

WHAT IS SUCCESSFUL DEVELOPMENT: AN OVERVIEW OF OLD AND NEW THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

The concept of lifespan development has been discussed extensively by several theorists for decades. This paper briefly reviews two old theories particularly Freud's psychosexual and Erikson's psychosocial stages of development, summarising their basic themes as well as their similarities and how they view successful development. Balte's theory of lifespan development (particularly on the dynamics of growth (gains) and decline (losses)) will be explained and supported with examples where necessary. The paper ends with the lifespan model of developmental challenge which explains development as an interactive pattern and mostly based on individual differences. This implies that it can offer an inter-cultural and inter-generational understanding of lifespan development. Criticisms and suggestions will be offered to enhance and help further theories that will be developed as far as lifespan development is concerned.

Keywords: lifespan development, psychosocial, psychosexual stages, growth, gains.

Introduction:

The concept of lifespan development has been discussed extensively by several theorists for decades. Lifespan developmental psychology involves the study of constancy and change in behaviour through the life course- from conception to death. Contrary to this definition, conventional developmental psychologists have emphasized the first two decades of the lifespan by describing within and identifying antecedent- consequence relationship. In the light of this, development can be seen as involving change in the organizational state of a system in time, which is maintained (rather than lost) once the conditions of its emergence disappear (Valsiner, 1997).

Specifically, the purpose of this paper is to briefly present Freud's psychosexual and Erikson's psychosocial stages of development taking into consideration their themes and similarities associated with them. Baltes theory of lifespan development particularly the concept of Multi-directionality about growth (gains) and decline (losses) will also be considered. How do these theorists view successful development? Is it only about resolving of crisis/conflicts alone? What are the lapses in these theories, and what have current theories about development done? In the light of this, a new emerging lifespan model of developmental challenge which has in one way or the other covered the lapses or shortfalls in one or more of the early developmental theories will also be considered and possibly find out what problem about lifespan development is yet to be covered.

Traditional Theories:

Sigmund Freud (1938) was one of the pioneers to see the problems of personality and development as closely related. He postulated that individuals move through five stages of psychosexual development in a discontinuous ways with emphasizes that development is centered around a specific erogenous zone. At each stage there is a conflict between the innate needs (id) and the societal constraints, and the way an individual solves this conflicts (using defense mechanisms) determines his personality growth and behaviour in later life (Schultz and Schultz, 1996). Accordingly, there is a successful development when the child is able to go through the stages and have solved the crisis. The child can also be fixated and this can lead to personality problems (smoking, excessively neat, compulsive, kissing, over eating, etc.) of which Freud enumerated according to the stage in which the individual could not overcome the crisis. One crucial factor is that, ones personality is determined by the age of five without regard to what happens after this year.

Closely related to the psychosexual stages of development is the psychosocial stages postulated by Erikson with more emphasises on the social setting and less on the sexual motive as depicted in Freud's theory. According to the psychosocial theory of development, individuals go through a series of stages throughout their life span coupled with psychosocial demands (crises) which the individual has to cope with at different age (Erikson, 1980). Development of trust vs mistrust, industry vs inferiority, identity formation vs identity diffusion, intimacy vs isolation, integrity vs despair are some of the psychosocial demands that has to be resolved These crises arise because the social and the physical environment make new demands. In this particular theory, development is also discontinuous (in stages) but lifelong (childhood – old age). Successful development will be seen as a result of moving through these stages smoothly from childhood to adulthood making it possible to enjoy a satisfactory old age. Thus, your inability to solve these crises will eventually lead to despair in old age and integrity - the outcome of successful progression through the stages.

The necessity of a crisis or conflict and the notion that development in early life strongly influences development in later life are the few commonalities that exist between these two theorists. According to the psychosexual theory, there is always a conflict between the innate need (id) and societal constraints, and in most cases defense mechanisms are used to solve these conflicts. Smoking, kissing and eating were some of the behaviours that he described to be associated with

fixation (too much or too little) at the oral stage. Excessive optimism, sarcasm and cynicism could also be attributed to events that occurred during the oral stage of development.

