A commentary on the life of Eleanor Roosevelt through Erikson’s eight stages of psychosocial development theory

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Introduction

Erik Erikson is known as a neo-psychoanalyst. Erikson follows in the Freudian tradition, though he breaks from Freud's obsession with sexual and deathly energies, and instead believes that social interactions provide context for the construct of personality. According to Erikson, individuals move through eight stages of identity development. It is important to consider that Erikson did not limit the attitudes that comprise each crisis to a particular point in life. For instance, an individual may still face some residual trust issues later in life even though this crisis becomes dominant in the post-natal period. Similarly, a newborn may show signs of autonomy even though he will not fully undergo this particular crisis for several months to come. Rather, Erikson states that autonomy even though he will not fully develop in the post-natal period. Similar to a newborn, a newborn may show signs of autonomy even though he will not fully understand the complexity of this crisis for several months to come. Rather, Erikson states that the complexity of each crisis is present in some form or another throughout life span development, but that each crisis rises to the centre of the stage at a particular point in time.

In this, Erikson argues that identity develops similarly to the way a child develops physically, with each element of potential development being present from birth. One then moves from one stage to another according to the level of maturity and how well mastery is achieved in the previous stage.

These crises do not refer to disastrous life events, but rather signify a turning point and opportunity in an individual’s life to further develop and mature as their perspective begins to radically change. Each crisis has to be overcome before the individual can move on to the next stage, and the manner in which the individual resolves and interprets the crisis shapes his identity.

When it comes to resolving a crisis, positive resolution can be achieved by striking a balance between the two attitudes present in each stage of crisis. For instance, leaning too much towards either attitude may cause maladjusted tendencies. Erikson was an admirer of autobiographies, which led him to apply his theory of development to several notable figures. Erikson wrote that such works of literature may function as a “source of insight into the development of identity.”

After the publication of his acclaimed books, Childhood and Society and Identity: Youth and Crisis, in which he elaborates on his theoretical perspective, Erikson went on to write Young Man Luther and Gandhi’s Truth, in which he examines the lives of these extraordinary men through the lens of his theory of development. Following the trend established by Erikson, this paper is an attempt to study the life of Eleanor Roosevelt through the application of Erikson’s eight stages of development.

Trust versus Mistrust

The first of Erikson’s psychosocial developmental stages takes into account how well attended a child is by his caregivers, and thus the establishment of a system of trust or mistrust between child and parent. Erikson elaborates that the amount of trust developed depends not only on the provision of basic needs such as food and love, but more importantly on the quality of the relationship the child has with the mother. Eleanor wrote in her autobiography that she believed her mother was more attached to her two brothers. During her childhood Eleanor was given the monikers of “granny”, “old fashioned” and “ugly duckling” by her mother due to her shyness and lack of beauty, making her feel like a disgrace in the eyes of her mother. Her mother, Anna, used to introduce Eleanor by saying she was “plain at best.” She grew up in a society where a lack of maternal care was common; her primary care giver was her French nurse, rather than her mother. Experiences such as these might have taught young Eleanor that she could not rely on her environment to meet her needs.

Initiative versus Guilt

The third stage as described by Erikson is the initiative versus guilt stage. According to Erikson, at approximately four to five years of age, a sense of ambition and purpose to try new endeavors begins to emerge within a child. However, this initiative behavior may be suppressed through the feeling of guilt derived from the fear of punishment or for being caught misbehaving. Erikson proposes that this fear of disapproval develops into something similar to a conscience or an inner voice that inhibits the child’s behavior. The figures in Eleanor’s early childhood appear rather strict with their expectations of her. She was to do and be, and as a child she was rarely allowed to grow in initiative behavior. Her grandmother was a demanding woman who had strong ideas on what a woman should and should not do, and disapproved of Eleanor doing anything out of the ordinary. Eleanor described her grandmother as someone who felt that she had failed her own children, and as such intended to raise her grandchildren with strict discipline and the “principle that ‘no’
was easier to say than ‘yes.’”

Industry versus Inferiority.

The state industry versus inferiority occurs when a child is between the ages of six and twelve. According to Erikson, a child at this stage seeks competence in the things they attempt, and tries to please others by fulfilling social expectations and roles he is placed in. Similarly, he states that children at this stage begin to define themselves by what they can and cannot accomplish. As such, Erikson identifies the inverse of industriousness as a feeling of helplessness or a lack of pride and enjoyment in doing something well. During this stage, peers, teachers, and the overall culture of the society play crucial roles in building the child’s self-esteem.

