

Life Review/Reminiscence with the Elderly From the Perspective of Erikson's Theory*

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Introduction

In terms of the development and growth of the individual, the aging process tends to be viewed as a deteriorating stage in life. Although many theories exist regarding different aspects of old age, no comprehensive personality theory of old age has been formulated. Erik Erikson's theory (Erikson, 1968, 1980, 1982) of the whole life cycle "as an integrated psychosocial phenomenon" contributed greatly to an understanding of the particular tasks of old age and to an awareness of the unique role of the elderly person within the life cycle. Some predictable issues that must be dealt with in later life include increased isolation as the result of the loss of significant others, role changes and the loss of a sense of purpose as the result of loss of employment, anxieties about increasing dependency because of chronic illness, and the need to consolidate identity to prepare for the end of life. Rather than promote change or the adoption of new coping strategies, dealing with the issues of later life may trigger a loss of functioning. In viewing the aging process as a part of the total process of living, however, it may be argued that aging is also a continuum of the development and adaptation in which the individual is constantly called upon to mobilize his or her personality strengths. This paper will describe the cores of Erikson's theory to comprehend the psychosocial problems of the elderly and to combine his theory with the "life-review" or "reminiscence" process that help social workers enrich their practice for the elderly.

Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory

Erikson (1982) begins with "the assumption that a human being's existence depends at every moment on three possesses of organization that must complement each other. There is, in whatever order, the biological process of the hierarchic organization of organ systems constituting a body (soma); there is the psychic process organizing individual experience by ego syntheses (psyche); and there is the communal process of the cultural organization of the interdependence of persons (ethos)" (p. 25).

In his theory, the phases of psychosocial development to understand growth relate the phases of "the epigenetic principle which is derived from the growth of organisms in utero" (Erikson, 1980, p. 53). This principle states that anything that grows has a general plan at ground level, and that out of this general plan the parts emerge, each part having its time of special ascendancy, until all parts have arisen to form a functioning whole. This is clear for fetal development where each part of the organism has its critical time of ascendancy or danger of defect. Erikson (1968) generalized it as follows:

At birth the baby leaves the chemical exchange of the womb for the social exchange system of his society, where his gradually increasing capacities meet the opportunities and limitations of his culture (p. 93).

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