Identity: The application of Erikson’s psychosocial theory to explain Tony’s and Jo’s identity, using a thematic analysis of a semi-structured interview

By

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ABSTRACT

The study details an analysis of interviews with couple by two different interviewers. The aim was to question the application of psychosocial theory of identity to explain Tony’s and Jo’s identity. Interview transcripts and video were provided by the Open University. The study employed thematic analysis in which condensation, categorization and interpretation featured. The analysis was evaluated critically in relation to psychosocial theory. Analysis showed that relationships and use of different interviewers can influence the information participants give. The research concluded that Erikson’s psychosocial theory of identity can be applied to study and explain identity from subjective accounts.

Keywords: identity, Erikson’s psychosocial theory, qualitative, identity crisis, relationships.

INTRODUCTION

Identity is a psychosocial concept concerned with understanding who we are and who were are not and what other people think we are. (Phoenix, 2002:45). The concept of identity is however, difficult to understand.

Erikson’s psychosocial theory was developed through clinical and naturalistic observations, ethnography and biographical work. Tests, questionnaires, interviews and analyses were used to tap beliefs and experiences about identity. According to Phoenix (2002:102) these methods seek to gain access to individual identities in their social and historical contexts but such interview data never give a complete picture and vary from time to time, context and relationship with interviewer(s) (Goodley, Lawthom, Tindall, Tobell & Wetherell, 2003). Analysis of inner viewpoints seeks to understand the viewpoints of individuals, commonalities and differences from the researcher’s or outsider viewpoint. Interview data analysis enables generalisations into themes to be done. (Phoenix, 2002).

Erikson described identity as psychosocial because it is influenced by personal and social factors in which memory plays a vital part (Phoenix, 2002). Social and personal identities are interlinked. What happens to individuals depends on what is happening in society during the historical period in which they live. (Phoenix, 2002). Every person has a core and fixed identity characterized by conscious sense of uniqueness and unconscious striving for continuity and solidarity with group ideals. (Erikson, 1968 in Phoenix, 2002). People have a variety of sources of identities but these are integrated into a coherent whole. (Phoenix, 2002).

Identity formation involves the development of a stable, consistent and reliable sense of who we are and what we stand for. However, focus on continuity does not mean that identity never changes once achieved. Identity is a lifelong development process which involves a progressive resolution of conflicts or crises between individual needs and those for the group. Erikson described identity as developing in stages with adolescence as the critical stage when identity is achieved. (Phoenix, 2002). This is because adolescents are at war with themselves if they fail to make commitments to adult roles. However, (Friedman (1999) in Phoenix, 2002) argues that only people with a troubled identity could see identity crisis as universal. Erikson has been criticized for overemphasizing the importance of adolescence as the period when identity is achieved and that adolescence is a time of crisis. The notion of mid-life crisis has become topical. (Phoenix, 2002).

Although Erikson views identity as psychosocial, his work concentrated more on individual, personal aspects of identity than on group identities. (Phoenix, 2002).

In view of the background given, the study sought to answer the following research question: ‘Can Erikson’s psychosocial theory of identity explain Tony’s and Jo’s identities?’
METHOD

The study reported is a thematic analysis of interview transcripts of interview transcripts and video prepared by the Open University. A couple, Tony and Jo were interviewed successively by Jane, a female very well known to the couple and Dan, a male who met the couple for the first time. The video was edited for teaching purposes, and therefore did not show all that happened during the interview. An evaluation interview by Wendy was also examined for the study. For ethical reasons the names of the interviewers cannot be mentioned in full. As a researcher I chose to omit surnames of the participants so that their identities remain anonymous for ethical reasons. I read the transcripts three times initially and watched the video three times as well before deciding on the research topic. I then read the relevant literature on identity before deciding on the research question. Once the research topic was stated, I read the transcript again and annotated sections that dealt with identity (I). I also identified explanatory factors emerging from the interviews (CI=core identity, M=multiple identity, SR= social relations, IC=identity crisis). Annotations were also made from the video to indicate body language during the interviews. This was done to capture both conscious and unconscious behavior that complemented the discussion and reflexive sections of the study. These were the themes around which the analysis was done.

Analysis

I employed thematic analysis for a qualitative analysis of texts and visual interviews. My agenda was to question the practical application of psychosocial theory to explain identity from subjective data. The following themes emerged from the transcripts.

(i) Core and fixed identity

Tony and Jo described themselves as ‘workaholic, a core and shared identity for both. The following quotes illustrate this: (Laughter before responses and Jo listens intently with a smile on the face). They had other shared interests.

“A workaholic to some extent.” (Tony) [line 7], “...we’re both tarred by the same brush of being workaholic. Yes I think we are...” (Jo) [lines 11-12], “...both say you are workaholics so work has been a big thing for both of you…. through the relationship and through your lives.” (Jane) [lines 51-53]. “...there’s a lot of shared experience between the two of you...” (Dan) [lines 100-110]. “We have a lot of interests in common....the things that bring you together...” (Tony) [124-125].

(ii) Conscious sense of individual uniqueness

Asked by Dan whether there was a conflict between individual and shared identity as couples, their responses suggested unique, multiple and diverse identities which they wish to maintain as the following quotes show:

“What the shared identity?” (Jo) [line112], “Not for one, No. “ (Tony) [line113], “Never.” (Jo) [line114]. “…we got married late. And we had our own interests...We’ve encouraged each other to keep up our own interests as much as we possibly could...” (Jo) [line 119-123]. I don’t feel for one minute we are one being...” (Tony) [lines 127]. “We work... towards that (shared identity) I have to say. “ (Tony) [line 131].

