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erikson's psychosocial development theory

erik erikson's psychosocial crisis life cycle model - the eight stages of human development

Erikson's model of psychosocial development is a very significant, highly regarded and meaningful concept.

Life is a series of lessons and challenges which help us to grow. Erikson's wonderful theory helps to tell us why.

The theory is helpful for child development, and adults too.

For the 'lite' version, here's a [quick diagram and summary](#). Extra details follow the initial overview.

For more information than appears on this page, read Erikson's books; he was an award-winning writer and this review does not convey the richness of Erikson's own explanations. It's also interesting to see how his ideas develop over time, perhaps aided by his own journey through the 'psychosocial crisis' stages model that underpinned his work.

Erik Erikson first published his eight stage theory of human development in his 1950 book *Childhood and Society*. The chapter featuring the model was titled 'The Eight Ages of Man'. He expanded and refined his theory in later books and revisions, notably: *Identity and the Life Cycle* (1959); *Insight and Responsibility* (1964); *The Life Cycle Completed: A Review* (1982, revised 1996 by Joan Erikson); and *Vital Involvement in Old Age* (1989). [Erikson's biography](#) lists more books.

Various terms are used to describe Erikson's model, for example Erikson's biopsychosocial or bio-psycho-social theory (bio refers to biological, which in this context means life); Erikson's human development cycle or life cycle, and variations of these. All refer to the same eight stages psychosocial theory, it being Erikson's most distinct work and remarkable model.

The word 'psychosocial' is Erikson's term, effectively from the words psychological (mind) and social (relationships).

Erikson believed that his psychosocial principle is genetically inevitable in shaping human development. It occurs in all people.

He also referred to his theory as 'epigenesis' and the 'epigenetic principle', which signified the concept's relevance to evolution (past and future) and genetics.

Erikson explained his use of the word 'epigenesis' thus: "...epi can mean 'above' in space as well as 'before' in time, and in connection with genesis can well represent the space-time nature of all development..." (from *Vital Involvement in Old Age*, 1989).

In Erikson's theory, Epigenetic therefore does not refer to individual genetic make-up and its influence on individual development. This was not central to Erikson's ideas.

Erikson, like Freud, was largely concerned with how personality and behaviour is influenced after birth - not before birth - and especially during childhood. In the 'nature v nurture' (genes v experience) debate, Erikson was firmly focused on nurture and experience.

erik erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development

Like other seminal concepts, Erikson's model is simple and elegant, yet very sophisticated. The theory is a basis for broad or complex discussion and analysis of personality and behaviour, and also for understanding and for facilitating personal development - of self and others.

The main elements of the theory covered in this explanation are:

- [Erikson theory overview](#) - a diagram and concise explanation of the main features of model.
- [The Freudian stages of psychosexual development](#), which influenced Erikson's approach to the psychosocial model.
- [Erikson's 'psychosocial crises' \(or crisis stages\)](#) - meanings and interpretations.

- ['Basic virtues' \(basic strengths\)](#) - the potential positive outcomes arising from each of the crisis stages.
- ['Maladaptations' and 'Malignancies'](#) - potential negative outcomes (one or the other) arising from each crisis stage.
- [Erikson terminology](#) - variations and refinements to names and headings, etc.
- [Erik Erikson biography \(briefly\)](#)

N.B. This summary occasionally uses the terms 'positive' and 'negative' to identify the first or second factors in each crisis (e.g., Trust = positive; Mistrust = negative) however no crisis factor (disposition or emotional force - whatever you choose to call them - descriptions are quite tricky as even Erikson found) is actually wholly positive or wholly negative. Healthy personality development is based on a sensible balance between 'positive' and 'negative' dispositions at each crisis stage. Erikson didn't use the words positive and negative in this sense. He tended to use 'syntonic' and 'dystonic' to differentiate between the two sides of each crisis, which is why I occasionally use the more recognisable 'positive' and 'negative' terms, despite them being potentially misleading. You should also qualify your use of these terms if using them in relation to the crisis stages.

erikson's psychosocial theory - summary diagram

Here's a broad introduction to the main features of Erikson's model. Various people have produced different interpretations like this grid below. Erikson produced a few charts of his own too, from different perspectives, but he seems never to have produced a fully definitive matrix. To aid explanation and use of his theory he produced several perspectives in grid format, some of which he advocated be used as worksheets. He viewed his concept as an evolving work in progress. This summary attempts to show the main points of the Erikson psychosocial crisis theory of human development. More detail follows this overview.

| Erikson's psychosocial crisis stages (syntonic v dystonic) | Freudian psycho-sexual stages | life stage / relationships / issues | basic virtue and second named strength (potential positive outcomes from each crisis) | maladaptation / malignancy (potential negative outcome - one or the other - from unhelpful experience during each crisis) |
|--|-------------------------------|---|--|---|
|--|-------------------------------|---|--|---|

| | | | | |
|------------------------------|------------------------|---|----------------------------|--|
| 1. Trust v Mistrust | Oral | infant / mother / feeding and being comforted, teething, sleeping | Hope and Drive | Sensory Distortion / Withdrawal |
| 2. Autonomy v Shame & Doubt | Anal | toddler / parents / bodily functions, toilet training, muscular control, walking | Willpower and Self-Control | Impulsivity / Compulsion |
| 3. Initiative v Guilt | Phallic | preschool / family / exploration and discovery, adventure and play | Purpose and Direction | Ruthlessness / Inhibition |
| 4. Industry v Inferiority | Latency | schoolchild / school, teachers, friends, neighbourhood / achievement and accomplishment | Competence and Method | Narrow Virtuosity / Inertia |
| 5. Identity v Role Confusion | Puberty and Genitality | adolescent / peers, groups, influences / resolving identity and direction, becoming a grown-up | Fidelity and Devotion | Fanaticism / Repudiation |
| 6. Intimacy v Isolation | (Genitality) | young adult / lovers, friends, work connections / intimate relationships, work and social life | Love and Affiliation | Promiscuity / Exclusivity |
| 7. Generativity v Stagnation | n/a | mid-adult / children, community / 'giving back', helping, contributing | Care and Production | Overextension / Rejection |
| 8. Integrity v Despair | n/a | late adult / society, the world, life / meaning and purpose, life achievements | Wisdom and Renunciation | Presumption / Disdain |

The colours are merely to help presentation and do not signify any relationships between factors. This chart attempts to capture and present concisely the major elements of Erikson's theory, drawn from various Erikson books, diagrams and other references, including *Childhood and Society* (1950); *Identity and the Life Cycle* (1959); *The Life Cycle Completed: A Review* (1982, revised 1996 by Joan Erikson); and *Vital Involvement in Old Age* (1989). Erikson later suggested psychosexual stages 7 and 8, but they are not typically part of Freud's scheme which extended only to Puberty/Genitality. See [Freud's psychosexual stages](#) below.

erik erikson's psychosocial theory overview

Erikson's psychosocial theory is widely and highly regarded. As with any concept there are critics, but generally Erikson's theory is considered fundamentally significant. Erikson was a psychoanalyst and also a humanitarian. So his theory is useful far beyond psychoanalysis - it's useful

for any application involving personal awareness and development - of oneself or others.

