

# Beyond Essentialist Critiques: The Co-development of Individual and Society within Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Theory of Identity Development

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**Abstract:** Erikson's psychosocial theory is often positioned as essentialist, creating the groundwork for criticisms about the resolution of crises as a universal aspect of identity development towards a unified and coherent Self. These critiques represent an oversimplification of Erikson's theory and overlook the centrality of the *co-development of the individual and society* within his theory of identity development. To justify this claim, we examine Erikson's concepts of ego identity (1959, 1968), and demonstrate overlap with Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain's 'figured worlds' framework (1998). The purpose of these comparisons is to problematize essentialist critiques of Erikson and create a dialogic space for socio-cultural researchers to consider Erikson's psychosocial theory of identity formation when exploring relationships between identity, agency, power and cultural worlds of practice.

Erikson's psychosocial theory is often positioned within an essentialist framework that conceptualizes identity development as universal across cultures, as an individual and asocial act, and as linearly moving through a series of stages, or identity crises, to create a unified and singular Self. Through such positioning, Erikson's theory is commonly portrayed and criticized for being a rigid, normative, and hierarchical stage-structured approach (Dannefer, 1984; Weiland, 1993, as cited in Kinnvall, 2004). Cultural theorists reject this essentialist position in favor of concepts of identity that are contextually bound (Bourdieu, 1977; Willis, 1977), (re)made through on-going struggles to participate in cultural worlds of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 2003), and manifest through multiple and often conflicting selves that are always forming, never complete (Bakhtin, 1981). Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte and Cain (1998) provide an excellent summary of how the essentialist and cultural stances are often contrasted.

Cultural studies of the person—including a significant proportion of the anthropological research on (cultural) identity—share an opposition to a general “Western” notion of identity that takes as its prototype a coherent, unified, and originary subject. ... The projects of these newer studies are quite unlike that of Erik Erikson ... with its focus on the tasks any person must successfully accomplish to resolve the psychodynamic dilemmas of maturation and thus establish a coherent identity. ... [N]ewer studies rely upon feminist and later psychodynamic approaches ... which recognize social forces that make such an integrated subject an unlikely occurrence. (p. 7)

These statements highlight the characterization of, and opposition to, Erikson's theory of identity because it is framed within biological and psychological concepts that do not recognize the multiple, conflicting, and irresolvable nature of self-hood, and has little regard toward cultural interactions and associated social power. We argue that such characterization represents an oversimplified account of Erikson's theory, and overlooks the centrality of the *co-development of the individual and society* within his theory of identity development. To justify this claim, we examine differences between Erikson and Freud, his theories about identity development, personality and stages (1959, 1968), and demonstrate conceptual overlap with aspects of Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain's 'figured worlds' framework (1998).

The overarching purpose of this conceptual examination is to problematize some of the essentialist critiques of Erikson's theory and create a dialogic space such that research may consider Erikson's psychosocial concepts within sociocultural research about identity, agency, and cultural worlds of practice. Such space is important because, as Erikson argues, “We must learn to understand cultural and technological consolidation, for it, ever again, inherits the earth” (1968, p. 33).

## Erikson's *Psychosocial* Theory of Identity Development

To understand how the co-development of the individual and society could be central to Erikson's research, one must differentiate Erikson from Freud by historically situating Erikson's work. He worked closely with Sigmund and Anna Freud, used Freudian terms such as id, ego, and superego, and is rightly characterized as a psychoanalytic theorist. Because of the similarities, many have incorrectly considered Erikson's use of terms analogous with Freud's use of the terms, and confused Erikson's *psychosocial theory* with Freud's psychosexual theory. Whereas Freud focused on the primal baseness of human nature, Erikson looked to ways humans could flourish within social and institutional milieus. When Erikson began his American psychological practice in the 1940s, he observed an uncommonly high number of patients who, he believed, were being misdiagnosed with psychosis by Freudian psychoanalysts. As a result, Erikson began to conceptualize his client's struggles in terms of identity conflicts—conflicts that were intimately tied to society. Erikson recognized the changing culture of America, the changing nature of America's identity. Fresh from WWII and in the throes of industrialization, Americans were conflicted with unprecedented economic growth, while their humanity was reduced to labor as a cog in an assembly line (Weber, 1958). Given Erikson's growing conceptualization of the social into his psychoanalytic practice, it was inevitable for him to reformulate Freud's work and emphasize social over biological factors for his theory of epigenetic development (Roazen, 1976). It also explains differences in the use of terms because he felt, "the traditional psychoanalytic method . . . cannot quite grasp identity because it has not developed terms to conceptualize the environment" (Erikson, 1968, p. 24).