Some responses to Jane implied diversity in addition to their “workaholic” identity:

“fairly easy going. I’m accused of manipulating situations. (Tony) [lines 8-9]. “…I’m abrupt, perhaps and more direct. That’s the difference. “ (Jo) [lines 13-14]

(iii) Psychosocial influences on identity

Personal and social factors contributed to their identity as “workaholic.” These include marriage, parents, society and history. The following quotations illustrate influences:
“It’s part of our background.” (Tony) [line 54]
“...it’s the Victorian work ethic... (Tony) [line 54], our parents’ influence... the Methodist attitude. (Jo) [lines 59, 62]. “...Jo's mother was brought up as a Methodist and my father was as well...Methodist principles were fairly entrenched. And yes I think that... makes us to a certain extent the sort of people we are.” (Tony) [lines 59, 62-67].
“...when I left school... you know you’ll either be a nurse... it was so narrow I wanted to do something with biology... But there was no opening...” (Jo) [lines 72-77].

(iv) Identity crisis
To maintain individual identities or take on a shared one, evidence given suggests that Tony and Jo were experiencing some identity crisis or dilemma over their identities as a couple namely, to maintain individual identities or adopt a shared one. The following quotes show:

“we got married late... we had our own interests...” (Tony) [line 116-117]. “We've encouraged each other to keep our own interests as much as we possibly could.” (Jo) [119-120]. “I don't feel for one minute as though we are one being...” (Tony) [127]. “I don't think it's right anyway.” (Jo) [line 129]. “We are working towards that...” (Tony) [line 131].

DISCUSSION
The analysis of the interviews (subjective evidence) has revealed that Tony and Jo have a core and fixed identity as “workaholic” but also have unique and multiple identities influenced by psychosocial influences and were experiencing identity crisis since getting married. These are discussed in relation to Erikson's psychosocial identity theory.

Tony and Jo have a core and fixed identity as “workaholic”, an identity that gives them a sense of stability, consistency and reliability. This agrees with Erikson's view of core identity. (Phoenix, 2002). However, they were also unique and experiencing themselves as individuals in accordance with Erikson’s view of uniqueness of identity. (Phoenix, 2002). Evidence given to Dan suggests identity and diversity though early life experiences were shared. This appears to contradict the concept of core identity (workaholic) given to Jane earlier and is also complementary.

The relationship between the two interviewers and interviewees (part of the social environment) and time lapse between interviews may have influenced the evidence given. Data gathered with a given participant will change over time and place to reflect experiences at the time. For example, different responses, during successive interviews with Jane and Dan (Goodley, Lawthom, Tindall, Tobbell & Wetherell, 2003).

Identity crisis facing Tony and Jo occurred in middle aged as opposed to adolescence suggested by Erikson showing. This also confirms Erikson’s idea that identity is a lifelong development process (Phoenix, 2002). Though information revealed is richer than an experiment would have done interviews like memory never give a complete picture. (Goodley et al. 2003).

The community in which children and adolescents live helps to shape their identity. (Erikson, 1968 in Phoenix, 2002). This equally applies to Tony and Jo whose identity as “workaholic” was shaped by society in which they and their parents lived: Victorian, limited opportunities, religious (Methodist) in early childhood.

Thus, Erikson's psychosocial theory can be used to describe and explain psychological phenomena such as identity from subjective texts and visual materials.

Reflexive analysis
Unlike quantitative research which seeks objectively in order to generalize to a wider context, excluding personal or cultural values of the researcher from the research process, qualitative research seeks to explore subjectivity using participants' personal experiences and their meaning with the researcher in the centre of the whole process. I chose the research topic, did the literature search, outlined the research question, decided on method of analysis and interpreted the evidence to answer the research questions. There is therefore, ownership of the whole research process. The responses to Jane’s and Dan's questions appear to be contradictory and yet also complementary and provide more information than would have been possible had one person interviewed. According to Goodley et al, (2003), repeated interviews can give access to the complexity of identity as it is experienced. However, coming up with literature for the study was time consuming. Literature was chosen to suit research topic and question. I found re-reading transcripts most beneficial. Each time I read the interview transcripts new data on my chosen topic.
surfaced. Word limit of the report made it impossible to include all the salient points. Use of pre-existing data removed the burdensome and time-consuming data collection. On the whole the study was more taxing than the quantitative. Focusing on the differences in the evidence given is part of hermeneutic tradition (qualitative) which aims to describe differences and meanings rather than equivalence. (Meill & Pike, 2003). Thus, using participants’ self-reports and immersing myself in participants’ words, and social relations as children, husband and wife, I managed to uncover details about their identities (Kvale’s ‘miner and traveller’ metaphor) and how Erikson’s psychosocial theory can be applied to explain identity. I used both the humanistic (insider viewpoint) and psychoanalytic (outsider viewpoint) perspectives (Miell et al, 2003) to explore the psychological phenomenon, identity as reported in the interviews. Subjective data such as this can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Future research could replicate with adolescents and/or explore the application of other identity theories.

CONCLUSION

The analysis has demonstrated that it was possible to gain a deeper understanding of individuals from what they said using existing data such as interview transcripts. Furthermore, the use of thematic analysis in which condensation, categorization and interpretation featured enabled revelation of relationships and that the use of different interviewers influenced information participants gave. It further revealed that thematic analysis of qualitative data could reveal more information than a quantitative methodology could. The study therefore, concluded that Erikson’s psychosocial theory could be applied to study and explain identity from subjective accounts.

REFERENCES