There is a strong, but not essential, Freudian element in Erikson's work and model. Fans of Freud will find the influence useful. People who disagree with Freud, and especially his psychosexual theory, can ignore the Freudian aspect and still find Erikson's ideas useful. Erikson's theory stands alone and does not depend on Freud for its robustness and relevance.

Aside from Freudian psychoanalysis, Erikson developed his theory mainly from his extensive practical field research, initially with Native American communities, and then also from his clinical therapy work attached to leading mental health centres and universities. He actively pioneered psychoanalytical development from the late 1940's until the 1990's.

Erikson's concept crucially incorporated **cultural and social aspects** into [Freud's biological and sexually oriented theory](#).

Erikson was able to do this because of his strong interest and compassion for people, especially young people, and also because his research was carried out among human societies far removed from the more inward-looking world of the psychoanalyst's couch, which was essentially Freud's approach.

This helps Erikson's eight stages theory to be a tremendously powerful model: it is very accessible and obviously relevant to modern life, from several different perspectives, for understanding and explaining how personality and behaviour develops in people. As such Erikson's theory is useful for teaching, parenting, self-awareness, managing and coaching, dealing with conflict, and generally for understanding self and others.

Both Erikson and his wife Joan, who collaborated as psychoanalysts and writers, were passionately interested in childhood development, and its effects on adult society. Erikson's work is as relevant today as when he first outlined his original theory, in fact given the modern pressures on society, family and relationships - and the quest for personal development and fulfilment - his ideas are probably more relevant now than ever.

Erikson's psychosocial theory basically asserts that people experience eight 'psychosocial crisis stages' which significantly affect each person's development and personality. Joan Erikson described a 'ninth' stage after Erik's death, but the eight stage model is most commonly referenced and is regarded as the standard. (Joan Erikson's work on the 'ninth stage' appears in her 1996 revisions to *The Life Cycle Completed: A Review*, and will in the future be summarised on this page.)

Erikson's theory refers to 'psychosocial crisis' (or psychosocial crises, being the plural). This term is an extension of Sigmund Freud's use of the word 'crisis', which represents internal emotional conflict. You might also describe this sort of crisis as an internal struggle or challenge which a person must negotiate and deal with in order to grow and develop.

Erikson's 'psychosocial' term is derived from the two source words - namely **psychological** (or the root, 'psycho' relating to the mind, brain, personality, etc) and **social** (external relationships and environment), both at the heart of Erikson's theory. Occasionally you'll see the term extended to biopsychosocial, in which bio refers to life, as in **biological**.

Each stage involves a crisis of two opposing emotional forces. A helpful term used by Erikson for these opposing forces is 'contrary dispositions'. Each crisis stage relates to a corresponding life stage and its inherent challenges. Erikson used the words 'syntonic' for the first-listed 'positive' disposition in each crisis (e.g., Trust) and 'dystonic' for the second-listed 'negative' disposition (e.g., Mistrust). To signify the opposing or conflicting relationship between each pair of forces or dispositions Erikson connected them with the word 'versus', which he abbreviated to 'v'. (Versus is Latin, meaning turned towards or against.) The actual definitions of the syntonic and dystonic words (see [Erikson's terminology](#) below) are mainly irrelevant unless you have a passion for the detailed history of Erikson's ideas.

Successfully passing through each crisis involves 'achieving' a **healthy ratio or balance** between the two opposing dispositions that represent each crisis. For example a healthy balance at crisis stage stage one (Trust v Mistrust) might be described as experiencing and growing through the crisis 'Trust' (of people, life and one's future development) and also experiencing and growing a suitable capacity for 'Mistrust' where appropriate, so as not to be hopelessly unrealistic or gullible, nor to be mistrustful of everything. Or experiencing and growing through stage two (Autonomy v Shame & Doubt) to be essentially 'Autonomous' (to be one's own person and not a mindless or quivering follower) but to have sufficient capacity for 'Shame and Doubt', so as to be free-thinking and independent, while also being ethical and considerate and responsible, etc.

Erikson called these successful balanced outcomes 'Basic Virtues' or 'Basic Strengths'. He identified one particular word to represent the fundamental strength gained at each stage, which appear commonly in Erikson's diagrams and written theory, and other explanations of his work. Erikson also identified a second supporting 'strength' word at each stage, which along with the basic

virtue emphasised the main healthy outcome at each stage, and helped convey simple meaning in summaries and charts. Examples of basic virtues and supporting strengths words are 'Hope and Drive' (from stage one, Trust v Mistrust) and 'Willpower and Self-Control' (from stage two, Autonomy v Shame & Doubt). It's very useful however to gain a more detailed understanding of the meaning behind these words because although Erikson's choice these words is very clever, and the words are very symbolic, using just one or two words alone is not adequate for truly conveying the depth of the theory, and particularly the emotional and behavioural strengths that arise from healthy progression through each crisis. More detail about basic virtues and strengths is in the [Basic Virtues](#) section.

Erikson was sparing in his use of the word 'achieve' in the context of successful outcomes, because it implied gaining something clear-cut and permanent. Psychosocial development is not clear-cut and is not irreversible: any previous crisis can effectively revisit anyone, albeit in a different guise, with successful or unsuccessful results. This perhaps helps explain how 'high achievers' can fall from grace, and how 'hopeless failures' can ultimately achieve great things. No-one should become complacent, and there is hope for us all.

Later in his life Erikson was keen to warn against interpreting his theory into an 'achievement scale', in which the crisis stages represent single safe achievement or target of the extreme 'positive' option, secured once and for ever. Erikson said (in Identity and the Life Cycle):

"...What the child acquires at a given stage is a certain **ratio** between the positive and negative, which if the balance is toward the positive, will help him to meet later crises with a better chance for unimpaired total development..."

He continued (in rather complicated language, hence paraphrasing) that at no stage can a 'goodness' be achieved which is impervious to new conflicts, and that to believe so is dangerous and inept.

The crisis stages are not sharply defined steps. Elements tend to overlap and mingle from one stage to the next and to the preceding stages. It's a broad framework and concept, not a mathematical formula which replicates precisely across all people and situations.

Erikson was keen to point out that the transition between stages is 'overlapping'. Crisis stages connect with each other like inter-laced fingers, not like a series of neatly stacked boxes. People don't suddenly wake up one

morning and be in a new life stage. Changes don't happen in regimented clear-cut steps. Changes are graduated, mixed-together and organic. In this respect the 'feel' of the model is similar to other flexible human development frameworks (for example, [Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's 'Grief Cycle'](#), and [Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs](#)).

