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Theories of Development in Adolescence

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There is no real sense of identity before adolescence (Erikson, 1968). Between the ages of 13 and 18, adolescence is a time period marked by a great deal of transitions and has been identified as a sensitive period for stress (Broderick & Blewitt, 2015). The study of human development is a multifaceted process linking together various theories and disciplines. Bronfenbrenner and Erikson’s theories offer an insight into the complex progress of learning and development in across the lifespan, and in particular adolescence. As I continue to grow as a helping professional, Bronfenbrenner and Erikson’s theories have shaped my understanding of learning and behaviour. Bronfenbrenner and Erickson’s theory of development are essential in understanding human development, especially in adolescents, as these theories both offer unique perspectives on growth and development that can also apply into counselling practices and counselling theories. This paper first outlines my work experiences as a mental health teacher and personal experiences in adolescence. Secondly, I briefly summarize the movie, *Thirteen,* as this movie focuses on the challenges of adolescence. Next, I will discuss how Bronfenbrenner and Erikson’s theory of development has shaped my thinking on adolescent development, including how they complement and challenge each other as well as unique aspects of both, all the while including examples from the movie, *Thirteen.* Finally, I will discuss my personal counselling theory in relation to the theories of human development. Bronfenbrenner and Erickson’s theories both add unique perspectives on how to apply them into the counselling profession.

**Professional and Personal Experiences**

I noticed my father struggling with depression, alcoholism, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) especially during my adolescent years. The prevalence of mental health issues in my family inspired me to pursue a career in counselling. My high school counsellor helped me tremendously during this time and this led me to the path of counselling adolescents. For the past 5 years I have worked as a mental health teacher with the Calgary School Board. I work with students from the ages of 14 to 20 years that have been diagnosed with numerous mental health concerns, such as anxiety, depression, PTSD, eating disorders, and bi-polar disorder. I employ a variety of techniques when counselling students, such as solution focused therapy, positive psychotherapy, and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). As a teacher, I am aware of how my students learn best and how to teach them in the ways they will be most successful. By drawing on learning theories, specifically, Erikson and Bronfenbrenner, I am able to incorporate many different learning theories into the classroom and into my teaching style.

**Thirteen**

The movie follows 13-year-old Tracey, a junior high student in Los Angeles, who starts socializing with Evie, who is a troubled, yet popular girl at the school. She begins to experiment in sexual behaviour, substance abuse, and crime. Tracey’s mother, Melanie, is divorced and a recovering alcoholic, who struggles financially to keep her family together as a hairdresser. Throughout the movie, Melanie has an on and off relationship with her unstable boyfriend, Jeremy. Tracey starts the movie by socializing with well rounded peers and is an honours student. However, once she begins socializing with Evie, she begins to dabble in world of crime, sex, drugs, and suicidal idealizations.

**Bronfenbrenner’s Theory of Development**

**Theory Overview**

The bioecological model developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner serves as an integrated framework as it illustrates the complexity of human development (Zhou & Brown, 2014). This model examines how an individual’s surrounding environment influences their life. Bronfenbrenner argued that child and youth development is influenced and developed within a complex system of relationships, all of which are affected by multiple surrounding levels of the environment (Berk, 2012; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Development takes place through interactions of an evolving system of people and institutions in the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem (Tudge, Fatfield, & Karnik, 2009). The child lies within the multidimensional system that includes genetic aspects and personal characteristics that they bring into social situations, such as gender, race, intelligence, temperament, and motivation (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Tudge et al., 2009). The first system the child interacts with the most is the microsystem (Zhou & Brown, 2014). The microsystem is composed of influences that the child interacts with the most in their immediate environment, such as family, friends, school, and community (Zhou & Brown, 2014). There is a bi-directional influence in the microsystem in which the environment influences the child and the child influences the environment (Shaffer, 2002). The second level is the mesosystem, consists of the relations between microsystems that interact with each other (Broderick & Blewitt, 2015). For example, the interactions between the child and teacher (Broderrick & Blewitt, 2015). The third level is the exosystem, in which the child may not have direct interaction but is still greatly influenced nonetheless (Broderick & Blewitt, 2015). For example, the child may not have direct contact with their parent’s workplace, but the workplace will affect the parents, which thereby affects the child (Shaffer, 2002). The fourth layer is the macrosystem, which includes ideologies, cultures, and economies that help shape the microsystems (Zhou & Brown, 2015). For example, if the cost of education or medical care rises, it would affect the individual and the family. Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model encompasses the various environmental influences that impact a person’s life. The bioecological model is useful in as it examines the individual as a whole and at all the influences in an individual’s life that affects their learning development (Guhn & Goelman, 2011).

