Revisiting Erikson’s Neglected Concepts of Ego-Identity and Self-Identity: Hidden Persuaders in the Twilight Zones of Awareness

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Abstract

Philosophical origins of the identity concept – including James’ concepts of I, ME, and personal identity – are used to frame a detailed examination of Erikson’s concepts of ego-identity and self-identity. Ego-identity was defined in terms of the continuity and quality of experiences related to social reality, and self-identity was defined in terms of the continuity and quality of experiences related to past and present self-images. The minimal correspondence between Erikson’s original work and contemporary identity theory was noted and used to motivate an analysis of Erikson’s identity theory using contemporary dual-process and multilevel systems theories. Although ego-identity and self-identity can be described as dual systems, their relations to ego and I (as well as constructs developed in other identity theories) may be more effectively described by reference to multiple interacting subsystems.

Keywords: personal identity, self-identity, ego-identity, I-self, me-self, self-concept, self-system, personality, multilevel systems

Many identity theories use concepts attributed to Erikson, but few of these theories distinguish explicitly between ego-identity and self-identity. Although the use of one or the other of these terms is common, few use them both, and fewer use them the way Erikson used them. For example, a search of the PsychInfo database for publications between 1982 and 2012 revealed 626 abstracts containing the term ego-identity, 1620 abstracts containing the term self-identity, but only 12 abstracts containing both of these terms. Of these 12, 8 appeared to use these terms interchangeably, and none appeared to use definitions of these terms corresponding to Erikson’s definitions. Clearly, the distinction between ego-identity and self-identity is a neglected topic.

In this review, I begin with a brief introduction to the philosophical background of the identity concept followed by a relatively extensive review of Erikson’s development of the concepts of ego-identity and self-identity. Next, I briefly describe the neglect of these concepts in the contemporary identity literature followed by their interpretation from a multilevel systems theory perspective. The basic idea pursued throughout the review is that relatively complex phenomena associated with the term identity have been both neglected and
grossly misrepresented in contemporary theory and research. The alleged misrepresentation appears to stem mainly from the neglect of both (a) theoretical distinctions that have existed for decades within the psychological and identity literatures and (b) systems theory concepts that have existed for decades within the wider psychological, social, biological, and physical sciences.

In particular, revisiting Erikson’s original thinking and writing on the concepts of ego-identity and self-identity, through the lens of contemporary dual-process models (e.g., Strack and Deutsch, 2004) or multilevel systems theories (e.g., Peck, 2007), revealed insights generated by Erikson that have been either completely overlooked or explicitly rejected by contemporary identity theorists. The primary insight was that self-systems appear to be organized in at least two qualitatively different yet complimentary ways, to which he applied the terms ego-identity and self-identity. A second insight was that these two aspects of the self-system were not to be confused with awareness, or what James (1890) termed the I-self. In other words, as described below, ego-identity and self-identity can be viewed as two distinct results of species-typical human learning processes that tend to exist and function outside of awareness; that is, in Koestler’s (1967) terms:

learning begins to condense into habits..., which means that the rules which control performance are now applied unconsciously. ...so the canons of our manipulative and reasoning skills operate below the level of awareness, or in the twilight zones of awareness. (p. 108)

1. Philosophical Foundations

The question, “What is identity?” may have first become an issue when humans attained the capacity for self-reflective thought (Rychlak, 1997). This evolutionarily recent phenomenon has been hypothesized to reflect changes in how information is processed by the brain and, specifically, in the development of the human capacity to reflect consciously on what Jaynes (1976) referred to as the analog-I (i.e., the currently activated mental representation of the self in context); “the resultant subjective identity enabled the individual to frame a narrative account of his or her behavior” (Rychlak, p. 141). Regardless of the timing of its historical emergence, self-reflective thought appears to create the kinds of human experience that make issues of identity noticeable, interesting, and relevant.

One of the early philosophical inquiries into the nature of identity was conducted by Descartes (1637/1985). Descartes struggled to find – beyond any personal doubt – any substantive reality attributable to his personal psychological existence. His solution to this personal challenge became, for him, a fundamental truth: Cogito, ergo sum (i.e., I think, therefore I am). This basic form of self-awareness is a good starting point for modern attempts to understand identity because it can be viewed as a natural consequence of the capacity for self-reflection and a prerequisite for questions about identity.

