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The psychosocial development theory of Erik Erikson: critical overview

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ABSTRACT

While much has been written on the influence of Erik Erikson's contributions to education, little has been said about his place in terms of his contribution to the general theoretical notion of what it means to be a human being. This article aims to broaden current reflections on Erikson's position in the spectrum of work done on human development in general and on early child development especially. A concise qualitative theoretical overview sheds light on some basic biographical details, Erikson's academic background, the work for which he is an established name, and his views on people as sentient beings. Also discussed are the emergence of his psychosocial development theory and his core research and its possible impact on theory and practice are discussed as is his largely unacknowledged contribution to the intertwined disciplines of self – and career counselling and life design-related science, practice, and profession.

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Erikson's general theoretical orientation on what it means to be a human being

Erik Erikson played a key role in articulating a new framework for early child development in the twentieth century that shed light on the way young children negotiate the early years, sometimes successfully, sometimes unsuccessfully. He believed that young children's development should not be seen only through a psychosexual and mechanistic lens but also through an inclusive humanistic and phenomenological lens. Cherry (2020) contends that Erikson's psychosocial development theory (1968) provides a broad framework for the study of human development throughout people's entire lifespan. Instead of focusing only on early childhood events and people's educational development, his psychosocial theory considers how educational and social influences and relationships contribute to people's personalities throughout their lives.

His views on the notion of identity crisis (role confusion) (Cherry, 2020; Psychoanalyst coined identity crisis, 1994) in particular signified a major advance in the theory of developmental psychology at the time – views that still today influence our thinking on human development generally and early child development especially. Erikson's theories marked a paradigm shift in global perspectives on the construct of personality.

Goals of the article

This article discusses Erikson's position in the spectrum of work on human development and his psychosocial development theory in particular. It aims to broaden current reflections on his core

research and his impact on the theory and practice of early child development especially. It seeks to answer the following specific questions.

- a. What is Erik Erikson's position in the spectrum of work on human development?
- b. What impact has Erikson's work had on the theory and practice of early child development?
- c. How did Erikson's views on identity status influence the field of early child development in general and the science, practice, and profession of the self- and career construction (and life design) disciplines especially?

Research method

A modified version of the type of qualitative review advocated by Higgins and Green (2011) was used in the research.

Adapted systematic qualitative review of the literature

As this article is based on a wholly qualitative literature search, I gathered information and sources until I reached a point of data saturation and was convinced I could no longer find new themes (Booth, 2001). The literature review focused on scholarly books, book chapters, and articles, as well as popular online articles and social media (web-based and mobile technologies) including magazines, Internet forums, weblogs, YouTube, social blogs, Academia, ResearchGate, videos, photographs, podcasts, and webinars. Older seminal sources were also included. After having generated and analysed the 'data', I integrated and synthesized the findings. The following procedure was adhered to.

- i. I requested the departmental academic information specialist to identify abstracts of several databases for information. This included books, book chapters, articles, conference papers, reference works, as well as other relevant publications on Erikson. She began by choosing EBSCOHOST with its various databases as her basic platform. EBSCOHOST databases included: Academic Search, Masterfile, Eric (which includes book references, book reviews, and reports), Sabinet (which includes books, articles, and newspaper clippings (older clippings)), PsycInfo, PsycArticles, and Sociological Abstracts.
- ii. The information specialist and I simultaneously searched on Google and Google Scholar to identify the widest range of sources possible.
- iii. I signed up to various Internet publishing entities to ensure that I received all the latest news on Erikson.
- iv. I compared and removed duplicate sources if they did not add meaningfully to the database.
- v. I then determined the appropriateness of all the sources, after which the academic information specialist requested full texts.

Inclusion criteria:

- a. Sufficient evidence that the sources helped illuminate the topic.
- b. The sources reflected more than possibly unreliable personal opinions.
- c. The information in the sources contributed to the thoroughness of the literature overview.
- d. The sources were in English.

Exclusion criteria:

- a. The sources did not reflect more than just personal opinions.
- b. The sources did not relate satisfactorily to the topic.

- c. The sources reflected some form or degree of bias.
- d. Dated sources considered insufficiently seminal.