**Conceptualization of Bronfenbrenner’s Theory in Adolescence**

Bronfenbrenner argues that development is optimal when the interactions with the different microsystems are supportive and positive (Shaffer, 2002). Tracey’s peer interactions throughout the movie are anything but positive. One of the main influences in Tracey’s microsystem has been the negative influence of Evie and her friends. In the beginning, Tracey wants to be accepted by Evie so she demands that her mother takes her shopping stating, “Mom I need new clothes because I look stupid.” Broderick and Blewitt (2015) state that self-esteem decreases in females around the time they enter middle school. Tracey does not have high self esteem and feels the only way to make herself happy is to be friends with the popular girls. Adolescents put more value into how their peers see them compared to their parents as they get older and functioning well within a peer group is considered one of the most important markings in adolescence (Broderick & Blewitt, 2015). As Tracey becomes more influenced by Evie starts smoking cigarettes and marijuana, has sex with numerous men and does cocaine. In addition, Tracey primarily interacts and is influenced by her turbulent relationship with her mother Melanie. Melanie has a permissive parenting style and not does not always monitor Tracey’s behaviour, as she has her own issues to deal with, such as stress with finances and her alcoholism. Broderick and Blewitt (2015) argue that parents who monitor their child’s behaviour and who use authoritative parent styles have more influence on the sexual behaviour of early adolescents. Tracey not only has a slightly distant and distracted mother, but she also has a distant relationship with her father as she regularly attempts to get his approval but he constantly rejects her. Tracey’s environmental influences, such as poor parental and peer relationships, neglect, and adverse family situations have all contributed to her depression and drug abuse.

**Erikson’s Theory of Development**

**Theory Overview**

Erik Erikson’s theory of development attempts to describe the psychosocial characteristics of behaviour, attitudes and feelings towards the self and others (Broderick & Blewitt, 2015). In a series of eight stages, Erikson’s psychoanalytic theory identities time periods in which a person passes through from infancy to adulthood (Zhou & Brown, 2014). In each stage, the individual confronts a challenge or developmental task and faces a different crisis (Broderick & Blewitt, 2015). Each stage brings new challenges and builds upon successful completion of the previous stage. Mastery of each stage is not required, as mastering skills can be modified and development throughout life experiences (Zhou & Brown, 2014). However, unsuccessful resolution between stages may lead to future problems, such as maladaptive behaviours (Broderick & Blewitt, 2015). For example, if an infant enters into the toddler stage of autonomy versus shame and doubt with more fear and mistrust in others, he or she is more likely to carry less hope into the next stage (Crain, 2011). For the purpose of space and attention, I will focus on Erikson’s fifth stage in his theory which is identity versus role confusion. Dunkel and Harbke (2017) argue that the fifth stage is the most important stage in development as the adolescent is faced with the question, “Who am I?” In this stage, adolescents make difficult decisions such as, vocational and school choices, values, goals and develop a sense of personal sexuality identity (Broderick & Blewitt, 2015). Identity formation results in the virtue of fidelity, in which an individual gains a sense of self-understanding (Dunkel & Harbke, 2017). This stage of development is unique as it synthesizes earlier stages and brings to an end of childhood, yet anticipates and prepares for what is next in life (adulthood) (Zhou & Brown, 2014). Adolescents tend to experience role confusion and mixed feelings about how they fit into society and peer groups and experiment with different roles and behaviours (Zhou & Brown, 2014).

**Conceptualization of Erickson’s Theory in Adolescence**

The question of, “Who and I and what can I be” are heavy and stressful questions to ask oneself. The emerging sense of self is an overwhelming and uncertain time in an adolescent’s life. During this time, adolescents take part in sensation seeking in which they crave new sensations and experiences and are willing to take physical and social risk to feel the sense of freedom and belonging (Broderick & Blewitt, 2015). Tracey takes part in sensation seeking in order to receive peer acceptance. She steals money from a stranger in order to give her friends money to buy clothes, she does drugs in order to be accepted, and she has sex in front of Evie to prove her loyalty. The invincibility fable is apart of adolescents as increasing in risk taking rise and less prosocial behaviour is common, especially in the diffusion status, which Tracey currently falls into (Broderick & Blewitt, 2015). Erikson believed that adolescents desire the ability to free experiment and explore the boundaries around them as this emerges a sense of identity and awareness of who he or she is and will become (Zhou & Brown, 2014). Tracey pushes the boundaries with her mother as she sneaks out at night, hides her drug use, and tells her she is studying while she is out experimenting with drugs and sex. Teenage years are times of exploration, and with that comes and increase in school problems, mood and anxiety disorders, drug and alcohol abuse and sexuality activity (Broderick & Blewitt, 2015). Furthermore, the shifts in adolescents state of mind, stability and anxiety are unique to adolescents (Broderick & Blewitt, 2015). Erikson also stated this unique time as individuals in crisis, or identity crisis as is commonly expressed (Gross, 1987). Tracey finds herself in crisis throughout the film, as she throws out her dolls, clothes, and stuffed animals at the beginning, and the middle of the film she is completely desperate to make sure she fits in regardless of what she has to do, and near the end she is in crisis and she realizes she does not know who she is anymore and crawls into bed with her mom, crying in her arms saying she is sorry.