Where a person passes **unsuccessfully** through a psychosocial crisis stage they develop a tendency towards one or other of the opposing forces (either to the syntonic or the dystonic, in Erikson's language), which then becomes a behavioural tendency, or even a mental problem. In crude terms we might call this 'baggage' or a 'hang-up', although perhaps avoid such terms in serious work. I use them here to illustrate that Erikson's ideas are very much related to real life and the way ordinary people think and wonder about things.

Erikson called an extreme tendency towards the syntonic (first disposition) a 'maladapation', and he identified specific words to represent the maladapation at each stage. He called an extreme tendency towards the dystonic (second disposition) a 'malignancy', and again he identified specific words to represent the malignancy at each stage. More under ['Maladapations' and 'Malignancies'](#).

Erikson emphasised the significance of and 'mutuality' and 'generativity' in his theory. The terms are linked. Mutuality reflects the effect of generations on each other, especially among families, and particularly between parents and children and grandchildren. Everyone potentially affects everyone else's experiences as they pass through the different crisis stages. Generativity, actually a named disposition within one of the crisis stages (Generativity v Stagnation, stage seven), reflects the significant relationship between adults and the best interests of children - one's own children, and in a way everyone else's children - the next generation, and all following generations.

Generations affect each other. A parent obviously affects the child's psychosocial development, but in turn the parent's psychosocial development is affected by their experience of dealing with the child and the pressures produced. Same for grandparents. Again this helps explain why as parents (or teachers or siblings or grandparents) we can often struggle to deal well with a young person when it's as much as we can do to deal with our own emotional challenges.

In some ways the development actually peaks at stage seven, since stage eight is more about taking stock and coming to terms with how one has made use of life, and ideally preparing to leave it feeling at peace. The perspective

of giving and making a positive difference for future generations echoes Erikson's humanitarian philosophy, and it's this perhaps more than anything else that enabled him to develop such a powerful concept.

erikson's psychosocial theory in more detail

freud's influence on erikson's theory

Erikson's psychosocial theory of the 'eight stages of human development' drew from and extended the ideas of Sigmund Freud and Freud's daughter Anna Freud, and particularly the four (or five, depending on interpretation) Freudian stages of development, known as Freud's psychosexual stages or Freud's sexual theory. These concepts are fundamental to Freudian thinking and are outlined below in basic terms relating to Erikson's psychosocial stages.

Freud's concepts, while influential on Erikson, are not however fundamental to Erikson's theory, which stands up perfectly well in its own right.

It is not necessary therefore to understand or agree with Freud's ideas in order to appreciate and use Erikson's theory. If you naturally relate to Freud's ideas fine, otherwise leave them to one side.

Part of Erikson's appeal is that he built on Freud's ideas in a socially meaningful and accessible way - and in a way that did not wholly rely on adherence to fundamental Freudian thinking. Some of Freud's theories by their nature tend attract a lot of attention and criticism - sex, breasts, genitals, and bodily functions generally do - and if you are distracted or put off by these references then ignore them, because they are not crucial for understanding and using Erikson's model.

freud's psychosexual stages - overview

Age guide is a broad approximation, hence the overlaps. The stages happen in this sequence, but not to a fixed timetable.

| | | |
|---|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Freudian psychosexual stages - overview | Erikson's | age guide |
|---|---------------------------|---------------------------|

| | psychosocial crisis stages | |
|---|---------------------------------------|---|
| 1. Oral Stage - Feeding, crying, teething, biting, thumb-sucking, weaning - the mouth and the breast are the centre of all experience. The infant's actual experiences and attachments to mum (or maternal equivalent) through this stage have a fundamental effect on the unconscious mind and thereby on deeply rooted feelings, which along with the next two stages affect all sorts of behaviours and (sexually powered) drives and aims - Freud's 'libido' - and preferences in later life. | 1. Trust v Mistrust | 0-1½ yrs, baby, birth to walking |
| 2. Anal Stage - It's a lot to do with pooh - 'holding on' or 'letting go' - the pleasure and control. Is it dirty? Is it okay? Bodily expulsions are the centre of the world, and the pivot around which early character is formed. Am I pleasing my mum and dad? Are they making me feel good or bad about my bottom? Am I okay or naughty? Again the young child's actual experiences through this stage have a deep effect on the unconscious and behaviours and preferences in later life. | 2. Autonomy v Shame and Doubt | 1-3 yrs, toddler, toilet training |
| 3. Phallic Stage - Phallic is not restricted to boys. This stage is focused on resolving reproductive issues. This is a sort of dry run before the real game starts in adolescence. Where do babies come from? Can I have a baby? Why has dad got a willy and I've not? Why have I got a willy and mum hasn't? Why do they tell me off for touching my bits and pieces down there? (Boys) I'm going to marry mum (and maybe kill dad). (Girls) I'm in love with my dad. Oedipus Complex, Penis envy, Castration Anxiety, etc. "If you touch yourself down there it'll fall off/heal up.." Inevitably once more, experiences in this stage have a profound effect on feelings and behaviour and libido in later life. If you want to know more about all this I recommend you read about Freud, not Erikson, and I repeat that understanding Freud's psychosexual theory is not required for understanding and using Erikson's concepts. | 3. Initiative v Guilt | 3-6 yrs, pre- school, nursery |
| 4. Latency Stage - Sexual dormancy or repression. The focus is on learning, skills, schoolwork. This is actually not a psychosexual stage because basically normally nothing formative happens sexually. Experiences, fears and conditioning from the previous stages have already shaped many of the child's feelings and attitudes and these will re-surface in the next stage. | 4. Industry v Inferiority | 5-12 yrs, early school |

| | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|---|
| <p>5. Genital stage - Puberty in other words. Glandular, hormonal, and physical changes in the adolescent child's body cause a resurgence of sexual thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Boys start treating their mothers like woman-servants and challenge their fathers (Freud's 'Oedipus'). Girls flirt with their fathers and argue with their mums (Freud's 'Electra'). All become highly agitated if away from a mirror for more than half an hour (Freud's Narcissus or Narcissism). Dating and fondling quickly push schoolwork and sports (and anything else encouraged by parents and figures of authority) into second place. Basically everyone is in turmoil and it's mostly to do with growing up, which entails more sexual undercurrents than parents would ever believe, even though these same parents went through exactly the same struggles themselves just a few years before. It's a wonder anyone ever makes it to adulthood, but of course they do, and mostly it's all perfectly normal.</p> <p>This is the final Freudian psychosexual stage. Erikson's model, which from the start offers a different and more socially oriented perspective, continues through to old age, and re-interprets Freudian sexual theory into the adult life stages equating to Erikson's crisis stages. This incorporation of Freudian sexual stages into the adult crisis stages is not especially significant.</p> | <p>5. Identity v Role Confusion</p> | <p>11-18 yrs, puberty, teens</p> <p>earlier for girls</p> |
| <p>Arguably no direct equivalent Freudian stage, although as from Identity and the Life Cycle (1969) Erikson clearly separated Puberty and Genitality (Freud's Genital stage) , and related each respectively to Identity v Role Confusion, and Intimacy v Isolation.</p> | <p>6. Intimacy v Isolation</p> | <p>18-40, courting, early parenthood</p> |
| <p>No direct equivalent Freudian stage, although Erikson later interpreted this as being a psychosexual stage of 'Procreativity'.</p> | <p>7. Generativity v Stagnation</p> | <p>30-65, middle age, parenting</p> |
| <p>Again no direct equivalent Freudian stage. Erikson later called this the psychosexual stage of 'Generalization of Sensual Modes'.</p> | <p>8. Integrity v Despair</p> | <p>50+, old age, grandparents</p> |

N.B. This is a quick light overview of Freud's sexual theory and where it equates to Erikson's crisis stages. It's not meant to be a serious detailed analysis of Freud's psychosexual ideas. That said, I'm open to suggestions from any Freud experts out there who would like to offer improved (quick, easy, down-to-earth) pointers to the Freudian psychosexual theory.

erikson's eight psychosocial crisis stages

Here's a more detailed interpretation of Erikson's psychosocial crisis stages.