Basic biographical details

Erik Salomonsen (Erik Erikson) was born in Frankfort (Germany) on 15 June 1902 and raised in the Jewish religion. His mother Karla Abrahamsen was a member of a wealthy Jewish family from Copenhagen (Denmark). She first married Valdemar Salomonsen, who unexpectedly left for North America a day after their marriage. She never saw him again. When she fell pregnant some years later (still married to Valdemar), she was either sent to or left voluntarily for Germany to pre-empt a scandal. She lived near or with relatives and eventually settled in Frankfurt. Shortly after her son was born, she learned that his biological father had died. According to Elkind (2015), she never revealed the identity of his father to Erik, which gave rise to his lifelong quest for his father's (and, by extension, his own) true identity and underpinned his writings on the identity crisis construct. Karla raised Erik alone. At the age of three, he fell ill, and she took him to Theodor Homburger, the local pediatrician, with whom she later fell in love and married. Homburger helped her raise Erik as his own son. When he was about eight, Erik was informed that Homburger was not his biological father, but he nevertheless grew up as Erik Homburger (Coles, 1970; Erikson Bloland, 2005; Friedman, 1999; Kelland, 2017). (Erikson never learned his biological father's name.) After relocating to the United States at the suggestion of his son, Kai, Homburger changed his adopted son's surname from Homburger to Erik's son (son of Erik) or Erikson and then also adopted the surname for Karla and himself. Elkind (2015) writes that it was clear from an early age to everyone (including Erik himself) that Erik, who had blond hair and blue eyes, was not Homburger's child. While he was called a 'goy' (the name used by Jews for a non-Jew) by the local Jews, the Christian children called him a 'Jew'. This no doubt created identity confusion and insecurity in Erik's young mind. In addition, he was mocked at school by his classmates who called him 'hamburger', which is what prompted to change his son's and his wife's surname to Erikson (Kelland, 2017).

This brief glimpse into Erikson's early years unlocks some of his key life themes – themes that revolve around the identity crisis he experienced throughout his early as well as his career-life. The first of these themes relates to his sense of his mother and he himself having been let down by meaningful others at key points in his early development (his biological father in the first place). The second theme relates to his uncertainty about who his father was and, consequently, who he was, highlighting his fundamental identity crisis. He went so far as to rename himself and to refer to himself as Erik Erikson (Erik, son of Erikson (myself)). The third theme relates to his search for 'self-discovery'.

Overview of Erikson's academic background

Erikson held appointments at various illustrious institutions, including the Harvard Medical School, the Massachusetts General Hospital, the Judge Baker Guidance Center, the Harvard Psychological Clinic, the Yale University Institute of Human Relations, the University of California, the University of Pittsburgh, the University of California at Berkeley, and the Austen Riggs Center in Stockbridge (Cherry, 2020; Coles, 1970; Friedman, 1999). Some of these appointments are discussed briefly below.

After graduating from high school in 1920, Erikson embarked on a nine-year-long journey of self-discovery (referred to as a *Wanderschaft*) instead of studying medicine, which is what his father wanted him to do (Elkind, 2015). After his 'journey', he accepted a post at the Hietzing School for Children, a school that had connections with Anna Freud and that catered for children with emotional problems. Although having met Sigmund Freud, he was trained (or rather analysed to prepare him for work as a psychoanalyst) by Anna Freud (sister of Sigmund) and was later welcomed as a member of the American Psychoanalytic Society. In due course, he also qualified as a Montessori

teacher. In 1933, Erikson, together with his wife and two children, moved to the United States where he established and ran a private practice as a psychoanalyst for several years. He accepted an assistantship post at Harvard University and enrolled for a degree in psychology but did not complete the degree. On learning that he had no future at Harvard because of his lack of degrees, he relinquished his post and subsequently spent three years at the Institute of Human Relations at Yale University. However, factors such as his use of qualitative rather than quantitative methods and anti-Semitic feelings against him led to his departure from Yale too. In 1949, Erikson was appointed a professor of psychology and a lecturer in psychiatry at the University of Berkeley. However, his stay there was of short duration following his refusal to sign an oath rejecting communist ideas because in his view the oath was redolent of Nazi intolerance. Erikson rejoined Harvard University in 1960 (despite never having received a formal degree in either psychology or medicine) as a professor of human development and a lecturer in psychiatry at the Harvard Medical School. He retired as emeritus professor in 1970 (Coles, Hunt, & Maher, 2002; Friedman, 1999).

Erikson's publication *Gandhi's truth* (Erikson, 1969) was awarded the Pulitzer Prize as well as the National Book Award. His only tertiary qualifications were a certificate from the Montessori Teachers Association and a diploma from the Vienna Psychoanalytic Institute (Cherry, 2020). However, he was awarded an LLD (Hons) from Harvard in 1978 (Friedman, 1999).

He retired in 1970 at the age of 68 but continued writing until 1987 when poor health forced him finally to put down his pen. He died on 12 May 1994.