Erikson (1968) even explained difficulties of researching identity formation because it was "located *in the core of the individual* and yet also *in the core of his communal culture*" (p. 22, italics original). To address this difficulty and to highlight how individuals and society co-develop, Erikson argued that, "identity formation employs the process of simultaneous reflection . . . by which the individual judges himself . . . [and how] he perceives the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves." This process is, "luckily, and necessarily, for the most part unconscious except where inner conditions and out circumstances combine to aggravate a painful, or elated, 'identity consciousness'" (p. 22). Identity consciousness is always changing and developing in increasing differentiation and inclusiveness through awareness of others, and there is no separation of:

Personal growth and communal change, nor can we separate the identity crisis in individual life and contemporary crises in historical development because the two help to define each other and are truly relative to each other. In fact, the whole interplay between the psychological and the social, the developmental and the historical . . . could be conceptualized only as a kind of *psychosocial relativity*. (p. 23)

## Erikson's Identity Stages

Identity stages/crises/conflicts are specific forms of identity consciousness that Erikson argues, and critics rightly point out, occur in a developmental sequence; that is, earlier stages must be resolved before later stages can be resolved. Erikson identified the following stages: trust/mistrust (infancy), autonomy/shame and doubt (toddler years), initiative/guilt (preschool years), industry/inferiority (elementary school years), identity/role confusion (adolescence), intimacy/isolation (young adulthood), generativity/stagnation (middle adulthood), integrity/despair (late adulthood). The ways that one resolves these stages govern the epigenesis of one's personality and allows us to "re-emerge from each crisis with an increased sense of inner unity, with an increase of good judgment and an increase in the capacity 'to do well' . . ." (1968, p. 92-93). This is consistent with Holland et al.'s (1998) claim that his theory revolves around "tasks any person must successfully accomplish to resolve the psychodynamic dilemmas of maturation and thus establish a coherent identity," and sets up their critique that Erikson fails to recognize "social forces that make such an integrated subject an unlikely occurrence" (p. 7). We argue this critique is problematic because Erikson: (1) recognized the social as central to his theory of identity development; (2) viewed the resolution of identity crises as on-going sources of strength and adjustment that enable persons to negotiate social worlds; and (3) did not equate the resolution of identity crises with a unified self.

## Social Nature of Identity Crises

Erikson recognizes the social nature of an individual's development. Indeed, the social is consistent with, and is central to, his concepts of psychosocial and cultural relativity. When one revisits the quote in the preceding paragraph by Erikson about the importance of crises in its fuller context, one reads that the individual is able to:

Re-emerge from each crisis with an increased sense of inner unity, with an increase of good judgment and an increase in the capacity 'to do well' ... according to his own standards and to the standards of those who are significant to him. The use of the words 'to do well' of course points up to the whole question of cultural relativity. Those who are significant to a man may think he is doing well when he 'does some good' or ... when he learns to conform all around or to rebel significantly; when he is merely free from neurotic symptoms or manages to contain within his vitality all manner of profound conflict. (1968, p. 92)

This quote highlights that at the heart of any increased sense of inner unity is the appropriation of 'doing well.' Further, doing well is contingent on points-of-view and the cultural capital affording those views importance, both of which are inherently social and particular to the cultural context in which one is deemed to do well.