Remember age range is just a very rough guide, especially through the later levels when parenthood timing and influences vary. Hence the overlap between the age ranges in the interpretation below. Interpretations of age range vary among writers and academics. Erikson intentionally did not stipulate clear fixed age stages, and it's impossible for anyone to do so.

Below is a reminder of the crisis stages, using the crisis terminology of the original 1950 model aside from the shorter terminology that Erikson later preferred for stages one and eight. The 'Life Stage' names were suggested in later writings by Erikson and did not appear so clearly in the 1950 model. Age range and other descriptions are general interpretations and were not shown specifically like this by Erikson. [Erikson's main terminology changes](#) are explained below.

Crisis stages are driven by physical and sexual growth, which then prompts the life issues which create the crises. The crises are therefore not driven by age precisely. Erikson never showed precise ages, and I prefer to state wider age ranges than many other common interpretations. The final three (adult) stages happen at particularly variable ages.

It's worth noting also that these days there's a lot more 'life' and complexity in the final (old age) stage than when the eight stages were originally outlined, which no doubt fuelled Joan Erikson's ideas on a 'ninth stage' after Erik's death.

erikson's eight psychosocial stages

| Psychosocial Crisis Stage | Life Stage | age range, other descriptions |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Trust v Mistrust | Infancy | 0-1½ yrs, baby, birth to walking |
| 2. Autonomy v Shame and Doubt | Early Childhood | 1-3 yrs, toddler, toilet training |
| 3. Initiative v Guilt | Play Age | 3-6 yrs, pre-school, nursery |
| 4. Industry v Inferiority | School Age | 5-12 yrs, early school |
| 5. Identity v Role Confusion | Adolescence | 9-18 yrs, puberty, teens* |

| | | |
|------------------------------|-------------|-----------------------------------|
| 6. Intimacy v Isolation | Young Adult | 18-40, courting, early parenthood |
| 7. Generativity v Stagnation | Adulthood | 30-65, middle age, parenting |
| 8. Integrity v Despair | Mature Age | 50+, old age, grandparents |

* Other interpretations of the Adolescence stage commonly suggest stage 5 begins around 12 years of age. This is reasonable for most boys, but given that Erikson and Freud cite the onset of puberty as the start of this stage, stage 5 can begin for girls as early as age nine.

Erikson's psychosocial theory essentially states that each person experiences eight '**psychosocial crises**' (internal conflicts linked to life's key stages) which help to define his or her growth and personality.

People experience these 'psychosocial crisis' stages in a fixed sequence, but timings vary according to people and circumstances.

This is why the stages and the model are represented primarily by the names of the crises or emotional conflicts themselves (e.g., Trust v Mistrust) rather than strict age or life stage definitions. Age and life stages do feature in the model, but as related rather than pivotal factors, and age ranges are increasingly variable as the stages unfold.

Each of the eight 'psychosocial crises' is characterised by a conflict between two opposing positions or attitudes (or dispositions or emotional forces). Erikson never really settled on a firm recognisable description for the two components of each crisis, although in later works the first disposition is formally referred to as the 'Adaptive Strength'. He also used the terms 'syntonic' and 'dystonic' for respectively the first and second dispositions in each crisis, but not surprisingly these esoteric words never featured strongly in interpretations of [Erikson's terminology](#), and their usual meanings are not very helpful in understanding what Erikson meant in this context.

The difficulty in 'labeling' the first and second dispositions in each crisis is a reflection that neither is actually wholly good or bad, or wholly positive or negative. The first disposition is certainly the preferable tendency, but an ideal outcome is achieved only when it is counter-balanced with a degree of the second disposition.

Successful development through each crisis is requires a balance and ratio between the two dispositions, not total adoption of the apparent 'positive'

disposition, which if happens can produce almost as much difficulty as a strong or undiluted tendency towards the second 'negative' disposition.

Some of the crisis stages are easier to understand than others. Each stage contains far more meaning than can be conveyed in just two or three words. Crisis stage one is 'Trust versus Mistrust', which is easier to understand than some of the others. Stage four 'Industry versus Inferiority' is a little trickier. You could say instead 'usefulness versus uselessness' in more modern common language. Erikson later refined 'Industry' to 'Industriousness', which probably conveys a fuller meaning. See the more detailed [crisis stages descriptions](#) below for a clearer understanding.

Successful passage through each stage is dependent on **striking the right balance between the conflicting extremes** rather than entirely focusing on (or being guided towards) the 'ideal' or 'preferable' extreme in each crisis. In this respect Erikson's theory goes a long way to explaining why too much of anything is not helpful for developing a well-balanced personality.

A well-balanced positive experience during each stage develops a corresponding '**basic virtue**' (or 'basic strength - a helpful personality development), each of which enables a range of other related emotional and psychological strengths. For example passing successfully through the Industry versus Inferiority crisis (stage four, between 6-12 years of age for most people) produces the 'basic psychosocial virtue' of 'competence' (plus related strengths such as 'method', skills, techniques, ability to work with processes and collaborations, etc). More detail is under '[Basic virtues](#)'.

Where passage through a crisis stage is less successful (in other words not well-balanced, or worse still, psychologically damaging) then to a varying extent the personality acquires an unhelpful emotional or psychological tendency, which corresponds to one of the two opposite extremes of the crisis concerned.

Neglect and failure at any stage is is problematical, but so is too much emphasis on the apparent 'good' extreme.

For example unsuccessful experiences during the Industry versus Inferiority crisis would produce a tendency towards being overly focused on learning and work, or the opposite tendency towards uselessness and apathy. Describing these unhelpful outcomes, Erikson later introduced the terms '**maladaptation**' (overly adopting 'positive' extreme) and '**malignancy**' (adopting the 'negative' extreme). More detail is

under ['Maladaptations'](#) and ['Malignancies'](#). In the most extreme cases the tendency can amount to serious mental problems.

