

Role Theory, Erikson's Theory, and Family System Theory:

How Development is Effected

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Human Behavior

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Abstract

Role theory, Eriksonian theory, and Family System theory are all influenced by one another. This paper attempts to simplify how development is effected by using these three different theories. Role theory states that you find out someone's development based on what role they play in society. Next, Eriksonian theory says that you can pin point where the problem occurred during development, if they are having a problem. Family System theory believes no individual can be evaluated without their family, and get an accurate evaluation of that person. No matter which theory you choose to evaluate development, there are positives and negatives involved.

Keywords: role overload, role conflict, role discontinuity, Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, Epigenesis, crisis, transition, complementarily, subsystems, triangled

Role Theory

1. To understand role theory you first need to understand what a "role" is in society.

A role is the duties one plays in a given situation, either what you want to do or what you are expected to do. Yet, some roles given to us are not always met, which causes conflict. However, this conflict is not always bad such as when an abused child fights back against their abusive parents. Some roles we choose and some we do not; however, we may be able to decide how we play that role, whether we choose it or not. Choosing how we play this role can tell a social worker a lot about how one might behave in society¹.

2. It is very common for a person to feel overwhelmed with too many roles, such as a friend, boyfriend, student, brother, or employee. This is called **role overload** which should not to be confused with role conflict, yet they do go hand in hand. An example of role overload could be any college student. For example, let's take my roommate. He is expected to be a good student, a son, an employee, and a boyfriend. This may lead to prevention of meeting expectations on some of his or her roles in society¹.

Many people believe what I have just described would be **role conflict**; however, role conflict is a, "concept that refers to the existence of two contradictory sets of prescriptions for an individual's role performance." (Garvin 161) For example, a role conflict I was once in was being a good boyfriend and being a good friend. When I first started dating my girlfriend I always wanted to see her and be with her, causing me to never see my friends. I did not know how

to solve this conflict. Which role was more important? Over time I had to learn how to juggle time to see both my girlfriend and my friends¹.

Role conflict may occur due to **role discontinuity**. Simply, role discontinuity states taking on new roles that one is not prepared for due to past roles. For example, a young child usually goes to his mom for help, I know I did, but then when I went off to preschool I was lost because I did not have my mother there to help me. This role discontinuity may cause role conflict, because the child may not know how to play his new role, or he may not know which role to play, student or son¹.

3. If a person is stuck in between roles or is confused on how to play a role, that will show in their behavior in society. In extreme cases an adult might still act like a child, showing that they never moved out of that role. Role theory can be helpful in understanding where one might be in life, depending on what role they play in society.

Role theory has helped social workers look at social expectations at different stages of life. Some of these stages are biological and others are societal. For example, you can not become a parent until puberty (biological). However, society determines most of the expectations at different stages of life. For example, in American society a nineteen-year-old should be in college, and a thirty-year-old should be married with children, or about to have children¹.

Role theory talks about what one expects from someone in society. For example, as a teenager you are expected to be a son or daughter, student, possibly a boyfriend or girlfriend, and more. However, when you grow older and all of

your kids move out, you have less expectations, but does that mean development slows down? I do not think development does slow down, but that's what this theory is saying.

4. "Role theory has been utilized extensively to illuminate phenomena associated with cultural diversity and to solve practice issues associated with such diversity because role theory focuses on behavior in relationship to social positions and the performances associated with these positions"¹ (Garvin 165). Simply stated, culture influences what the society expects for a human, different societies expect different positions at different times. For example, in the Jewish faith after you turn the age of thirteen, and have your Bar Mitzvah, you take on many adult like roles. However, in Christian faith when you turn thirteen you are still a child and the roles mainly remain the same¹.

I do not think any specific group of race or ethnicity would be problematic with this theory; however, I believe that it could cause problems with the gay and lesbian community because roles may be different for gay couples with children, compared to heterosexual couples with children. However, no one has the right to say that their roles in the family are wrong just because they are different.

5. Social policies such as food stamp programs, help parents in poverty to fulfill their role as parents. If these programs were not in place, the parents of poverty stricken households would not be able to support their families, ultimately failing in their role as a parent. With the help of food stamps, the parent may be able to get back on their "feet," and eventually start providing for their family. Another example of a social policy that would relate to role theory would be sponsoring a

family at holiday time. This is a program where donors can help a needy family supply presents for their children around the holidays. However, I feel that some families take advantage of these policies, especially food stamps and do not ever try to provide for themselves. If food stamp programs only allowed a family to have them for a certain length of time, in the long run it would actually be more beneficial to the parent in their role as parent. All in all, I believe that social policies should only be available until the family is back on their "feet" or for a certain amount of time, to make sure they are not taking advantage of the policy, and ultimately crippling their chance for development.

