

The development of psychological flexibility: A conceptual exploration based on Erickson's psychosocial perspective

¹*Ms. Athira Alex, ²Dr. Kailash Sureshkumar, ³Dr. Ramgopal C N

¹ORCID:<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-7047-8276>, Research Scholar, Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, Chettinad Academy of research and Education, Kelambakkam - 603 103, Chengalpattu District,, Chennai, Tamil Nadu India

²Professor &Head of the Department, Department of Psychiatry, Chettinad Hospital & Research Institute, Kelambakkam - 603 103, Chengalpattu District, Chennai, Tamil Nadu India

³Professor of Counselling Psychology, Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, Chettinad Academy of research and Education, Kelambakkam - 603 103, Chengalpattu District, Chennai, Tamil Nadu India

*Email ID of corresponding author: athiraalex@gmail.com

Address (Home) of corresponding Author:

Athira Alex, Airukaran House, Nalukettu Post, Konoor, Koratty, Thrissur, PIN:680308, Kerala, India

KEYWORDS

Psychological flexibility & Erickson's Psychosocial theory of development

ABSTRACT:

Off late, psychological flexibility (PF) has garnered significant attention among researchers. Coined by Prof. Steven Hayes, PF refers to the ability to engage fully with present-moment experiences without defence. It is recognized that PF can be cultivated and enhanced throughout one's life span. Present paper aims to explore the developmental trajectory of psychological flexibility as a fundamental protective factor in mental health, particularly within the framework of Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory. This paper is the first to explore the formation and significance of psychological flexibility from a life span developmental perspective. A recent study has demonstrated a significant relationship between age and PF, with higher levels of PF observed from the beginning of late adulthood onwards (age 60+). Studies constantly validate the crucial role of psychological flexibility in the areas of emotional regulation, mindfulness and acceptance, neuropsychology and personality, and in quality of life. Given this potential role of PF, interventions can be designed to enhance PF in individuals at each stage of life span. By implementing the interventions, there is a great potential to aid those suffering from pathology while also help healthy functioning people find greater efficacy and fulfilment in their life.

STATEMENT & DECLARATIONS

Funding

Not Applicable

Competing Interest

The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

Data Availability Statement

Not Applicable

Authors' Contributions

- Athira Alex - First Author: Conceptualization and Manuscript writing.
- Dr. Kailash Sureshkumar - Second Author: Provided Supervision and guidance throughout the Manuscript writing process
- Dr. C N. Ramgopal - Third Author: Provided significant feedback and review about the content clarity.

Ethics Approval

Not Applicable

Consent to Participate

Not Applicable

Consent to Publish

Not Applicable

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Ms. Farisha ATP for her insightful feedback and discussions that significantly enhanced the quality of this manuscript.

Introduction

Psychological flexibility (PF), a key fundamental process in mental health (Malo, Acier, & Bulteau, 2022) is defined as being in contact with the present moment, fully aware of emotions, sensations, and thoughts, welcoming them, including the undesired ones, and moving in a pattern of behavior in the service of chosen values (Hülshager et al., 2013). PF, being an acquired trait, is critical for every individual throughout life to effectively adapt to and deal with surroundings, social contexts, and resilience, which also act as a mental immune system (Gentili et al., 2019). This conceptual paper aims to investigate the development of PF over the lifespan via the lens of Erickson's psychosocial theory of development, to address the research gap in this area.

During eight stages of psychosocial development, each marked by a distinct conflict between two opposing psychological inclinations, individuals gain unique virtues by resolving developmental crises. Considering this, to develop virtues, individuals need to grow up in an environment that promotes PF, which allows them to adapt to new situations, show perseverance even when they fail, learn from experiences, and incorporate these learnings into their behaviour and personality. Lacking PF, individuals may struggle to develop virtues potentially affecting their developmental progress in the subsequent stages, as each stage builds upon the previous one. A growing body of research demonstrates that PF leads to psychological benefits and adaptive behavior modification (Doorley, Goodman, Kelso & Kashdan, 2020).