Erikson's core research: why he is an established name in psychology and early child development

According to Erikson's daughter (Erikson Bloland, 2005), 'he was a psychoanalyst whose ideas and style of writing appealed to many people outside of his own field – to scholars in a wide range of disciplines and to the lay public – making him one of the most widely read and influential psychoanalysts in the field' (p. 1) as well as 'a cultural icon, and his face appeared from time to time in the pages of the New York Times or on the cover of Newsweek or other widely read magazines' (p. 1). However, his views on people's psychosocial development throughout their lifespan were what really distinguished him from other psychoanalysts of his time. These views are discussed in more detail below.

Psychosocial development theory

Erikson (1963; 1964; 1968) attained eminence through his work on developmental psychology. However, his many writings on 'identity crisis' (a term coined by him) stand out as his most significant contribution to the field of psychology. Epigenetics lies at the heart of his theoretical framework and has strong links with the notion of 'identity crisis'. Briefly summarized, epigenetics holds that people's personalities progress from birth until old age through eight stages in human development in a prearranged sequence of psychosocial development Erikson, 1950. According to Kerpelman and Pittman (2018), Erikson insisted that 'identity develops continuously throughout life', yet he also conceded that identity 'is "consolidated" in adolescence' (p. 311). Kroger (2018) and McLeod (2018) argue that all people experience psychosocial crises during all eight stages that may impact their personality development negatively. These authors maintain further that any 'problem' that occurs in any given stage will influence the 'integration of the whole ensemble' (Erikson & Erikson, 1997, p. 29). Various authors have since written about the concept of 'identity crisis' and have cited Erikson's work to substantiate their views and have also linked the concept of identity crisis to their own work. Examples of identity crises are the notions of 'career identity', 'career-life identity', 'career identity development', and 'vocational identity' (see, for instance, Hartung, 2018; Maree, 2016, 2020; Savickas, 2019; Super, 1980, 1990).

Below, I elaborate briefly on key aspects of what many people (including me) consider Erikson's seminal contributions to psychology, early child development, and self- and career construction (Guichard, 2009; Savickas, 2015a, 2015b), namely his emphasis on key developmental tasks that need to be worked through and mastered during the different stages of people's development and the link between these tasks and people's identity crises.

Erikson's focus on key developmental tasks

Erikson's (1950; 1964; 1968) psychoanalytic theory stresses the importance of eight stages in human development that all people have to work through (navigate) successfully in order to lead integrated, meaningful, and fulfilled lives. These stages (first reported on in Erikson's, 1950 publication *Childhood and society*) (Chapman, 2006-2013) are discussed below. The first five stages relate to early childhood especially.

1. Basic trust vs Mistrust (infancy, 1–2 years). If infants care-related and trust needs are not met adequately, they may become anxious and learn to mistrust others.
2. Autonomy vs Shame and Doubt (early childhood, 2–4 years). This is the stage during which infants need to achieve an adequate sense of self- and personal control over their over physical competencies in their striving to become more independent – in the process they develop their own will.
3. Initiative vs Guilt (preschool age, 4–5 years). In Stage 3, children should be allowed to complete certain tasks successfully on their own. They need to try things out on their own and explore their own abilities. In so doing, they can develop the determination to achieve goals and gain a sense of direction in their lives.
4. Industry vs Inferiority (school age, 5–12 years). This is the stage during which children become more competent and more adept in carrying out increasingly complex assignments. In the process, they consciously attempt to acquire new competencies. If they are consistently encouraged and praised by significant others, their chances of acquiring an adequate sense of proficiency and self-belief are increased.
5. Identity vs Role Confusion (adolescence, 13–19 years). During Stage 5, children need the continued support and encouragement of significant others to help them achieve an adequate sense of self (who they are) and become more independent of others. To this end, they need to be given the opportunity (under careful guidance) to experience success in increasingly complex tasks.
6. Intimacy vs Isolation (early and emerging adulthood, 20–40 years). During this stage, emerging adolescents and adolescents increasingly seek intimate relationships that they can establish, maintain, and promote with key people they can trust. They need to establish relationships that allow them to acknowledge their vulnerability.
7. Generativity vs Stagnation (adulthood, 40–65 years). This is the stage during which people need to acquire the ability to care for others and not only themselves. If they manage to navigate this stage successfully, and even learn to care about others without needing to feel that their love and care are returned, they typically experience a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. During this stage, people generally experience a deep need to have children to help them create a living legacy.
8. Ego Integrity vs Despair (maturity, 65+) (Erikson, 1994; Sprouts, 2017). During the final stage of life, people are particularly confronted with the idea of dying and their mortality. Typically, during this stage, people reflect on whether their live have been successful or not.

