

PERSONALITY THEORIES

ERIK ERIKSON

1902 - 1994

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Biography

Erik Erikson was born in Frankfurt, Germany, on June 15, 1902. There is a little mystery about his heritage: His biological father was an unnamed Danish man who abandoned Erik's mother before he was born. His mother, Karla Abrahamsen, was a young Jewish woman who raised him alone for the first three years of his life. She then married Dr. Theodor Homberger, who was Erik's pediatrician, and moved to Karlsruhe in southern Germany.

We cannot pass over this little piece of biography without some comment: The development of identity seems to have been one of his greatest concerns in Erikson's own life as well as in his theory. During his childhood, and his early adulthood, he was Erik Homberger, and his parents kept the details of his birth a secret. So here he was, a tall, blond, blue-eyed boy who was also Jewish. At temple school, the kids teased him for being Nordic; at grammar school, they teased him for being Jewish.

After graduating high school, Erik focussed on becoming an artist. When not taking art classes, he wandered around Europe, visiting museums and sleeping under bridges. He was living the life of the carefree rebel, long before it became "the thing to do."

When he was 25, his friend Peter Blos -- a fellow artist and, later, psychoanalyst -- suggested he apply for a teaching position at an experimental school for American students run by Dorothy Burlingham, a friend of Anna Freud. Besides teaching art, he gathered a certificate in Montessori education and one from the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. He was psychoanalyzed by Anna Freud herself.

While there, he also met Joan Serson, a Canadian dance teacher at the school. They went on to have three children, one of whom became a sociologist himself.



With the Nazis coming into power, they left Vienna, first for Copenhagen, then to Boston. Erikson was offered a position at the Harvard Medical School and practiced child psychoanalysis privately. During this time, he met psychologists like Henry Murray and Kurt Lewin, and anthropologists like Ruth Benedict,

Margaret Mead, and Gregory Bateson. I think it can be safely said that these anthropologists had nearly as great an effect on Erikson as Sigmund and Anna Freud!

He later taught at Yale, and later still at the University of California at Berkeley. It was during this period of time that he did his famous studies of modern life among the Lakota and the Yurok.

When he became an American citizen, he officially changed his name to Erik Erikson. No-one seems to know where he got the name!

In 1950, he wrote *Childhood and Society*, which contained summaries of his studies among the native Americans, analyses of Maxim Gorkiy and Adolph Hitler, a discussion of the "American personality," and the basic outline of his version of Freudian theory. These themes -- the influence of culture on personality and the analysis of historical figures -- were repeated in other works, one of which, *Gandhi's Truth*, won him the Pulitzer Prize and the national Book Award.

In 1950, during Senator Joseph McCarthy's reign of terror, Erikson left Berkeley when professors there were asked to sign "loyalty oaths." He spent ten years working and teaching at a clinic in Massachusetts, and ten years more back at Harvard. Since retiring in 1970, he wrote and did research with his wife. He died in 1994.

The first stage

The first stage, infancy or the **oral-sensory stage**, is approximately the first year or year and a half of life. The task is to develop **trust** without completely eliminating the capacity for **mistrust**.

If mom and dad can give the newborn a degree of familiarity, consistency, and continuity, then the child will develop the feeling that the world -- especially the social world -- is a safe place to be, that people are reliable and loving. Through the parents' responses, the child also learns to trust his or her own body and the biological urges that go with it.

If the parents are unreliable and inadequate, if they reject the infant or harm it, if other interests cause both parents to turn away from the infant's needs to satisfy their own instead, then the infant will develop mistrust. He or she will be apprehensive and suspicious around people.

Please understand that this doesn't mean that the parents have to be perfect. In fact, parents who are overly protective of the child, are there the minute the first cry comes out, will lead that child into the **maladaptive tendency** Erikson calls **sensory maladjustment**: Overly trusting, even gullible, this person cannot believe anyone would mean them harm, and will use all the defenses at their command to retain their Pollyanna perspective.

Worse, of course, is the child whose balance is tipped way over on the mistrust side: They will develop the **malignant tendency** of **withdrawal**, characterized by depression, paranoia, and possibly psychosis.

If the proper balance is achieved, the child will develop the virtue **hope**, the strong belief that, even when things are not going well, they will work out well in the end. One of the signs that a child is doing well in the first stage is when the child isn't overly upset by the need to wait a moment for the satisfaction of his or her needs: Mom or dad don't have to be perfect; I trust them enough to believe that, if they can't be here immediately, they will be here soon; Things may be tough now, but they will work out. This is the same ability that, in later life, gets us through disappointments in love, our careers, and many other domains of life.