Ericksonian Theory

1. Erik Erikson's theory described development that occurs throughout the lifespan.

Erikson's theory became known as the psychosocial theory. This theory proposes that individuals are not only affected by social forces when conscious, but also must face conflicts while unconscious². Many older psychologists focused on the *id*, or the innate source of tension in the personality³. However, Erikson was primarily concerned about the *ego*, or the executive arm of personality. The key to Erikson's personality development theory is the interaction between the *ego* and the environment, or in other words, how environment affects human behavior.

That is how it got its name of psychosocial theory

2. Erikson was a student of Sigmund Freud, whose psychoanalytic theory and psychosexual stages³ became the outline of the **Erikson's stages of psychosocial development**. The first four of Erikson's life stages correspond to Freud's oral, anal, phallic, and latency phases. Erikson focused on individual stages in one's life, and how their experiences shaped their development. There are

eight different stages starting with Trust vs. Mistrust from birth to two years of age, then there is Autonomy vs. Shame from two until about four, next is Initiative vs. Guilt from four until five, after that is Industry vs. Inferiority from the years five to twelve, following that is Identity vs. Identity Confusion from twelve until twenty-two, then comes Intimacy vs. Isolation in the adult years from twenty-two until thirty-four, after that is Generativity vs. Stagnation from the years for thirty-four to about sixty, and lastly Integrity vs. Despair which is from sixty years to death. You can use your self as an example. I am in the Identity vs. Identity Confusion stage. In the past stage of my development, Industry vs. Inferiority I struggled due to dyslexia. However, I believe that has made the Identity stage even easier because it was a hard time in my life and I found myself and realized I could do anything.

However, some people do not complete these stages to their fullest ability, causing the future stages to be harder due to the lack of knowledge from the prior stage. This is known as **Epigenesis**. Epigenesis is the idea that each stage of development depends on the resolution of the experiences of prior stages. If one has difficulty in one stage and moves on to the next stage, they will eventually fail in development of the next stage. A great example of this would be my friend. I believe he did not fully complete the stage of Industry vs. Inferiority to his fullest ability and now is having problems in the Identity vs. Identity Confusion stage. My friend has lacked confidence ever since I can remember and always needs help doing everything. Now that he is in the Identity vs. Identity Confusion stage he is lost and does not know who he is².

Erikson states that at the end of each development stage, a person goes through psychosocial crisis; this is where one learns the basic strength that they will keep throughout their lives. On the other hand, other psychologists say we do not go through crises, but instead transitions. However, Erikson's train of thought was on the right track, but I believe that we go through transitions. Erikson was right in saying that we go through a change from stage to stage, yet what we go through is not necessarily a crisis. Again you can take your self as an example, every time you move from one stage to another your life does not completely fall apart. Yet, it could for example if you do not make a smooth transition from the Industry vs. Inferiority stage to the Identity vs. Identity Confusion stage you might get involved in illegal activities such as drinking, drugs, or crime because you do not know who you are and you are trying to find yourself².

3. Erikson focused on how experiences in ones life influenced a person's development through the stages. Different life experiences cause different development from person to person. Each stage poses a different challenge that one has to over come and the people that complete them to the best of their ability have a smooth development: however, people that do not complete the challenge correctly struggle in future stages.

One value of this theory is that it illuminates why individuals who have been frustrated in early phases, such as in learning healthy levels of trust and autonomy in toddlerhood had such difficulty with the crises that came in adulthood. This theory makes it easy to pin point where the problem might have occurred, making the job of a social worker much easier.

As I talked about earlier, Erikson believed that right before we move to the next stage we go through crisis to get to the next stage. He believed this is where one learns the basic strength that they will keep throughout their life. However, other psychologist believe that the transition is smooth, which makes more sense to me. So I want to know why he believed that it was crisis at the end of each stage instead of transition.

4. According to Erikson, the stages are universal, and the ages at which one is said to have passed from one to another stage are also fairly universal. As we know, that is not correct because children from different cultures have different expectations at different stages in life. For example, in the Jewish community children are adults after bar mitzvah, at the age of thirteen. Their experiences will be different from a Christian child, causing the development to be different².

Also, Erikson's Theory pertaining to women carries some criticism.

Erikson says women's identity is centered around the wish to bear children while men's identity is focused on the capacity to work productively. I agree with the critics because women development should not completely be based around bearing children. Women development should focus on all events she will pass through in life, not just having children.