About a century later, Hume (1739/1878) argued that because experience could be described best as changing constantly, it would be inaccurate to use the term identity where referring to this experience:

The controversy concerning identity is not merely a dispute of words. For when we attribute identity, in an improper sense, to variable or interrupted objects, our mistake is not confin’d to the expression, but is commonly attended with a fiction, either of something invariable and
uninterrupted, or of something mysterious and inexplicable, or at least with a propensity to such fictions. (p. 536)

In other words, according to Hume, assigning the term identity to something requires that this something remains substantively identical over time; and, because conscious experience appears to be in a constant state of change, Hume argued that it should not be described using the term identity. Descartes used a similar sameness criterion, but he applied it to the fact of his experience as opposed to the continuity of this experience. These distinct foci (i.e., on the fact vs. quality of conscious experience) typified centuries of philosophical debate about the nature of human identity and presaged the need for psychologists to distinguish explicitly between identity processes and identity content, a distinction that figures centrally in understanding Erikson’s concepts of ego-identity and self-identity.

2. Identity According to James

2.1. James’ Self Theory. Over a century after Hume, James (1890) used the distinction between content and process where describing personal identity within the context of his theory of the “Self.” According to James (1890), “the constituents of the Self may be divided into two classes, those which make up respectively—(a) The material Self; (b) The social Self; (c) The spiritual [aka, psychological] Self; and (d) The pure Ego” (p. 292). The material, social, and psychological selves constitute the basic “objects” (i.e., content) of experience, or what he referred to as the “Empirical Me” (or, me selves); whereas the “pure Ego” constitutes the basic “subject” (i.e., process) of experience, or what he referred to as the “I” self.

Assuming the existence of the I-self, an assumption similar to Descartes’ Cogito, ergo sum, James (1890) turned his attention to questions about how the I-self functioned within the stream of consciousness. James described the I-self as “Thought,” or “the present mental state [that] binds the individual past facts with each other and with itself” (p. 338). Despite viewing Thought as a transient phenomenon within the stream of consciousness, James assigned to it some important psychological functions. For example, he argued that experiencing particular me selves was dependent on distinguishing what was me from what was not me; therefore, “there must be an agent of the appropriating and disowning…. It is the Thought to whom the various ‘constituents’ are known. That Thought is a vehicle of choice as well as of cognition” (p. 340). Summarizing his discussion of the Self, James made the following proposal: “Hereafter let us use the words ME and I for the empirical person and the judging Thought” (371).

2.2. James’ Identity Theory. James (1890) distinguished explicitly between Thought (i.e., the process of conscious awareness) and the objects of this Thought (i.e., the contents of conscious awareness). In contrast to Hume, however, James was not prepared to abandon the concept of identity just because the stream of consciousness was in constant flux. Despite acknowledging that each successive Thought constitutes a unique experience, James argued that each Thought embodied in experience all that was present in each previous Thought. This transmission of “whatever it realized as its Self” (p. 339) to each successive experience illustrates how the sense of personal identity corresponds to both a constantly changing stream of content and a Thought that observes this content. James used this differentiated model of the self-system to describe how the I-self – which was not to be confused
with the contents of consciousness – provides the basis for individuals’ sense of personal identity by bringing together, in consciousness, past and present me-self images.

James (1890) maintained that it was the I-self that embodied the pure principle of individual existence – or the "abstract numerical principle of identity" (p. 318) – and it did so through its capacity for subjective synthesis. Subjective synthesis was viewed as a basic function of the I-self and integral to all human experiences; that is, “this sort of bringing of things together into the object of a single judgment is of course essential to all thinking” (331) – “the thinking them is thinking them together” (331). Although the process of subjective synthesis is enough to signify the fact of one’s existence, it cannot achieve what James understood as the sense of personal identity without having as the objects of this synthesis past and present me-self images. When the I-self brings together past and present me-self images, the sense of personal identity as the conscious experience of selfsameness is achieved.

In contrast to the sense of personal identity, James (1890) described the substance of personal identity in terms of me-self objects:

Resemblance among the parts of a continuum of feelings (especially bodily feelings) experienced along with things widely different in all other regards, thus constitutes the real and verifiable “personal identity” which we feel. (James, 1890, p. 336)

This reference to “bodily feelings” referred to his description of the substantive constituents of the psychological self, or our “inner, subjective being.” In short, James viewed the substantive constituents of personal identity as aspects of the ME, regardless of whether or not they were currently within the stream of consciousness. James’ descriptions of these conscious and unconscious contents and processes provides a useful framework for understanding Erikson’s neglected distinction between ego-identity and self-identity.