Stage two

The task is to achieve a degree of **autonomy** while minimizing **shame and doubt**.

If mom and dad (and the other care-takers that often come into the picture at this point) permit the child, now a toddler, to explore and manipulate his or her environment, the child will develop a sense of autonomy or independence. The parents should not discourage the child, but neither should they push. A balance is required. People often advise new parents to be "firm but tolerant" at this stage, and the advice is good. This way, the child will develop both self-control and self-esteem.

On the other hand, it is rather easy for the child to develop instead a sense of shame and doubt. If the parents come down hard on any attempt to explore and be independent, the child will soon give up with the assumption that cannot and should not act on their own. We should keep in mind that even something as innocent as laughing at the toddler's efforts can lead the child to feel deeply ashamed, and to doubt his or her abilities.

And there are other ways to lead children to shame and doubt: If you give children unrestricted freedom and no sense of limits, or if you try to help children do what they should learn to do for themselves, you will also give them the impression that they are not good for much. If you aren't patient enough to wait for your child to tie his or her shoe-laces, your child will never learn to tie them, and will assume that this is too difficult to learn!

Nevertheless, a little "shame and doubt" is not only inevitable, but beneficial. Without it, you will develop the maladaptive tendency Erikson calls **impulsiveness**, a sort of shameless willfulness that leads you, in later childhood and even adulthood, to jump into things without proper consideration of your abilities.

Worse, of course, is too much shame and doubt, which leads to the malignancy Erikson calls **compulsiveness**. The compulsive person feels as if their entire being rides on everything they do, and so everything must be done perfectly. Following all the rules precisely keeps you from mistakes, and mistakes must be avoided at all costs. Many of

you know how it feels to always be ashamed and always doubt yourself. A little more patience and tolerance with your own children may help them avoid your path. And give yourself a little slack, too!

If you get the proper, positive balance of autonomy and shame and doubt, you will develop the virtue of **willpower** or determination. One of the most admirable -- and frustrating -- thing about two- and three-year-olds is their determination. "Can do" is their motto. If we can preserve that "can do" attitude (with appropriate modesty to balance it) we are much better off as adults.

Stage three

From three or four to five or six, the task confronting every child is to learn **initiative** without too much **guilt**.

Initiative means a positive response to the world's challenges, taking on responsibilities, learning new skills, feeling purposeful. Parents can encourage initiative by encouraging children to try out their ideas. We should accept and encourage fantasy and curiosity and imagination. This is a time for play, not for formal education. The child is now capable, as never before, of imagining a future situation, one that isn't a reality right now. Initiative is the attempt to make that non-reality a reality.

But if children can imagine the future, if they can plan, then they can be responsible as well, and guilty. If my two-year-old flushes my watch down the toilet, I can safely assume that there were no "evil intentions." It was just a matter of a shiny object going round and round and down. What fun! But if my five year old does the same thing... well, she should know what's going to happen to the watch, what's going to happen to daddy's temper, and what's going to happen to her! She can be guilty of the act, and she can begin to feel guilty as well. The capacity for moral judgement has arrived.

Erikson is, of course, a Freudian, and as such, he includes the Oedipal experience in this stage. From his perspective, the Oedipal crisis involves the reluctance a child feels in relinquishing his or her closeness to the opposite sex parent. A parent has the responsibility, socially, to encourage the child to "grow up -- you're not a baby anymore!" But if this process is done too harshly and too abruptly, the child learns to feel guilty about his or her feelings.

Too much initiative and too little guilt means a maladaptive tendency Erikson calls **ruthlessness**. The ruthless person takes the initiative alright; They have their plans, whether it's a matter of school or romance or politics or career. It's just that they don't care who they step on to achieve their goals. The goals are everything, and guilty feelings are for the weak. The extreme form of ruthlessness is sociopathy.

Ruthlessness is bad for others, but actually relatively easy on the ruthless person. Harder on the person is the malignancy of too much guilt, which Erikson calls **inhibition**. The inhibited person will not try things because "nothing ventured, nothing lost" and,

particularly, nothing to feel guilty about. On the sexual, Oedipal, side, the inhibited person may be impotent or frigid.

