

Major Theories of Cognitive and Psychosocial Development in Childhood

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Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development

Overview of the Theory

Erik Erikson developed the psychosocial development theory, which states that humans' development happens through a series of stages with a unique psychological conflict to be resolved during each stage. The initial five stages of Erikson's model of development are crucial to the progress of the individual's identity and emotional well-being and happen during the period of infancy, childhood, and adolescence. These stages are: trust vs. mistrust (infancy), autonomy vs. shame and doubt (toddlerhood), initiative vs. guilt (early childhood), industry vs. inferiority (middle childhood), and identity vs. role confusion (adolescence) (Rorije et al., 2023). At each stage of development, the child faces unique developmental challenges, and the resolution of these challenges impacts the child's personality and relationships with others.

Major Contributors

This theory was first introduced by Erik Erikson, a German-American psychologist and psychoanalyst, during the mid-twentieth century. His theory was based on the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud but with more emphasis on social relationships and culture rather than biological needs alone. Erikson based his theory on clinical observations, cross-cultural studies, and psychological analysis (Maehler & Hernández-Torrano, 2025). His theory was based on the fact that development occurs as a combination of biological maturation and social experiences. This shows that nature and nurture go hand-in-hand to form a perfect whole. This theory of identity development is still used today to understand how teenagers develop their sense of self and personal values.

Critical Analysis

Erikson's theory has been highly valued for the importance it places on the role of social relationships and the development of emotions during childhood and adolescence. Erikson's theory was the first to introduce the idea that identity development is a lifelong process, which is affected by interactions with family, friends, and society. Erikson's theory has been highly effective, especially regarding the identity development of adolescents (Rorije et al., 2023). Another advantage of Erikson's theory is that it links the study of developmental psychology with the real world, such as parenting, education, and society.

However, despite the impact of Erikson's model, some people have criticized the theory as being somewhat hard to test empirically because conflicts within psychosocial development are hard to measure. In addition, the stages may be oversimplified because individuals may experience more than one psychosocial challenge at any given time (Maehler & Hernández-Torrano, 2025). Some people have argued that the theory was developed based on the experiences of people from only Western cultures.

Social Justice and Community Application

Erikson's theory also emphasizes the significance of supportive relationships and a stable environment in healthy psychosocial development. Children from under-served communities may experience difficulties in their psychosocial development because of their socio-economic background, discrimination, and lack of access to resources. More to the point, Erikson's theory of psychosocial development is useful in promoting children's psychosocial health (Maehler & Hernández-Torrano, 2025). For example, in promoting children's confidence and competence during the industry vs. inferiority stage, educators and mentors in schools may encourage collaborative learning and recognize children's achievements. Understanding children's psychosocial development may help communities develop strategies to help children develop their identity.

Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory

Overview of the Theory

Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory focuses on the importance of observation, interaction, following, and cognition in the process of learning. According to the Social Cognitive Theory, children learn not only through direct experience but also through observing the behavior of others and the consequences of their actions. This type of learning is called observational learning or modeling. Bandura proposed the concept of reciprocal determinism. This concept explains that behavior, person-related factors, and environmental factors mutually interact with each other (Ye et al., 2025). Children's beliefs, motivations, and cognition affect their behavior. Similarly, the environment affects children's experiences.

Major Contributors

Albert Bandura, a Canadian-American psychologist, proposed this theory through his experiments on learning and behavior. One of the most famous experiments conducted by him was the Bobo Doll experiment, which showed the imitation of aggressive behavior among children when they see adults doing the same (De la Fuente et al., 2023). Albert Bandura's approach integrated the ideas of behaviorism and cognitive psychology.

Critical Analysis

This theory has greatly impacted education, psychology, and public health. More to the point, Social cognitive theory helps to understand how children learn social behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions through observing and interacting with the world around them (Ye et al., 2025). Moreover, the theory also recognizes the need for positive role models for children to be exposed to. Studies have applied Bandura's theory to various issues, including children's learning motivation, classroom behavior, and the feedback process in education. One of the limitations of social cognitive theory is the possible underestimation of the role of biology in influencing behavior. Although the theory acknowledges the role of

cognition, some scholars argue that the theory does not adequately account for the changes that are evident with the development and maturation of an individual.

Social Justice and Community Application

Bandura's theory emphasizes the impact of the social environment on the development of children. Children who live in disadvantaged communities may have fewer positive role models or supportive educational environments. This could have a negative effect on their educational experiences. From this perspective, the theory can be used to provide a supportive educational environment for children where positive role models can be found. Children can build their confidence in their abilities. Social cognitive theory is equity-based in that the importance of positive role models is emphasized (De la Fuente et al., 2023). Children who see positive role models of different backgrounds succeeding in educational settings, leadership positions, or in the community will begin to think that they too can achieve the same things.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Overview of the Theory

Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a motivational theory that states that people are motivated to fulfill a set of needs that form a hierarchy within their lives. This hierarchy is represented as a pyramid with five levels of needs that include physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs. Maslow's hierarchy admits that individuals can fulfill their needs at higher levels only when they have met their needs at lower levels first (Frei-Landau & Levin, 2023; Papaleontiou-Louca et al., 2022). For instance, children who lack basic needs such as food and shelter may not be able to focus on their psychological needs or self-actualization needs. Maslow's approach is based on the idea that people have an innate desire to fulfill their self-actualization needs, which mean that people have a desire to fulfill their potential or to self-actualize. This is a concept

that accentuates that people's development is not limited to their minds but also to their emotional and psychological needs.

Major Contributors

Abraham Maslow is an American psychologist, the founder of the humanistic psychology movement, and the developer of the theory. His research was based on the need to understand human motivation. Maslow grounded his hierarchy development in the study of people with high psychological well-being and creativity (Frei-Landau & Levin, 2023). His research focused on the importance of biological needs as well as the environment in the motivation of humans.

Critical Analysis

Maslow's theory has been successful because it emphasizes the role of basic needs in supporting learning and development. In the context of education, Maslow's hierarchy of needs was positively accepted because it has reminded teachers and other educators that children cannot focus on learning and attaining academic success if their physical and emotional needs are not met. Maslow's hierarchy of needs has also guided the development of policies on child welfare, mental health support, and educational support systems (Papaleontiou-Louca et al., 2022). It has emphasized the role of the provision of safe environments and the promotion of the growth of the child.

However, despite the popularity of Maslow's theory, it has been criticized on the grounds that there is a lack of substantial evidence to back the theory. In addition, some researchers have noted that human needs may not necessarily follow a hierarchical pattern (Frei-Landau & Levin, 2023). It is argued that culture may play a part in determining the priority given to different needs. It is also argued that humans may strive to meet their needs at a higher level even if their needs at a lower level are not fully met.

Social Justice and Community Application

Maslow's theory has profound implications for the development of poor and/or unstable environments for children. When the basic needs of children are not provided, it becomes difficult for the child to develop and grow properly. Maslow's theory offers a platform to design systems to support the development of poor and/or unstable environments for children. Some of the programs designed to support the development of poor and/or unstable environments for children are initiatives to provide meals to the poor, mental health programs, and safe havens for poor and/or unstable environments for children. In this context, Maslow's theory promotes the idea of social justice and provides support to programs that work to eliminate inequalities among individuals (Frei-Landau & Levin, 2023). Granting basic facilities to all individuals helps create a platform for the development and growth of all individuals.

References

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