Commencing at birth, these stages end during late during adulthood. They are characterized by people's unique circumstances, including the way they were nurtured, raised, and educated as well as their particular environments and cultures.

Erikson (1968) as well as Hihara, Sugimura, and Syed (2018) argue that people's identities have negative and positive features, with 'negative identities not simply lacking positive ones' (Hihara et al., 2018, p. 325). Erikson, Erikson, and Kivnick (1986) contend that, in the presence of adequate support structures as well as actual support, education and guidance, people who are emotionally and socially 'healthy' can successfully negotiate the numerous psychosocial struggles in their lives. Naturally, these struggles will differ from one cultural context to another. Kroger (2018) argues that the struggles or conflicts present 'new possibilities for interaction that both support the individual developmental process as well as helping to shape the social and cultural milieu to the needs of growing individuals themselves' (Kroger, 2018, p. 335). The order in which people deal with psychosocial development tasks is a key factor in determining how the tasks will impact their identity, irrespective of the context (Erikson, 1964). Ideally, infants, adolescents, and older people will encounter and successfully manage (master) consecutively the different challenges in each stage. However, many people in the different stages fail to deal with certain challenges effectively. Erikson and Erikson (1997) maintain that unresolved developmental challenges or 'problems' in any given stage will negatively influence the 'integration of the whole ensemble' (p. 29). Consequently, challenges that have not been dealt with effectively often resurface as 'problems' in later stages. People nevertheless transition from one stage to another consecutively regardless of whether they have managed to deal with the 'problems' or challenges experienced during preceding stages effectively or not.

Erikson's conceptualization of identity formation

The importance of gaining insight into core aspects of people's identity development, especially during their early years, is generally accepted today. Such insight promotes counsellors' understanding of how clients either experienced their early years and navigated their transition to adulthood successfully or unsuccessfully. It also promotes counsellors' ability to help clients adapt successfully to new contexts and eventually enter the world of work. As mentioned earlier, Erikson (1968) regarded identity formation as the most important developmental task in childhood, especially during the third, fourth, and fifth stages (when children move from early childhood to adolescence and from adolescence to early and emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004)). These latter life stages are the stages during which fields of study, careers, and/or jobs are typically chosen.

Between 1942 and 1946, Erikson worked with veterans who had returned from the battlefield. He took a particular interest in the fact that these men returned from the Second World War deeply emotionally scarred despite having been emotionally healthy before going to war. According to Elkind (2015), Erikson rejected the common practice of using psychiatric labels to describe the condition of these men. Instead, he began to describe them as 'emotionally confused' – believing that having been taken away from their accustomed environment to the field of battle had severely disrupted their sense of who they were and what they were and had given rise to their identity confusion. Erikson later spent time with the Yurok tribe of Northern California in the Pine Ridge Reservation, observing and researching in particular the interaction between the mothers and their children (Coles, 1970; Friedman, 1999). He noted the difference between the tribal culture and the North American culture, concluding that it could lead to identity confusion among members of the tribe.

Different theoretical orientations for understanding human behaviour and planning appropriate interventions

It is not the aim of this article to 'prove' that Erikson's approach is any 'better' or 'worse' than any other approach in psychology. As discussed elsewhere (Maree, 2020), it is generally considered unwise to compare empirically or qualitatively different approaches to psychology that yield different results or outcomes because of different theoretical and philosophical assumptions. Rather, it is generally accepted that different approaches to psychology can be compared empirically or qualitatively only if they yield more or less the same kind of outcomes. In such a case, it may be

possible to design appropriate assessment criteria and tests to assess whether and to what extent certain agreed-upon aims have been achieved. Only then can it be said that certain approaches are ‘better’, more or less appropriate, or more or less advantageous than others.

In the absence of a ‘conclusive’ or ‘final’ theory (and given that there never can be such a theory), theorists, researchers, and practitioners are free to choose any particular theoretical approach or combination of theoretical approaches to explain and plan their interventions and evaluate the relative usefulness or effectiveness of these interventions regarding different manifestations of human behaviour.

Critical overview of psychodynamic approaches

While Freud (1939; 1964) emphasized people’s subconscious motives and experiences, Sullivan (1953) underscored the interpersonal aspects of behaviour, Adler (1933) stressed people’s striving for superiority, and Erikson (1968) highlighted people’s ability to triumph over adversity and live fulfilled and successful lives. Although the value of the psychodynamic approach was generally acknowledged, many scholars criticised the research methodology of the main proponents of the approach (Maree, 2004), stating that

- a. most psychodynamic researchers relied on the outcomes of case studies rather than on the outcomes of large-scale research;
- b. psychodynamic research was conducted mainly in uncontrolled circumstances;
- c. the importance of what human beings had suffered in the past tended to be exaggerated;
- d. Freud in particular overemphasized the role of people’s sexual drive and that his views were largely sexist and therefore unacceptable in postmodern, post-structural contexts (Gavey, 1989).

