

Erik Erikson

Erik Erikson was born in Frankfurt, Germany in 1902 as the result of an extramarital relationship. In Erikson's early childhood, his mother divorced her first husband and remarried a pediatrician named Homburger. At that time in Germany, being born to parents who were not married was socially stigmatized and so Erikson's mother concealed the facts concerning his birth from Erik and everyone else except her husband. Dr. Homburger adopted Erik and so he was raised in the Jewish religion with the name Erik Homburger not knowing his biological origin. Both his parents were warm and supportive although they lived through difficult times during World War I in Europe. In adolescence Erikson learned the truth about his birth although his mother could tell him nothing of his father except that his first name was Erik. Not knowing his true origin added to Erikson's normal adolescent sense of needing to discover who he was.

Erik was a mediocre student who felt constrained by traditional education. After receiving the equivalent of a high school diploma he became interested in art and went to study art in Vienna. He came of age intellectually in the 1920's or "Roaring Twenties" as they were often called due to the widespread questioning and rejection of the repression of the Victorian sense of order. This questioning was in large part due to the horribleness of the first world war which people thought to be a result of the over control of society by the upper class. It was a time of sexual coming out which included the first mini-skirts in modern western society, women smoking in public and many movements for sexual liberation and women's right to vote in both Europe and the United States.

In Vienna, Erikson soon became involved in a school where students received no grades and were given considerable freedom in their studies and other activities. Through this he met Anna Freud who was impressed with the young man and invited him to be analyzed by her and become a child psychoanalyst. He did this as well as study the education methods of Maria Montessori. Montessori believed that children had an in-born urge to learn and a natural creativity which traditional education usually strangled. She and Erikson both believed that teachers and students could establish a cooperative relationship focused on the child's learning what they really wanted to know rather than the usual student-teacher relationship in which students view teachers as authorities who are forcing them to do things they don't want to do. Erikson began writing articles about ideas he derived from his experience working with children which were widely read and soon established him as an innovative thinker in the field of education and child development.

In 1933, to escape the Nazis, Erikson moved to Boston where he was the city's first child analyst. At the time of his immigration, he changed his name to Erik Homburger Erikson and his religion from Jewish to Christian. Later in his life, Erikson shortened his name first to Erik H. Erikson and later to simply Erik Erikson. Erikson continued to write about children's development and this led, despite never having attended college, to his being invited to Yale to conduct research and later to become a professor of Psychology at the University of California at Berkeley and later Harvard University.

During the communist witch hunts of the 1950's, the state of California passed a law which made it necessary for all state employees to sign an oath declaring the person's loyalty to the constitutions of both the United States and the state of California. Many persons were unwilling to sign such an oath because of either religious or political beliefs and so were fired from their jobs. The faculty in the Psychology Department at Berkeley refused to sign the oath as they considered an infringement of their civil liberties and all were threatened with the loss of their jobs. Erikson and the other most senior faculty told all the junior faculty to sign the oath as their careers might be ruined if they were fired and that they would fight the loyalty oath. And so, in a frenzy of political correctness, Erik Erikson and all the most famous psychologists at Berkeley were fired. He subsequently returned to Boston and became a professor at Harvard University. Erikson returned to Berkeley almost every year thereafter and spoke with the graduate students in Developmental Psychology who missed the privilege of studying with him due to the narrow mindedness of the politicians of the 1950's. He lived until the age of 94 and his wife of more than fifty years still lives in the Bay Area.

In addition to living in the United States, Erikson traveled extensively in Africa, Europe and Asia. He lived on the reservation with a group of Cheyenne and spent a year studying children in Africa and another in India. In Africa he became friends with a traditional healer whom he called as sophisticated a psychoanalyst as any that he had met in Europe or the United States. His observations in various cultures as well as his reading of the ideas of the early anthropologists led him to the belief that there are basic patterns of development common to all children regardless of their culture.