Here is each crisis stage in more detail.

erikson's psychosocial crisis stages - meanings and interpretations

Erikson used particular words to represent each psychosocial crisis. As ever, single words can be misleading and rarely convey much meaning. Here is more explanation of what lies behind these terms.

Erikson reinforced these crisis explanations with a perspective called 'psychosocial modalities', which in the earlier stages reflect Freudian theory, and which are paraphrased below. They are not crucial to the model, but they do provide a useful additional viewpoint.

| 'psychosocial crisis' / 'psychosocial modality' | meaning and interpretation |
|---|--|
| <p>1. Trust v Mistrust</p> <p>'To get'</p> <p>'To give in return'</p> <p>(To receive and to give in return. Trust is reciprocal - maybe karma even..)</p> | <p>The infant will develop a healthy balance between trust and mistrust if fed and cared for and not over-indulged or over-protected. Abuse or neglect or cruelty will destroy trust and foster mistrust. Mistrust increases a person's resistance to risk-exposure and exploration. "Once bitten twice shy" is an apt analogy. On the other hand, if the infant is insulated from all and any feelings of surprise and normality, or unfailingly indulged, this will create a false sense of trust amounting to sensory distortion, in other words a failure to appreciate reality. Infants who grow up to trust are more able to hope and have faith that 'things will generally be okay'. This crisis stage incorporates Freud's psychosexual Oral stage, in which the infant's crucial relationships and experiences are defined by oral matters, notably feeding and relationship with mum. Erikson later shortened 'Basic Trust v Basic Mistrust' to simply Trust v Mistrust, especially in tables and headings.</p> |
| <p>2. Autonomy v Shame & Doubt</p> <p>'To hold on'</p> <p>'To let go'</p> | <p>Autonomy means self-reliance. This is independence of thought, and a basic confidence to think and act for oneself. Shame and Doubt mean what they say, and obviously inhibit self-expression and developing one's own ideas, opinions and sense of self. Toilet and potty training is a significant part of this crisis, as in Freud's psychosexual Anal stage, where parental reactions, encouragement and patience play an important role in shaping the young child's experience and successful</p> |

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| <p>(To direct behaviour outward or be retentive. Of course very Freudian...)</p> | <p>progression through this period. The significance of parental reaction is not limited to bottoms and pooh - it concerns all aspects of toddler exploration and discovery while small children struggle to find their feet - almost literally - as little people in their own right. The 'terrible twos' and 'toddler tantrums' are a couple of obvious analogies which represent these internal struggles and parental battles. The parental balancing act is a challenging one, especially since parents themselves are having to deal with their own particular psychosocial crisis, and of course deal with the influence of their own emotional triggers which were conditioned when they themselves passed through earlier formative crisis stages. What are the odds that whenever a parent berates a child, "That's dirty.." it will be an echo from their own past experience at this very stage?</p> |
| <p>3. Initiative v Guilt</p> <p>'To make (= going after)'</p> <p>'To "make like" (= playing)'</p> <p>(To make and complete things, and to make things together. To pursue ideas, plans)</p> | <p>Initiative is the capability to devise actions or projects, and a confidence and belief that it is okay to do so, even with a risk of failure or making mistakes. Guilt means what it says, and in this context is the feeling that it is wrong or inappropriate to instigate something of one's own design. Guilt results from being admonished or believing that something is wrong or likely to attract disapproval. Initiative flourishes when adventure and game-playing is encouraged, irrespective of how daft and silly it seems to the grown-up in charge. Suppressing adventure and experimentation, or preventing young children doing things for themselves because of time, mess or a bit of risk will inhibit the development of confidence to initiate, replacing it instead with an unhelpful fear of being wrong or unapproved. The fear of being admonished or accused of being stupid becomes a part of the personality. "If I don't initiate or stick my neck out I'll be safe.." (from feeling guilty and bad). Parents, carers and older siblings have a challenge to get the balance right between giving young children enough space and encouragement so as to foster a sense of purpose and confidence, but to protect against danger, and also to enable a sensible exposure to trail and error, and to the consequences of mistakes, without which an irresponsible or reckless tendency can develop.</p> <p>This crisis stage correlates with Freud's psychosexual Phallic stage, characterised by a perfectly natural interest in genitals, where babies come from, and as Freud asserted, an attachment to the opposite sex parent, and the murky mysteries of the Oedipus Complex, Penis Envy and Castration Anxiety, about which further explanation and understanding is not critical to appreciating Erikson's theory.</p> <p>What's more essential is to recognise that children of this age are not wicked or bad or naughty, they are exploring and</p> |
| <p>4. Industry v</p> | <p>Industry here refers to purposeful or meaningful activity. It's the</p> |

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| <p>Inferiority</p> <p>'To make (= going after)'</p> <p>'To "make like" and complete things, and to make things together'</p> <p>(To initiate projects or ideas, and to collaborate and cooperate with others to produce something.)</p> | <p>development of competence and skills, and a confidence to use a 'method', and is a crucial aspect of school years experience. Erikson described this stage as a sort of 'entrance to life'. This correlates with Freud's psychosexual Latency stage, when sexual motives and concerns are largely repressed while the young person concentrates on work and skills development. A child who experiences the satisfaction of achievement - of anything positive - will move towards successful negotiation of this crisis stage. A child who experiences failure at school tasks and work, or worse still who is denied the opportunity to discover and develop their own capabilities and strengths and unique potential, quite naturally is prone to feeling inferior and useless. Engaging with others and using tools or technology are also important aspects of this stage. It is like a rehearsal for being productive and being valued at work in later life. Inferiority is feeling useless; unable to contribute, unable to cooperate or work in a team to create something, with the low self-esteem that accompanies such feelings.</p> <p>Erikson knew this over fifty years ago. How is it that the people in charge of children's education still fail to realise this? Develop the child from within. Help them to find and excel at what they are naturally good at, and then they will achieve the sense of purpose and industry on which everything else can then be built.</p> |
| <p>5. Identity v Role Confusion</p> <p>'To be oneself (or not to be)'</p> <p>'To share being oneself'</p> <p>(To be yourself and to share this with others. Affirmation or otherwise of how you see yourself.)</p> | <p>Identity means essentially how a person sees themselves in relation to their world. It's a sense of self or individuality in the context of life and what lies ahead. Role Confusion is the negative perspective - an absence of identity - meaning that the person cannot see clearly or at all who they are and how they can relate positively with their environment. This stage coincides with puberty or adolescence, and the reawakening of the sexual urge whose dormancy typically characterises the previous stage.</p> <p>Young people struggle to belong and to be accepted and affirmed, and yet also to become individuals. In itself this is a big dilemma, aside from all the other distractions and confusions experienced at this life stage.</p> <p>Erikson later replaced the term 'Role Confusion' with 'Identity Diffusion'. In essence they mean the same.</p> |
| <p>6. Intimacy v Isolation</p> <p>'To lose and find oneself in another'</p> | <p>Intimacy means the process of achieving relationships with family and marital or mating partner(s). Erikson explained this stage also in terms of sexual mutuality - the giving and receiving of physical and emotional connection, support, love, comfort, trust, and all the other elements that we would typically associate with healthy adult relationships conducive to mating and child-rearing. There is a strong</p> |