3. Identity According to Erikson

About a half century after James articulated his self and identity theories, Erikson (1946, 1950, 1956, 1959, 1968, 1970, 1974, 1981/1996) embarked upon an ambitious treatment of the identity concept. Given his psychoanalytic background and desire to advance our understanding of the social context, Erikson tended to address identity questions by reference to the ego and its relation to the environment. He used a wide variety of identity-specific terms (e.g., ego-, self-, personal-, inner-, core-, sexual-, negative-, pseudo-, psychosocial-, historical-, national-, cultural-, group-, and public-identity), yet focused mainly on the concepts of ego-identity (as related to integrating social information), self-identity (as related to integrating self-images), and psychosocial identity (as related to the fit between the self and social reality).

3.1. Erikson’s early thoughts on identity theory. In the opening chapter of “Childhood and Society,” after describing the case of a client who was suffering from what might currently be called posttraumatic stress disorder, Erikson (1950) revealed some of his early thinking about the nature of identity:

What impressed me most was the loss in these men of a sense of identity. They knew who they were; they had a personal identity. But it was as if, subjectively, their lives no longer hung together—and never would again. There was a central disturbance of what I then started to call ego
identity. At this point it is enough to say the this sense of identity provides the ability to experience one’s self as something that has continuity and sameness, and to act accordingly. (p. 38)

Erikson (1950) used the term personal identity where referring to the experience of ‘knowing who (or that) I am,’ or the fact of one’s existence. This definition of personal identity corresponds to both Descartes’ “Cogito, ergo sum” and James’ (1890) “abstract numerical principle of identity” (p. 318). In contrast, Erikson (1950) used the term ego-identity where referring to the experience of self-sameness, or the quality of one’s existence. In doing so, he implicitly aligned his definition of ego-identity with James’ (1890) definition of the sense of personal identity.

In addition to this equation of ego-identity with the ability to experience a sense of continuity, there was also the equation of the sense of continuity with emotional qualities associated with social interactions (e.g., “confidence” or “disturbance”) that further characterized this sense. For example, later in this book, where discussing identity specifically within the context of adolescence, Erikson (1950) provided the following description of ego-identity:

The integration now taking place in the form of ego identity is, as pointed out, more than the sum of the childhood identifications. It is the accrued experience of the ego’s ability to integrate all identifications with the vicissitudes of the libido, with the aptitudes developed out of endowment, and with the opportunities offered in social roles. The sense of ego identity, then, is the accrued sense of confidence that the inner sameness and continuity prepared in the past are matched by the sameness and continuity of one’s meaning for others” (p. 228).

These statements reflect closely similar statements made in 1946 (e.g., p. 363) and reveal one of the main differences between Erikson’s initial conception of identity and those conceptions that had preceded him: the emphasis on the emotional experience characterizing individuals’ particular form of continuity and sameness. Specifically, Erikson extended discussions about human identity beyond questions of mere existence (and of the continuity and sameness of this existence) by raising questions about (a) the “quality” of emotional experience associated with social interactions (i.e., the “sense” of ego-identity), (b) the configuration of identity elements associated with this experience (i.e., the “form” of ego-identity), and (c) the relations between these experiences and the social environment (i.e., psychosocial identity).

3.2. The concept of ego. Clarifying the relevance of the ego concept for Erikson’s identity theory is a complicated task because, like his treatment of the unconscious mind, he tended to take the meaning of this concept for granted. Further, the precise functions and meanings that he assigned to the ego concept changed over the four decades during which he elaborated various aspects of his identity theory. Nevertheless, in order to appreciate better Erikson’s concept of ego-identity, it is useful to keep in mind the basic meaning he assigned to the term ego. For example, in 1946, Erikson defined ego as “the individual center of organized experience and reasonable planning” (p. 359) and “ego space” as consisting of “an internalized pattern” (p. 375) that results from years of previous experiences. In 1950, he provided the following description:

Between the id and the superego,
then, the ego dwells. Consistently balancing and warding off the extreme ways of the other two, the ego keeps tuned to the reality of the historical day, testing perceptions, selecting memories, governing action, and otherwise integrating the individual’s capacities of orientation and planning. (pp. 167-168)

The important point here is that Erikson’s conceptualization of the ego, despite being popularized in terms of the ways that it differed from Freud’s conceptualization, nevertheless corresponded closely to the classic psychoanalytic view of the ego as a gatekeeper, or an executive function, responsible for regulating and integrating experience, behavior, and the contents of conscious awareness.

