A literature review of Erikson’s Psychosocial Development theory.

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It is essential to the practice of social work that a practitioner has a wide scope understanding and knowledge of human development and behaviour. As Harms (2010) explains, a multidimensional approach is necessary when discussing the various theoretical perspectives which are used to explain and give reason to an individuals’ development throughout their life course. Through the multidimensional approach one can recognise the various strengths and weaknesses of a theory whilst putting them into practice, the following literature review will provide a critical analysis of Erik Erikson’s psychosocial theory by discussing selected literature which explains the ‘eight stages of man’ theory, the key principles, strengths and weaknesses, then ending on an overall conclusion of how effective this theory is in the context of understanding human development and behaviour.

Erik Erikson was born in Germany, later relocating to Vienna to pursue a career in arts and teaching, through his work Erikson was introduced to the Freudian circle which resulted in his entry into the Vienna Psychoanalytic Institute where Erikson became a child analyst alongside Anne Freud, daughter of the famous psychologist Sigmund Freud (Miller, 2002; Roazen, 1976). Sigmund Freud is recognised as one of the first pioneers of psychology who began the movement of psychoanalysis and introduced one of the first models of human development, where there was a great emphasis on the first five years of an individual’s development (Bae, 1999; Evans, 1981). As Miller (2002) and Robbins, Chatterjee & Canda (19980) discuss, Freud’s model inspired a diverse group of theorists to revisit and re-evaluate the theory, Erikson acknowledged the concepts of Freud’s theory of psychological structures, the early stages of childhood development, and psychoanalytic methodology, however he redeveloped the theory by introducing a life span view of development. Erikson introduced an eight stage model of psychosocial development which focuses on the influences of the
surrounding social environment. In contrast to Freud’s theory which emphasised development during infancy, Erikson’s model identified eight ‘critical periods’ which occur from infancy throughout to adulthood (Harms, 2010; Miller, 2002). Appendix A demonstrates and explains these eight stages.

Psychosocial theory puts a great emphasis on the outside social interactions to human development and how this influences the individual’s to find their identity, as Pinker (2003, cited in Harms, 2010) explains a newborn infant is not a ‘blank slate’, but is the beginning of their pivotal role in being influential and influenced by the environment they are born into. Erikson deemed the principle of life was to find one’s identity where the ego progresses through the demands of society through the stages of one’s development, for example the repercussions of physical maturation. As Miller (2002) explains maturations brings upon new possibilities for an individual but also more responsibilities from the increased social demands, ‘there is a fit between a child and his culture’. Psychosocial development is considered culturally relative in two ways

1) Although the eight stages of development occur in the same process for each individual, different cultures have their own distinctive way of influencing the development of an individual’s behaviour in each stage.

2) Each generation of individuals is impacted by the events during their era, such as industrialization, urbanization, immigration, the depression, and the civil right movement. Society and institutions must mould to the needs of an individual during that particular era in order to allow progression through the stages of development.
Through *culture relativism*, the wider society which influences an individual’s development adapts to meet the individual’s new needs. Erikson (1959) describes a ‘cog-wheeling’ of life cycles where a child is a life circle within a ‘community of life cycles’, in other words an individual is surrounded by a community of individuals passing through the developmental stages.

Tribe (1982, cited in Bae, 1999) explains during the eight stages of development one must resolve the basic stages and central crisis periods of trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, identity, intimacy, generativity, and ego integrity in order to gain confidence and the capacity the go on to the next stage. Appendix A demonstrates Erikson’s eight stages of with the key principles of the psychosocial development method including the key social relationships needed to progress through the life span.

Erikson (1978, cited in Harms, 2010) stressed the importance of each crisis stage being successfully completed, this then *lays the foundation* for the succession of the next stage to continue developing a healthy ego and identity, failure to deal with each crisis is said to lead to disorder, dysfunction and overall psychopathology.

The development of psychoanalytic studies has been highly credited to Erikson for strengthening the theory through his contributions of psychosocial methods. Miller (2010) discusses the various strengths of the psychosocial theory where Erikson included the life span view of development and the cultural and society influences on an individuals development. Erikson’s theory is perceived as relevant to the everyday lives with the important search for one’s identity. This framework has been deemed useful to counselling and therapy particularly
for adolescents who are going through the identity vs role confusion stage as viewed in appendix A. However, as Roazen (1976) explains Erikson’s theory has often been criticized by social scientist and is too difficult for the general reading public to understand. This is often due to the terms Erkison used were misleading and unclear such as generativity and integrity are not defined as they usually would be (Miller). There are many debates on the development of identity, in particularly from the youth industry and from a gender perspective. As Appendix A explains stage five is the key stage of the formation of one’s identity. Kroger (1996) discusses many contradictions of this theory such as the development process of a women’s identity to that of a man, Erikson contradicted himself through the statement that women faced the problem of finding their identity until they found a suitable partner. This statement clearly conflicts with the notion of the identity crisis being resolved during that particular stage period especially in today’s society where women delay marriage to pursue a career. Furthermore, although Erikson attempts to be aware of the different social and cultural expectations, this theory it is deemed cultural bias to that of a society which allows a choice of ideological and religious beliefs which may not be so in different social contexts (Kroger).

Erikson’s theory is praised amongst many early theorists however, with the world and society continuing to develop many expectations are forced upon individuals at an early agr, with the lack of flexibility in the life span development the theory can be deemed irrelevant to a male or females development. However Erikson stated with the correct scientific training which he never had his theory could be more precise (Erikson cited in Kroger, 1996). Despite the many criticisms of Erikson’s theory his model continues to recongised as a key theory of understanding the development of an individual.
References

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### Appendix A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Psychological crises</th>
<th>Radius of significant relations</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (birth – 1 year)</td>
<td>Trust vs. Mistrust</td>
<td>Maternal person</td>
<td>Development of trusting relationships with caregivers and of self trust (hope)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 (2 – 3 years)</td>
<td>Autonomy vs. shame and doubt</td>
<td>Parental persons</td>
<td>Development of control over bodily functions and activities (will)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (3 – 5 years)</td>
<td>Initiative vs. guilt</td>
<td>Basic family</td>
<td>Testing limits of self assertion and purposefulness (purpose)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 (6 – 12 years)</td>
<td>Industry vs. inferiority</td>
<td>Neighbourhood school</td>
<td>Focus on mastery, competence, and productivity (competence)</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 (12 – 18 years or so on)</td>
<td>Identity vs. role confusion</td>
<td>Peer groups</td>
<td>Focus on formation of identity and coherent self concept (fidelity)</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 (early 20’s)</td>
<td>Intimacy and solidarity vs. isolation</td>
<td>Partners in friendship, sex, competition, cooperation</td>
<td>Focus on achievement of an intimate relationship and career direction (love)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 (late 20’s – 50’s)</td>
<td>Generativity vs. stagnation</td>
<td>Divided labour and shared household</td>
<td>Focus on fulfilment through creative, productive activity that contributes to future generations (care)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 (after 50)</td>
<td>Integrity vs. despair</td>
<td>“Mankind” “My kind”</td>
<td>Focus on belief in integrity of life, including successes and failures (wisdom)</td>
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