Eleanor began to have fears that she was unable to fulfill the expectations of others. and perhaps this made her feel inferior. Eleanor, in her autobiography, makes reference to the fact that she often disappointed her father with her timid nature, such as an incident in which she refused to ride a donkey down a hill because she was afraid of falling and getting hurt. Though the anxiety and fear that developed during the incident is natural for a child, the anxiety she probably felt from disappointing her father is developed many different fears as a child, among which was her fear of being inferior. Eleanor developed many different fears as a child, among which was her fear of being reprimanded and disliked by others.

During this crucial developmental period, Eleanor’s father was admitted into a mental institution for his suicidal tendencies, alcoholism, and morphine addiction. Several months after that, she lost her mother and younger brother to diphtheria. Two years later, her father passed away as well. Losing them at a young age would almost certainly have a shattering effect on Eleanor’s development.

Identity versus Role Confusion

Erikson’s identity versus role confusion stage occurs during adolescence. Erikson proposes that during this stage, young adults try numerous roles so as to better understand how they may perceive themselves and how society may perceive them. Erikson references faddish adolescent culture as an attempt among adolescents to experiment with different societal roles. It is inferred from her biographies that Eleanor tried on several roles. She believed in her youth that someone would come and rescue her, and so she behaved with great decorum and correctness, exhibiting a “sweet and thoughtful nature” towards others. When she was 15, Eleanor was sent to attend Allenswood in London, which was run by a headmistress dedicated to liberal causes. Her favorite classes were history and literature, taught by Headmistress Mlle Souvestre. There, she was exposed to political and social issues that she had been previously sheltered from.

Eleanor developed into the role of the ideal student; she was popular, received good grades, and was well loved and respected by her teachers. Her idea of herself and even her health began to improve under Mlle Souvestre’s care. Mlle Souvestre had opened Eleanor’s eyes to the world outside of her privilege class and helped her gain a sense of confidence. It is during this stage that Eleanor began exploring the role of being a philanthropist. She began working for social causes and making friends outside of her socio-economic class. Eleanor made her debut in New York society when she was 17, and soon became well known for volunteer work such as teaching children on the Lower East Side and joining the Junior League of the City of New York, much to the disapproval of her family.

Intimacy versus Isolation

Eleanor’s brief interest in humanitarian work does not fully explain her development from a timid girl to someone who would change the lives of many for the better. In fact, this humanitarian streak would be suppressed during her marriage to Franklin Delano Roosevelt. During this time, Eleanor had to go through the intimacy versus isolation stage of Erikson’s theory, before finally reaching a point of stability. This stage stresses the need for building healthy, committed and intimate relationships with others without losing one’s sense of self. Another element of this stage is the ability to accept another for who they are, with all their faults and differences.

For the first ten years of her marriage, Eleanor’s sense of identity was submerged in her belief of what a dutiful mother and wife should be. Perhaps this overlap is due to Eleanor not having fully developed her sense of self at the time of her marriage; the tendency of making hasty life decisions before resolving the identity crisis is termed premarital foreclosure. When she met Franklin, Eleanor was 18, and she married him at the age of 21. Eleanor was afraid of hurting or losing Franklin through confrontations with her mother-in-law, Sara, and so she spent those years acquiescing to the older woman in spite of her own reservations about the utility or value of her demands. For instance, Sara chose the home they would live in, appointed the servants and choose the decorations. Furthermore, the social reforms in which Eleanor participated were curbed by Sara. Eleanor was told that she might get infected with germs from working in the settlement home and pass them on to her children.

In the early years of her marriage, Eleanor felt that she was merely reflecting the taste and preferences of others. Her sense of identity was based on her relationship with her husband and children. This relationship was jeopardized when Eleanor found love letters addressed to her secretary, Lucy, from Franklin. This betrayal caused a rift in her relationship with her husband, and strangely, strengthened her bond with her mother-in-law. The intimacy between Eleanor and Franklin never returned to what it was prior to the discovery of his affair. The betrayal may have been the catalyst that pushed Eleanor to develop her own sense of self. Eleanor felt that she could no longer trust Franklin to such an extent or be as dependent on him as she had been before.