Freud’s (1964) views will of course always remain the ‘Olympic gold standard’ in debates on and attempts to understand human behaviour.

Contextualizing Erikson’s work

According to Elkind (2015), Erikson was torn between his wife’s views and those of Anna Freud. His wife supported him in his belief that people’s emotional challenges were caused by their personal circumstances, and she rejected Freudian theorists and practitioners’ ‘narrow-mindedness’. At the same time, Anna Freud tried to persuade him to focus rather on intrapersonal issues such as the emotions, ideas, and thoughts people engaged in internally when they were alone. This ‘battle’ added to Erikson’s sense of identity confusion.

Kelland (2017) states that contextualizing Erikson’s work is problematic. This is hardly surprising because although Erikson stated his belief in Freud’s (1964) theoretical orientation, he actually shifted his own theoretical emphasis fundamentally from people’s psychosexual stages to the psychosocial crises they experienced throughout their lifespan. He asserted also that psychodynamic processes persisted throughout people’s lives – a major deviation from traditional psychodynamic perspectives. Moreover, even though psychodynamic theorists such as Adler (1933), Horney (1945), and Boeree (1997) highlighted the importance of sociocultural factors in adulthood, Erikson proposed a single, unbroken psychodynamic theory that ranged from people’s birth to later adulthood and even into old age. His research on the Sioux and the Yurok helped him formulate his psychosocial theory of development (Syed & Fish, 2018).

For the purposes of this article, however, it is more important to note that Erikson’s (1968) views differed widely from the generally held psychodynamic views on human behaviour and development. For example, he argued, that

- a. people’s past undeniably had an influence on them but that, at the same time,
- b. they could also influence their environment, their development, and their future lives.

The value of Erikson's work for postmodern career psychology

In a recent article, 'The stresses of the way we work now: What vocational psychologists can teach us about the new ways of working', Lucchesi (2020) writes that millions of American workers have lost their jobs, and she goes on to say: 'For many people, work provides a sense of identity, as well as psychological benefits that come from being productive' (p. 1). Indeed, skyrocketing unemployment rates globally are giving rise to an unprecedented work identity crisis. Against this background, the link between Erikson's work and the intertwined disciplines of self- and career counselling and life design warrants discussion.

Erikson (1968) and other scholars such as Super (1957) and Miller-Tiedemann and Tiedemann (1990) and Tiedemann (1964) stress the importance of people's life processes (e.g. growth, choice, willingness and capacity to adapt and change) as well as their ongoing self-exploration, self-renewal, and search for personal and career identity. These authors agree that career development is based on the process of forming a career-life identity where people's potential to remain in control of their circumstances is emphasized as much as the decision-making process itself. Career is regarded as 'an exciting journey, rather than ... a goal-oriented drudgery that is imposed on individuals by society' (Miller-Tiedemann & Tiedemann, 1990, p. 309).

Erikson (1964) contends that some people's inability to choose appropriate careers, to execute successful careers, and to establish an adequate sense of career self (put differently: people with an adverse or negative career identity) obscures and undermines their ability to navigate career-related transitions successfully. While emphasising the core role of the social aspects of identity formation, Erikson (1968) acknowledges that more general contexts, too, influence and co-determine people's various personal and career-life roles. McAdams, Josselson, and Lieblich (2001) and Savickas (2019), too, regard the process of identity formation as a continuous process of self-construction that evolves and develops over time. Authors such as Hartung (2018), McAdams' (2010), and Savickas (2015a, 2015b) agree that understanding better how and why some people adapt successfully while others do not can assist with psychological counselling (including career counselling) and dealing with unresolved issues in people's lives. Addressing and resolving such issues can help clients design successful lives or redesign 'unsuccessful' lives (see later on). Stringer, Kerpelman, and Skorikov (2011) argue that career identity comprises 'the sense of self derived from one's development of an occupational career ... [it] is an important component of one's overall identity' (p. 158). Similar to Erikson's (1968) views on what happens during people's early lives and especially the developmental tasks they need to master during each of the eight stages, Charopaki (2019), Hartung and Santilli (2018), Maree (2020), Super (1957), and Savickas (2019) believe that people go through a systematic process of problem solving before eventually arriving at a career choice. In fact, Santilli, Nota, and Hartung (2019) argue that the process of 'self-making' commences in the early years and permeates adolescence: 'Youth, in particular, need to develop foundational attitudes, competencies, and resources useful to their life-long career planning, decision making, and work adjustment' (p. 49). Taylor and Betz (1983), too, maintain that 'career decision self-efficacy refers to the individual's belief that he or she can successfully complete tasks necessary to career decision making' (p. 66). Collectively, the authors cited above argue that decision making commences when people encounter challenges ('problems') in their career choices or have to make career choice decisions.