### **Contested 'Resolutions' of Identity Crises**

The term "resolution" is problematic given Erikson's definition of crisis. "Crisis is used here in a developmental sense to connote not a threat of catastrophe, but a turning point, a crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential [for identity formation], and therefore, the ontogenetic source of generational strength and maladjustment" (Erikson, 1968, p. 96). Crises should not be viewed as something to be resolved as a means to some ultimate identity formation, but as critical periods in its on-going development. Therefore, identity is not something that can begin or end through a crisis, period or stage of one's life. Rather, identity is a dynamic change process that is influenced by continuous interactions between person and social systems, and is continuously created, maintained and recreated throughout adulthood.

For it is through their ideology that social systems enter into the fiber of the next generation and attempt to absorb into their lifeblood the rejuvenate power of youth. Adolescence is thus a vital regenerator in the process of social evolution, for youth can offer its loyalties and energies both to the conservation of that which continues to feel true and to the revolutionary correction of that which has lost its regenerative significance. (1968, p. 134)

Erikson (1959) emphasized that one should not assume that societal norms, and the resulting identity formation, could be grafted onto a genetically asocial individual through the process of disciplines or socialization. Instead, this process occurs through the membership society extends to the individual and the manner the persons resolves the tasks of her epigenetic development while interacting with society. This could be viewed as an interactive (authoritative) parental relationship, which is characterized by enforced rules and the inclusion of individual participation in making the rules. Translated into broader aspects of society this analogy highlights Erikson's stance that without institutional ideologies there can be no identity formation, and without the participation of the individual there can be no institutions.

To support participation in ways that acknowledge both institutional ideologies and individual agency in the process of identity formation, Erikson (1959) argued many cultures create *institutionalized moratoria*—specific social settings/spaces that afford individuals in *psychosocial moratorium* greater agency to explore, experiment with, and develop different roles and identities. Psychosocial moratorium is not synonymous with a specific crisis or stage, but is a period of time during which individuals choose to participate in these less structured social settings in ways that can be different than dictated by institutional ideologies—i.e., cultural norms, practices and values. Combined, institutional and psychosocial moratorium facilitates participation through the freedom to experiment with various roles without expectations of permanent responsibilities and commitments (Côté & Levine, 1988, 2002). This process appears to be consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) theory of play and Bakhtin's (1984) notion of carnival; each concept acknowledges the agentic affordances and opportunities for identity development. And each concept also acknowledges constraints. Consistent with Vygotsky and Bakhtin, Erikson asserts that this period does not have a total lack of structure; it is still dependent upon degrees of conformity to norms and values of adult society. Institutional moratoria that are loosely structured might have liabilities that result in fragile and/or broken identities; for example, WWII and other veterans who struggle within normative, peacetime societies after experiencing ethic and moral institutional and psychosocial moratorium during war (Erikson, 1968).

Erikson observed that these moratoria are most evident during adolescence, and used this observation to explain why adolescence represents a critical period in one's identity development. His observations appear to be

similar to the work of Holland and Skinner (1995) that explored the agency and resulting identity formation/self-authoring of Naudada women in Nepal that took place through the songs of the Tiji festival. The Tiji festival created a type of institutional moratorium on the topics that women were allowed to discuss within the community, and the women entered a psychosocial moratorium as they capitalized on the opportunity to explore different political and gender narratives and roles through the songs they created and performed (Holland & Skinner, 1995).

### **Identity Crises and a Coherent Self**

Erikson did not equate the resolution of identity crises with the creation of a coherent and unified Self. He instead refers to the 'I,' a complex view of sel(ves) that is not unlike the I-self/Me-self distinction of William James (1892) or G.H. Mead (1934). Consider the following comments by Erikson. (1)

What the "I" reflects on when it sees or contemplates the body, the personality, and the roles to which it is attached for life—not knowing where it was before or will be after—are the various selves which make up our composite Self. There are constant and often shocklike transitions between these selves. (1968, p. 217)

