# Comparison and Contrast of Erikson’s Stage Theory and Alder’s Individual Psychology Theory

## Abstract

There are various psychosocial theories of personality that have been advanced to explain development and among them are Erikson’s stage theory and Alder’s individual psychology theory. This paper compares and contrasts Erikson’s stage theory and Adler’s individual psychology theory by analysing their various concepts that underlay the understanding of personality. The theorists draw their arguments from the same perspective of human beings being social and having to partake in social interests that shape their personalities. Similarly, although both do not concentrate on the stages of development, they tend to agree on the issue of enhancing ego and overcoming the feeling of inferiority having been shaped by the surrounding and preceding development stage, even though it does not have to necessarily play a part.

*Keywords*: personality, development, Erikson’s Stage Theory, Alder’s Individual Psychology, psychoanalytic theorists

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Life is a series of interactions and it involves forming relationships and bonds through one’s life that are considered as important aspects of psychoanalytical development in human beings. These relationships are the foundation of the social and emotional experiences that guide the individual progression as explained by psychoanalytic theorists such as Erikson and Adler. In understanding personality, these theorists agree that the development of children at preschool forms a critical segment in their development years of accepting their inner self and that of those they interact with. There are different approaches in understanding human development that various scholars have employed. However, for purposes of this paper, we shall examine Adler’s individual psychology theory and Erikson’s development theory by drawing comparisons and similarities between the theories in understanding personality development.

Both Erikson’s stage theory and Adler’s individual psychology theory were inspired by Sigmund Freud’s development perspectives, and they emphasize on the significance of human experiences in development stages. Erikson’s psychosocial theory concentrated on expounding on the development stages, which involves the development conflicts that one should overcome in order to succeed in later development stages (Sokol, 2009). He divided the stages into eight which include Trust versus Mistrust, Autonomy versus Doubt, Initiative versus Guilt, Industry versus Inferiority, Identity versus Confusion, Intimacy versus Isolation, Generativity versus Stagnation, and lastly, Integrity versus despair.

On the other hand, Adler deviated from the stages by elaborating on the individual dynamics that are constantly shaping development, such as the urge to compensate for feelings of being inferior that are normally felt by firstborn and last born siblings. Adler indicates that birth order is very important in development of individual personalities. According to his theory, the inferiority feeling will always crop in firstborn children the moment younger siblings are born. However, he asserts that middle born siblings rarely have the inferiority feeling because they are never pampered as the younger and older sibling, and they fight it off by having a sense of superiority that they can employ in dethroning their older siblings (Sarah, 2012). Similarly, like their older siblings, the lastborn siblings will always feel inferior because of pampering and they end up developing personality problems of having to deal with inferiority feelings.

The theories share a similar perspective on the issues to deal with development of ego, where one gives the abstract for combination, while the other supports its practical application. Erikson’s stage theory characterizes the concept of human development and adeptly indicates the risks and challenges that humans undergo at each stage in the process of developing psychologically in their entire lifetime (Erford, 2016). On the other hand, Adler employs a holistic approach of viewing individuals as social beings who can be understood best by studying their social setting, instead of concentrating in their individual identification or their ego.

Comparison of the two theories indicates that humans are social in nature and thus their personalities are defined by the need to associate with a particular environment. Although progression to the next stage in Erikson’s view depends on the experiences of early stages, he did emphasise that human beings are not defined by their past experiences, but rather by their ability to adapt to and understand their surroundings. Therefore, lack of mastery of a prior stage according to him will not necessarily inhibit progression to the next stage since these stages occur in a predetermined sequence, and thus development is guided by the principle of adapting to new environment and the innate ability to have control on the surrounding (Çelik & Ergün , 2016). Similarly, Adler’s understanding of human beings is that they are a definition of their lifestyles that is tailored towards expressing select goals. Therefore, to Adler, relationships and social connections are very important in development since humans will always engage in societal, occupational, and love engagements, which form part of the social motives of an individual. Humans can only be understood through their styles of life or the patterns of individual personalities.

Theoretically, both Erikson and Adler draw their inferences on understanding personality from the same school of thought, where they consider identity and ego as things that only take precedence in the biological self of an individual through interaction with the environment. There is an evolutionary process in the lifestyle of the child that is involved in the development of personality according to Adler, which is equally reflected in the development of ego identity (Erford, 2016). Both theories consider the environment as an integral part in the development of children, with Adler focusing on the relationships and bonds that children form with their guardians, whereas Erickson concentrates on the interaction among peers and diversity of the surrounding in terms of culture as the things that shape ego in later stages.

Similarly, Erikson and Adler point out that individual development is very important compared to the id in a healthy personality. In normal circumstances, human beings believe in their inner self and they will create personal goals that guide them in a manner that they have greater meaning in their lives. The theorists emphasize on dynamism of organising personality processes instead of detaching from the structures that define who they are. Social cooperation as the urge by people to belong to a certain group is emphasized by both theories as a way of understanding the personalities of individuals (Çelik & Ergün , 2016). Adler indicates that these social groupings can be seen in children and their involvement in wanting to help and contribute.

The concept of one’s lifestyle is interfaced by the social groping, which in most cases is influenced by past childhood experiences thus defining the personality of an individual. The same thoughts of social grouping are echoed by Erikson who indicates that the psychosocial factors within that social group are the forces that shape development of personality in individuals (Sokol, 2009). Social involvement as a result of being in a social grouping therefore makes one develop a sense of responsibility and belongingness in society, which in most cases, can be considered as a sign of growth and development. In the social setup, emotions and feelings are controlled by ego, which Erikson indicates that it acts as a mediator between identity and personality. However, Adler indicates that ego or individual personality creates a particular style of life that integrates environmental perceptions and influences into the patterns of life and interpersonal orientations of different individuals of diverse personalities.