Using self-, career, and life design counselling and incorporating Erikson's psychosocial development theory to resolve people's work-Related identity crises

Career construction theory (CCT)

Hartung (2013a, 2013b) argues that CCT covers people's narratability (their ability to narrate their 'stories' intelligibly), the adaptability they need to deal with changes in their selves and their

contexts, and their aim to design meaningful and successful lives. Seen through this lens, counsellors using career construction counselling from a social constructionist perspective endeavour to promote people's ability to identify and focus on central life themes that uncover patterns of personal meaning. Eliciting and analysing people's earliest memories (a psychodynamic *modus operandi*) facilitates the uncovering of these themes and promotes people's understanding of their sense of self- and career identity (Savickas, 2005; 2015a, 2015b). By linking Super's (1957) career development theory (see below) with CCT, counsellors and their clients are reminded that work and personal roles and lives cannot be seen in isolation (Hartung, 2011). Lastly, Savickas (2008) emphasises the importance of identifying people's attributes, values, and interests as part of their sense of identity and self.

Super's (self-concept) development theory

According to Perosa and Perosa (1985), 'Erikson's description of resolving our 'identity crisis' appears similar to Super's notion of 'implementing the self-concept''. I concur with this view. Super (1957), too, addressed the issue of identity formation and the pivotal place it has in the early development (career development especially) of young children and adolescents during what he termed the 'exploratory stage of life', which he defined as roughly between the ages of 14 and 24 years. From the perspective of this article, theories that relate to and promote our understanding of early child development as well as development during adolescence and the challenges young people experience in their efforts to navigate and negotiate numerous transitions during this stage of life are key to our understanding of how people develop their sense of self, self-concept, and identity – three closely related terms. This is a time when young people strive to undertake key developmental tasks and, especially, validate their sense of self, who they are, their self-concept or self-view, as well as their self-image.

Self construction theory (SCT)

Self-construction theory (SCT) also covers key facets of people's personal as well as their career development (Guichard, 2009). It differentiates between the major factors and occurrences that influence how people design their lives and cope with repeated challenges. Executing different key life roles enables people to take part in activities and verbal discourses that can help them identify and understand the dynamics that resonate with their central or main selves. This process culminates in self-construction and the development of their sense of self (i.e. their core identity or sense of who they really are) in harmony with their experiences (Guichard, 2008a, 2008b). Self-construction counselling includes self-reflective behaviours aimed at recognizing people's 'values as well as the elements that give meaning and direction to their lives' (Guichard, Pouyaud, De Calan, & Dumora, 2012, p. 56).

Merging CCT and SCT

Counselling for self- and career construction assumes first that people achieve their understanding of 'reality' by enacting career-life roles, competencies, and life themes in social spaces and by agreeing on shared meanings and meaning-making. Second, it assumes that people's career and life identities develop and crystallise during their active participation in these spaces. Third, it assumes that 'identity crises' occur because of key developmental tasks that have not been mastered during the early years in particular. Self- and career construction counsellors attempt to uncover unresolved challenges and hurt that people have experienced during any given phase in their lives (in the earliest phases especially) and help them convert their 'suffering' or unresolved issues into hope and social contributions. This is achieved by resolving previously challenging issues in their storylines, that is, resolving passively endured and unsolved issues. Earlier 'defeat' is converted into 'victory', not having been heard or noticed into being listened to and recognized, having felt disempowered

into feeling empowered, having been a 'victim' into becoming resilient, having experienced misfortune into seeing new opportunities, and converting perceived or real weaknesses into felt strengths and social contributions. Career and self-construction thus helps people identify their key life themes, their authentic interests, and their dormant strengths, thereby helping them overcome suffering and using suffering as a springboard to achieving meaning-making, experiencing a sense of purpose, and rediscovering a sense of hope in their career-lives and in their lives generally. In this way, the integrated conceptual framework of psychosocial development (Erikson, 1968), the theory of self-construction (Guichard, 2005), and the theory of career construction (Savickas, 2019) are given practical application.