4. The Core of Erikson’s Identity Theory

Erikson was not insensitive to the implications of terminological confusion for our collective understanding of identity, and in the years following the publication of his 1950 book, he devoted a substantial amount of effort to addressing this confusion. For example, at the beginning of his classic book, “Identity: Youth and Crisis,” Erikson (1968) stated:

   In the twenty years since the term was first employed in the particular sense to be discussed in this book, its popular usage has become so varied and its conceptual context so expanded that the time may seem to have come for a better and final delimitation of what identity is and what it is not. (p. 15)

In an effort to achieve this final delimitation, Erikson (1968) attempted to refine and define his terms. At the same time, however, he readily acknowledged that he used the term identity in a variety of different ways; saying, for example:

   I have tried out the term identity almost deliberately—I like to think—in many different connotations. At one time it seemed to refer to a conscious sense of individual uniqueness, at another to an unconscious striving for a continuity of experience, and at a third, as a solidarity with a group’s ideals. (p. 208)

There remains significant amounts of ambiguity and confusion about the meaning and utility of many of the terms used by Erikson and those who refer to his work. Given his extensive and enduring influence on identity theory and research – and the extent to which contemporary social scientists draw upon this work – it is useful to review carefully exactly what identity is and is not, according to Erikson.

4.1. Elaborating the concepts of personal and ego-identity. Throughout his work, Erikson used the evolving concept of “ego identity” as a cornerstone for explaining important aspects of human development. In his 1968 book – and in his 1956/1959 article, The Problem of Ego Identity – Erikson’s conceptualization of ego-identity was far more elaborated than the conceptualizations found in his 1950 book, “Childhood and Society.” For example, although Erikson barely mentioned the term personal identity in his 1956 article – and did so, there, with no accompanying definition – he provided an explicit definition of this concept in his 1968 book:

   Here it is necessary to differentiate between personal identity and ego identity. The conscious feeling of having a personal identity is based on two simultaneous observations: the perception of the selfsameness and continuity of one’s existence in time and space and the perception of the
fact that others recognize one’s sameness and continuity. (p. 50)

Whereas he had initially associated the term personal identity with recognizing only the fact of one’s existence and the term ego-identity with recognizing the continuity, selfsameness, and quality of this existence; by 1968, he was using the concept of the sense of continuity and sameness with respect to both personal identity (i.e., as the fact of one’s existence over time) and ego-identity (as the quality of this existence over time). In effect, Erikson was now using the term personal identity in almost exactly the same way that James had used this term, leaving the term ego-identity to denote aspects of the human identity experience that had been largely neglected by previous identity theorists.

Similar to his 1950 description of the sense of ego-identity as the “accrued sense of confidence” (p. 228), Erikson began his 1968 description by noting that ego-identity could be understood as an individual’s growing sense of being “capable of integrating effective steps toward a collective future” (p. 49) and described this sense of confidence as developing from individuals’ participation in meaningful mastery experiences (e.g., “through the coincidence of physical mastery and cultural meaning” p. 49). This description of ego-identity reflects Erikson’s general tendency to think about identity in terms of the quality of one’s existence (as opposed to the fact of one’s existence); for example:

What I have called ego identity, however, concerns more than the mere fact of existence; it is, as it were, the ego quality of this existence. Ego identity then, in its subjective aspect, is the awareness of the fact that there is a selfsameness and continuity to the ego’s synthesizing methods, the style of one’s individuality. (p. 50)

This distinction between the fact and quality of one’s existence – and the use of the terms personal identity and ego-identity to differentiate between these two aspects of human experience – further distinguishes Erikson’s views on identity from the views of his predecessors. Additionally, it is important to note the distinction between “ego identity…in its subjective aspect” and ego-identity in its objective aspect; Erikson usually referred to the former as the “sense of ego-identity” (i.e., a process) and to the latter as “ego identity” (i.e., as content).

5. Terminological Diversity in Eriksonian Identity Theory

Understanding Erikson’s view of (the sense of) ego-identity as (the sense of) continuity in the quality (or style) of one’s existence requires a deeper analysis of a wider range of identity concepts used throughout his work. In particular, in the middle of both his 1956 article and 1968 book, Erikson included his most detailed discussions about the various meanings he thought ought to be assigned to the terms ego, ego-identity, self, and self-identity. Here, again, there are changes in his thinking, so I address sequentially the distinctions he made among these terms.

