

Course: Development Psychology

Essay Topic: Critical evaluation of whether certain assumptions are present in Erikson's psychosocial development theory and how important these assumptions are in the context of South Africa.

Word count: 1118 (excluding reference list)

Three assumptions present in developmental theories, as mentioned by Duncan, van Niekerk and Mufumadi (2003) will be described in a concise fashion. The assumptions, 'development follows a predictable pattern', 'human beings are resilient', and 'development is a function of the interaction between innate and environmental functions', will also be examined insofar as they relate to the issues and concepts of Erikson's theory. Furthermore, these assumptions and the theoretical concepts of Erikson's theory will be discussed in terms of their importance in a South African context. Interwoven with this, is the argument that although Erikson's theory has validity in certain instances, it relies on specific assumptions to hold true, and is ultimately convincing and applicable only within a definite societal context.

Duncan *et al* (2003) mention the assumption 'human development follows a predictable pattern'. What they mean is physical, cognitive and psychosocial processes of development in humans tend to follow a particular trend.

This assumption is reflected in Erikson's socioemotional theory, as evidenced by him systematically laying down definite psychosocial stages of development, which are inextricably linked to specific age periods in a lifespan (Santrock, 2003). Consequently, development follows a predictable pattern. For example, his second stage occurs in early childhood, from approximately age 2 – 4, and ties in with the natural physical progression during that period. Erikson posited that human development involved the resolution (in a positive or negative sense) of a crisis (AKA a turning point) in different stages and ages

(Hergenhahn, 1994). For example, in the above stage, the polarities to be resolved were autonomy versus shame and doubt, the positive synthesis of which would be will-power (Louw, van Ede & Louw, 1999).

Turning now to South Africa, the structure of this society, in the author's belief, has been in a state of mutation for the past 50 years, from political, racial and educational oppression, to an uprising, through democracy and reconstruction, onto a society now on the brink of a

catastrophe from AIDS (Freeman, 1993; Erasmus, 2005). To assess whether human development follows a predictable pattern, these aforementioned factors need to be examined. However, in terms of the above assumption, only the disease AIDS will be focused upon. Some of the other factors will be considered further in the paper, inasmuch as they pertain to the other two assumptions.

The family structure has changed radically as a result of AIDS and AIDS-related deaths (Richter, 2003). Many children are/will be living without a parent/s and have had to, for example, head-up households long before they have reached adulthood (Richter, 2003; Freeman, 2004). This is going to affect their development, particularly in their formative years because of the psychological stresses and trauma placed on them. In the author's opinion, the development pattern will as a result be anything but predictable. Freeman states that "The death of a significant person in one's life is almost always traumatic and has consequences at many levels." (2004, p. 150). The author believes that the consequences of the trauma of losing parents to AIDS, will be an irregular and stunted pattern of development.

Returning to Erikson, his theory (written in 1968) was based largely on a USA perspective, within a particular timeframe, and with a dual parent family structure in mind (Louw *et al*, 1999). In that scenario, the assumption 'development follows a predictable pattern' would apply (certainly the first four stages). In the current South African context however, application of this theory based on this assumption would be, in the author's opinion, erroneous, because of the factors highlighted in the previous paragraph.

Following on from this, the next assumption to be examined is 'human beings are resilient'. What this means is despite experiencing an adverse environment during their development,

people have the potential to become healthy individuals in the psychosocial sense of the word (Duncan *et al*, 2003).

Erikson does not refer much to the resilience of humans in his theory, except to state that people can go back and positively resolve stages that were previously negatively actualized. (Louw *et al*, 1999).

An example of human resilience would be, despite many South Africans having lived with political, racial and educational oppression from childhood, some of them have risen above their circumstances, educated themselves and gone on to lead successful lives financially, socially and emotionally as adults (Jordaan & Jordaan, 1998). As quoted in Freeman's article "The fact that so many people have managed to survive abominable circumstances is, as Straker *et al*. (1992) put it, 'a tribute to the human spirit's capacity to deal with adversity'"(1993, p.158). Therefore, human resilience is important when applied to the South African context, however has limited presence in Erikson's theory.

Development is a function of the interaction between innate and environment functions, is the final assumption that will be considered. What this means is biology determines the timing of development, however the social environment also plays a pivotal role (Hergenhahn, 1994).

Erikson subscribed to the epigenetic principle. "The word epigenetic means that development takes place according to a genetically determined plan and demands set by society at each development stage" (Louw *et al*, 1999, p. 51). In other words, humans have a fated genetic ground plan but there is interdependence with the social environment for their development (or lack thereof) (Hergenhahn, 1994). Because of this connection, Erikson called the stages of development psychosocial, and it can be concluded that the above assumption is present in his theory.

Leading on from this, in terms of the South African context, the above assumption would relate as follows. In her article, Linda Chisholm (2005) poignantly quotes a high school learner from rural KwaZulu-Natal, who could easily represent a substantial portion of the school-going population of South Africa, as follows: "...I have to wake up at 04:00 and only get back home at 16:00. I am normally dead tired and very hungry on my return and there is no time to

study.” (2005, p.218). Not only is the social environment of this youngster dire as evidenced from further reading of the article, but the physical development could be stunted as a result of malnutrition. Therefore, the psychosocial development, in the author’s opinion, might be retarded as a result of these combined factors.

Erikson’s ideology was based on interpretation and speculation, and lacked empirical evidence (Louw *et al*, 1999). However, his socioemotional development theory can hold water, firstly if certain basic assumptions are present and secondly, if the societal context is distinct. As has been demonstrated in the above paper, not all three assumptions in developmental theories discussed above, are clearly present in Erikson’s theory, and the unique context of current South African society makes it difficult to always apply his theory, however, in specific areas there can be application.

Reference List:

Chisholm, L. (2005). The state of South Africa's schools. In J. Daniel, R. Southall and J. Lutchman (eds.). *State of the Nation. South Africa 2004-2005*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.

Duncan, N., van Niekerk, A. and Mufumadi, J. (2003). Developmental Psychology: A lifespan perspective. In L. Nichols (ed), *Introduction to Psychology*. Landsdown: UCT Press.

Erasmus, Z. (2005). Race and identity in the nation. In J. Daniel, R. Southall and J. Lutchman (eds.). *State of the Nation. South Africa 2004-2005*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.

Freeman, M. (2003). "Seeking identity – township youth and social development" *South African Journal of Psychology* 23: 4, 157-166

Freeman, M. (2004). HIV/Aids in developing countries: Heading towards a mental health and consequent social disaster? *South African Journal of Psychology*, 34 (1). 139-159.

Hergenhahn, B.R. (1994). *An Introduction to Theories of Personality*. (4th Ed.) Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

Jordaan, W. & Jordaan, J. (1998). *People in Context* (3rd Ed.). Sandton: Heinemann Higher & Further Education (Pty) Ltd

Louw, D.A., van Ede D.M. and Louw, A.E. (1999). *Human Development* (2nd Ed.). Pretoria : Kagiso Publishers.

Richter, R. (2003) The Impact of HIV/AIDS on the development of children. Paper presented at the seminar : HIV/AIDS, Vulnerability and children : What does it mean for Southern Africa's security?, Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria, April.

Santrock, J.W. (2003). *Psychology* (7th Ed.). Dallas: McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.