Counselling for self- and career construction (Guichard, 2009; Savickas, 2020 (in Arthur, 2020)) focuses on the importance of uncovering unresolved issues (thus linking up with Erikson's notion of identity crises) that occurred in people's early years in an attempt to identify their key life themes. Uncovering people's earliest recollections (or their most painful experiences or challenges) can yield important information on their life themes and help them and their career counsellors work collaboratively towards resolving these issues – people enact these key themes in their career-lives thus converting their hurt into hope. Like Erikson (1964), I believe that identity crises surface throughout the lifespan and that uncovering later recollections or challenges, too, can shed light on how current career-life issues and concerns can be resolved.

The link between Super (1957) and Erikson's (1968) work is discussed briefly below.

Life design counseling

Guichard (2018) maintains that self- and career construction as well as life design counselling interventions can help people respond meaningfully to the following question: 'By what kind of active life might I give meaning and perspective to my existence?' Savickas (2010) indirectly confirms Erikson's (1950; 1982) view on life design counselling intervention, which he describes as 'an identity intervention that cultivates intention and action through story telling' (p. 3). Moreover, Savickas (2010) asserts that 'life design interventions assist clients to elaborate and revise their identity narratives to comprehend and confront the traumas and transitions that a previous version of their life story could not accommodate' (p. 3). In the same vein, Guichard et al. (2012) contend that 'through interactions and dialogues people develop a cognitive structure of constructs (a subjective system of identity frames)' (p. 54) that enables them to construe themselves and others in their own personal way and to act accordingly. These two quotations indicate the strong link between Erikson's views on identity development and on the aims of life design.

Erikson's (1980; 1982) psychosocial and self-concept development conceptual frameworks hold that all people regularly and throughout life must confront and manage personal and career-life challenges. Many of these challenges remain unresolved and impact negatively on people's sense of meaning, hope, and purpose in their career- and personal lives. Left unresolved, such challenges will likely continue to influence their experience of a sense of life and career fulfillment negatively, irrespective of how financially successful, for instance, they may eventually become. At the same time, their identity formation may also be impacted negatively. As mentioned earlier, Guichard (2009), Hartung (2015), Maree (2019; 2020), Savickas (2019, 2020 (in Arthur, 2020)) and others have demonstrated and reported on the power of self- and career construction as an intervention strategy that can be used at any life stage to help people deal with challenges related to unsatisfactory identity formation (which is reciprocally and strongly positively related to their self- and career construction). The aim of helping them in this way is to elicit their autobiographies (promote their narratability), uncover their central life themes, enact these themes in their career- and personal lives, underscore their personal agency, and enhance acceptance of personal authorship of their various micro- as well as 'grand' personal and career-life stories.

Importance of Erikson's views on people's early lives for counselling for self- and career construction

People who present for career counselling inevitably (implicitly and/or explicitly) seek answers to the fundamental questions, 'Who am I?', 'Where am I going?', and 'What is the purpose of my existence?' (Rogers, 2018). To assist them to answer these questions (in addition to responding to the 'standard' question, 'What are my career choice options?'), career counsellors endeavour to help clients uncover their unresolved challenges or the 'initial pain' they suffered in their early lives so that they can convert this hurt into hope. Challenging developments in their storylines signify unresolved issues they have passively experienced or key developmental tasks they have failed to master successfully. Over and above helping people uncover their career-life themes, interests, strengths, and areas for development ('weaknesses'), counselling for self- and career construction can help them actively master what they have passively suffered (Freud, 1964; Savickas, 2019). Even though Erikson did not allude to the principle of active mastery of passive suffering directly, his strong emphasis on the importance of young children mastering key developmental tasks is a fundamental contribution to current thinking on the essence of career counselling. Merging theories of self-construction, career construction, and psychosocial development provides researchers and practitioners with a theoretical and conceptual framework and an associated strategy to help people design successful lives (Savickas, 2019). Career counsellors and clients work together to construct positive career-life identities reflectively by eliciting micro-stories that relate to the origin of people's inadequate identity formation and help them re-integrate their micro- and meso-narratives to enable them to craft a larger and more coherent macro-narrative that reflects a clear and robust sense of identity. In the end, the theories of psychosocial development (Erikson, 1968), self-construction (Guichard, 2005), and career construction (Savickas, 2019) are interwoven and converted into practice (Savickas et al., 2009) that can help people enact personal and career-life stories that are founded on a healthy sense of identity and promote their chances of living successful and purposeful lives,

Impact of Erikson's work on theory and practice early child development

Erikson's global status and recognition as a researcher, scholar, and thinker in the field of early child development and care are indisputable. His contributions to this field in particular are acknowledged internationally as 'pioneering' and 'ground-breaking'. He has also consistently succeeded in translating 'thick' research evidence into comprehensible information for the broader psychology community and the public at large.