A good balance leads to the psychosocial strength of **purpose**. A sense of purpose is something many people crave in their lives, yet many do not realize that they themselves make their purposes, through imagination and initiative. I think an even better word for this virtue would have been courage, the capacity for action despite a clear understanding of your limitations and past failings.

Stage four

The task is to develop a capacity for **industry** while avoiding an excessive sense of **inferiority**. Children must "tame the imagination" and dedicate themselves to education and to learning the social skills their society requires of them.

There is a much broader social sphere at work now: The parents and other family members are joined by teachers and peers and other members of the community at large. They all contribute: Parents must encourage, teachers must care, peers must accept. Children must learn that there is pleasure not only in conceiving a plan, but in carrying it out. They must learn the feeling of success, whether it is in school or on the playground, academic or social.

A good way to tell the difference between a child in the third stage and one in the fourth stage is to look at the way they play games. Four-year-olds may love games, but they will have only a vague understanding of the rules, may change them several times during the course of the game, and be very unlikely to actually finish the game, unless it is by throwing the pieces at their opponents. A seven-year-old, on the other hand, is dedicated to the rules, considers them pretty much sacred, and is more likely to get upset if the game is not allowed to come to its required conclusion.

If the child is allowed too little success, because of harsh teachers or rejecting peers, for example, then he or she will develop instead a sense of inferiority or incompetence. An additional source of inferiority Erikson mentions is racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination: If a child believes that success is related to who you are rather than to how hard you try, then why try?

Too much industry leads to the maladaptive tendency called **narrow virtuosity**. We see this in children who aren't allowed to "be children," the ones that parents or teachers push into one area of competence, without allowing the development of broader interests. These are the kids without a life: child actors, child athletes, child musicians, child prodigies of all sorts. We all admire their industry, but if we look a little closer, it's all that stands in the way of an empty life.

Much more common is the malignancy called **inertia**. This includes all of us who suffer from the "inferiority complexes" Alfred Adler talked about. If at first you don't succeed, don't ever try again! Many of us didn't do well in mathematics, for example, so we'd die

before we took another math class. Others were humiliated instead in the gym class, so we never try out for a sport or play a game of raquetball. Others never developed social skills -- the most important skills of all -- and so we never go out in public. We become inert.

A happier thing is to develop the right balance of industry and inferiority -- that is, mostly industry with just a touch of inferiority to keep us sensibly humble. Then we have the virtue called **competency**.

Stage five

Stage five is **adolescence**, beginning with puberty and ending around 18 or 20 years old. The task during adolescence is to achieve **ego identity** and avoid **role confusion**. It was adolescence that interested Erikson first and most, and the patterns he saw here were the bases for his thinking about all the other stages.

Ego identity means knowing who you are and how you fit in to the rest of society. It requires that you take all you've learned about life and yourself and mold it into a unified self-image, one that your community finds meaningful.

There are a number of things that make things easier: First, we should have a mainstream adult culture that is worthy of the adolescent's respect, one with good adult role models and open lines of communication.

Further, society should provide clear **rites of passage**, certain accomplishments and rituals that help to distinguish the adult from the child. In primitive and traditional societies, an adolescent boy may be asked to leave the village for a period of time to live on his own, hunt some symbolic animal, or seek an inspirational vision. Boys and girls may be required to go through certain tests of endurance, symbolic ceremonies, or educational events. In one way or another, the distinction between the powerless, but irresponsible, time of childhood and the powerful and responsible time of adulthood, is made clear.

Without these things, we are likely to see role confusion, meaning an uncertainty about one's place in society and the world. When an adolescent is confronted by role confusion, Erikson says he or she is suffering from an identity crisis. In fact, a common question adolescents in our society ask is a straight-forward question of identity: "Who am I?"

One of Erikson's suggestions for adolescence in our society is the **psychosocial moratorium**. He suggests you take a little "time out." If you have money, go to Europe. If you don't, bum around the U.S. Quit school and get a job. Quit your job and go to school. Take a break, smell the roses, get to know yourself. We tend to want to get to "success" as fast as possible, and yet few of us have ever taken the time to figure out what success means to us. A little like the young Oglala Lakota, perhaps we need to dream a little.

There is such a thing as too much "ego identity," where a person is so involved in a particular role in a particular society or subculture that there is no room left for tolerance. Erikson calls this maladaptive tendency **fanaticism**. A fanatic believes that his way is the only way. Adolescents are, of course, known for their idealism, and for their tendency to see things in black-and-white. These people will gather others around them and promote their beliefs and life-styles without regard to others' rights to disagree.

