

Akeelah and the Bee

An Analysis of Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Theory of Development

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Summary

Akeelah and the Bee is a film released in 2006 about a young girl from an underprivileged Los Angeles neighbourhood who uses her exceptional spelling ability to make it to the Scripps National Spelling Bee competition. At 11 years old, Akeelah is already an at-risk youth who treats school as if it were of little consequence, skipping classes, and neglecting her homework. It is Akeelah's English teacher who first recognizes Akeelah's talent, and suggests she enter the school's spelling bee. She has no interest, but after the principal gives her an ultimatum, she relents as an alternative to detention. An old friend of the principal attends the spelling bee and recognizes Akeelah's talent. An English professor and one-time participant in the Scripps National Spelling Bee, Dr. Joshua Larabee agrees to coach Akeelah. Her journey also brings her into contact with other young spellers who quickly become her new social group and inspire her to work hard towards her goal of reaching the Scripps National Spelling Bee. Along the way, Akeelah is plagued by doubt and insecurities, especially when discovering how advanced and driven her competitors are. Facing her fears, Akeelah puts forth an admirable effort that wins her first place, along with another boy, at the national spelling bee.

Erikson's Psychosocial Theory of Development

Influenced by Freud's theory of psychosexual development, psychologist Erik Erikson developed an eight-stage theory describing how an individual's identity develops through interactions with his environment over time. Erikson posed that in each sequential stage, a person faces a crisis in which she must make choices that result in either a positive or negative outcome.

The first stage occurs between birth and 12-18 months, and is known as **trust vs. mistrust**. If the infant experiences consistent care, he develops a sense that the world is a secure place; if he does not, he will lack confidence in the world around him and view it with fear.

At 18 months to 3 years of age, a child enters the second stage, **Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt**. During this phase, a child either becomes confident in her ability to care for herself, or she doubts her capacity to survive.

The third stage is **initiative vs. guilt**. From age 3 to 6, children learn how to be assertive and gain confidence in decision-making, or conversely, may become insecure about the choices they make.

Stage four is related to a child's experience in school and takes place between the ages of 6 and 12. **Industry vs. inferiority** is a time when children experience either success or failure in academics and other skills, leading to a sense of competence or inadequacy, respectively.

Identity vs. role confusion is the next stage, and occurs in adolescence. Young people must decide on career, values, and relationships to form an identity. If unable to do this, role confusion may result.

In stage 6, **intimacy vs. isolation**, young adults develop intimate relationships with others outside their families, or become isolated and lonely.

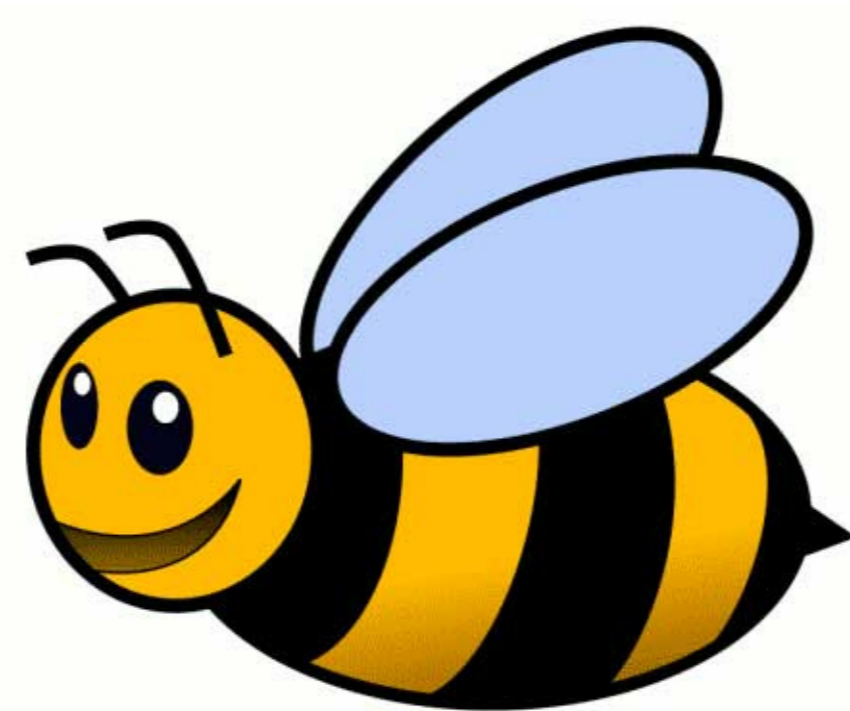
The next stage, **generativity vs. stagnation** occurs in middle adulthood, and requires an individual to contribute to society through work and/or giving to the younger generation

The last stage, **ego integrity vs. despair**, is a reflection on one's life in late adulthood. Contentment with one's achievements gives a sense of fulfillment, while regret leads to despondency.