5.1. Identity and self-representations.

Erikson (1956) began by noting that “the term identity covers much of what has been called the self by a variety of workers, be it in the form of a self-concept…, a self-system…, or in that of fluctuating self experiences” (pp. 102-103). Erikson selected Hartmann’s (1950) term, “self-representation” (as contrasted to “object-representation”) to denote that part of the personality system that could be understood as a configuration of identity elements that develops in accord with the generally successful executive functioning of the ego; that is:
In this paper, we are concerned with the *genetic continuity* of such a self-representation—a continuity which must lastly be ascribed to the work of the ego. No other inner agency could accomplish the selective accentuation of significant identifications throughout childhood and the gradual integration of self-images in anticipation of an identity. It is for this reason that I have called identity, at first, ego identity. (p. 103)

This 1956 statement is critical for clarifying (a) what Erikson meant by the term identity, (b) what he meant by the term ego, (c) why he used the term ego-identity, and (d) how these terms relate to the terms self-representation, self-concept, and self-system.

First, to the extent that the term identity, as used by Erikson, refers to what many psychologists have termed *self-representation*, we can link Erikson’s identity theory to volumes of other theoretical and empirical work. Second, to the extent that we understand Erikson’s selection of the term ego-identity as driven by his desire to emphasize the agentic role of the ego in selecting, synthesizing, and organizing self-representations, we are in a position to understand how Erikson’s initial (but not final) conceptualization of the sense of ego-identity is related to the concept of identity as a configuration of self-representations that have been successfully selected, synthesized, and organized by the active agency of the ego. This conceptualization of a substantive identity configuration—characterized by developmental continuity—was consistent with Erikson’s original statements about ego-identity reflecting the quality of one’s existence. Finally, note the implicit distinction between ego-identity as a substantive identity configuration (i.e., objective content) and the *sense of* ego-identity as conscious experience arising from the quality of this configuration (i.e., a subjective process).

5.2. *Ego ideal versus ego-identity.* Erikson (1956) used the concept of ego ideal to clarify what he meant, and did not mean, by the term ego-identity. Whereas the ego ideal was believed to be centrally involved with monitoring the moral quality of cultural norms, ego identity…would in comparison be even closer to social reality in that as a subsystem of the ego it would test, select, and integrate the self-representations derived from the psychosocial crises of childhood. It could be said to be characterized by the more or less actually attained but forever-to-be-revised sense of the reality of the self within social reality. (pp. 104-105)

Hence, in contrast to the concept of personal identity, Erikson elevated the concept of ego-identity to the status of being a subsystem of the ego. In doing so, however, he complicated our task of differentiating among ego, ego-identity, and self-identity; that is, Erikson claimed here that the ego and ego-identity shared at least some of the same agentic properties, one of which was to integrate self-representations.

5.3. *Ego, ego-identity, and self.* There are several complex theoretical issues implicit in Erikson’s 1956 identity theory that remain to be addressed. None of these issues is more central to understanding Erikson’s contribution to identity theory than the nature of the relation between ego and ego-identity. Erikson referred to the substance of ego-identity in terms of identity contents, in some places, and in terms of ego functions, in other places. These divergent tendencies raise some challenging questions about whether the substance and functions of ego-identity are
isomorphic with the substance and functions of ego, whether the substance of ego-identity might be construed adequately as a configuration of self-representations, and whether there are no substantive differences between the configuration of ego-identity and the basis of ego functions.

In contrast to James’ formulation, Erikson (1956) did not provide a systematic analysis of the four basic ways that identity appears to manifest within the human being; that is, the subjective and objective manifestations of identity contents and processes. Nevertheless, as evidenced in the following quotation, questions about these diverse manifestations were apparently beginning to become salient for Erikson as he wrestled with the various meanings that could be assigned to the terms self, ego, and ego-identity:

In using the word self in the sense of Hartmann’s self-representation, one opens the whole controversy to a radical consideration. One could argue that it may be wise in matters of the ego’s perceptive and regulative dealings with its self to reserve the designation “ego” for the subject, and to give the designation “self” to the object. The ego, then, as a central organizing agency, is during the course of life faced with a changing self which, in turn, demands to be synthesized with abandoned and anticipated selves. (p. 105)

In these terms, the ego-as-subject appears similar to James’ “I-self,” and the self-as-object appears similar to James’ “me self.” The ego, as subject, is responsible for bringing identity elements (i.e., the “selves”) together into a coherent whole. The resulting configuration will engender a sense of ego-identity that is characterized by feelings of coherence and efficacy. In other words, despite questions this position raises about the relation between self-reflective thought and ego functions (discussed below), Erikson seemed to be arguing that (in “Jamesian” terms) the subjective I-self (ego) senses and synthesizes the objective me self (ego-identity), and positive feelings follow to the extent that this me-self has been well-configured.

