**Theory Paper (Correlation between Psychological theories with assessment of child development)**

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Both the children under observation displayed behavior during the sessions that can be understood or categorized under the theory of psychosocial development by Erik Erikson. The child (initials SA) displayed behavior that clearly indicated the child to be in psychosocial stage three, as explained by Erik Erikson. The other child (initials AA) also displayed behavior linking them to Erik Erikson’s third psychosocial stage. This theory paper delves deeper into Erikson’s theory and links it with the children’s behavior as observed by the student during live sessions with them.

Erik Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development is widely understood to be one of the most influential theories on the progressive development of a whole personality. It is apparent from the works of Erikson that his theoretical train of thought takes its inspiration from Freud. The stimulus for his work has come in the form of carefully laid out stages of the psychosexual development that Freud championed. It is based on borrowing a similar idea of a personality gradually developing in distinct stages from Freud’s work; but linking it with a social cause and effect. Freud focuses on the id and its relationship with the superego. Erikson, however, lends his focus to the ego only and has his works revolve around how cultural and social influences shape the formation of the ego. Erikson lets go of Freud and the way he has divided his psychosexual stages after following in his footsteps for the initial stages. Erikson’s work expands to include adulthood and the influence of social interactions on personality development. (H. Q. Kivnick, 2013)

This theory lists a total of eight stages in the growth of a person’s ego. These eight stages signify maturity from infancy to adulthood and list the behavioral anecdotes that are representative of each stage. It is interesting to observe that the distribution depends on how the individual reacts to and handles crisis situations. (Mulaney, 1977) The manner in which the person engages a crisis and resolves it leaves its influence on subsequent stages of psychosocial development as well. Each stage lays the groundwork for the degree of social maneuvering the person can successfully do. It provides or denies the confidence needed to confront the crises that are bound to come at later stages of development. An interconnected series of crisis management hence evolves to become a personality. Another interesting factor in Erikson’s theory is the idea that at every stage, the individual culminates their success by finding something that was originally missing. In general terminology, this is called the ‘virtue’ associated with each stage of psychosocial development. Having the virtue at the end of crisis resolution defines the positive outcome needed at the end of a developmental stage. Each stage brings a new dilemma between two opposing tendencies. Erikson calls these ‘syntonic’ and ‘dystonic’. (E. H. Erikson, 1986) Out of this dilemma, emerges the virtue. Erikson has insisted on various points that the conflicting emotions are not exclusive of each other. For example, a child can experience both trust and mistrust towards their caregiver. The catch, however, lies in establishing a situation where trust outshines mistrust. (Erikson, 1950)

The first stage is called trust vs mistrust and represents infancy when the child is entirely dependent on its caregivers. The child will only develop a sense of safety and security in the presence of their caregiver if trust has been successfully established. The basic virtue in this stage is ‘hope’. The second stage is called autonomy vs shame and represents the age of 1.5 to 3 years. This is the stage where the child develops ‘will’ and acquires the ability to undertake control of simple decisions while understanding the outcome. If encouraged, the child attains a sense of autonomy. The third stage is called initiative vs guilt and represents ages between 3 to 5 years. Here, a greater idea of control over their surroundings is developing in the child. Children who can successfully navigate this stage attain ‘purpose’. The fourth stage is called industry vs inferiority and represents ages between 5 to 12 years. The child is moving to early adolescence and their social interactions reinforce ‘competence’ at this stage. A sense of confidence in their ability to achieve can be maintained if it develops at this stage. The fifth stage is called ego identity vs confusion and represents adolescence (ages 12 to 18). This part of personality development is based on gaining ‘fidelity’ by being sure of one’s identity. The sixth stage is called intimacy vs isolation and represents young adults aged between 18 and 40. The virtue for this stage is ‘love’ which spins around the development and retainment of successful personal relationships. Deep commitments indicate appropriate personality growth. The seventh stage is called generativity vs stagnation and represents adulthood between 40 and 65 years of age. This stage signifies a balance between career and family and is linked to ‘care’ as the virtue. The eighth stage is called ego integrity vs despair and represents maturity after 65 years of age. The virtue is ‘wisdom’ and the focus is on reflecting back at life and gaining or losing a sense of integrity.

In the context of observing and analyzing the behavior displayed by SA and AA, it is significant to focus on the third stage of Erikson’s psychosocial development. Both these children are aged between 3 and 4 years. Both express a sense of mild control on their surroundings by taking simple decisions. These children are, however, unable to completely process the outcomes of these decisions. The two tipping scales of stage 3 of psychosocial development are initiative and guilt. Both these emotions are expressed in the behavior displayed by AA and SA.

