

3: Erikson and Psychosocial Theory

Erikson and Psychosocial Theory: Now, let's turn to a less controversial psychodynamic theorist, Erik Erikson. Erikson presents eight developmental stages that encompass the entire lifespan. For that reason, Erikson's psychosocial theory forms the foundation for much of our discussion of psychosocial development.



Figure 1.9: Erik Erikson.

Erikson (1950) proposed a model of lifespan development that provides a useful guideline for thinking about the changes we experience throughout life. Erikson broke with Freud's emphasis on sexuality as the cornerstone of social-emotional development and instead suggested that social relationships fostered development. Erikson proposed that *each period of life has a unique challenge or crisis that the person who reaches it must face, referred to as psychosocial crises*. According to Erikson, successful development involves dealing with and resolving the goals and demands of each of these psychosocial crises in a positive way. (These crises are usually called *stages*, although that is not the term Erikson used.) If a person does not resolve a stage successfully it may hinder their ability to deal with later stages. For example, the person who does not develop a sense of trust (Erikson's first stage) may find it challenging as an adult to form a positive intimate relationship (Erikson's sixth stage). Or an individual who does not develop a clear sense of purpose and identity (Erikson's fifth stage) may become self-absorbed and stagnate rather than working toward the betterment of others (Erikson's seventh stage). However, most individuals are able to successfully complete the eight stages of his theory (See Table 1.3).

Table 1.3: Erikson's Psychological Stages.

Age Range	Psychosocial crisis	Positive resolution of crisis
Birth to 12 to 18 months	Trust versus Mistrust	The child develops a feeling of trust in his or her caregivers.
18 months to 3 years	Autonomy versus shame/doubt	The child learns what he or she can and cannot control and develops a sense of free will.
3 to 6 years	Initiative versus Guilt	The child learns to become independent by exploring, manipulating, and taking action.
6 to 12 years	Industry versus inferiority	The child learns to do things well or correctly according to standards set by others, particularly in school.
12 to 18 years	Identity versus role confusion	The adolescent develops a well-defined and positive sense of self in relationship to others
19 to 40 years	Intimacy versus isolation	The person develops the ability to give and receive love and to make long-term commitments
40 to 65 years	Generativity versus stagnation	The person develops an interest in guiding the development of the next generation, often by becoming a parent
65 to death	Ego integrity versus despair	The person develops acceptance of his or her life as it was lived.

Erikson's theory has been criticized for focusing so heavily on stages and assuming that the completion of one stage is prerequisite for the next crisis of development. His theory also focuses on the social expectations that are found in certain cultures, but not in all. For instance, the idea that adolescence is a time of searching for identity might translate well in the middle-class culture of the United States, but not as well in cultures where the transition into adulthood coincides with puberty through rites of passage and where adult roles offer fewer choices.

Learning Theory: Also known as **Behaviorism**, is based on the premise that it is not possible to objectively study the mind, and therefore psychologists should limit their attention to the study of behavior itself. The most famous behaviorist was Burrhus Frederick (B. F.) Skinner (1904– 1990), who expanded the principles of behaviorism and also brought them to the attention of the public at large. Skinner used the ideas of stimulus and response, along with the application of rewards or *reinforcements*, to train pigeons and other animals. In addition, he used the general principles of behaviorism to develop theories about how best to teach children and how to create societies that were peaceful and productive (Skinner, 1957, 1968, 1972).

The behaviorists made substantial contributions to psychology by identifying the principles of *learning*. Although the behaviorists were incorrect in their beliefs that it was not possible to measure thoughts and feelings, their ideas provided new insights that helped further our understanding regarding the nature-nurture debate as well as the question of free will. The ideas of behaviorism are fundamental to psychology and have been developed to help us better understand the role of prior experiences in a variety of areas of psychology.

Social Learning Theory, developed by Albert Bandura (1977), calls our attention to the ways in which many of our actions are not learned through conditioning, as suggested by Skinner; rather, *they are learned by watching others*. Young children frequently learn behaviors through imitation. Especially when children do not know what else to do, they learn by modeling or copying the behavior of others.

Bandura (1986) suggests that there is interplay between the environment and the individual. We are not just the product of our surroundings, rather we influence our surroundings. *There is interplay between our personality and the way we interpret events and how they influence us. This concept is called reciprocal determinism.* An example of this might be the interplay between parents and children. Parents not only influence their child's environment, perhaps intentionally through the use of reinforcement, etc., but children influence parents as well. Parents may respond differently with their first child than with their fourth. Perhaps they try to be the perfect parents with their firstborn, but by the time their last child comes along they have very different expectations, both of themselves and their child. Our environment creates us and we create our environment.

Other social influences: TV or not TV? Bandura et al. (1963) began a series of studies to look at the impact of television on the behavior of children. Bandura began by conducting an experiment in which he showed children a film of a woman hitting an inflatable clown or “bobo” doll.

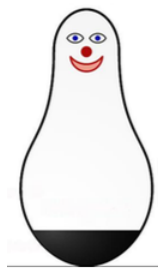


Figure 1.10: The Bobo Doll. Source.

Then the children were allowed in the room, where they found the doll and during their play they began to hit it. The children also demonstrated novel ways of being aggressive toward the doll that were not demonstrated by those children who did not see the aggressive model. Bandura's research raised concerns about the impact of violence on young children. Since then, considerable research has been conducted on the impact of violent media on children's aggression including playing video games.