The lack of identity is perhaps more difficult still, and Erikson refers to the malignant tendency here as **repudiation**. They repudiate their membership in the world of adults and, even more, they repudiate their need for an identity. Some adolescents allow themselves to "fuse" with a group, especially the kind of group that is particularly eager to provide the details of your identity: religious cults, militaristic organizations, groups founded on hatred, groups that have divorced themselves from the painful demands of mainstream society. They may become involved in destructive activities, drugs, or alcohol, or you may withdraw into their own psychotic fantasies. After all, being "bad" or being "nobody" is better than not knowing who you are!

If you successfully negotiate this stage, you will have the virtue Erikson called **fidelity**. Fidelity means loyalty, the ability to live by societies standards despite their imperfections and incompleteness and inconsistencies. We are not talking about blind loyalty, and we are not talking about accepting the imperfections. After all, if you love your community, you will want to see it become the best it can be. But fidelity means that you have found a place in that community, a place that will allow you to contribute.

Stage six

If you have made it this far, you are in the stage of young adulthood, which lasts from about 18 to about 30. The ages in the adult stages are much fuzzier than in the childhood stages, and people may differ dramatically. The task is to achieve some degree of **intimacy**, as opposed to remaining in **isolation**.

Intimacy is the ability to be close to others, as a lover, a friend, and as a participant in society. Because you have a clear sense of who you are, you no longer need to fear "losing" yourself, as many adolescents do. The "fear of commitment" some people seem to exhibit is an example of immaturity in this stage. This fear isn't always so obvious. Many people today are always putting off the progress of their relationships: I'll get married (or have a family, or get involved in important social issues) as soon as I finish school, as soon as I have a job, as soon as I have a house, as soon as.... If you've been engaged for the last ten years, what's holding you back?

Neither should the young adult need to prove him- or herself anymore. A teenage relationship is often a matter of trying to establish identity through "couple-hood." Who am I? I'm her boy-friend. The young adult relationship should be a matter of two independent egos wanting to create something larger than themselves. We intuitively recognize this when we frown on a relationship between a young adult and a teenager: We see the potential for manipulation of the younger member of the party by the older.

Our society hasn't done much for young adults, either. The emphasis on careers, the isolation of urban living, the splitting apart of relationships because of our need for mobility, and the general impersonal nature of modern life prevent people from naturally developing their intimate relationships. I am typical of many people in having moved dozens of times in my life. I haven't the faintest idea what has happened to the kids I grew up with, or even my college buddies. My oldest friend lives a thousand miles away. I live where I do out of career necessity and feel no real sense of community.

Before I get too depressing, let me mention that many of you may not have had these experiences. If you grew up and stayed in your community, and especially if your community is a rural one, you are much more likely to have deep, long-lasting friendships, to have married your high school sweetheart, and to feel a great love for your community. But this style of life is quickly becoming an anachronism.

Erikson calls the maladaptive form **promiscuity**, referring particularly to the tendency to become intimate too freely, too easily, and without any depth to your intimacy. This can be true of your relationships with friends and neighbors and your whole community as well as with lovers.

The malignancy he calls **exclusion**, which refers to the tendency to isolate oneself from love, friendship, and community, and to develop a certain hatefulness in compensation for one's loneliness.

If you successfully negotiate this stage, you will instead carry with you for the rest of your life the virtue or psychosocial strength Erikson calls **love**. Love, in the context of his theory, means being able to put aside differences and antagonisms through "mutuality of devotion." It includes not only the love we find in a good marriage, but the love between friends and the love of one's neighbor, co-worker, and compatriot as well.

Stage seven

The seventh stage is that of **middle adulthood**. It is hard to pin a time to it, but it would include the period during which we are actively involved in raising children. For most people in our society, this would put it somewhere between the middle twenties and the late fifties. The task here is to cultivate the proper balance of **generativity** and **stagnation**.

Generativity is an extension of love into the future. It is a concern for the next generation and all future generations. As such, it is considerably less "selfish" than the intimacy of the previous stage: Intimacy, the love between lovers or friends, is a love between equals, and it is necessarily reciprocal. Oh, of course we love each other unselfishly, but the reality is such that, if the love is not returned, we don't consider it a true love. With generativity, that implicit expectation of reciprocity isn't there, at least not as strongly. Few parents expect a "return on their investment" from their children; If they do, we don't think of them as very good parents!

