

Psychosynthesis Essay - Ego Development and the Self

Write a paper showing your understanding of the basics of developmental psychology from a psycho-spiritual point of view.

When considering developmental psychology many questions come to mind when trying to explain human development. Maturity can form many guises - in the form of physical, social, psychological and cognitive changes within the individual. Are these developments independent of one another or is the progression of maturity inter-linked? In attempt to answer these questions one must consider if development is a conscious or unconscious process. A great body of evidence suggests that both levels of consciousness are present throughout human life. Whether these changes are physical, social, psychological and cognitive, these changes may represent conscious or unconscious growth. An element of understanding one's own personal growth is to have an awareness of how the 'Self' is perceived and developed. The self is essential to the representation of one's personality - for example how one subjectively sees themselves in relation to the world around them. The self is built up of unconscious and conscious elements - the Id, the Ego and the Superego (Freud). The Id represents the self's impulsive and unconscious part to personality. The Superego is also unconscious and plays the opposing role of the id, with high morals to control the individual's impulsive behaviour. It is the ego that plays the conscious part of personality and acts as a mediated version between the id and superego's demands. The ego is what is presented to the outside world. Therefore, a good understanding of ego development is essential for any psychosynthesis counsellor to have, in the presence of a client that is struggling with issues or concerns affecting or influencing the perception of themselves in relation to others. A psychosynthesis counsellor may see clients with self-esteem issues, low self-confidence or personality disorder traits. An understanding of how these circumstances may have arrived is vital to understanding how the professional can help resolve the client's worries. This essay will discuss the development of the ego, its functions and the formation of the self. In addition, the discussion will be lead into an evaluation of how positive and negative influences from the family and other social surroundings can have an impact on ego development. It is intended by the close of the essay that a better understanding will be gained as to how these theories can be applied to the real world and practiced in a psycho-spiritual clinical setting.

The ego is the basis of how the individual expresses their personality. This conscious element of personality is referred to as the 'Self'. The self is considered to be partial, impermanent and changeable. Therefore, this implies that external world can influence and affect its position. However, the self is also believed to be whole, permanent and absolute. However, we must be careful not to assume that the ego is simply a unified collection of perceptions, cognitions and effects rather it is an organised cluster or patterns of what are referred to as ego states (Federn, 1952). The contrast in states is caused by the existence of conscious and unconscious elements.

The importance of the ego - is that it represents the conscious part of an individual's personality. Therefore, the ego represents a vehicle for the self to manifest in the social world. Referring back to the notion of ego states - Erickson (1950) argues that there are eight stages of psychosocial growth in the normal human being. An extension of Freud's psycho-sexual stages - Erickson believes that instead of the human being motivated by sexual urges, we are motivated and influenced by social situations that affect our psychological well-being. Like Freud, Erickson believes that we progress through these eight stages from childhood to adulthood- and if we get frustrated or fails to complete a particular stage, we will get fixated and stuck in that stage, thus unable to move through to the next stage.

A brief description of Erickson's eight psycho-social stages of human development will help to understand how the individual progresses through life and why the ego is important in this process of progression. Knowledge of these stages will also provide a platform for the counsellor to interpret their clients behaviour or personality difficulties. The first stage, starting from conception to 6 months old is characterised by bonding activities-and the seeking of trust-vs.-mistrust and healthy co-dependence. Healthy parenting skills show the child that they can rely on their primary caregivers for a sense of worth and trust. This is what Jung (1959) refers to as Ego Inflation. However, if the parents fail to give healthy feedback or display boundaries and create limits for the child, this child will grow into an adult exhibiting negative ego inflation. This is because a negative ego was formed in early childhood - characterised by feeling of unworthiness, guilt and ambiguity from the lack of healthy parenting they received. Naturally, parents will start to selectively respond and reject to the child's demands. This is healthy parenting and leads us into stage 2 of development: Exploration. In this stage the child is in a practising phase - whereby they are able to explore the world - but have a understanding that even though they are separated from their primary care giver, that care, protection, ever-presence and power is always within reach. Of course these elements are taken for granted, but healthy development of the ego allows the child to do so. Stage 3, involves the need for separation. However, this stage often carries with it confusion - with the child wanting to create distance from their caregiver to explore, yet also having a desire for intimacy. Therefore, this stage is characterised by the need for Separation and Individuation. Separation, defined by Mahler as an intrapsychic achievement. This is not to be confused with physical separation, but rather referred to as the inner thoughts of achievement and ability act independent from their parent or caregiver. Individuation refers to the child's assumption of his or her own individual characteristics - for example, awareness that their own actions can have an impact on the world around them. Therefore, healthy development focuses on creating a separate identity, thinking and problem solving for themselves and creating a sense of autonomy vs. shame and doubt. Problems occur if the parent/caregiver reacts badly to the child separating from them. If the parent feels abandoned when the child 'leaves' - this instils a sense of shame, which leads to the child not being able to develop proper independence, personal power and trust in other relationships. A major problem with Erickson's psycho-social stages is it rarely takes into account other cultures and cultural differences in child-rearing, for example, games that involve teasing or threats of abandonment are suggested to be common parenting styles for aboriginal girls in Canada to go through. It is argued that these methods of child rearing that are

designed to develop the youngster's self-reliance and independence (Briggs, 1982). However, from a western perspective, they may be considered harsh in western society - and in terms of this essay - such techniques are believed to be associated with a dysfunctional ego development. Therefore, an awareness of different cultures and how different families or tribes rear their young is useful to take into account when evaluating psychological development.