Development of PF through Erickson's stages

The UNC Biomedical Research Imaging Center (BRIC) examined the emergence of neural flexibility in infants, which refers to the process of human brain developing its complexity and cognitive flexibility, by which a brain region changes its role from one functional network to another, contributing to PF (Aslan and Turk, 2022).

Trust Vs Mistrust

Infants acquire beliefs and perceptions about their surroundings, including themselves, depending on their interaction with their primary caregiver, which develops a sense of trust. Here, cognitive flexibility plays a crucial role, in underpinning psychological flexibility in later life. The core focus of the caregiver in this foundational stage is ensuring a secure attachment environment fostering the child's development of trust and preventing the development of hopelessness. The caregiver who validates and helps infants to soothe & manage difficult emotions, like frustration or hunger, contributes to the development of emotional regulation, one of the key aspects of PF. This occurs through the active cooperation of the infant seeking and reaching out for objects they need rather than passively waiting for them to be provided (Marcia, 2020), indicating that a social context is the foundation of fostering PF in the initial stage of life.

Autonomy vs Shame and doubt

Progressing to stage two upon successful completion of first stage, infants inherently take on the responsibility for the actions & their consequences if given freedom to make their own choices and act upon them. This fosters PF through building self-efficacy, which strengthens their connection with autonomy, an essential for personal growth and resilience. It allows them to adapt to various situational demands, shift their mindset when situations change, and balance competing desires, needs, and life domains by believing in themselves (NASP, 2010). A child develops feelings of shame and uncertainty when they are overly restricted in their ability to explore their surroundings and their behaviours, if failures are punished, and there is excessive support and protection. They may struggle to accept things as they are, leading to self-loathing, harsh self-criticism, and a lack of self-compassion, correlating with psychological inflexibility.

Initiative vs. Guilt

Erikson's third stage of establishing a sense of agency through exploration and initiative is closely related to PF helping the child to be psychologically stable, in the face of conflict or change

(Pattison Professional Counselling & Mediation centre, n.d). Establishing the groundwork for PF, learning to deal with obstacles and disappointments results in instilling a sense of competency and mastery. During adversity, children with higher PF can experience frustration or disappointment, however they persist and try again, fostering resilience and a growth mindset, believing that abilities can be developed through effort. Conversely, if a child's initiative is stifled by criticism or overprotection, they may develop a sense of guilt or fear of failure (Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 2011), manifesting to a lack of confidence, reduced exploration, and ultimately hindering the development of PF (Audet & Lefebvre, 2017). PF flourishes during this stage through a combination of exploration, problem-solving, emotional regulation, and imaginative play. Additionally, problem-solving and decision-making become crucial as children take initiative in play and social interactions, fostering cognitive flexibility (Kashdan, & Rottenberg, 2011).

Industry vs. Inferiority

At stage 4, the child learns to perform things properly about developmental standards, leading to a sense of competence. Parents can nurture PF by emphasizing the significance of effort and perseverance over innate ability, guiding children to learn from setbacks rather than giving up, providing constructive comments, and promoting emotional regulation. Moreover, psychologically flexible parents can be better role models (Hayes and Leeming, 2016). On the contrary, parents who are overprotective or critical result in a feeling of inferiority and inertia.

In the first four stages, it was evident that fostering the trait of PF is entirely dependent on the child's external environment and people within the environment, especially parents, siblings, teachers, and friends (Baştüzel, 2018). Developing virtues maintains a dichotomic balance, facilitating the successful completion of one stage and the progression to the next, and aids in the enhancement of PF.

Identity versus identity/role confusion

Erikson believed that identity formation is crucial for the development of psychological flexibility as it lays the groundwork for how individuals navigate and adapt to the complexities of life's choices and challenges. PF promotes broad identity exploration, openness to learning, self-acceptance, and resilience in navigating the challenges of identity formation during adolescence (Kukkola et al., 2023). On the contrary, adolescents who are psychologically inflexible end up in self-restriction, difficulty in managing challenges and negative emotions, hindering their ability to explore different facets of their identity (Morris et al., 2007) and a feeling that they were "living a life that others expected of them" (Kashdan et al., 2013).