He specifies that different environmental contexts attract reactions from different selves, and attempts to organize our selves are necessary to maintain the 'I.' This is similar to Holland et al.'s, (1998) notion of orchestration—our attempts to make meaning from our multiple voices/selves as we participate within figured worlds. Further, Erikson's illustration of a coherent 'I' and the shock-like transitions between selves appear to be similar to the process of self-authoring. Holland et al. (1998) explain self-authoring as the continuous process of answering and orchestrating multiple voices over time, and through this process how one can develop (although it is by no means a given) a fairly consistent authorial stance, or identity. In accordance with Bakhtin, they also provide caution against any move towards a coherent and unified self by arguing, "Dialogism makes clear that what we call identities remain dependent upon social relations and material contributions. If these relations and material conditions change, they must be 'answered', and old 'answers' about who one is may be undone" (p. 189). In this statement, they provide a reminder that one's identities are never settled. Erikson offers very similar remarks, "Identity is never 'established' as an 'achievement' in the form of a personality armor, or of anything static and unchangeable" (1968, p. 24).

### **Cultural Theories and Erikson's Psychosocial Theory**

If one accepts the arguments that identity formation within Erikson's psychosocial theory is inherently social, on-going, and never completely coherent or unified, then it opens the possibility of a dialogic space for cultural theories and Erikson's psychosocial theory to coexist and potentially inform one another as researchers strive for more complex and informative conceptual frameworks of identity. Holland et al.'s (1998) figured worlds framework provides an example of the ways that such acknowledgement might be mutually informative. Their work is a synthesis of practice theory (Bourdieu, 1977), dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981; Holquist, 1990), and the socio-cultural development of cognitive heuristics (Vygotsky, 1978) as a framework to tease apart and understand the relationship between cultural worlds, power and agency in the formation of identity. However, there are aspects to their framework that are not resolved. For example, they argue that self-authoring is a complex notion of orchestration. They continue to explain that "there is no integrity to self-understanding, but there are degrees of relatedness among the partial selves that respond to sets of our associates, our multiple others" (p. 211-212). Thus, Holland and her colleagues acknowledge that self-authoring (identity formation) happens and provide a basic description. However, they do not provide a theoretical framework about how or why it happens. Instead, they state, "[t]hat is the story [about how self-authoring happens] we will have to leave to another time" (p. 211-212). We believe it is exactly this process that Erikson's psychosocial theory of identity formation addresses. Specifically, Erikson's (1968) theory provides an account of orchestration and identity development such that 'the degrees of relatedness among partial selves' and the process of self-authoring can be conceptualized and understood through the ways that one's ego identity strives to establish a sense of temporal and spatial continuity.

Ego identity is the ego's ability to sustain a sense of continuity in the face of change and is "characterized as the actually attained but forever to-be-revised sense of the reality of the Self within social reality" (Erikson, 1968, p. 211). The ego defines situations and develops constructions of reality while actively managing the Self (Côté & Levine, 2002). The Self is not intended to be a singular orientation, but a compilation of selves that require synthesis/maintenance/orchestration. In particular, Erikson identified four general patterns in which ego identity struggles with issues of coherence. These patterns result over time and are contingent upon how one negotiates

experiences of everyday events and critical periods/crises in relation to norms, values and expectations of the cultural worlds in which they participate. The four general patterns are diffusion/confusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and 'more coherent.' (2) Diffusion/confusion is an ego identity lacking coherence and results from the absence of recognizing or orienting one's Self in alignment with or opposition to, social norms and values. As a result, one is not able to take an authorial stance; for example, a high school student to which nothing matters—grades, family, friends, job, and/or life in general. Foreclosure is a coherent ego identity that results from the absence of an identity crisis and is something imposed *on* the individual by society; for example, a Republican who unproblematically and consistently orients/authors one's Self as such because their family and/or community's commitment to Republican ideology. Institutional and psychosocial moratorium, as we have already described above, is striving for ego identity coherence by exploring different authorial stances. An example is a father struggling with and oscillating between their orientation/authorial stance towards his family, career and community. A more coherent ego identity results from the development of a consistent authorial stance from those explored in moratorium. For example, the father who consistently commits to and authors himself as father and family-oriented person, and that this orientation is present in other areas of their lives such as career and community. Note: this is not to argue that an achieved, coherent ego identity results in a unified or unchanging Self. As stated earlier, Erikson fully acknowledges that the "constant shock like transitions between the selves" (as father, community member, male, American, etc.) are ever-present within the Self of an achieved, coherent ego identity (1968, p. 217). Again, one's ego identity is never finished or "static and unchangeable" (p. 24)—through participation in different figured worlds, events and crises can arise that can create moratorium, and can result in a reorientation of one's ego identity.

