

ERIKSON WHY WAS HE IMPORTANT?

Although Erik Erikson (1902-1994) was schooled in the psychoanalytic tradition his view of personality shifts the emphasis from the id to the ego, from biology to culture and from psychosexual stages to the problem of identity. Like Anna Freud (Sigmund Freud's daughter) he was particularly interested in child development. In 1933 he emigrated to America where he set up practice as a child analyst in Boston. There he developed the view that it is not "anatomy that is destiny" (Freud's opinion) but the influence of society which is crucial in shaping the person we become.

Like Freud Erikson has a tripartite theory of the psychic apparatus. However, whereas for Freud the id was the most important determinant of behaviour Erikson attributes far more importance to the ego. Ego in Erikson's scheme serves to integrate the forces of biology with those of the cultural context to produce a stable personality. There are thus three interacting elements at work; the organism itself (the body), the groups to which we belong (social influence) and consciousness (which integrates the other two). Making an assessment of any individual for Erikson meant understanding how all three were related to each other in the human psyche. He referred to this as "triple bookkeeping".

Another similarity between Erikson and Freud is that both see personality development as a series of stages. However just as he recast Freud's view of the structure of the psyche so he also had somewhat different views on its dynamic. Freud's psychosexual stages (oral, anal, phallic, latency, genital) are reinterpreted in psychosocial terms. Thus it is no longer libidinal energy focused on particular parts of the body but the dilemmas that arise at different ages that mark out the territory of developmental theory.

The difference can be illustrated by comparing Freud's oral stage with Erikson's rather different interpretation of the psychological conflict occurring in the first year of life. For Freud what is crucial is the physical process of sucking which acts as a comfort and a pleasure. This then leads on to issues such as the psychological consequences of breast or bottle, is the baby fed on demand, and whether or not to give the infant a dummy or allow it to suck its thumb. However for Erikson it is not the nature of the physical contact between mother and child which is crucial but the meaning. For him the issue in the first year of life is whether the infant develops a basic trust or mistrust of the caregiver. Trust, claims Erikson, is fundamental to psychologically healthy development. It means the infant is equipped not only to get but also to

give back in return. This comes from “good mothering” in the widest sense and it creates in the infant a view of other people as helpful and dependable. However if care is inconsistent, or the child is mistreated or abandoned it develops fear and suspicion of others.

One can readily see here a link between Erikson’s ideas and research into the psychological consequences of attachment and separation. For example when John Bowlby put forward his views on maternal deprivation he could be said to be investigating the damaging effects of this acquired sense of mistrust. However Erikson’s theories have a much wider relevance and he was the initiator of what has come to be known as the “life span” approach to development.

Freud, it will be remembered, considered psychological development to be more or less complete by adolescence. Erikson argues that significant changes occur in later life. His view has been particularly influential in raising our awareness of issues such as the psychological consequences of the menopause, of retirement and of ageing. Indeed the very idea of a “mid-life crisis” can be interpreted as an aspect of Erikson’s claim that the psychosocial dilemma of middle age is the conflict between generativity and stagnation.

Here, as at every other stage in our lives, Erikson was aware that there are fundamental questions to be faced and that these are ultimately questions of identity. This emphasis on the subjective dimension of experience reminds us of the humanist perspective and one way of evaluating Erikson is to see his work as pushing psychoanalysis in this direction.

However it was not just because he was more interested in subjective experience than biology that Erikson’s work has a humanist flavour. Whereas Freud was primarily concerned with the diseased mind Erikson’s central interest was how to promote healthy development. Whereas Freud was pessimistic about the future of mankind Erikson was an optimist. Finally Erikson is a humanist in the deep compassion he showed for people who are suffering and his commitment to improving their lives. He wanted to help children overcome their fears, American Indians recover from the destruction of their culture and war veterans come to terms with the horrors they had experienced. Whilst his work was often criticised as speculative and unscientific no one could ever doubt Erikson’s sincerity in trying to put psychoanalysis to work to increase the sum of human happiness.

<http://www.simplypsychology.org/Erik-Erikson.html>