**Comparisons and Differences in Bronfenbrenner’s and Erickson’s Theories**

The bioecological model is valuable as it examines how an individual is influenced by multiple internal and external factors. This model serves as a guide to help counsellors and educators understand how an individual develops through a complex interrelated system (Zhou & Brown, 2014). The bioecological model allows counsellors to gain the necessary perspectives on how to support individuals and their families. Counsellors must be aware of the individual’s microsystem as this core values and beliefs are influenced the most by those around them (Swick and Williams, 2006). Bronfenbrenner’s approach examines the whole individual, including, cognitive and biological aspects of development to gain a better understanding of all the direct influences that affect learning and development. Similarly, Erickson’s approach also includes examining the interconnected dynamics of micro and macro levels of influence in an individual’s environment that affects learning and development, such as cultural influences and immediate influences, such as peer and family relations (Dunkel & Harbke, 2017). Erickson acknowledges that individuals develop through environment and genetic influences as biological, social, and psychology forces all play a role (Dunkel & Harbke, 2017; Zhou & Brown, 2014).

However, these two theories differ as Bronfenbrenner does not emphasize the socioemotional aspects of development as Erickson’s theory does a unique job of highlighting the psychosocial stages of development throughout the lifespan (Zhou & Brown, 2014). Furthermore, Erikson’s theory focuses on phases and changes that occur through different stages in one’s life, as Bronfenbrenner focuses on multiple surrounding levels of the environment that affect development (Berk, 2012). Bronfenbrenner and Erickson have both added tremendously to the area of development and their theories continue to grow and expand today (Zhou & Brown, 2014).

**Personal Theory of Counselling**

My personal theory of counselling has developed into an elastic approach as I believe drawing from different theories and procedures allows for flexibly in my approach to helping clients. I am more so drawn to approaches from client-centered, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), and systemic. If I were to work with a client such as Tracey, I would look at using a client-centered approach as I believe Rogers core conditions of the therapeutic alliance, such as positive regard, congruence, and empathic understanding are necessary for change (Raskin, Rogers & Witty, 2014). Tracey would benefit from a counsellor who listened to her in a non-judgemental and open manor. Secondly, I would consider CBT as it is recommended as the first line of treatment and most studied treatment for adolescents with mental health concerns (Arendt, Thastum, & Hougaard, 2015). Cognitive behavioural therapy focusea on shifting errors in information processing and altering core beliefs that permit dysfunctional thoughts and replacing them with more adaptative ones (Beck & Weishaar, 2014). Tracey has low self-esteem and can’t regulate her emotions and thoughts. Cognitive behaviour therapy would help her develop the necessary skills and tools to change her maladaptive depressive thoughts into realistic cognitions and positive behaviours. Finally, systemic therapy focuses on changing the complex interactions an individual takes part in in their social lives (Truscott, 2010). In addition, systemic therapy strives to promote optimal functioning individuals within a larger system of interconnected pieces (Truscott, 2010). Tracey has a lot of negative influences around her and a dysfunctional family dynamic on top of that in which systemic therapies would examine. Combining different counselling approaches will would benefit Tracey. Broderick and Blewitt (2015) argue that the best treatment for behavioural problems in early adolescence involve multidimensional techniques that focus on the individual, family, and peer relations. Both Bronfenbrenner and Erikson’s models state that adolescence are influenced by their immediate microsystems, such as family and peers, which is crucial to address these factors in the counselling process. In addition, Broderick and Blewitt (2015) state that techniques from cognitive, behaviour, and family therapies provide the tools to support healthy relationships and build family cohesiveness. Tracey also needs assistance in helping her with her drug abuse problems. Bergin and Bergin (2012) argue that all system levels need to be targeted when developing the appropriate intervention for an adolescent drug user. This coincides with Bronfenbrenner and Erikson as both models address the impact of micro and macro influences that individuals have in their environments. Overall, Bronfenbrenner and Erikson both assist counsellors and helping professionals in determining the appropriate path of treatment as knowing the development and influences in an individual’s life is crucial to the success of therapy.

**Conclusion**

Adolescence is a time for self-exploration, increased levels of stress, independence from families, dependence on peers, and a time to gain an understanding of identity and self-concept. Bronfenbrenner and Erikson offer unique perspectives on adolescent development and the challenges and influences that accompany this time period. Throughout this course, I have gained an immense understanding of various developmental learning theories and have learned how to combine them with counselling theories and applications. Bronfenbrenner and Erikson not only provide an understanding of development in adolescence, they also provide helping professionals with strategies and tools on how to counsel adolescence. By integrating counselling theories, such as client-centered, CBT, and systemic I was able to make the connecting between development theories and counselling theories. The movie, *Thirteen,* offered excellent examples and situations of adolescent development and also provided situations in which my future counselling strategies would be employed. Adolescence is a difficult time period, but with an understanding of how development occurs, counsellors will be better equipped in helping individuals in this age group.

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