In short, Erikson's concept of patterns of ego identity provide a means to examine the different ways that persons orchestrate their multiple selves and create (or not), change, and/or maintain, a consistent authorial stance within their figured worlds of practice. Whereas Holland et al.'s figured worlds framework (1998) acknowledge that self-authoring happens, exploring Erikson's psychosocial theory of ego identity provides opportunity to explore how self-authoring happens.

An additional reason to consider the overlap between cultural theories and Erikson's psychosocial theory of identity formation is that past research has attempted to employ Erikson's theory in a way that ego identity could be measured empirically. Thus, not only does such consideration provide fodder for the discussion and conceptualization of identity formation, but it also provides additional research tools for future studies; tools for research that are predicated on almost 50 years of empirical studies. One of the most well known measures of ego identity is the identity status paradigm created by James Marcia (1966). The identity status paradigm consists of a developmental progression through the identity statuses (in developmental order) of: diffused, foreclosed, moratorium and identity achieved, and is loosely based on Erikson's research. Marcia attempted to assess ego identity through semi-structured interviews to identify an individual's specific identity status. Marcia identified two criteria necessary to determine identity statuses: commitment and crisis. Diffusion is the lack of identity crisis/conflict and lack of commitment. Foreclosure requires a commitment, but lacks conflict. Moratorium is when one is in conflict/crisis without commitment. Identity achievement is a commitment a coherent ideological/society stance after experiencing the conflict during moratorium.

Not only can consideration of Erikson's theory provide additional research concepts and tools for cultural researchers conducting identity research, but cultural theories of identity development can also ensure that Erikson's theory is grounded within the social. Though Marcia's work is often considered a direct representation of Erikson's identity theory, it is not without critique. Specifically, critics such as Côté and Levine (1988) argue that Marcia's identity status paradigm oversimplifies Erikson's theory because it relies too heavily on psychological principles and largely ignores the social aspects of ego identity development. Marcia (1976) himself later noted the inconsistency of his identity status paradigm and ego identity development. He stated, "The problem with the statuses is that they have a static quality and identity is never static, not even for the most rigid Foreclosure" (p. 153). Because of this discrepancy, Côté and Levine (1988) consider the paradigm as an inaccurate theoretical representation of Erikson's identity theory and suggest making ego identity status terms more compatible with Erikson by fully integrating the social and historical aspects that make up Erikson's interdisciplinary perspective. We believe that Holland and colleagues' (1998) figured worlds framework can ground the social-historical aspects needed to restructure Marcia's two most stable and static identity statuses (and the two that are most inconsistent with Erikson): identity achievement and foreclosure (1966). Given suggestions of Côté and Levine (1988), we suggest the following changes.

If Identity achievement is viewed as a process of authoring oneself within a figured world, then orchestration, or the attempt to create a coherent “I” in specific social contexts, may serve as an “achieved” portion of identity. This does not mean that the coherent “I” can not be undone, but in that particular context, at that point in history, it has reached an achieved status. Viewing identity achievement as a dynamic process that may change given the social context can maintain a theory that is more compatible to that of Erikson’s and Holland et al., and may provide a specific, yet comprehensive explanation of identity that incorporate social, historical, and psychological perspectives.