Erikson's psychosocial theory also states clearly that individuals are faced with crises stemming from the social and the physical demands of the environment. A newly born baby within its few months has to face a crisis of developing trust or mistrust as a result of how s/he perceives the world and the rate at which demands are met from the parents. Erikson viewed integrity as the result of successful resolution of the crises in the early stages of development and despair to the contrary.

Contemporary Theory:

In order to cater for some of the lapses in early theories of development such as the inability to fit different cultures and discrete development stages with much emphasis on biology, Baltes (1987) proposed the theory of lifespan development. Even though there are other components of the theory, the concept of multi-directionality takes prominence here. The process of development, according to this theory is not a simple movement toward efficiency, such as incremental growth. Rather, throughout life development always consist of the joint occurrence of gains (growth) and loss (decline). The main aim was to expand the concept of development to include not only growth (gain) but other directions of change as well. These features (gains and losses) are seen as catalyst for change because they cause the individual or its environment to change. No developmental change during the life course is pure gain. This pattern of relative completeness does not exist for all the phases of life, beginning from late adulthood and certainly in old age, losses outnumber, and with age the balance becomes less positive (Baltes, 1997).

As a result, successful development was defined as the relative maximization of gains and minimization of losses (Baltes, Lindenberger and Staudinger, 1997). The determination of what is considered a gain or loss could change with age, cultural and historical context as well as adaptivity. The gain and loss idea was also in the work of Piaget, even though Piagetian theory is likely seen by most as the hallmark of a conception of development that features unidirectional growth. In the study of the age-development of visual illusions, Piaget (1969) described illusion that increase with age and others that decrease with age. Accordingly loss in visual accuracy is associated with advancement with age in cognitive stage.

This theory solved some of the lapses created by previous theorists especially by incorporating the cultural context of an individual. Notwithstanding this, the notion that gain and loss is in proportional shift across the lifespan does not suit every individual. He stated that as one grows the losses increases as the gains decrease not in isolation but with adaptivity. The theory laid much emphasis on adaptivity without considering the possibility that individual could have predispositions at birth. It is possible that some people could develop the Alzheimer's dementia, a disease which emerges in old age, could befall an individual who might have inherited a gene from parents. The loss of such an individual will start early in life and not in late adulthood as stipulated by the theory.

The lifespan model of developmental challenge is a theory not in isolation but based on some of the tenets of some of the theories above emphasizing that life long individual development results from dynamic interaction between potential resources within different psychosocial systems (Hendry and Kloep, 2002). According to this model, individual resources (physical, cognitive, social, emotional and material) cannot be defined unless the challenge is known and vice versa. Development occurs each time the life challenges are met successfully (solving that problem without draining the individual's resources) and adding further resources to his/her total resources.

According to this model, for development to take place there is always the need to be a challenge and the way this challenge is resolved determines whether an individual has developed or failed. Steve Wonder (one of the greatest musician in United States) was born blind (physical challenge) but realising that he had a good voice (biological resource) went into singing and became

one of Americans great musicians. This phenomenon could be defined as development by this model because the challenge was met successfully and further resources (such as money, high self esteem) were added to his resource pool. Any individual who finds his/herself in this situation is likely to take two decisions: accepting the situation as challenge, which may enable you to develop or accept you status quo and risk of stagnation (unwillingness to take challenges).

One crucial factor with this model is its validity to explaining human development throughout the lifespan because challenges encountered by individuals vary across culture and over time. This theory can fit into almost all cultures considering the way and manner the concept of development is been defined. This model has eventually bridged the gap created by previous developmental theorists and can stand the test of time.

Conclusion:

Notwithstanding these efforts made by lifespan developmental theorists, could it be possible to have one particular theory that could fit all cultures at one time. The human life course is a complex mechanism making individuals more complex and difficult to predict. Many theorists have explained this phenomenon from different points of view making it quite impossible to have a universal theory to explain the human life course. Even though it could be possible, as to when, no one can predict because of the complexity of human nature.

Even though it will be difficult, the progress made so far in my view has put the issue in a triangular-shaped, meaning the more theories are being developed the more likely that they will meet at the apex making it possible to have one theory.

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