To continue, also in this stage of separation, the child realises that the caregiver's presence or competence can not be guaranteed. The child thus realises they are not the centre of the universe and thus the ego is bruised - and experiences alienation. However, to combat any long-lasting or destructive affects - a loving environment keeps the ego from being damaged in the process. The ego infact dis-identifies from the self - but stay connected. However, if the child is in an engulfing or alienating environment (e.g. the child is rewarded for clinginess and not exploration) the ego's connection to the self is damaged - and disconnected from its origins and inner resources (i.e. the self). This leads to the individual to not feeling whole or integrated - and can lead to serious personality disorders - such as Borderline Personality Disorder. This shows how the family can have a detrimental effect on the individual's growth and healthy development. If the third stage is successfully progressed through, the next stage focuses on socialisation. This involves the individual creating a sense of identity and external power in the world around them. This can be characterised by a sense of initiative or guilt and belonging. For example, if people do not get the approval they need in order to develop a healthy ego, they become starved for approval. This may result in them scarifies their power or acting the victim to receive the approval they so much what. Therefore, the ego becomes adaptive to the situation as a strategy for getting approval and a sense of belonging. Alternatively, the ego may present ego defence mechanisms - such as repression. This is when the individual represses their feeling of anger or loneliness and displaces it with the opposing feelings of togetherness and calmness. On the outside the individual may appear content with their family situation, however, their inner emotions display much different. Often, these real emotions are said to present themselves in dreams. Freud argues that dreams are filled with latent content, which refers to the content that displays one's real emotions - which they are too scared to reveal in real life.

As the child grows, the ego strengths - in the next two stages Latency and Adolescence the ego is concerned with learning external and internal structures of how the world and individuals within it operate. The Latency stage focuses on developing concrete knowledge of how the society is structured and the consequences of breaking societal rules. Latency is also concerned with being able to disagree with others and yet still feel accepted and loved. Therefore a large part of the Latency stage is about co-operation within society and finding out where one can fit in. Adolescence is similar to Latency, although it is more focused on the ego trying to work out its internal forces and motivations. This stage is characterised by identity vs. role confusion. Again, like the stage 2, the individual goes through a process of practising different roles to decide which fits best. Adolescence has been described as a second individuation phase (Blos, 1968). This stage is about finding the correct ego identity to feel safe and accepted by themselves and by others - yet it is often a turbulent time for the individual to go through the process of inner discovery. This identity is then tested in Stage 7 - by seeing if the ego is strong enough to withstand fear and loss through intimacy. If done so, the successful building of new relationships completes

the process of separation from the parent/caregiver begun in stage 2. The effort to create and maintain an identity becomes a less negative experience than in adolescence and becomes a more positive quest for finding a fulfilling role in society. Finally, by the eighth stage of development/adulthood, the ego has its best hope of succeeding at creating a solid identity for itself. The eighth stage is when the individual is more focused on spiritual and emotional balance. For example, creating meaning in one's life through relationships, contribution to the community, self-actualization and spirituality. Problems occur if we develop emotionally but not spiritually, we may become stuck in the necessity to 'meet one's needs' and isolate from the peace that surpasses all understanding - i.e. getting the job done, does not necessarily mean that the job was understood. This concept goes for all of the stages described by Erickson. Although, Erickson argues that development is about succeeding through many tasks, without an understanding or aspect of learning from these experiences - the individual will fail to create a happy and healthy identity. They will be plagued by insecurities and uncertainty.

The above evidence provides a strong argument for the development of the self and how human beings develop an identity for themselves in relation to the rest of society and the world around them. These assumptions have been widely accepted in the academic and professional arenas. However, some argue that this perspective on development is simplistic and not an accurate assumption of the development of the true self. For example, Winnicott (1960) suggests that there is in fact a true self and a false self. The false self is described in Erickson's account of human development above. Winnicott (1960) goes as far to say that "the true self does not become a living reality except as a result of the mother's repeated success in meeting the infant's spontaneous gesture or sensory hallucination." Therefore, this suggests what we see before us and believe to be an image or creation of self is in fact illusionary. Winnicott (1960) goes on to say that, "The true self comes from the aliveness of the body tissues and the working of body functions, including the heart's action and breathing. It is closely linked with the idea of the primacy process, and is, at the beginning, essentially not reactive to external stimuli, but primary." Thus, the false self that we project to society is a mould created by social influences and controls, the true self being our biological make-up. The true self then could be referred to as "the natural self." The self is really a blend of individual self, social self, physical, emotional, mental, sociocultural, and spiritual aspects. It is not always the person that one feels that they are experiencing - thus may be something of an abstract entity. Therefore, it is important for a psychosynthesis counsellor to have an awareness of the development of the self and notions of true and false self. For example, to work on problems of the false self - it may be necessary to refer back to the basics of the true self to gain a sense of perspective and grounding.

To conclude, the above discussion has divulged into issues surrounding the topic of human development and development of the self. The self has been described as a development of the ego, a personality and intellectual abilities through a process of learning that occurs after birth. The concepts of true self and false self clarify that some psychologists believe that one's true self can only be found when one looks at the biological underpinnings of the individual's characteristics. The concept of false self is believed to represent the self that is formed through socialisation. Either way both concepts of self may overlap - and can not be seen in isolation from one another. Therefore, the counsellor can not ignore either biological or social aspects from their

client's life when trying to resolve issues with the client. The descriptions of the development stages by Erickson do provide a platform on which to interpret behaviours or personality problems. This may then lead onto re-learning aspects of separation and individuation. However, from a psychosynthesis point of view returning back to one's natural roots or basics can help rebuilt and re-focus one's stepping. What is needed is a spiritual understanding for how and why things happen and why one feels as such. Therefore, understanding notions of the false self can help to build upon and strengthen the true self.

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