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| <p>(Reciprocal love for and with another person.)</p> | <p>reciprocal feature in the intimacy experienced during this stage - giving and receiving - especially between sexual or marital partners.</p> <p>Isolation conversely means being and feeling excluded from the usual life experiences of dating and mating and mutually loving relationships. This logically is characterised by feelings of loneliness, alienation, social withdrawal or non-participation.</p> <p>Erikson also later correlated this stage with the Freudian Genitality sexual stage, which illustrates the difficulty in equating Freudian psychosexual theory precisely to Erikson's model. There is a correlation but it is not an exact fit.</p> |
| <p>7. Generativity v Stagnation</p> <p>'To make be'</p> <p>'To take care of'</p> <p>(Unconditional, non-reciprocating care of one's children, or other altruistic outlets)</p> | <p>Generativity derives from the word generation, as in parents and children, and specifically the unconditional giving that characterises positive parental love and care for their offspring. Erikson acknowledged that this stage also extends to other productive activities - work and creativity for example - but given his focus on childhood development, and probably the influence of Freudian theory, Erikson's analysis of this stage was strongly oriented towards parenting. Generativity potentially extends beyond one's own children, and also to all future generations, which gives the model ultimately a very modern globally responsible perspective.</p> <p>Positive outcomes from this crisis stage depend on contributing positively and unconditionally. We might also see this as an end of self-interest. Having children is not a prerequisite for Generativity, just as being a parent is no guarantee that Generativity will be achieved. Caring for children is the common Generativity scenario, but success at this stage actually depends on giving and caring - putting something back into life, to the best of one's capabilities.</p> <p>Stagnation is an extension of intimacy which turns inward in the form of self-interest and self-absorption. It's the disposition that represents feelings of selfishness, self-indulgence, greed, lack of interest in young people and future generations, and the wider world.</p> <p>Erikson later used the term 'Self-Absorption' instead of 'Stagnation' and then seems to have settled in later work with the original 'Stagnation'.</p> <p>Stagnation and/or Self-Absorption result from not having an outlet or opportunity for contributing to the good or growth of children and others, and potentially to the wider world.</p> |
| <p>8. Integrity v Despair</p> | <p>This is a review and closing stage. The previous stage is actually a culmination of one's achievement and contribution to descendents, and</p> |

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| <p>'To be, through having been</p> <p>To face not being'</p> <p>(To be peaceful and satisfied with one's life and efforts, and to be accepting that life will end.)</p> | <p>potentially future generations everywhere.</p> <p>Later Erikson dropped the word 'Ego' (from 'Ego Integrity') and extended the whole term to 'Integrity v Disgust and Despair'. He also continued to use the shorter form 'Integrity v Despair'.</p> <p>Integrity means feeling at peace with oneself and the world. No regrets or recriminations. The linking between the stages is perhaps clearer here than anywhere: people are more likely to look back on their lives positively and happily if they have left the world a better place than they found it - in whatever way, to whatever extent. There lies Integrity and acceptance.</p> <p>Despair and/or 'Disgust' (i.e., rejective denial, or 'sour grapes' feeling towards what life might have been) represent the opposite disposition: feelings of wasted opportunities, regrets, wishing to be able to turn back the clock and have a second chance.</p> <p>This stage is a powerful lens through which to view one's life - even before old age is reached. To bring this idea to life look at the 'obituaries' exercise.</p> <p>Erikson had a profound interest in humanity and society's well-being in general. This crisis stage highlights the issue very meaningfully.</p> <p>Happily these days for many people it's often possible to put something back, even in the depths of despair. When this happens people are effectively rebuilding wreckage from the previous stage, which is fine.</p> |
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erikson's basic psychosocial virtues or strengths (positive outcomes)

The chart below identifies the **'basic psychosocial virtues'** - and related strengths - which result from successfully passing through each crisis. Erikson described success as a 'favourable ratio' (between the two extremes) at each crisis stage.

A basic virtue is not the result of simply achieving the positive extreme of each crisis. Basic virtue is attained by a helpful balance, albeit towards the 'positive', between the two extremes. Helpfully balanced experience leads to positive growth.

Chief life stage issues and relationships are also re-stated as a reminder as to when things happen.

'Basic psychological virtue' and 'basic virtue' (same thing), are Erikson's terminology.

Erikson identified one **basic virtue**, plus another virtue (described below a 'secondary virtue') for each stage. At times he referred to 'basic virtues' as 'basic strengths'.

A bit confusing, but the main point is that based on what observed for each stage he identified one clear basic virtue and one secondary virtue. From this he was able to (and we can too - he encouraged people to do so) extrapolate other related strengths.

Bear in mind also that the first disposition in each crisis is also inevitably a related strength that comes from successfully experiencing each stage.

Erikson recognised this by later referring to the first disposition (e.g., Trust, Autonomy, etc) as an 'Adaptive Strength'.

basic virtues and other strengths

| crisis including adaptive strength | basic virtue & secondary virtue (and related strengths) | life stage / relationships / issues |
|---|---|--|
| 1. Trust v Mistrust | Hope & Drive (faith, inner calm, grounding, basic feeling that everything will be okay - enabling exposure to risk, a trust in life and self and others, inner resolve and strength in the face of uncertainty and risk) | infant / mother / feeding and being comforted, teething, sleeping |
| 2. Autonomy v Shame & Doubt | Willpower & Self-Control (self-determination, self-belief, self-reliance, confidence in self to decide things, having a voice, being one's own person, persistence, self-discipline, independence of thought, responsibility, judgement) | toddler / parents / bodily functions, toilet training, muscular control, walking |
| 3. Initiative v Guilt | Purpose & Direction (sense of purpose, decision-making, working with and leading others, initiating projects and ideas, courage to instigate, ability to define personal direction and aims and goals, able to take initiative) | preschool / family / exploration and discovery, adventure and play |

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| | and appropriate risks) | |
| 4. Industry v Inferiority | Competence & Method (making things, producing results, applying skills and processes productively, feeling valued and capable of contributing, ability to apply method and process in pursuit of ideas or objectives, confidence to seek and respond to challenge and learning, active busy productive outlook) | schoolchild / school, teachers, friends, neighbourhood / achievement and accomplishment |
| 5. Identity v Role Confusion | Fidelity & Devotion (self-confidence and self-esteem necessary to freely associate with people and ideas based on merit, loyalty, social and interpersonal integrity, discretion, personal standards and dignity, pride and personal identity, seeing useful personal role(s) and purpose(s) in life) | adolescent / peers, groups, influences / resolving identity and direction, becoming a grown-up |
| 6. Intimacy v Isolation | Love & Affiliation (capacity to give and receive love - emotionally and physically, connectivity with others, socially and inter-personally comfortable, ability to form honest reciprocating relationships and friendships, capacity to bond and commit with others for mutual satisfaction - for work and personal life, reciprocity - give and take - towards good) | young adult / lovers, friends, work connections / intimate relationships, work and social life |
| 7. Generativity v Stagnation | Care & Production (giving unconditionally in support of children and/or for others, community, society and the wider world where possible and applicable, altruism, contributing for the greater good, making a positive difference, building a good legacy, helping others through their own crisis stages) | mid-adult / children, community / 'giving back', helping, contributing |
| 8. Integrity v Despair | Wisdom & Renunciation (calmness, tolerance, appropriate emotional detachment - non-projection, no regrets, peace of mind, non- | late adult / society, the world, life / meaning and purpose, life achievements, acceptance |

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| | judgemental, spiritual or universal reconciliation, acceptance of inevitably departing) | |
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erikson and maslow correlations?

