

Stage Theory: Pros and Cons

There are several pros and several cons with stage theory in general. You should be aware of them, and know that while stage theory **dominates** the academic study of socialization, it has its critics. Also, more recent stage theorists have tried to improve the approach by addressing issues raised by its critics.

Stage Theory: Pros

- Provides guidelines for where people are supposed to be in their development, so those “on track” can be reassured of their “normality”
- Helps identify those who are behind in some aspect of development so they can be “caught up”
- Explains why groups of people who are of similar ages have things in common and behave in similar ways

Stage Theory: Pros

- Gives people an idea of what may happen in their future, and approximately when
- Enables social scientists to organize the vast amount of research on human development into an understandable and relatively concise format
- Provides, in effect, a **rubric for human development**

Stage Theory: Cons

- Stigmatizes people who don't fit the norms, and may make them feel like failures
 - Emphasizes age and ignores life experiences which could cause one to progress faster or slower through the stages
 - Implies an abrupt shift from stage to stage, when the shift is, in most cases, gradual
- (later theorists have introduced transitional stages for most stage theories)

Stage Theory: Cons

- Most stage theories are based on observation, which is unreliable (researchers may try to look harder for evidence that fits their theory)
- People might try to “force” success at a developmental task, at the expense of other important aspects of their lives
- Changing culture (earlier/longer adolescence, more college, later marriage, greater longevity) means the ages need to be updated frequently.

Stage Theory: Summary

- There are significant pros **and** cons to stage theory.
- It's not the only approach one should take to human development and socialization (we will look at some non-stage theorists, too).
- Stage theory can serve as a general guide (like a rubric), but like a rubric, sometimes it must be adapted for unique situations.

A Non-Stage Theorist

- Let's take a look at a theorist with a different approach (we already mentioned Maria Montessori, who believed children could develop faster cognitively, if “pushed”):
- **Abraham Maslow** didn't mention age in his theory, or deal with people in groups.
- He said everyone's behavior is based on his/her own unique life experiences.

A Non-Stage Theorist

- Maslow's focus was adult socialization. He studied people old enough to pursue their own lives independently.
- Maslow claimed behavior is based on a "hierarchy of needs". He said you first try to meet the most basic ones, then the more abstract ones, until you achieve "self-actualization". You will get a handout that explains this further.

Read and Discuss

- What does Maslow say are the most basic needs?
- What does a person search for once these basic needs are met?
- Which needs are considered by those lucky enough to have fulfilled physical, mental and emotional needs?
- What does “self-actualization” mean to you?
- Is this culturally biased? Is it accurate for everyone in our own culture? Why do you think it’s such a **popular** theory?