Marcia’s identity foreclosure status has been defined as individuals who rely solely on parental direction in ideology commitment. Erikson (1968), however, described foreclosure as the absence of identity crisis in which moratorium is prematurely ended and is the result of conflict with society. This is similar to Holland et al., (1998) who states, “The ‘identities’ that concern us are ones that trace our participation, especially our agency, in socially produced, culturally constructed activities - what we call figured worlds” (p. 41). If we move away from Marcia’s definition of foreclosure and align it with Erikson’s (1968) and build on Holland et al.’s focus on agency, we may conclude that the abrupt ending of moratorium may prevent individuals from self-authoring and limitations may be placed on the ego’s sense of agency within that figured world. Such definition provides demonstrates the complementary nature of the two theories, and provides a potentially more nuanced understanding of the development of identity and agency within cultural worlds.

## Conclusion

By conceptualizing ego identity development as dependent upon an orchestration of a coherent self within a cultural context, we believe that cultural and psychological researchers can begin to explore the compatibility and overlap of Erikson and Holland et al.’s theories. In particular, we discussed how the ways that ego identity struggles with issues of coherence provides insights into *how* Holland et al.’s concept of self-authoring occurs beyond their claims *that* it occurs. We also discussed ways that Holland et al.’s concept of agency within figured worlds provides insights into the ways that the ego’s sense of agency is constrained and afforded during foreclosure and moratorium through participation in society.

We acknowledge that our essay only touches the surface of these constructs, but see it as a starting point for future discussions of other areas of overlap between cultural and psychological theory. For example, a future area of discussion needs to be the relationship of history-in-person and the resolution of crises. Holland et al. discuss how a person embodies their experiences, as history-in-person, and that one’s history-in-person is that which interacts with the practices and tools of figured worlds and shape the way one figures themselves into those worlds. Embodied history coming to bear on the present is at the heart of Erikson’s theory about the importance of the resolution of crises (i.e., until one is able to historically embody a sense of trust, they will struggle with issues of intimacy later in life). The discussion also needs to be expanded to other theorists. Albert Bandura’s social-cognitive theory (1986), which is one of the most thoroughly researched and well-established theories within social psychology, argues that persons who have experienced success or failure in contextually-specific situations will embody that history of success or failure in their self-perceived expectancies, or self-efficacy, about their future ability in similar situations. Indeed, Bandura explicitly theorizes self-efficacy as a contextually-bound theory of agency. Building on Erikson’s theory, individuals who have obtained a more coherent sense of ego identity may experience higher levels of self-efficacy (agency) in their abilities to achieve in the future and may have a direct impact on the future success of that person. Tying self-efficacy back to history-in-person, we can identify yet another additional layer. In particular, history-in-person may identify the ways that cultural tools and practices, and issues of power affect one’s expectancies and sense of ego coherence, issues that neither psychological theory addresses particularly well.

In this essay we put forth the argument that Erikson’s psychosocial theory is generally regarded as an essentialist theory, and is also confused with Freud’s psychosexual theory. As a result, his theory is often dismissed by cultural researchers. Our intent of this essay was to demonstrate that these essentialist assumptions are a simplification of Erikson’s work and do not acknowledge the centrality of the co-development of the individual and society within his theory. In so doing, we hoped to create a dialogic space that can begin to bridge the gap between cultural, social, historical, and psychological theories for future research to consider a more complex view of identity, agency, power, and cultural practices and tools. Let the conversation begin ...

## Endnotes

- (1) It is important to note that although consistent, Erikson's use of the "I" appears to be more comparable to the Me-self rather than the I-self.
- (2) We use the term 'more coherent' because Erikson never used the widely acknowledged term 'identity achieved.' Consider the following quote from Erikson (1979):

I was somewhat shocked by the frequency with which not only the term identity, but also the other syntonio psycho-social qualities ascribed by me to various stages, were widely accepted as *conscious developmental "achievements"*, while certain dystonic states (such as identity confusion) were to be totally "overcome" like symptoms of failure. Thus, my emphasis in each stage on a built-in and lifelong antithesis ("identity" v. "identity confusion") was given a kind of modern Calvinist emphasis. (p. 24, emphasis added, as cited in Côté & Levine, 1988)

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