As an aside, there are significant parallels between the growth outcomes of the Erikson psychosocial model, and the growth aspects [Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs](#). It's not a precise fit obviously because the Erikson and Maslow perspectives are different, but the correlations are clear and fascinating. Erikson separately listed a series of 'Related Elements of Social Order' within his psychosocial model, which although quite obscure in this context, might aid the comparison. You might have your own views on this. For what it's worth here's mine:

| life stage / relationships / issues | crisis | virtue outcomes | Erikson's 'related elements of social order' | Maslow Hierarchy of Needs stage - primary correlation |
|--|------------------------------|--------------------------|--|---|
| infant / mother / feeding and being comforted, teething, sleeping | 1. Trust v Mistrust | Hope & Drive | 'cosmic order' | biological & physiological |
| toddler / parents / bodily functions, toilet training, muscular control, walking | 2. Autonomy v Shame & Doubt | Willpower & Self-Control | 'law and order' | safety |
| preschool / family / exploration and discovery, adventure and play | 3. Initiative v Guilt | Purpose & Direction | 'ideal prototypes' | belongingness & love |
| schoolchild / school, teachers, friends, neighbourhood/ achievement and accomplishment | 4. Industry v Inferiority | Competence & Method | 'technological elements' | esteem |
| adolescent / peers, groups, influences / resolving identity and direction, becoming a grown-up | 5. Identity v Role Confusion | Fidelity & Devotion | 'ideological perspectives' | esteem |
| young adult / lovers, friends, work connections / intimate relationships, work and social life | 6. Intimacy v Isolation | Love & Affiliation | 'patterns of cooperation and competition' | esteem |
| mid-adult / children, community / 'giving back', helping, contributing | 7. Generativity v Stagnation | Care & Production | 'currents of education and training' | self-actualisation |
| late adult / society, the world, life / meaning and purpose, life | 8. Integrity v Despair | Wisdom & Renunciation | 'wisdom' | self-actualisation |

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|--------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| achievements, acceptance | | | | |
|--------------------------|--|--|--|--|

N.B. I'm not suggesting a direct fit between Erikson's and Maslow's models. Rather, this simply puts the two perspectives alongside each other to show how similar aspects could inter-relate. Judge for yourself.

We might also use the Erikson model to help explain what happens in Maslow's theory when a particular trauma sweeps away a part of someone's life (perhaps due to redundancy, divorce, social exclusion, bankruptcy, homelessness), which causes the person to revisit certain needs and internal conflicts (crises) which were once satisfied earlier but are no longer met. According to both Erikson's and Maslow's theories, anyone can find themselves revisiting and having to resolve needs (or crisis feelings or experiences) from earlier years.

Further thoughts and suggestions about correlations between Maslow and Erikson are welcome.

erikson's model - maladaptations and malignancies (negative outcomes)

Later Erikson developed clearer ideas and terminology - notably 'Maladaptations' and 'Malignancies' - to represent the negative outcomes arising from an unhelpful experience through each of the crisis stages.

In crude modern terms these negative outcomes might be referred to as 'baggage', which although somewhat unscientific, is actually a very apt metaphor, since people tend to carry with them through life the psychological outcomes of previously unhelpful experiences. Psychoanalysis, the particular therapeutic science from which Erikson approached these issues, is a way to help people understand where the baggage came from, and thereby to assist the process of dumping it.

To an extent these negative outcomes can also arise from repeating or revisiting a crisis, or more realistically the essential aspects of a crisis, since we don't actually regress to a younger age, instead we revisit the experiences and feelings associated with earlier life.

This chart is laid out with the crisis in the centre to aid appreciation that 'maladaptations' develop from tending towards the extreme of the first

('positive') disposition in each crisis, and 'malignancies' develop from tending towards the extreme of the second ('negative') disposition in each crisis.

A maladaptation could be seen as 'too much of a good thing'. A malignancy could be seen as not enough.

In later writings malignancies were also referred to as 'antipathies'.

maladaptations and malignancies

| Maladaptation | Crisis | Malignancy |
|---|---------------------------|-------------------|
| Sensory Distortion (later Sensory Maladjustment) | Trust v Mistrust | Withdrawal |
| Impulsivity (later Shameless Willfulness) | Autonomy v Shame/Doubt | Compulsion |
| Ruthlessness | Initiative v Guilt | Inhibition |
| Narrow Virtuosity | Industry v Inferiority | Inertia |
| Fanaticism | Identity v Role Confusion | Repudiation |
| Promiscuity | Intimacy v Isolation | Exclusivity |
| Overextension | Generativity v Stagnation | Rejectivity |
| Presumption | Integrity v Despair | Disdain |

Erikson was careful to choose words for the maladaptations and malignancies which convey a lot of meaning and are very symbolic of the emotional outcomes that are relevant to each stage.

In each case the maladaptation or malignancy corresponds to an extreme extension of the relevant crisis disposition (for example, 'Withdrawal' results from an extreme extension of 'Mistrust'). Thinking about this helps to understand what these outcomes entail, and interestingly helps to identify the traits in people - or oneself - when you encounter the behavioural tendency concerned.

Malignancies and maladaptations can manifest in various ways. Here are examples, using more modern and common language, to help understand and interpret the meaning and possible attitudes, tendencies, behaviours, etc., within the various malignancies and maladaptations. In each case the examples can manifest as more extreme mental difficulties, in which case the terms

would be more extreme too. These examples are open to additional interpretation and are intended to be a guide, not scientific certainties. Neither do these examples suggest that anyone experiencing any of these behavioural tendencies is suffering from mental problems. Erikson never established any absolute measurement of emotional difficulty or tendency as to be defined as a malignancy or maladaptation.