Erikson's psychosocial theory of ego-identity is pertinent to any developmental framework that aims to enhance understanding of the separations and assimilations people experience in the course of career development. Guidance, education, and counselling premised on Erikson's approach enable people to enhance their skills; develop and affirm their self-concept, sense of self, identity, and self-understanding; and accept responsibility for their decisions.

According to the Erikson Institute (n.d.), Erikson's major contribution to theory is his view that every stage of people's lives relates to a different and specific psychological struggle that constitutes a key facet of their personality. 'His developmental progression ... was conceived as the sequential reorganization of ego and character structures. Each stage was the potential root of later health and pathology' (p. 2). Côté (2018) agrees that Erikson has reshaped our views on how people develop, adding that Erikson's 'influence on the study of identity formation is undisputed' (p. 1). Côté (2018) also supports Weigert, Teitge, and Teitge's (1986) view that Erikson's conceptualization of 'identity' is a 'reasonably value-neutral and interdisciplinary term' (p. 29) that substantially influenced scientific, philosophical, and political articulations of who and what it means to be a human being (Côté & Levine, 2016). Côté (2018) acknowledges at the same time that some scholars 'have questioned the need for the identity concept, given simpler concepts like self-concept (e.g., Hendry &

Kloep, 2018; Hill, 1973)' (p. 1) while others (e.g. Rattansi & Phoenix, 2005) have accused Erikson of bias in the sense that his perspectives were more applicable to males (boys) than to females (girls). Moreover, even though Erikson's theory is often proclaimed to be a lifespan theory in development psychology, these authors contend that Erikson focused more on (overemphasized) early development than on later (adult) life. According to Côté (2018), however, Erikson's views on identity (and identity crisis) have stood the test of time, but he laments that key aspects of Erikson's views on identity formation, 'particularly the identity crisis in its multiple manifestations' (p. 1), have received little research attention. Côté (2018) adds, however, that Erikson's contribution can perhaps be critiqued for not considering people's influence on their environment or context more fully.

Schachter and Galliher (2018) contend that Erikson's milestone publication *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1980) 'has historically served to consolidate identity as a central construct in developmental psychology, tying it to adolescence in both professional and popular circles' (p. 247). Schachter (2018) adds that Erikson's insistence on acknowledging the value of Freud's psychodynamic ideas is well known. However, equally well known are Erikson's views on the error of overemphasizing the psychosexual side of children's development. This can be seen in the stress he places on the social as well as the educational makeup of people. Schachter (2018) explains that Erikson 'strove to bridge the biological with the psychosocial' (p. 323).

As a researcher and practitioner in the field of counselling for self- and career construction and life design counselling, this article indicates to me that traumatic events in Erikson's (1980) personal life inhibited his attainment of a clear and strong sense of identity. He accordingly embarked on a life-long, existential quest in search of his core career-life identity: who he really was, where he came from, and where he was headed. Erikson is a rare example of a globally renowned scholar who, while not devoting his research directly to the field of career counselling, practically lived and demonstrated the power of the principle of someone actively mastering what he has suffered passively.

Limitations of the study

First, I accept that some colleagues may disagree with how I conducted the overview of the literature. They may have preferred a 'standard', semi-quantitative and authentic systematic qualitative approach. Second, some of the internet-based narratives that I drew on were not subjected to 'standard' peer review. Third, other researchers may have arrived at different conclusions after reviewing the documents used for the article. Last, my analysis of the 'data' and findings was inevitably influenced by my own personal views.

Conclusion

By any standards, Erikson's contributions to the twin disciplines of education and psychology are pioneering and ground-breaking, as attested to by numerous researcher-scholars. This article set out to broaden current reflections on his core research and views on human development. It highlights his conceptualization of the notion of 'identity crisis' as reflected in his eight-stage development framework and reveals that his contribution to the trio of self-construction, career construction, and life design theories has been to a large extent overlooked. It shows the value of Erikson's realization of the importance of mastering key developmental tasks in the early years and, more specifically, underscores the importance of considering the nature and impact of people's idiosyncratic identity crises during career counselling. It shows that a feasible theoretical and conceptual framework and strategy can help people master developmental tasks that they failed to master at appropriate times in their early lives and that later recur in the form of career choice-related challenges that impair their capacity to achieve a healthy career identity and experience a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. The article thus confirms Erikson's implicit contribution to counselling for self- and career construction in

terms of its power to help people resolve such career choice challenges and rewrite their career-life stories.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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