In the sessions with SA, the child originally exhibited anxiety and mistrust at meeting an intrusive stranger. Crying and hysteria in absence of his mother indicates mistrust for the stranger. Calming down in presence of mother shows stable trust for mother developed in earlier stages of the child’s development. However, the placement of the child in the third stage of psychosocial development became clearer as the sessions proceeded. An improved sense of trust developed in the second session as the child found distractions and made basic decisions in the presence of the stranger. The child gained control over his toys including his building blocks and initiated a sequence of putting blocks on top of each other. In the fourth week, the child showed stronger initiative by undertaking a task seemingly difficult for him. Taking out his bowl and reaching for cereal to pour it himself indicates the urge for exploration. Decision-making is also evident from the impulse that convinced the child to pour cereal for himself. However, this initiative faces guilt in the same beat when the child loses his grip on the cereal and it scatters about. Guilt manifests in the form of crying once the child spills the cereal. This guilt is later reinforced by his mother’s reaction to spilled cereal. The reinforcement is negative and may produce lesser yearning for adventure in future crises. It does not, however, negate the initiative that the child displayed. (E. H. Erikson, 1986) More initiative from SA is present in the sixth week of sessions when the child pushes his younger brother for taking his iPad. Although coming from a place of anger and mis-judgement, the initiative is still legitimate. Impulsive decision-making in the wake of a crisis shows the child to be capable of maneuvering through stage three. This also got momentarily snubbed by guilt when SA was made to go into timeout by his mother. The guilt is also misplaced and comes with the goal to get the iPad back. However, the presence of initiative and guilt are enough evidence of the stage of development according to Erikson’s theory.

Cultural background has an important relationship with Erikson’s theory. The type of social interaction enabled by the child’s culture is a determinant of the success scale for the child in their developmental stage. SA has a Nigerian immigrant family with strong religious beliefs. A healthy environment for education is encouraged in the family. Certain social restrictions are present but there is nothing alarming. The parents expect good behavior from the child and the tussle between initiative and guilt initiates from here.

In the sessions with AA, there is ample evidence for Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development as well. In the first session, the child shows understandable mistrust in the nurse. However, there is initiative in the way the child attempts to open the juice box himself. A working ability to make decisions also exists. This is followed, almost immediately, with guilt as the child spills the juice and apologizes profusely in acknowledgment of the guilt. In the next session, the child mimics the activity of the adults around him by drinking juice from the glass. Asking for permission portrays initiative. The child falls into guilt once he spills the juice and it is easily discernable from the child’s apologies that the guilt overpowers initiative in this crisis. However, the initiative is not negated nor annihilated. The child chooses his shirt and dresses himself which shows initiative and the fact that the child has an urge to take control of decisions that affect him. With successfully dressing up, the child also displays the acclaimed virtue of the third stage of psychosocial development: purpose. This is reinforced by the child choosing the premise for his own stories and successfully deciding on what toys to play with. A constant struggle between initiative and guilt is the hallmark of the third stage of Erikson’s theory. In subsequent sessions, AA repeatedly manifested this struggle. When the child was napping and later made his bed without anyone’s help shows initiative and purpose. The fact that the child insisted on not accepting help with making his bed shows stronger initiative. The child continued to display positive decision making while choosing his toys and playing with those toys according to his own decisions. Role-playing and storytelling while playing with his toys also displayed a sense of purpose. However, guilt was re-invoked when his mother asked him to be careful with his toys.

Cultural background plays a role in the case of AA as well. AA has a family of mixed nationalities and hence an amalgamation of cultural and ethnical backgrounds. The environment in the family supports growth and creativity as the child shows discernible interest in music and identifies a type of music: salsa. The child also believes himself and his father to be musicians. A routine gathering of extended family at weekly church masses reinforces the beliefs held by the adults in the family. The behavior expected of the child revolves around regular interactions with these adults. Their opinions and outlook on life therefore impacts the feelings of initiative and guilt in the child.

Psychological issues that relate to Erikson’s theory can be resolved with help in the form of psychodynamic therapy that engages the various aspects of Erikson’s stages. This type of therapy helps engage the social and cultural influences on the psychological state of the patient. Moreover, it helps the patient face problems with virtues in every psychosocial stage by consecutively going through each one. Psychotherapy keeping up with Erikson’s theory also includes enough space for the idea that identity can change during therapy. Erikson’s idea of trust can play a role in the emergence of a new identity during the therapy. (Knight, 2017) A form of therapy that incorporates Erikson’s theory can help these children find the virtue relevant to the stage they need help with. In the case of the third stage for SA and AA, a form of therapy that positively reinforces initiative and negatively reinforces guilt, can tip the scales in the favor of initiative and can help the child find purpose. The psychotherapy proposed here for these children involves an early resolution of the developmental stage where intervention is needed. Since the resolution has been established, therapy can simply begin based on favoring initiative over guilt.

# References

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