Erikson’s life course theory: practitioners’ perspectives on its utility in work with older adults with depression

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Theory in practice

Social workers and healthcare professionals are taught to use theories to inform their practice (British Association of Social Workers, 2018; Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2018).

Older adults with depression have unique experiences (Fiske et al 2010). We need theory to understand these unique experiences.

Confidence on the utility of theories is needed
Erikson’s life course theory

- Commonly taught theory in social work
- One of the only theories to specifically consider the experiences of older adults

Adapted from: Erikson and Erikson (1997)
Integrity versus despair

- Predicts that those who do not resolve the crisis will experience depression
- Supported by small scale studies (Chimich and Lekolaichuk, 2004; Rylands and Rickwood, 2001)
- Life review therapy: intervention to resolve the eighth crisis. More effective than the informal reminiscence therapy (Rubin et al, 2019)
- Suggested as an intervention to be used by social workers and other mental health professionals (Ingersoll-Dayton and Bommarito, 2006)
- In a different setting, practitioners were using techniques from life-review therapy without knowing where they were from (Trueman and Parker 2006).
Criticisms of Erikson’s theory

❖ Not culturally adaptable (Sneed et al, 2006)
❖ Does not consider older people’s development in much depth (Agronin, 2014)
❖ Not sufficient to explain depression in older adults
❖ Correlation versus causation
Why is this study needed?

- There are possible benefits to using Erikson’s theory in work with older adults with depression
- There may also be significant limitations
- There is no literature on practitioners’ perspectives on its utility
- Therefore the research topic is: Erikson’s life course theory: practitioners’ perspectives on its utility in work with older adults with depression
Method

- **Ethical approval** was granted by the University of York, the NHS Health Research Authority and by the Research and Development department of the NHS Trust in which the study took place.

- As the **researcher was a social worker in team which the research took place**, it was made clear to participants that the researcher was conducting the study separately to their role as an employee.

- This was a qualitative study.

- Eight **mental health practitioners** were recruited via email from an older adults’ mental health team in an outer London Borough. A sampling frame was planned but not used.

- **Semi-structured Interviews** were carried out, the interviews were transcribed. Data was anonymised.

- **Framework analysis** was used to identify key themes.

- NVIVO was used to aid analysis.
Findings

Four major themes or categories were identified:

• Understandings of causes of depression in older adults
• Benefits and criticisms of Erikson’s theory
• Suggested changes to Erikson’s theory
• Discussions of the past
Understandings of causes of depression

“...it’s natural when you’re thinking about your own mortality, to think about your own life so far.”

(Participant 3)

• Change experienced in old age were seen by all participants as by far the biggest cause of depression.

• Reflections on life so far, and proximity of death were seen by some participants as causes of depression.

• One participant gave a narrative which was consistent with Erikson’s theory.

• All participants had a very limited knowledge of theories about older adults.
Benefits and Criticisms of Erikson’s Theory

“All participants named some benefits to Erikson’s theory, including that it provides a framework for understanding service users’ experiences.

However, the perceived benefits were outweighed by participants’ significant criticisms, including that it is too prescriptive, and doesn’t account for broad range of experiences of older people, or different generational experiences.

There was disagreement about the eight stage of the theory, although most agreed that it could explain a cause of depression.”

“I think you can have a lot of integrity and also despair” (Participant 6)
Suggested changes to Erikson’s theory

“It’s unfinished based on the world today” (Participant 4).

- Despite not being asked to do so, most of the participants suggested changes which would improve Erikson’s theory.
- Suggested changes always reflected the criticisms of the theory.
- More stages in later adulthood are needed. These should either be repetitions of earlier stages, or new stages.
- Culture needs to be considered in teaching.
Discussions about the past

“People are so often seen when they’re old, as ‘another old person’ ... people forget that they’ve had a whole life before them ... it helps them to get out of that.”
(Participant 1)

- Participants have informal discussions about the past with service users.
- Most see discussing the past as part of their role.
- Perceived benefits are in line with Erikson’s theory.
- Participants are worried about the potential to cause harm.
Limitations

- No service user perspectives
- Small-scale, in a single location
- Analysis method (Srivastava and Thomson, 2009)
- Reduces Erikson’s theory
Discussion

• Although there were some similarities, Erikson’s theory does not account for the causes of depression which participants thought were most important. The theory needs to be adapted to be useful in practice with older adults with depression.

• Participants’ criticisms of Erikson’s theory are in line with current research (Hearn et al, 2012; Wiesmann and Hannich, 2011).

• Life review therapy would be a more effective intervention for depression than the current informal discussions, and should be taught alongside the adapted Erikson’s theory.
Implications

• Teaching on Erikson’s theory needs to consider the development of older adults.

• Knowledge of theories concerning older adults amongst professionals needs to be improved.

• Social work education needs to consider older people (Milne et al, 2013).

• A critical appraisal of other commonly taught theories is needed.
References


References


Thank you for listening
Any questions?