Stage 4: Industry vs. Inferiority

The movie tells us that, although Akeelah is intelligent, she is unmotivated to attend class and do her homework; as a result, she is failing several courses. Akeelah is at a crossroads in her life: she must choose to either apply herself, realizing success and pride in her accomplishments; or she may choose to continue in her lack of industry and risk failure and feelings of inadequacy. This dilemma suggests that Akeelah is in the *industry vs. inferiority* stage of her life. According to Erikson, teachers and mentors play a significant role in the lives of children at this stage. Encouragement and positive feedback are important to help children gain assurance that they are capable of succeeding.



Theory in Practice

Overall, the actions of Akeelah's mentors have a positive impact on her and the choices she makes. Akeelah's English teacher, Mrs. Cross, acknowledges Akeelah's ability, and informs Akeelah that she would be "one of her best students" if she attended class and completed homework assignments. By doing this, she reassures Akeelah that she is capable of succeeding if she applies herself. Supposing that Akeelah may have an interest in spelling based on her keen ability, Mrs. Cross encourages Akeelah to enter the school spelling bee in an attempt to engage her interest in school activities.

The school principal, Mr. Welch, becomes instrumental in helping Akeelah make better choices for herself by assisting her in achieving her dream of reaching the Scripps National Spelling Bee. Knowing that traditional summer school will interfere with preparation for the various spelling bee competitions, he designs a curriculum for Akeelah that allows her to gain credit for time she spends training for competitions. By doing this, he prevents Akeelah from becoming overwhelmed by an impossible workload and potentially giving up one – or both – pursuits. Another way Mr. Welch supports Akeelah is by attending every one of her competitions. This show of support gives Akeelah confidence that she is accomplishing something of value, and that others believe she will go far.

Besides Akeelah herself, Dr. Larabee becomes the most influential factor in why Akeelah realizes her goal of making it to the national spelling bee. He teaches her a number of strategies, including using her mnemonic device of keeping time to help her remember. He recognizes Akeelah's doubts and fears as a lack of confidence in herself and inspires her with Marianne Williamson's poem "Our Greatest Fear":

*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
It is our light not our darkness that most frightens us...*

Dr. Larabee not only provides the training, the resources, and the discipline Akeelah needs to succeed, he also helps her to believe in herself. He stands as a role model for Akeelah, someone who has made it to the Scripps competition himself, and someone who sincerely believes that she can as well. One of the most important things that Dr. Larabee does for Akeelah is resigning as her coach once he recognizes that she is able to continue without him. While this distresses Akeelah, it prevents her from becoming dependent on him, and forces her to turn to others, thereby learning how to achieve success for herself.

Gaps of Theory in Practice

While the school personnel and Dr. Larabee have a positive impact on Akeelah, they do not always take the best course of action. For example, while Mrs. Cross speaks to Akeelah about her absences and incomplete homework, there is no indication that she ever discusses the problem with her mother. In fact, Akeelah's mother seems oblivious when the school calls to inform her that Akeelah will have to attend summer school to make up for the classes that she has failed. Had Akeelah's mother been notified earlier, she may have been able to prevent her daughter from failing.

Mr. Welch is also misguided at times. It is apparent that he is eager for Akeelah to enter the school spelling bee, but using the threat of detention may have had a negative consequence. His approach may have sent the message that Akeelah could skip all she wanted without fear of reprisal, so long as she continued to compete in spelling bees. Had Principal Welch dealt with Akeelah's absences as a separate issue, he may have been able to prevent Akeelah from failing her classes.

Another problem is that Mr. Welch does not hide his primary motive for wanting Akeelah to compete: he wants Crenshaw Middle School to receive more funding. This often causes Akeelah to feel that the welfare of the school and its students is on her, which is too much pressure to place on someone so young. While Mr. Welch is driven by the desire to better his school, he should not place this pursuit above the personal wellbeing of one of his students.

Although deeply interested in seeing her succeed, Dr. Larabee makes some errors in his dealings with Akeelah. He reproaches her when she cancels one of their sessions to go to the mall to buy a Christmas gift for him, asking her if she was off doing another interview, "flaunting" herself on television. This deeply hurts Akeelah, and causes her to lose confidence in herself, telling her mother later that she doesn't want to do the "bee" anymore. It seems that Dr. Larabee expects too much of Akeelah at times, forgetting that he is dealing with an 11-year-old who is under a lot of pressure.

Conclusion

Akeelah and the Bee is a story offering a useful model of the fourth stage of Erikson's psychosocial theory. The choice Akeelah must make, between hard work and indolence, will alter the course of her life. And the reinforcement she receives from teachers and mentors will influence which choice she will make. This story contains a powerful lesson for teachers about the impact we have on students' developing self-concept, and how we should never take our role in this lightly.