theory?

Erikson said that we all want to be good at certain things in our lives. According to psychosocial theory, we go through eight developmental stages as we grow up, from being a baby to an old person. In each stage, we have a challenge to overcome.

If we do well in these challenges, we feel confident, our personality grows healthily, and we feel competent. But if we don't do well, we might feel like we're not good enough, leading to feelings of inadequacy.

What is an example of Erikson's psychosocial theory?

Throughout primary school (ages 6-12), children encounter the challenge of balancing industry and inferiority. During this period, they start comparing themselves to their classmates to evaluate their own standing.

As a result, they may either cultivate a feeling of pride and achievement in their academics, sports, social engagements, and family life or experience a sense of inadequacy if they fall short.

Parents and educators can implement various strategies and techniques to support children in fostering a sense of competence and self-confidence.