Although the majority of people practice generativity by having and raising children, there are many other ways as well. Erikson considers teaching, writing, invention, the arts and sciences, social activism, and generally contributing to the welfare of future generations to be generativity as well -- anything, in fact, that satisfies that old "need to be needed."

Stagnation, on the other hand, is self-absorption, caring for no-one. The stagnant person ceases to be a productive member of society. It is perhaps hard to imagine that we should have any "stagnation" in our lives, but the maladaptive tendency Erikson calls **overextension** illustrates the problem: Some people try to be so generative that they no longer allow time for themselves, for rest and relaxation. The person who is overextended no longer contributes well. I'm sure we all know someone who belongs to so many clubs, or is devoted to so many causes, or tries to take so many classes or hold so many jobs that they no longer have time for any of them!

More obvious, of course, is the malignant tendency of **rejectivity**. Too little generativity and too much stagnation and you are no longer participating in or contributing to society. And much of what we call "the meaning of life" is a matter of how we participate and what we contribute.

This is the stage of the "midlife crisis." Sometimes men and women take a look at their lives and ask that big, bad question "what am I doing for?" Notice the question carefully: Because their focus is on themselves, they ask what, rather than whom, they are doing it for. In their panic at getting older and not having experienced or accomplished what they imagined they would when they were younger, they try to recapture their youth. Men are often the most flamboyant examples: They leave their long-suffering wives, quit their humdrum jobs, buy some "hip" new clothes, and start hanging around singles bars. Of course, they seldom find what they are looking for, because they are looking for the wrong thing!

But if you are successful at this stage, you will have a capacity for caring that will serve you through the rest of your life.

Stage eight

This last stage, referred to delicately as **late adulthood** or maturity, or less delicately as old age, begins sometime around retirement, after the kids have gone, say somewhere around 60. Some older folks will protest and say it only starts when you feel old and so on, but that's an effect of our youth-worshipping culture, which has even old people avoiding any acknowledgement of age. In Erikson's theory, reaching this stage is a good thing, and not reaching it suggests that earlier problems retarded your development!

The task is to develop **ego integrity** with a minimal amount of **despair**. This stage, especially from the perspective of youth, seems like the most difficult of all. First comes a detachment from society, from a sense of usefulness, for most people in our culture.

Some retire from jobs they've held for years; others find their duties as parents coming to a close; most find that their input is no longer requested or required.

Then there is a sense of biological uselessness, as the body no longer does everything it used to. Women go through a sometimes dramatic menopause; Men often find they can no longer "rise to the occasion." Then there are the illnesses of old age, such as arthritis, diabetes, heart problems, concerns about breast and ovarian and prostate cancers. There come fears about things that one was never afraid of before -- the flu, for example, or just falling down.

Along with the illnesses come concerns of death. Friends die. Relatives die. One's spouse dies. It is, of course, certain that you, too, will have your turn. Faced with all this, it might seem like everyone would feel despair.

In response to this despair, some older people become preoccupied with the past. After all, that's where things were better. Some become preoccupied with their failures, the bad decisions they made, and regret that (unlike some in the previous stage) they really don't have the time or energy to reverse them. We find some older people become depressed, spiteful, paranoid, hypochondriacal, or developing the patterns of senility with or without physical bases.

Ego integrity means coming to terms with your life, and thereby coming to terms with the end of life. If you are able to look back and accept the course of events, the choices made, your life as you lived it, as being necessary, then you needn't fear death. Although most of you are not at this point in life, perhaps you can still sympathize by considering your life up to now. We've all made mistakes, some of them pretty nasty ones; Yet, if you hadn't made these mistakes, you wouldn't be who you are. If you had been very fortunate, or if you had played it safe and made very few mistakes, your life would not have been as rich as is.

The maladaptive tendency in stage eight is called **presumption**. This is what happens when a person "presumes" ego integrity without actually facing the difficulties of old age. The malignant tendency is called **disdain**, by which Erikson means a contempt of life, one's own or anyone's.

Someone who approaches death without fear has the strength Erikson calls **wisdom**. He calls it a gift to children, because "healthy children will not fear life if their elders have integrity enough not to fear death." He suggests that a person must be somewhat gifted to be truly wise, but I would like to suggest that you understand "gifted" in as broad a fashion as possible: I have found that there are people of very modest gifts who have taught me a great deal, not by their wise words, but by their simple and gentle approach to life and death, by their "generosity of spirit."