Intimacy versus Isolation

When navigating the complexities of intimacy, PF fosters skills like commitment, openness and emotional regulation, allowing individuals to be vulnerable and express themselves genuinely. A meta-analysis by Daks and Rogge (2020) showed that higher levels of psychological inflexibility in romantic partners are linked to lower relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, emotional supportiveness; higher negative conflict, physical aggression; attachment anxiety, and avoidance. Poor PF results in difficulty in maintaining healthy relationships leading to isolation.

Generativity versus Stagnation

At stage 7, when an individual is not involved in generative activities, they become stagnant, which is characterized by self-absorption, unwillingness to step out of their comfort zone, midlife role confusion, and failure to contribute to society. Being psychologically flexible improves adaptability, resilience, openness and not attempting to control things beyond their control, while remaining connected to their sense of purpose and contribution to society; a direct positive effect on life satisfaction among middle adults and shows high level of acceptance of negative emotions associated with chronic medical conditions, especially among middle adults age below 50 years (Lucas & Moore, 2019 & Zukerman et al, 2023). Considering the age factor, PF peaks at the age of 59.44 years (Slot et al., 2023). Developmental psychologists explained this change in terms of neurocognitive adaptation to limited opportunities and resources that typically occur in the second half of life (Thams & Brassen, 2023).

Integrity verses Despair

During the final stage, the individual reflects on their life experiences and strive for a sense of contentment and accomplishment, showing higher levels of openness, self-awareness and acceptance (Plys, et.al, 2023), which are the components of psychological flexibility. Being Psychologically flexible equips individuals with the skills to navigate throughgrief, physical decline, retirement, and changes in social roles. Conversely,the absence of PF fosters a sense of despair experienced by individuals when they are not able to deal with prolonged adversity, unmet expectations and goals. Here, PF is fundamental as a barrier to psychopathology and a building block for fulfilling and value-oriented lives (Kashdan &Rottenberg 2011).

Implications

PF is a dynamic construct that develops and evolves throughout the lifespan, is fundamental to mental health and acts as a buffer against Psychopathology (Kashdan, 2010)and correlates with life satisfaction (Moore & Lucas, 2019). Erikson's psychosocial theory proposes that successful resolution of stage-specific conflicts, might contribute to the development of PF. Each stage comes with unique opportunities and challenges to mold PF and specific characteristics associated with it, such as acceptance, mindfulness, and the ability to take action aligned with one's values. The foundation of PF, potentially shaped by successful navigation of Erikson's stages, holds promise for both prevention and treatment. Early interventions fostering PF in children could enhance resilience against future challenges. Likewise, PF- focused approaches could be tailored to manage pain and psychopathology in different age groups, potentially capitalizing on self-acceptance as a foundation for change. Therefore, future research directions can be ranging from investigating the efficacy of preventive PF interventions in children, to refine PF-based treatments for specific conditions across the lifespan, and explore how PF facilitates change and adaptation mechanisms. Addressing these aspects with future research can strengthen the role of PF in promoting Psychological Well-being across different age groups.

Suggestions for future research:

- Emphasizing the role of parents in fostering PF
- To identify the intervention effectiveness of PF across lifespan
- Exploring the role in adolescence andPF tailored interventionsfor establishing stable and healthy identity.
- Investigate the mechanisms of PF, particularly, how PF influences cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes across lifespan.
- Longitudinal, transgenerational and intersectionality studies

Conclusion

Psychological flexibility develops throughout life span and it is essential skill for wellbeing and life satisfaction. In the first four stages of Erickson's theory, individual's PF development is significantly determined by external factors. On the other hand, beginning with stage five, people must make intentional choices and strive to improve their psychological flexibility. Thus, psychological flexibility is not an innate skill, but rather an acquired trait that everyone should cultivate throughout their lives(Moore & Lucas, 2020). This provides a solid foundation for resilience, eventually changing us into strong individuals who live purposeful and value-driven lives.

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