Cognitive Theory: The **cognitive theories** focus on how our mental processes or cognitions change over time. Three important theories are Jean Piaget's, Lev Vygotsky's, and Information-processing.

Jean Piaget (1896-1980) was one of the most influential cognitive theorists in development. He was inspired to explore children's ability to think and reason by watching his own children's development. He was one of the first to recognize and map out the ways in which children's intelligence differs from that of adults (Piaget, 1929). He became interested in this area when he was asked to test the IQ of children and began to notice that there was a pattern in their wrong answers. He believed that children's intellectual

skills change over time and that maturation, rather than training, brings about that change. Children of differing ages interpret the world differently. Piaget theorized that children progressed through four stages of cognitive development (Table 1.4).

Table 1.4: Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development.

Stage	Approximate age range	Characteristics	Stage attainments
Sensorimotor	Birth to about 2 years	The child experiences the world through the fundamental senses of seeing, hearing, touching, and tasting.	Object permanence
Preoperational	2 to 7 years	Children acquire the ability to internally represent the world through language and mental imagery. They also start to see the world from other people's perspectives.	Theory of mind; rapid increase in language ability
Concrete operational	7 to 11 years	Children become able to think logically. They can increasingly perform operations on objects that are real.	Conservation
Formal operational	11 years to adulthood	Adolescents can think systematically, can reason about abstract concepts, and can understand ethics and scientific reasoning.	Abstract logic

Piaget has been criticized for overemphasizing the role that physical maturation plays in cognitive development and in underestimating the role that culture and experience plays. Looking across cultures reveals considerable variation in what children are able to do at various ages. Research has shown considerable overlap among the four stages and that development is more continuous.

Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) was a Russian psychologist who wrote in the early 1900s but whose work was discovered by researchers in the United States in the 1960s and became more widely known in the 1980s (Crain, 2005). His **sociocultural theory** *emphasizes the importance of culture and interaction in the development of cognitive abilities*. Vygotsky differed with Piaget in that he believed that a person not only has a set of abilities, but also a set of potential abilities that can be realized if given the proper guidance from others. Vygotsky developed theories on teaching that have been adopted by educators today.

Information Processing is not the work of a single theorist, but based on the ideas and research of several cognitive scientists *studying how individuals perceive, analyze, manipulate, use, and remember information*. This approach assumes that humans gradually improve in their processing skills; that is, development is continuous rather than stage-like. The more complex mental skills of adults are built from the primitive abilities of children. We are born with the ability to notice stimuli, store, and retrieve information. Brain maturation enables advancements in our information processing system. At the same time, interactions with the environment also aid in our development of more effective strategies for processing information.

Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005) developed the **Ecological Systems Theory**, *which provides a framework for understanding and studying the many influences on human development* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner recognized that human interaction is influenced by larger social forces and that an understanding of these forces is essential for understanding an individual. The individual is impacted by several systems including:

- **Microsystem** *includes the individual's setting and those who have direct, significant contact with the person, such as parents or siblings*. The input of those is modified by the cognitive and biological state of the individual as well. These influence the person's actions, which in turn influence systems operating on him or her.
- **Mesosystem** *includes the larger organizational structures, such as school, the family, or religion*. These institutions impact the microsystems just described. The philosophy of the school system, daily routine, assessment methods, and other characteristics

can affect the child's self-image, growth, sense of accomplishment, and schedule thereby impacting the child, physically, cognitively, and emotionally.

- **Exosystem** includes the larger contexts of community. A community's values, history, and economy can impact the organizational structures it houses. Mesosystems both influence and are influenced by the exosystem.
- **Macrosystem** includes the cultural elements, such as global economic conditions, war, technological trends, values, philosophies, and a society's responses to the global community.
- **Chronosystem** is the historical context in which these experiences occur. This relates to the different generational time periods previously discussed such as the baby boomers and millennials.

In sum, a child's experiences are shaped by larger forces such as the family, schools, religion, culture, and time period. Bronfenbrenner's model helps us understand all of the different environments that impact each one of us simultaneously. Despite its comprehensiveness, Bronfenbrenner's ecological system's theory is not easy to use. Taking into consideration all the different influences makes it difficult to research and determine the impact of all the different variables (Dixon, 2003). Consequently, psychologists have not fully adopted this approach, although they recognize the importance of the ecology of the individual. Figure 1.11 is a model of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.

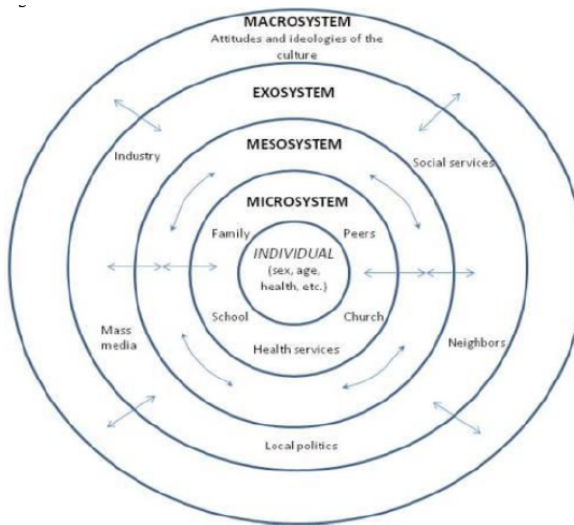


Figure 1.11. Source.

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