Erikson regarded himself as a psychoanalyst working within Freud's tradition and furthering Sigmund Freud's theories. Unlike most of the men around Freud whose ideas began to diverge from his, Freud maintained a warm, almost father-son relationship with Erikson until Freud's death. Freud had focused on delineating a model of the mind and the working of its parts with one another. Erik Erikson and his generation of analysts, including Anna Freud, are called Ego Analysts because they focused their studies on the relationship between the self (or ego) and the world. Erikson emphasized the creativity of the ego and considered the construction of self as the most important act of creativity in which humans engaged. Erikson developed a theory of stages of development that he called the Epigenetic Cycle of human development. This theory is his most important contribution to our understanding of how people work.

Stages of Development

Erikson believed that the Ego had to accomplish several tasks in relating with the world and that this relationship with the world influences our ideas about who we are. He also believed we accomplish these tasks in a predictable sequence in which one accomplishment makes the next possible. He called his stages Epigenetic Stages as he believed they were derived from the genetic pattern of human nature. He believed that culture influenced the style with which people expressed their development within each

stage and that cultures develop in ways to make possible the development of individuals within each stage.

Oral-Sensory Stage

The relationship between caregiver and child is always a little bit awkward. Any new parent will tell you that they don't always know what the child wants. Sometimes they think the child is hungry when it is tired. Sometimes they think it is tired when it is cold, wet or has gas. Over time parents come to think that they have learned to recognize a tired cry from a hungry cry. In truth there is a mutual learning so that the infant learns to cry differently in order to get an attentive parent to act differently as the parent learns to recognize the difference in the infants crying. This relationship is the infant's first sense of relationship and what Erikson calls a sense of Mutuality with another. Mutuality is the sense we adults have that we are on the same wavelength as another; that we truly have an understanding with another. And just like infants this is never permanent nor is it ever complete. There is always more to understand about another person and there are times when we don't understand one another. The sense we have in those fleeting moments when we feel truly understood or to truly understand someone else at a deep level is the same as that which a mother and child feel when they look at each other after successfully nursing. As adults we know that it is difficult and seldom that we have these moments of trust and closeness. Erikson wondered how it is that infants get to this sense of relationship so soon after birth given that they are born without any of the experience or understanding that we develop over time.

Erikson thought that we begin life focused on oral pleasure and trying to make sense out of the world. Much of our first year is spent learning to use our senses and integrating the information from the different senses. If you watch babies, they begin life without much ability to do very much and without the ability to perceive the world as clearly as adults do. The only part of them that works well are the parts necessary for maintaining bodily functions, like the heart, lungs etc. and the parts for taking in and digesting food. The only part of their body from which they get really accurate sensory information is the oral area – the lips and tongue particularly. They are unable to control the rest of their bodies and their sensory organs and brains have not formed all the connections necessary for making sense of the world around them in anything near an adult capacity.

In order to make sense of the world, they use the accurate sense of touch around their mouth to begin to integrate all the buzzing, booming confusion around them into something coherent and sensible. They stick everything in their mouth as soon as they are able to coordinate the movement of their hands. Eventually they depend most of all on sight to make sense of their world as do most adults but this is only at the end of their first year. During that first year touch starts out as the most important sense. The integration of sensory information revolves around getting what they need as does all of our adult sensory understanding. For infants this is primarily connected with taking in nourishment, being warm, free of gas, and having their skin stimulated in pleasant ways. All of these needs are dependent on their caregivers. So an infant's ability to make sense

of the world is tied to its relationship to who ever is taking care of it and particularly feeding it. In order to make sense of the world the infant needs things to be predictable.

Just as the infant needs for the relationship between what it sees and feels to be coordinated so it needs some sense of predictability in its relationship to its caregiver. It needs to learn how to act so as to get what it needs from its caregiver. In order for this to happen the caregiver has to act in predictable ways so the infant can learn that it can expect or Hope for its needs to be met. As the infant and the caregiver learn to interact the infant develops a sense of Trust in the caregiver and the world in general. It learns that the world is a place that is predictable enough so that it believes "I can act in ways which meet my needs at least some of the time." Erikson believed this need fulfilling relationship allowed the infant to believe that it can trust others. From this trust the infant develops a sense of hope that its needs will be fulfilled in the future if it acts appropriately. This means that a person's sense of who "I" is depends on their relationship with others. Thus I and You are not ideas the infant is born with but something that develops over time as the infant sorts out what I can feel and control and what is beyond me and must be dealt with in another way.