5. Many children are challenged by negative influences and may be tempted to take the wrong path in life; however, after school programs may steer children in the right direction. Providing children the opportunity to be surrounded by good influences, may "rub off" on the child and he may take the right path. Yet, there are not nearly enough after school programs, especially in places where they are

most need such as the projects. If there were more after school programs in the inner-city schools, there would most likely be a lower crime rate. This is because it takes children off the streets, and helps them find out who they really are in Identity vs. Identity Confusion stage. There has to be more fun after school programs such as acting class, skateboarding, drawing, or free writing. Programs that children will like so they actually enjoy going. However, the most important factor of an afterschool program is the stability and positive influences it provides to children by keeping them busy and off the streets.

Family system Theory

1. Individuals can not be understood in isolation from one another, but rather as part of their family. Families are systems of interconnected individuals, which can not be understood or helped when alone, without the family. "Family systems theory suggests that family structure may be observed, understood, and changed through planned intervention" (Green 174). Within the system of the family each member has different roles to play, which are either given to them or one they choose to take over. Within the roles of the family system, patterns emerge as certain family members take different roles causing other family members to interact differently. Maintaining the same pattern of behaviors within a system may lead to balance in the family system, but also to dysfunction⁴.
2. Many of these roles family members choose or are given do not fit that person's personality. However, most of the time the role does fit the person within the family, this is called **complementarily**. Complementarily simply means the fit between roles⁴. For example, it is pretty easy for me to play the role of a child and sibling, but some people might struggle, possibly due to abuse or abandonment.

Within every system there are **subsystems**, and that is true for the family system as well. Subsystems are smaller parts of a larger system with common characteristic and boundaries⁴. For example, my the parents have their own subsystem, then my sibling and I own subsystem, then my brother, father and I have our own subsystem as the men in the house, while my sister and mother have their own subsystem as the women in the house. A great example of a subsystem boundary problem in my life was when I was young my parents were very controlling. They would always tell me and my siblings what to do. I understand now that they were just being good parents, but at the time we just needed space to learn on our own.

Have you ever been forced into an argument between two of your siblings? Well if you have not, consider yourself lucky. This is called being **triangled**. For example, one time I can remember my brother and sister were fighting over what to watch on television. Then they asked me which show I would rather watch. Always looking up to my brother and enjoying the same shows as him, I sided with him. After, I felt horrible that I went against my sister like that, but either way someone would have been hurt.

3. Family development is crucial because if a family is not willing to accept changes the system will fall apart. As the family grows and changes, "system theory suggests that family transitions bring about changes for the individual"⁴ (Green 179). For example, if your son has a child you need to make the transformation from parent to grandparent.

"As individual family members interact over time, patterns, such as the division of labor, authority structure, and rules for behavior emerge and evolve over time" (Green 179). Throughout the life of a family, members learn to deal with developmental changes within the family and the environment surrounding that family⁴.

This theory believes that you cannot evaluate an individual without looking at their family. Looking at the family may help greatly; however, saying that you cannot evaluate the person at all without the family is a bit ridiculous. If that was the case many social workers and psychologist would be using methods that do not work.

4. As the Caucasian family life seems to be spread out in individual steps, African American family cycles seem to be condensed. This may be due to single parent households, or more gang violence⁵. This may cause trust problems in the future. I do believe that you can use the family system theory when you are evaluating African-American family problems, but you have to hold different expectations. In that case, if you are evaluating any family that is not Caucasian (or what you are used to) you will have to hold different expectations because different cultures develop at different speeds.
5. Department of Children and Families (DCF) is one of the most commonly used social policies in the United States. DCF can go in and help parents that need help with parenting skills. However, I believe this policy can be changed by not only educating the parents to become better parents, but also helping the children with behavioral and coping skills (this is of course if the parents are not abusive, and if

the child should be removed from the home). After you teach both the parents and children how to work together, the family will begin to develop into a more cohesive unit.

All theories

6. Role theory, Eriksonian theory, and Family system theory all go hand in hand.

The role one plays may tell you about there behavior in society, but it can also tell you how there family may behave in society. Also, depending on what stage of Erikson's psychosocial development you are in, your role in society and in the family might be completely different then it was just a year ago. I believe that Erikson's theory influences role theory, and role theory influences family systems theory. However, that is just my opinion.

¹Garvin, Charles D. "Social Learning and Role Theory." N.p.: n.p., n.d. 160-66. Print.

²Greene, Roberta R. Human Behavior Theory and Social Work Practice. Third ed. New Jersey: Transaction, 2008. 85-102. Print.

³Greene, Roberta R. Human Behavior Theory and Social Work Practice. Third ed. New Jersey: Transaction, 2008. 65-67. Print.

⁴Greene, Roberta R. Human Behavior Theory and Social Work Practice. Third ed. New Jersey: Transaction, 2008. 174 and 179-180. Print.

⁵Hines, Paulette M. "THE FAMILY LIFE CYCLE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILIES LIVING IN POVERTY." N.p.: n.p., n.d. 329. Print.