Relevance of Erik Erikson’s model on psychosocial development: recent trends related to Intimacy, Cheating, and Infidelity

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Abstract

The ideal yet rarely discussed item to be addressed when talking about development, growth, and maturity during adolescence is various notions connected to sexual orientation with gender identity, relationship preferences, and role uncertainty as a life crisis. Trust, safety, acceptance, communication, and, comprehending one’s wants and expectations from a relationship are some essential components of intimacy. Challenges in Intimacy such as trust issues, imbalanced relationships, misunderstanding, adultery, and so on are common instances of problems that can arise as a result of unresolved trauma and preference differences from one’s past. Infidelity has not only increased but has been tolerated as a result of the expansion of Cosmopolitanism. Modern normalizations like Polyamory could encourage mutual understanding and acceptance, assisting in increasing inclusion. To determine if a person is likely to cheat on their partner, one must first comprehend their partner’s goals and requirements, as well as their relationship expectations. This paper aims to explore the current trends in relationships and addresses the gap in the theoretical framework of psychosocial development.

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ABSTRACT:

The ideal yet rarely discussed item to be addressed when talking about development, growth, and maturity during adolescence is various notions connected to sexual orientation with gender identity, relationship preferences, and role uncertainty as a life crisis. Trust, safety, acceptance, communication, and, comprehending one’s wants and expectations from a relationship are some essential components of intimacy. Challenges in Intimacy such as trust issues, imbalanced relationships, misunderstanding, adultery, and so on are common instances of problems that can arise as a result of unresolved trauma and preference differences from one’s past. Infidelity has not only increased but has been tolerated as a result of the expansion of Cosmopolitanism. Modern normalizations like Polyamory could encourage mutual understanding and acceptance, assisting in increasing inclusion. To determine if a person is likely to cheat on their partner, one must first comprehend their partner’s goals and requirements, as well as their relationship expectations. This paper aims to explore the current trends in relationships and addresses the gap in the theoretical framework of psychosocial development.

There have been efforts made to have a comprehensive understanding of developmental processes by theorists, researchers, and academicians, and different schools of thought approached the human developmental processes too, focusing on different domains or stages, and paces with which humans grow and develop. An attempt like Eric Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development has predicted the developmental changes throughout a human’s life span. However, the new age understanding and exploration of different types of intimate relationships in the current scenario has compelled us to rethink the theoretical perspective to understand and predict human behavior. Different concepts relating to sexual orientation with gender iden-
Adolescence is a challenging phase in everybody’s lives, as it is a period of not just growth and maturity but also a period of transition from childhood to adulthood. As a phase involving existential self-introspection and questioning, adolescence can lead to various changes in one’s personality, preferences, and beliefs. These could be largely influenced by the individual’s psychosocial and interpersonal interactions. Thus, children start to discover their own identities at this time, be it their self-image, societal role, gender role, or sexual orientation. Such discoveries, along with other childhood experiences shape the types of relationships that the individual prefers. Sometimes, more often than not, this process of “finding oneself”, or establishing one’s identity could extend into adulthood or old age, or sometimes, never come to an end. An inability to leastwise break down and analyze one’s own personality could then result in a lack of understanding of the boundaries and curtailments of one’s comfort and wants when talking about intimacy.

Consequently, an essential part of any type or form of relationship happens to be intimacy. Human beings are social animals that need to fraternize and develop relationships with those around us to survive, making intimacy an important part of our lives. The word intimacy is often associated with sexual relationships, but it doesn’t necessarily have to be so, as one could share a close, intimate bond with not just their sexual partners, but also with pronounced friends and family members; showing us how intimacy could range from different types of emotional to physical intimacies too.

To develop an intimate bond with one other, certain key factors need to be considered and given priority: trust, safety, acceptance, honesty, affection, compassion, easy and effective communication, and most importantly, knowing what one wants and expects from the relationship. More often than not, traumatic instances that have a negative impact on these factors (mentioned previously) during any of the early developmental stages, go on to influence an individual’s actions when intimate relationships are involved. Problems like trust issues, relationship instabilities, miscommunication, cheating, etc are some classic examples of intimacy issues that one might experience due to unresolved “emotional baggage” from their past.

Our ability to evolve as credulous individuals have now been put to test with the sudden increase in the different types of intimate relationships in existence. Recently, with the acceptance and progressive normalization of previously disdained statuses of different relational preferences (which was a result of the largely prevailing patriarchy), we have come to understand that intimate relationships, especially sexual ones, can be of multiple types, and not just the “socially acceptable” heterosexual ones. Widely acknowledged forms of relationships in India where the people in consideration are involved with each other intimately were- Casual or close friendships, Committed or Long-term relationships, Heterosexual Dating, Heterosexual Engagement, and Heterosexual Marriage.