Personality development within the social context according to Erikson and Adler gives a bearing against or towards meaningful societal lifestyles. In Adler’s individual psychology theory, he indicates that individuals normally experience feelings of inferiority, but nevertheless, such feelings are at times turned to the advantage of the individual. Therefore, it is the surrounding that makes the superiority feeling to kick in thus compensating on the inferiority feeling and thus defining the personality of an individual (Sarah, 2012). In the end, an individual will have built a foundation for strong self-esteem, which makes them adaptable and thus raising their egos and ability to express themselves in social groups. In contrast, Erikson deduces that the psychosocial process is an outcome of personality, which essentially, is a correlation of individual character and the environment. Erikson stresses on the impact of socio cultural influences in shaping development, where all the social interactions and relations among preschool children, the love among youths, and the caring expressed by guardians and parents form the social interests that are necessary in defining personality (Sarah, 2012). On the other hand, Adler advanced an argument that progression of things like trust, intimacy, and wisdom is not possible without establishing the social interests first.

Whereas Erikson’s theory focuses on ego identity, on the contrast, Adler focuses on inferiority feelings. According to Erikson’s stage theory, ego identity is influenced by the surrounding of an individual at each of the eight stages of psychosocial personality development, and its evolution is geared towards finding a solution that is either positive or negative to the specific challenges and crisis that each stage present. It is a normal occurrence for someone to feel inferior according to Adler, and sometimes, there are those personalities who in the process of development, get discouraged and thus they are unable to develop superiority in social groupings in what Adler refers to as pathological personalities. Such kind of personalities are developed from the relationships that children develop in the family setup from their guardians, parents, and siblings as a result of either neglect, competition, domination, pampering, abuse or mistrust, which contribute to the pathological personalities since the children are discouraged to have any kind of social interest (Çelik & Ergün , 2016). Therefore, according to Adler, an individual with a neurotic or healthy lifestyle will always try to fight the challenge of having an inferiority feeling. According to Erikson, having to develop good social relationships at each stage is an important aspect in personality development, and thus having to deal with the crisis or the conflict presented at each stage enhances a healthy personality and ego identity in an individual.

Therefore, it is apparent that social interest is a major tenet in the development of personality, either shedding inferiority feelings or enhancing one’s ego identity. As a result, it requires individuals to have longer dependency periods on others to mature, which thus requires one to belong to a social grouping at any given stage because the challenges presented at each stage are different and as much as movement to the next stage does not require past experiences according to Erikson, skipping them can lead to derailed development and feeling of inferiority, which hurts one’s ego (Erford, 2016). It is therefore necessary that one consolidates and advances their ego identity at each stage so as to avoid issues of that may rise up later in life in form of impaired self enhancement and social status. However, according to Erikson, failure of fulfilment of the development conflicts at each stage may leave vulnerabilities in an individual. Adler on the other hand does not agree of such vulnerabilities inhibiting personality development in that according to him the inferiority experiences presented at each stage prompt an individual to coalesce into developing superior feelings.

Erikson in his fourth stage, Industry versus Inferiority, agrees with Adler that inferiority plays a role in personality development of children. Erikson asserts that at this stage, a child learns to produce things and thus being competent. If a child is not prepared well for this stage, they may experience despair, anxiety or depression, which culminates into an inferior feeling (Sarah, 2012). On the other hand, although Adler’s theory focused on inferiority, he does not cluster it to a particular stage in development, but rather a continuous feeling in personality development that one has to deal with throughout until they overcome it.

The urge for perfection in an individual may however be held back in circumstances where an individual’s identity is acted upon by social development, intellectual, and physical failures. Individuals who are inferior tend to exhibit similar symptoms as those of whose ego identity has been acted on, and they may lack social interest, which lowers their self-esteem. Inferiority feelings manifest themselves as the development conflicts that Erikson’s theory talks of, and thus individuals will want to compensate on the same by developing superior feelings as a means of dealing with this crisis.

According to Erikson, individuals identify with various ideologies in what he calls ego identity that spans different cultural realms and that can be in terms of religion, occupation or political lifestyle. These domains form the basis of social groupings that dominate cultural identities which contribute in the development of individual egos (Erford, 2016). However, environmental and cultural aspects tend to have more influence in minority social groups, and thus the identities of the cultural groups have more influence on the individual. Similarly, Adler’s theory gives more weight to the cultural and societal context in defining an individual’s personality (Çelik & Ergün , 2016). According to Adler, age groups, gender differences, lifestyles, and social interests form part of the cultural aspect, and thus an individual cannot be taken out of that context. Both theorists agree that the environment and cultural surrounding helps shape individuals personalities, be it enhancing their ego or making them overcome inferior feelings.

In conclusion therefore, Erikson and Adler, who are both considered to be neo-Freudians contributed much in understanding personality and they did not concentrate on the individual, but rather on the experiences and the social environments, which play important roles in personality development. Their works on psychosocial development marked a change on prior theories since they focused on identity holistically and throughout the entire lifespan of an individual. Rather than delving into the unconscious, the theorists focused on surface phenomena, where they considered development conflicts or crisis as a means of influencing and individual’s identity. Regardless of them concentrating on the developmental stages, they both noted that from a psychosocial perspective, the identities of individuals cannot develop devoid of the environment and the social groupings. Ethnic groups and cultures are thus highlighted as fundamental contributors to the development of personalities. Similarly, progression to the next stage of development is not solely dependent on past experiences. However, having to successfully deal with the conflicts in one stage before the other is very beneficial in dealing with inferiority feelings and in enhancing one’s identity ego.

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