

Psychosocial Theory: Personal Development

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### Abstract

When examining my own psychosocial development, I found the most benefit in utilizing multiple theories. In particular, I have reflected on my self-development by using Erikson's Identity Development Theory and Chickering's Developmental Vectors and Educationally Influential Environments. This self-assessment is not an exhaustive list of developmental milestones, but it will serve as an introduction to several pivotal moments as viewed through the lenses of the abovementioned theories.

### **Psychosocial Theory: Personal Development**

Throughout my post-secondary studies I experienced several developmental crises that I felt worthwhile to analyze in this paper. These crises could be analyzed and examined using any number of theories, either individually or concurrently. These theories give a strong foundation for exploring the root of the crises, as well as the resulting development (or lack thereof). I feel that the moments and crises I've selected give the most high-level view of my own development leading to my identity today.

One of the first developmental moments I can pinpoint is my identity development, as discussed in Erikson's Identity Development Theory. As discussed in Erikson's Identity Development Theory, *Stage Five: Identity versus Identity Diffusion*, identity development begins when one gains independence, experiences the complexities of life, and explores the question "Who am I?" This stage is further defined by the feeling of mounting societal pressures to define one's identity. If one is unable to clearly define their sense of self or purpose, Erikson labels this as "identity diffusion." Identity diffusion is compounded when one has no clear understanding of their role, or a tendency to over-identify with influential people in their lives (Patton et al., 2015).

Looking back at my initial semester of community college, I now see how I struggled with identity versus identity diffusion. For the first time in my life, I was entirely responsible for my decisions regarding my future -- whether to stay near my hometown or move away, what major to pursue, what relationships and friendships were worth keeping -- and I grappled with this independence. As I went through the semester, this identity crisis was furthered by my interactions with professors and peers. During high school, I had rebelled against the beliefs I had been raised with. Now, I was having to finally define those beliefs in the face of seeing my community for what it was. I was beginning to understand the monoculturalism in my

community and how it limited understanding and tolerance. I was also beginning to see the radical difference in the prevailing religious and political beliefs and my own emerging ideals.

As I battled with my perception of and relationship with the community I was raised in, I began to fully realize and build upon the identity foundations I had established during my teenage years. This cycle of crisis, resolution, and commitment is fundamental to Erikson's theory (Patton et al., 2015). While I was still a long way from where I am now, it was this crisis that springboarded how I made decisions during my early 20s. I knew that I had to leave my community in order to escape the ignorance and monoculturalism of rural Kentucky. I felt that art, spirituality, self-expression, and many other aspects of my own identity would never flourish if I didn't experience something radically different. However, this radical difference was still some time away.

Moving on to my experience at Eastern Kentucky University (EKU), I will use Chickering's Developmental Vectors and Educationally Influential Environments to examine the developments made here. Chickering uses seven vectors that contribute to the formation of identity. According to Patton et al. (2015), "Chickering's work takes into account emotional, interpersonal, ethical, and intellectual aspects of development." I feel this holistic approach to development is especially relevant to this time in my life. First and foremost, my experience at EKU was a furthering of my independence; it was my first experience living many hours away from home, having complete autonomy, and ultimately being responsible for my own success and failure. However, what stood out during this time was my exposure to new ideas in the classroom, new experiences, and a new environment.

Of all the new experiences and responsibilities, I believe the most impactful was simply the courses and classroom experience. Engaging with professors in a more direct and thought-

provoking manner than in my prior classrooms, grappling with topics such as philosophy, anthropology, and theology, and finally deciding on a major (music) all sent me into a new identity crisis. I grew up in a family that was religious but not overly so. In high school, I, like many teenagers, began my own questioning of religion. Eventually, I settled into a staunch and pessimistic atheism. I distinctly remember my first Theology course at ECU, Religions of the World, where for the first time I was exposed to spiritual ideas outside of southern Protestantism. What interested me most of all was Eastern theology; the exposure to this would start a chain reaction that has led me to where I now call home. Additionally, I had finally decided to pursue music — a decision I made out of pure self-indulgence, though not without my own reasons.

How this relates to Chickering's theory is explained in two vectors, *Developing Purpose* and *Developing Integrity*. In *Developing Purpose*, Chickering notes the importance of “developing clear vocational goals” and “making meaningful commitments to specific personal interests and activities” (Patton et al., 2015, p. 263). *Developing Integrity* is explained as progressing to a humanized value system in which one can balance social responsibility and self-interest, and where core values are affirmed and strengthened. This exposure to new cultures and religions served to satisfy both of these vectors. Not only was I developing a deeper connection to humanity and the world around me, but I was also gaining many new ideas and interests that I felt compelled to explore professionally and personally.

Moving into the last period of time, during my studies at Bellarmine University, I will continue using Chickering's Developmental Vectors. There are many things that occurred during this time period that I could examine through various vectors, including *Managing Emotions*, *Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships*, or *Moving Through Autonomy Toward Interdependence*. However, I would like to focus on *Establishing Identity*. Within this vector,

Chickering describes how one establishes their identity by finding comfort with body, appearance, gender, sexual orientation, and other senses of one's social and cultural heritages (Patton et al., 2015). Self-acceptance and self-esteem and personal stability and integration are vital outcomes of this vector.

While at Bellarmine, and perhaps more importantly while living in Louisville, I was exposed to an array of people and experiences. Finding and developing my musical talents, connecting with professors from various disciplines, making new friends and developing strong relationships, and taking my first trips outside of America were all catalysts in my own journey of establishing identity. Performing my music live was a large part of establishing and improving upon my self-esteem. The simple act of taking my art and self-expression public taught me how to accept and strengthen my resolve based on criticism and feedback. My first trips outside of America as a backpacker taught me about my own social and cultural heritages, and opened my eyes to a world outside of America. The sum of these things was the stability and integration of what I'd come to understand as my identity and my role as a being on this planet.

My development did not stop here — it continues to this day. Nor have I adequately covered the many events of crisis and commitment. I am, however, confident in my understanding that no single theory is complete, nor does any single theory suit my own journey. Instead, I've found the benefit of examining my experience through various theories as a way to understand my own ongoing self-development.

References

Patton, L. D., Renn, K. A., Guido, F. M., & Quaye, S. J. (2015). Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice (3rded.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.