This distinction between the ego-as-subject and the self-as-object represents a significant refinement in Erikson’s thinking about ego-identity because it provided a conceptual framework that worked against the tendency to equate the concepts of ego and ego-identity as unconscious, integrative functions. Whereas he had previously assigned the subjective, agentic function of integrating socially-based self-representations to ego-identity and not to the ego (see his 1956, pp. 104-105 quote, on my p. 8), he was now in a position to retain the traditional view of ego as agent and define ego-identity in terms of substantive identity content.

5.4. Into the terminological thicket. After distinguishing between the ego-as-subject and the self-as-object, Erikson (1956) maintained the distinction between ego (as subject) and ego-identity (as object) by pointing out that the ego, in its capacity as a “central organizing agency” (p. 105), would need to integrate (in addition to the abandoned and anticipated selves) the “body self” (by which he meant “the [physical] attributes of the organism;” p. 105), the “ideal self” (by which he meant the objects of the ego ideal), and the “ego-identity” (by which he appears to have meant the previously integrated identity elements). Erikson dispensed with using the term ego-identity as subjective agent by explicitly identifying the ego as an agent and the ego-identity as one set of elements among several other kinds of identity elements.
However, immediately after having successfully distinguished between ego-as-subject and self-as-object – and, in the process, having helped to clarify the distinction between ego and ego-identity – Erikson (1956) then proposed the following distinction between ego-identity and self-identity:

What could consequently be called the self-identity emerges from all those experiences in which a sense of temporary self-diffusion was successfully contained by a renewed and ever more realistic self-definition and social recognition. Identity formation thus can be said to have a self-aspect, and an ego aspect. It is part of the ego in the sense that it represents the ego’s synthesizing function on one of its frontiers, namely, the actual social structure of the environment and the image of reality as transmitted to the child during successive childhood crises. (p. 105)

In the process of distinguishing between self-identity and ego-identity, Erikson seemed to be contradicting his previous distinction between the ego-as-subject and ego-identity-as-object by assigning to the latter an agentic, synthesizing function in relation to the social world. However, he provided no further elaboration on these distinctions in his 1956 publication. Rather, Erikson (1956) concluded his discussion by saying only,

until the matter of ego vs. self is sufficiently defined to permit a terminological decision, I shall use the bare term identity in order to suggest a social function of the ego which results, in adolescence, in a relative psychosocial equilibrium essential to the tasks of young adulthood. (p. 105)

In summary, after having reflected on the possible relations among the concepts of ego, self, and identity – and the implications these terms might have for understanding the psychological dynamics associated with human development in context – Erikson left unresolved (in 1956) several theoretical issues. Whereas he seemed, at one point, to have resolved the distinction between ego and ego-identity – that is, by defining the former as an active agent (i.e., process) and the latter as an identity element (i.e., content) – he subsequently reverted to the position that ego-identity, as a social information synthesizing function, was a subsystem of the ego. Consequently, the viability of Erikson’s proposed distinction between ego-as-subject and self-as-object, and the implications this distinction might have for our understanding of the ego-identity concept, remained undeveloped.

6. Advanced Eriksonian Identity Theory

Although changes in Erikson’s conceptualizations of identity between his 1956 and 1968 publications were often subtle, they are important for at least two reasons. First, using one or the other of these sources as a basis for understanding or extending Erikson’s identity theory results in perpetuating one or another of the meanings of the various terms he used. Second, discussing these different meanings will help illuminate some of the distinctions that may be important for advancing contemporary identity theory.

6.1. Revisiting the terminological thicket.

After reminding us that he had been exploring various possible meanings of the term identity (as indicated by his 1968 statements on p. 208, quoted on my p. 6) – and having further commented that he was about to address “questions which it took a decade to formulate” (p. 208) – Erikson (1968) explained that he would now “come
back once more to the concept of ego because when I first reported on the subject… I called what I was exploring Ego-Identity” (p. 208). The first notable change in Erikson’s thinking is related to the distinction between ego-as-subject and self-as-object. Whereas he had suggested the utility of, but did not apply, this distinction in 1956, by 1968 he had omitted explicit reference to this distinction and had begun to incorporate it directly into his thinking and definitions. For example, whereas in 1956 he had described ego-identity as a subsystem of ego that had agentic properties, Erikson avoided this tendency in 1968 by using the phrase, “what I once called ego identity would… test, select, and integrate” (p. 210, italics added, to be compared with his 1956, pp. 104-105 statement, quoted on my p. 8). Where he once used the term ego-identity, he now used only the term ego, thereby instantiating clearly the distinction between ego-as-subject and ego-identity-as-object.