This sense of Basic Trust and the Hope that come from it are not absolute. A healthy infant will not believe that its partner will always meet its needs nor that it will always get what it wants. It would be unrealistic to trust everyone all the time. What we all need is a sense that we can trust some people and this gives us hope that our future will be worth living. When we don't have that sense of trust the future looks pretty bleak.

You might wonder; "What happens if an infant doesn't develop this sense of Trust and hope for the future?" Well what is it like when you are temporarily without hope? There is a sense of despair and helplessness. There are beliefs that the external world is uncaring and unpredictable. The frustration this engenders often turns to hostility and a belief that the external world is hostile as well as uncaring. Many infants who have grossly inadequate relationships with caregivers die. Others have distorted senses of themselves and the world around them. We remember from Freud that the only reason for an ego to develop is because it is better at meeting the individual's needs than is the id alone. If the ego can do nothing to help the infant; if the infant cannot have a positive effect on its caretakers then there is no reason for the person to develop a sense of self in relation to others and the self does not develop in a normal way. In the orphanages of the totalitarian era in Romania and other similar circumstances in which infants had their bodily needs met but little or no other interactions with humans are found high rates of infant mortality and children lacking in basic capacity to relate to others. We need a caretaker to interact with in order to develop a sense of who we are.

A mother or other caretaker does not have to be perfect. It is just necessary for the other or other caretaker to be sufficiently responsive to the child's signals so that the infant feels some level of Basic Trust and can develop Hope that their needs will be met in the future. This trust and hope are the bases for all our interactions with the world. We do not develop a complete trust in our caretakers as they do not perfectly meet our needs. It needs to be just enough so that we have the hope and so courage to go on in life. Too

much trust would lead us to be naïve and overly dependent on others. What we need is enough trust so that we are willing to work with the world to meet our own needs. We have all gotten this basic but imperfect trust in others from our caretakers or we would not be able to study personality theory. We would not have a sense that something good might come of studying this or getting a college education and so would not have the hope to try.

Muscular Anal Stage

Along with making sense of the world with our senses we learn to control our bodies. The ability to accurately perceive must come first as without being able to know what was going on we would not be able to judge how we were doing in controlling our bodies. So as we get a clear understanding of our environment and body through our senses and develop our sense of being able to work with the world, our focus gradually shifts from sensory integration to bodily control. What we want is to be able to get our body to do what we want done. To do this we have to learn to finely control all the muscles of our body in an integrated way. If you watch little babies they move in jerky and poorly coordinated ways. When an infant first tries to put something into their mouth they are likely to miss their mouth and poke themselves in the cheek or eye.

If you watch babies closely they first are terrible at putting things in their mouths. You can watch as they stare at their hands and at things they are trying to put into their mouths and try again and again in different ways to do what they want. They gradually get better and better until it becomes almost automatic. By the time a baby is eight or ten months old they never miss when they try to put something in their mouth and can do so while they are also doing something else. Following the cephalo-caudal principle they begin to control their lower body after their hands and arms are pretty well under control.

Babies want to move around to get into the various things they can now see clearly. To do this they first learn to creep, then crawl and finally to walk. All of these are efforts in a program of learning to control the body so as to be able to get what the baby wants. Babies expend a lot of time, attention and effort in these. I remember when my younger daughter was eight months old and was trying to learn to walk. I set her in the middle of an adult bed and just watched her. For forty-five minutes she stood up and fell down over and over again. Whenever she would stand for a moment she would smile radiantly. The whole time she was trying to stand she would have an expression of intense concentration on her face. She was making an effort with the hope of succeeding which would allow her to get what she wanted.

One part of the body we have difficulty in controlling is our bowel. When an infant is first born the bowels move reflexively. When there is sufficient pressure of feces moved into the bowel it contracts and expels it. The same is true of bladder function. When we are around a year old the adults around us generally become interested in having us control our bowels and later our bladders. This fits with our own program to control our bodies. But parents want us to control our bowels and bladders in ways they find

desirable. When we do so, they tend to be pleased and relieved. Over time we do learn to control our bowels and bladder in ways that please our parents. In doing this we simultaneously control ourselves and achieve social approval. This leads us to have a sense of being able to impose our Will on ourselves and to general sense of being able to act on our own in general.