But now, we get to see the growing awareness, acceptance, and active involvement of individuals in more types of relationships that previously did not exist from a social or legal standpoint. A few examples are Cohabitation (unmarried individuals living together), Homosexual relationships, Romantic friendships (romantically involved friends), “friends-with-benefits”/Sexual friendships, Situationships (informal romantic/sexual relationships), etc. In fact, we have also come to know that the idea of a long-term relationship and the type of bond shared between those involved too could be of many types; the choice of wanting a monogamous or non-monogamous relationship is different for everybody. The level, type, and extent of intimacy in each of the above-mentioned relationships again depend on each/both/all of the individuals involved.

The overall impact of identity on intimacy is more influential than we might think it to be. The interrelation between the eight stages of Erikson’s theory on human development becomes extremely evident with respect to Stages 5 and 6, i.e., Identity/Confusion and Intimacy/Isolation respectively. Establishing a comfortable relationship with your identity is an essential part of understanding the types and kinds of intimacy that you would be comfortable with. In the Identity development stage, adolescents experience newer and previously unexplored situations, relationships, and beliefs; this is also when the scope for our psychosocial development is most flexible. In India, the 21st century has seen a drastic change in the way identity development takes
place among teenagers of today, but unfortunately, there is little research on the impact it has had on the development of their understanding of relationships by them. Generally, especially in the evolving and fast-growing social sphere of the middle to the upper-middle class of Indians, teenagers were/have been restricted from exploring their identity and their selves, told to focus only on academics and job-securing, and instantaneously propelled into the world of relationships only at a “marriageable” age. Even when individuals took to identifying and understanding the depths of their identity, they had to do so within their personal or safe spaces (which we see even today) for fear of being discriminated against or criticized by society. This could also possibly justify the lack of information on the types of intimate relationships that Indians indulge in. Regardless, multiple researchers and developmental psychologists worldwide have come to agree that most individuals with an advanced understanding of intimacy are most likely to have undergone their phase of identity development at their own pace and without much restrictions, hence having developed a holistic image of their selves.

An important aspect of any intimate relationship, the prevalence of which goes beyond contextual, cultural, moral, or societal restrictions is Cheating or Infidelity. Cheating, on one hand, could mean multiple different things to different people. The general meaning states cheating as behaving unfairly or dishonestly, for an eventual gain. But in relationships, where cheating is referred to as Infidelity, it could mean behaving, acting, or doing certain actions that are perceived by the partner/partners as unfaithful or disloyal.

Infidelity has been an ever-persistent, ubiquitous problem in all kinds of relationships from the beginning of time, and continues to be so; the perception of which varies with each relationship due to the different meanings that each individual gives to it. As unethical as the idea of infidelity might sound to a monogamous individual, the matter of its prevalence isn’t something that can be assumed to be a common occurrence or a rare one, as even if an individual is conventionally cheating on their partner, the probability that they would admit to it, or even perceive it the same way, is very low. But on considering the results of anonymous surveys organized by researchers worldwide, many committed individuals admit to having cheated on, at least thought of, or wanted to cheat on their partners. There are again multiple reasons why one would partake in the activity of infidelity, but some of the common reasons are having an emotional, physical, or sexual disconnection with their current partners, which could range from feeling underappreciated, depressed, or unloved in the current relationship.

In the year 2018, with the decriminalization of infidelity and adultery in India, we have gotten to see that a large part of the Indian population might not be completely against the idea of having a relationship outside of the one that they are already committed to. With the progress in technology that our country has gotten to experience, people are now able to come across and interact with people who have similar tastes and ideals. Over time, it has also been observed that with advancement in Cosmopolitanization, Infidelity hasn’t just risen, but has come to be accepted too. Since 2018, the involvement of the Indian population in apps like Gleeden (an extra-marital affair app), Tinder (a dating app), etc. Although it has been a part of Indian religious and social history, pursuing a polyamorous relationship is still illegal in India as of 2022.

Even though Cheating is such a largely prevailing phenomenon, it is not necessarily a justifiable act, due to the widespread preference for monotony. Feelings of devastation, betrayal, and heartbreak by being cheated on, along with a heavy psychological impact on the people involved in such relationships is a common observation. Parallely, having to confine oneself to monotony can cause grave mental distress to those who believe they have more to discover about themselves. Surprisingly, non-monotony isn’t a western idea, and concepts like polyamory did prevail in our society, which was before the influence of colonization; but the normalization of relationships that aren’t necessarily heteronormative in the current society is a newer progression, and can definitely help in increasing inclusivity by supporting mutual understanding and acceptance.

In order to understand if an individual is likely to cheat on their partner, one would need to understand their counterpart’s wants and needs, and also their expectations from the relationship. In fact, it is more important for us to establish a healthy relationship with what we expect from the relationship ourselves. Acknowledging and fully accepting our identity, and coming to terms with what we, as individuals are comfortable with
in terms of love and intimacy helps form relationships that we are comfortable with, and that we can learn from. The lack of a large-scale, inclusive understanding of the complexities, tool developments, and standardizations involved in relationship intimacies is the most essential matter at hand.

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