Erikson (1968) then extended this line of thinking by incorporating the subject-object distinction into his discussion about the differences between ego-identity and self-identity. In contrast to the 1956 version of this discussion, Erikson now made it clear that he viewed both ego-identity and self-identity as identity-objects (i.e., configurations of identity elements) and as products of the ego’s synthesizing activities. This clarification provided a partial solution to that previously troubling “terminological decision” pertaining to “the matter of ego vs. self” (i.e., by treating the former as subject and the latter as object) and allowed Erikson to focus on the distinction that seemed to have driven him to use the term self-identity in the first place; that is, the distinction between synthesizing information related to social reality versus synthesizing information related to self-images. Erikson described this distinction in the following terms:

Ego-Identity, then, is the result of the synthesizing function on one of the ego’s frontiers, namely, that “environment” which is social reality as transmitted to the child during successive childhood crises…. One can then speak of ego identity when one discusses the ego’s synthesizing power in the light of its central psychosocial function, and of self-identity when the integration of the individual’s self- and role-images are under consideration. (p. 211)

Erikson did not elaborate further on these descriptions in his 1968 book. Nevertheless, he had finally provided a relatively clear description of the terms ego-identity and self-identity as configurations of two different kinds of objects in the personality or self-system, both of which were distinguishable from the synthesizing functions of the ego. Further, the term ego-identity was now being used where referring to the continuity and quality of experiences related to the social world, and the term self-identity was being used where referring to the continuity and quality of experiences related to past and present self-images.

Despite this important yet neglected achievement, defining elemental components of the overall identity configuration with respect to their origins on the “self” and “social” frontiers introduced a variety of other challenging questions. For example, do the identity elements generated by these distinct ego functions differ structurally, functionally, or in some other important way(s)? If so, are we to construe self-identity elements as only “self” images and ego-identity elements as only “social” images? Whatever Erikson’s true intentions were, one of the central points of the current analysis is to reveal the extent to which contemporary identity theories fail to build directly on Erikson’s identity theory by, for example, failing to use Erikson’s
terms ego-identity and self-identity in the same way Erikson used these terms.

6.2. Discovering lost treasure. At this point, we have arrived at what appears to be the fruition of about twenty years of Erikson’s thinking about the many difficult issues associated with the concept of identity. In what appeared in his 1968 book to be a completely new addition to his identity theory – under the heading “I, My Self, and My Ego” (p. 216) – Erikson attempted to integrate basic theoretical formulations from psychodynamic psychology with theoretical formulations emerging from a wide variety of other areas of psychological investigation. The primary conceptual unit that Erikson added here to his previous identity theory was the concept of I (which had been, up to this point, notably absent).

Erikson (1968) had not completely neglected the concept of I – having referred to it at least once as “an observing center of awareness and of volition” (p. 135) – but he certainly had not integrated this concept into his theories of personality or identity. He attempted to clarify his conceptualization of the I, and its relation to ego and identity, by way of two observations. First, he noted that autistic children find it difficult or impossible to grasp the meaning of the concepts “I” and “You” and, hence, do not enjoy the experience of a coherent I. Erikson then observed that

work with deeply disturbed young people confronts the worker with the awful awareness of the patients’ incapacity to feel the “I” and the “You” that are cognitively present…. No other affliction makes it equally clear that ego psychology alone cannot encompass certain human problems which so far have been left to poetry or metaphysics. (p. 217)

In this case, Erikson suggested that the I exists (i.e., is “cognitively present”) whether or not one is able to “feel” it – which implies that Erikson believed that the I must have some basis in reality beyond our capacity to feel or formulate a conscious idea about it.

This perspective is similar to the one Erikson initially articulated in reference to the disconnection between ego-identity and personal identity; that is, the latter can exist despite the status of the former. This realization appears to have helped motivate the intensive examination of identity that eventually lead Erikson to the conclusion that ego-identity contents exist as objects within the personality system, despite the extent to which the misconfiguration of these contents engenders disturbing experiences (or what he termed, in 1950, “the loss…of a sense of identity” [p. 38]). The point, in both cases, is that the process of conscious experience must be distinguished from the typically non- and pre-conscious content that gives rise to this experience. In short, whereas Erikson began by taking a Jamesian approach to understanding I (i.e., by refusing to assign any substantive reality to it, beyond our thought about it), he moved further from this position as he approached his discussion about how the I relates to ego and identity.