Generativity versus Stagnation

The stage of generativity versus stagnation deals with striving to feel as though one has contributed and provided guidance to future generations. While as a young lady Eleanor had volunteered for charitable causes, this behavior was suppressed and didn’t remerge until the events of World War I spurred her into action as a civil and social advocate. In 1921, Franklin was diagnosed with polio. Eleanor nursed and supported Franklin following his illness. She continued her political activities as a way to motivate Franklin and to represent him in public. Her ability to accept his flaws and forgive his transgressions also demonstrates that she had progressed and graduated from the previous crisis of intimacy vs. isolation. She truly became his helpmate at this stage, even though they would never return to the same levels of physical intimacy.

The numerous activities in which Eleanor participated illustrate how she chose to express the need for generativity. During this stage of her life, Eleanor participated in several charitable causes, including the Women’s Trade Union League and The Women’s Division of the New York Democratic Committee. She later established Van-Kill Industries, and taught at a private school for girls, Todhunter School. In 1932, Franklin D. Roosevelt became the 32nd President of the United States. Prior to and after the death of her husband, Eleanor continued to contribute to society by championing women’s rights, dealing with the squalid conditions of the coal town, Arthurdale, tackling poverty and unemployment among women and youths.
avidly supporting the Public Works Art Project, fighting for the rights of African-Americans, participating in the United Nations delegation that supported the rights of Soviet refugees, and planning the Declaration of Universal Human Rights.1

Ego Integrity versus Despair

The final stage of Erikson’s theory concerns how one views his or her accomplishments in life.2 Someone who has accepted all the failures and who is proud of what they had accomplished achieves ego integrity, and conversely, someone filled with the bitterness of regret undergoes despair.3 The ability to face the concept of death without fear is a key component of this stage.2,3 Up until the last days of her life, Eleanor Roosevelt did not lose her energy and drive to fight for her humanitarian causes.4 She taught for two years at Brandeis University and continued to write her daily column up until she was in her death bed.1 At the age of 78, Eleanor Roosevelt was diagnosed with bone marrow tuberculosis, which slowed her down considerably during the last two months of her life.7 According to biographers Burns and Dunn, she had pleaded with the doctors to let her die rather than to fruitlessly search for means to keep her alive.7 She finally passed away on November 7th, 1962. It is difficult to say if Eleanor truly felt either ego integrity or despair, though one might assume that towards the end of her life, she was proud of all her many accomplishments. In 1961 her memoirs were published. The fact that she could look back at the events of her life with all its ups and downs, and write of them in a positive manner speaks of her character and her acceptance of the life she had lived. She did not give up on living a full life and was quoted as saying “…I could not, at any age, be content to take my place in a corner by a fireside and simply look on.”7

Conclusion

In summation, Erikson’s paradigm’s provides an interesting perspective into the psycho-history of Eleanor Roosevelt. Through the lens of his theory, one can evaluate the life history of great historical figures. In turn, such application provides an example and breaks down the many ways in which an individual can choose to navigate through life crises. Eleanor illustrates that having a tragically sad childhood or being betrayed does not doom a person to leading a tragically sad life. She presumably mistrusted her social environment, experienced shame and doubt in her early childhood, felt guilt as well as inferiority over her inability to obtain approval from her family, and struggled with her identity as a youth. It is unlikely that any persons from her childhood could have predicted that the shy, timid child would grow up to become an important player on the world stage. More so, Eleanor reached the extremes of intimacy at the beginning of her marriage, and it seems she became too attached and dependent on Franklin to make her own decisions.

Yet the turning point of her life started when she moved away from her mother-in-law to Washington. This moment was when the developmental umbilical cord was finally cut, or when the psychological weaning took place. Sometime after they moved to Washington, Eleanor discovered the betrayal of her husband, and finally broke away from him to discover her own identity. From then on, one can see her drive and endless dedication to helping her fellow Americans and the world at large to ensure a better future for generations to come. Her life ended with her having accomplished numerous feats and having changed the image of what was expected of a First Lady, and indeed, a woman. For her contributions to the betterment in the treatment of people all around the world, especially the marginalized, she is given the accord, The First Lady of the World.

References