

Erik Erikson's 8 Stages of Psychosocial Development

Erik Erikson was an ego psychologists who developed one of the most popular and influential theories of development.

What is Psychosocial Development?

Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development is one of the best-known theories of personality in psychology. While his theory was influenced by psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud's work, Erikson believed that personality develops in a series of stages. Unlike Freud's stages which ended at adolescence, Erikson's theory describes the impact of social experience across the whole lifespan.

One of the main elements of Erikson's psychosocial stage theory is the development of **ego identity**. Ego identity is the conscious sense of self that we develop through social interaction. According to Erikson, our ego identity is constantly changing due to new experiences and information we acquire in our daily interactions with others. As we face each new stage of development, we face a new challenge that can help further develop or hinder the development of our personal identity.

Developing Identity

When psychologists talk about identity, they are referring to all of the beliefs, ideals, and values that help shape and guide a person's behaviour. The formation of identity is something that begins in childhood and becomes particularly important during adolescence, and continues throughout life. Our personal identity gives each of us an integrated and cohesive sense of self that endures and continues to grow as we age.

Developing competence at each stage

In addition to ego identity, Erikson also believed that a sense of competence motivates behaviours and actions. Each stage in Erikson's theory is concerned with becoming competent in an area of life. If the stage is handled well, the person will feel a sense of mastery, which is sometimes referred to as **ego strength** or **ego quality**. If the stage is managed poorly, the person will emerge with a sense of inadequacy.

Challenges in the developmental stages (conflict)

In each stage, Erikson believed people experience a conflict (challenge) that serves as a turning point in development. In Erikson's view, these conflicts are centred on either developing a psychological quality or failing to develop that quality. During these times, the potential for personal **growth** is high, but so is the potential for **failure**. If people successfully deal with the conflict, they emerge from the stage with psychological strengths that will serve them well for the rest of their life. If they fail to deal effectively with these conflicts, they may not develop the essential skills needed for a strong sense of identity and self.

Below are the Stages of Development as identified by Erikson

Psychosocial Stage: Infancy

Trust vs. Mistrust

- The first stage of Erikson's theory of psychosocial development occurs between birth and one year of age and is the most fundamental and crucial stage in life.
- Because an infant is utterly dependent, the development of trust is based on the dependability and quality of the child's caregivers. At this point in development, the child is utterly depending upon an adult caregiver for everything – food, love, warmth, safety, nurturing. Everything!
- If a caregiver fails to provide adequate care and love in any of those essential needs, the child will come to feel that he or she cannot trust or depend upon the adults in his or her life.
- If a child successfully develops trust, he or she will feel safe and secure in the world. Caregivers who are inconsistent, emotionally unavailable, or rejecting, contribute to feelings of mistrust in the children they care for. Failure to develop trust will result in fear and a belief that the world is inconsistent and unpredictable.
- Of course, no child is going to develop a sense of 100 percent trust or 100 percent doubt. Erikson believed that successful development was all about striking a balance between the two opposing sides. When this happens, children acquire **hope**, which Erikson described as an openness to experience tempered by some wariness that danger may be present.

Psychosocial Stage 2: Age 18 months to 3 years

Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt

- The second stage of Erikson's theory of psychosocial development takes place during early childhood and is focused on children developing a greater sense of personal control. At this point in development, children are just starting to gain a little bit of independence. They are starting to perform basic actions on their own and making simple decisions about what they prefer. By allowing children to make choices and gain control, parents and caregivers can help children develop a sense of autonomy.
- Like Freud, Erikson believed that toilet training was a vital part of this process. However, Erikson's reasoning was quite different than that of Freud's. Erikson believe that learning to control one's bodily functions leads to a feeling of control and a sense of independence.
- Other important events include gaining more control over food choices, toy preferences, and clothing selection.
- Children who successfully complete this stage feel secure and confident, while those who do not are left with a sense of inadequacy and self-doubt.
- Erikson believed that achieving a balance between autonomy and shame and doubt would lead to will, which is the belief that children can act with **intention**, within reason and limits.

Psychosocial Stage 3: Age 3 to 5 Years

Initiative vs. Guilt

- During the preschool years, children begin to assert their power and control over the world through directing play and other social interactions.
- Children who are successful at this stage feel capable and able to lead others. Those who fail to acquire these skills are left with a sense of guilt, self-doubt, and lack of initiative.
- When an ideal balance of individual initiative and a willingness to work with others is achieved, the ego quality known as **purpose** emerges.

Psychosocial Stage 4: Age 5-11 Years

Industry vs. Inferiority

- This stage covers the early school years from approximately age 5 to 11.
- Through social interactions, children begin to develop a sense of pride in their accomplishments and abilities.
- Children who are encouraged and commended by parents and teachers, develop a feeling of competence and belief in their skills. Those who receive little or no encouragement from parents, teachers, or peers will doubt their abilities to be successful. Those who struggle without supportive instruction will lose a sense of self-belief.
- Successfully finding a balance at this stage of psychosocial development, leads to the strengths known as **competence** or **self-belief** in our own abilities to handle the tasks set before us.

Psychosocial Stage 5: Age 12 - 18 Years

Identity vs. Confusion

- During adolescence, children explore their independence and develop a sense of self.
- Those who receive proper encouragement and reinforcement through personal exploration will emerge from this stage with a strong sense of self and a feeling of independence and control. Those who remain unsure of their beliefs and desires will feel insecure and confused about themselves and the future.
- Completing this stage successfully leads to **integrity or faith** in their own identity, which Erikson described as an ability to live harmoniously within society's standards and expectations.

Psychosocial Stage 6: Age 18-35 Years

Intimacy vs. Isolation

- This stage covers the period of early adulthood when people are exploring personal relationships.
- Erikson believed it was vital that people develop close, committed relationships with other people. Those who are successful at this step will form relationships that are committed and secure.

- Each step builds on skills learned in previous steps. Erikson believed that a strong sense of personal identity was important for developing intimate relationships. Studies have demonstrated that those with a poor sense of self tend to have less committed relationships and are more likely to suffer emotional isolation,
- Successful resolution of this stage results in the virtue known as **love**. It is marked by the ability to form lasting, **meaningful relationships** with other people.

Psychosocial Stage 7: Age 35 – 55 Years

Generativity vs. Stagnation

- During adulthood, we continue to build our lives, focusing on our career and family, in whichever forms they take.
- Those who are successful during this phase will feel that they are contributing to the world by being active in their home and community. Those who fail to attain this skill will feel unproductive and uninvolved in the world.
- **Care** is the virtue achieved when this stage is handled successfully. Being proud of your accomplishments and watching your children, or others' children, grow into adults, and developing a sense of **unity** with your life partner or companion are important accomplishments of this stage.

Psychosocial Stage 8: Age 55 to Death

Integrity vs. Despair

- This phase occurs during old age and is focused on reflecting back on life.
- Those who are unsuccessful during this stage will feel that their life has been wasted and will experience many regrets. The individual will be left with feelings of bitterness and despair.
- Those who feel proud of their accomplishments will feel a sense of integrity. Successfully completing this phase means looking back with few regrets and a general feeling of **satisfaction**. These individuals will attain **wisdom**, even when confronting death.

The Strengths of Erikson's Theory

One of the strengths of psychosocial theory is that it provides a broad framework from which to view development throughout the entire lifespan. It also allows us to emphasise the social nature of human beings and the important influence that social relationships have on development. Researchers have found evidence supporting Erikson's ideas about identity, and have further identified different sub-stages of identity formation. Some research also suggests that people who form strong personal identities during adolescence are better capable of forming intimate relationships during early adulthood.

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