In truth each of us is subject to emotional feelings and and extremes of various sorts, and it is always a matter of opinion as to what actually constitutes a problem. All people possess a degree of maladaptation or malignancy from each crisis experience. Not to do so would not be human, since none of us is perfect. It's always a question of degree. It's also a matter of understanding our weaknesses, maybe understanding where they come from too, and thereby better understanding how we might become stronger, more productive and happier.

maladaptations and malignancies - examples and interpretations

| examples | maladaptation | crisis | malignancy | examples |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|-------------|----------------------------------|
| unrealistic, spoilt, deluded | Sensory Distortion | Trust v Mistrust | Withdrawal | neurotic, depressive, afraid |
| reckless, inconsiderate, thoughtless | Impulsivity | Autonomy v Shame/Doubt | Compulsion | anal, constrained, self-limiting |
| exploitative, uncaring, dispassionate | Ruthlessness | Initiative v Guilt | Inhibition | risk-averse, unadventurous |
| workaholic, obsessive specialist | Narrow Virtuosity | Industry v Inferiority | Inertia | lazy, apathetic, purposeless |
| self-important, extremist | Fanaticism | Identity v Role Confusion | Repudiation | socially disconnected, cut-off |
| sexually needy, vulnerable | Promiscuity | Intimacy v Isolation | Exclusivity | loner, cold, self-contained |
| do-gooder, busy-body, meddling | Overextension | Generativity v Stagnation | Rejectivity | disinterested, cynical |
| conceited, pompous, arrogant | Presumption | Integrity v Despair | Disdain | miserable, unfulfilled, blaming |

erikson's terminology

This section explains how some of the model's terminology altered as Erikson developed his theory, and is not crucial to understanding the model at a simple level.

Erikson was continually refining and re-evaluating his psychosocial theory, and he encouraged his readers and followers to do likewise. This developmental approach enabled the useful extension of the model to its current format. Some of what is summarised here did not initially appear clearly in *Childhood and Society* in 1950, which marked the establishment of the basic theory, not its completion. Several aspects of Erikson's theory were clarified in subsequent books decades later, including work focusing on old age by Joan Erikson, Erik's wife and collaborator, notably in the 1996 revised edition of *The Life Cycle Completed: A Review*.

The Eriksons' refinements also involved alterations - some would say complications - to the terminology, which (although presumably aiming for scientific precision) do not necessarily aid understanding, especially at a basic working level.

For clarity therefore this page sticks mostly with Erikson's original 1950 and other commonly used terminology. Basic Trust v Basic Mistrust (1950) is however shortened here to Trust v Mistrust, and Ego Integrity (1950) is shortened to Integrity, because these seem to be more consistent Erikson preferences. The terms used on this page are perfectly adequate, and perhaps easier too, for grasping what the theory means and making use of it.

Here are the main examples of alternative terminology that Erikson used in later works to describe the crisis stages and other aspects, which will help you recognise and understand their meaning if you see them elsewhere.

- Erikson used the terms 'syntonic' and 'dystonic' to describe the contrary dispositions and effects within each crisis stage - 'syntonic' being the 'positive' first-listed factor (e.g., Trust) and 'dystonic' being the 'negative' second-listed word (e.g., Mistrust). Again realise that a balance between syntonic and dystonic tendencies is required for healthy outcomes. Extreme tendency in either direction is not helpful. Syntonic extremes equate to maladaptations. Dystonic extremes equate to malignancies. The words syntonic and dystonic outside of Erikson's theory have quite specific scientific medical meanings which are not easy to equate to Erikson's essential ideas. Syntonic conventionally refers to a high degree of emotional response to one's environment; dystonic conventionally refers to abnormal muscular responsiveness. See what I mean?.. neither literal

definition particularly aids understanding of Erikson's theory and as such they are not very helpful in using the model.

- Erikson later used 'Adaptive Strength' as a firm description of the first disposition in each crisis, e.g., Trust, Autonomy, Initiative. He used the description loosely early in his work but seems to have settled on it as a firm heading in later work, (notably in *Vital Involvement in Old Age*, 1986).
- 'Basic Virtues' Erikson also called 'Basic Strengths' (the word 'basic' generally identified the single main virtue or strength that potentially arose from each crisis, which would be accompanied by various other related strengths).
- Erikson (or maybe Joan Erikson) later used the term 'Antipathy' as an alternative for 'Malignancy' (being the negative tendency towards the second resulting from unsuccessful experience during a crisis stage).
- 'Sensory Distortion' was later referred to as 'Sensory Maladjustment', being the maladaptive tendency arising at stage one (Trust v Mistrust).
- 'Impulsivity' he later changed to 'Shameless Willfulness', being the maladaptive tendency arising at stage two (Autonomy v Shame & Doubt).
- Erikson generally used the simpler 'Trust v Mistrust' instead of 'Basic Trust v Basic Mistrust' which first appeared in the 1950 model.
- Erikson later refined 'Industry' to 'Industriousness'.
- Erikson later referred to 'Role Confusion' as 'Identity Diffusion' and 'Identity Confusion'.
- He later referred to 'Intimacy' also as 'Intimacy and Distantiation'. (Distantiation means the ability to bring objectivity - emotional detachment - to personal decision-making.)
- 'Ego Integrity' he also simplified at times to simply 'Integrity'.
- 'Stagnation' was later shown alternatively as 'Self-Absorption', and later still reverted to 'Stagnation'.
- At times he extended 'Despair' to 'Despair and Disgust' (Disgust here being a sort of 'sour grapes' reaction or rejective denial).

in conclusion

Erikson's psychosocial theory very powerful for self-awareness and improvement, and for teaching and helping others.

While Erikson's model emphasises the sequential significance of the eight character-forming crisis stages, the concept also asserts that humans continue to change and develop throughout their lives, and that personality is not exclusively formed during early childhood years. This is a helpful and optimistic idea, and many believe it is realistic too. It is certainly a view that greatly assists encouraging oneself and others to see the future as an opportunity for positive change and development, instead of looking back with blame and regret.

The better that people come through each crisis, the better they will tend to deal with what lies ahead, but this is not to say that all is lost and never to be recovered if a person has had a negative experience during any particular crisis stage. Lessons can be revisited successfully when they recur, if we recognise and welcome them.

Everyone can change and grow, no matter what has gone before. And as ever, understanding why we are like we are - gaining meaningful self-awareness - is always a useful and important step forward. Erikson's theory, along with many other concepts featured on this website, helps to enable this meaningful understanding and personal growth.

Erikson's psychosocial theory should be taught to everyone - especially to school children, teachers and parents - it's certainly accessible enough, and would greatly assist all people of all ages to understand the connections between life experiences and human behaviour - and particularly how grown-ups can help rather than hinder children's development into rounded emotionally mature people.

Erikson was keen to improve the way children and young people are taught and nurtured, and it would be appropriate for his ideas to be more widely known and used in day-to-day life, beyond the clinical and counselling professions.

Hopefully this page explains Erikson's psychosocial theory in reasonable simple terms. I'm always open to suggestions of improvements, especially for a challenging and potent area like this one.

I recommend for more detail you see the wonderful materials created by Professor George Boeree of the Shippensburg (Pennsylvania) University Psychology Department, and specifically [George Boeree's Erikson theory explanation](#).

Or read any of Erikson's books - they are very accessible and rich in ideas, and they do have a strong resonance with much of what we face in modern life.