6.3. Taking the “I” seriously. Erikson appears to have been partially motivated to address these somewhat esoteric issues in an effort to reconcile psychodynamic theory with the mainstream of “non-dynamic” psychological theory. Concepts like self, motive, trait, attitude, and value had been discussed increasingly frequently for years and were replacing, rather than complementing, psychodynamic concepts like id, ego, and superego. Being a clinician, and having been trained as a psychoanalyst, Erikson had a deep appreciation of the dynamics of emotion
and consciousness. Consequently, notwithstanding his belief in the similarity between the concepts of I and ego, and as evidenced by the following comments, Erikson (1968) was not prepared to abandon the concept of ego (which embodied most of what he seemed to think was important about both emotions and consciousness) in favor of the concept of I (which, notwithstanding James’ seminal contributions) had remained enigmatic within most areas of investigation:

Only after we have separated the “I” and the selves from the ego can we consign to the ego that domain which it has had ever since it came from neurology into psychiatry and psychology in Freud’s earliest days: the domain of an inner “agency” safeguarding our coherent existence by screening and synthesizing, in any series of moments, all the impressions, emotions, memories, and impulses which try to enter our thought and demand our action, and which would tear us apart if unsorted and unmanaged by a slowly grown and reliably watchful screening system. (p. 218)

Erikson clearly wanted to integrate the concept of I into his theories of personality and identity. However, he also wanted to achieve this integration without equating the ego with the I and while retaining the concept of ego-as-agent.

The solution he used to solve this problem, in 1968, was to divest from the ego the one aspect of the Jamsian I about which psychodynamic theories had contributed relatively little. Specifically, Erikson (1968) implicitly relegated the I concept to the domain of awareness, thus allowing him to assign the agentic functions to the ego concept (functions, not incidentally, that James had assigned to the I). The evidence for this can be inferred mainly from Erikson’s failure to discuss explicitly the agentic features of the I and from statements where he associated the I concept with the concept of awareness. For example, Erikson argued that “what the ‘I’ reflects on when it sees or contemplates the body, the personality, and the roles to which it is attached for life…are the various selves which make up our composite Self” (p. 217) and that “one should be really decisive and say that the ‘I’ is all-conscious, and that we are truly conscious only insofar as we can say ‘I’ and mean it” (p. 218).

By urging us not to use the term ego when referring to the self as an object, Erikson instantiated again his ego-as-subject versus self-as-object formulation. In this case, however, he also instantiated the idea of I as subject, suggesting that there are two different kinds of “subjects,” hence more than one kind of subject-object distinction, operating within the self-system (cf. Peck, 2007).

6.4. A view from the highest peak. In subsequent publications (e.g., 1974, 1981/1996), Erikson delved deeper into the nature and meaning of I. Unfortunately, he did not accompany these discussions with any explicit discussion about how the I
relates to or differs from the terms personal identity, self-identity, or ego-identity. In fact, surprisingly, he did not use the terms self-identity or ego-identity at all and made only passing reference to the term personal identity; instead, where he mentioned it at all, he used the bare term identity. Nevertheless, he did discuss the relation between the I and the ego; and, insofar as ego (for Erikson) was so centrally related to identity, it is worth considering further how Erikson reconciled the concepts of I and ego.

In contrast to James’ treatment of the I concept, Erikson nowhere attempted an explicit definition of the term I. Erikson (1981/1996) tended to vary unsystematically between describing the I in terms of the process of conscious experience and substantive contents of the human mind. In addition to arguing that the human experience of I is “a vital phenomenon that lies on the borderline of psychology and of theology” (p. 293), he also described the I as “a center so numinous that it amounts to a sense of being alive” (p. 284); “that most obvious and most elusive endowment of creatures with consciousness” (p. 293); and a “growing, maturing, observing” (p. 291) psychological characteristic.

According to Erikson (1981/1996), Freud focused on the way “consciousness” could be used “in the process of calling to mind what...had become denied and repressed” (p. 316); in these terms, the I was associated more with awareness (e.g., insight) than with agency (e.g., synthesizing). Rather than being “sidetracked” by the “age-old claim to a soul” (p. 316), Freud “emphasized what he called the human Ich—the right word for I in German, but always (and sometimes questionably) translated into English as ‘ego’” (p. 316). However, this human I, “the Ich as ego” was viewed by Freud as “a primarily unconscious inner organization of experience on which human adaptation and sanity depend” (p. 316). Given the extent to which the terms ego and I were equivalent for Freud, and used to represent an aspect of mind described as an unconscious inner organization (of something), it is not surprising that Erikson found it difficult to integrate into his identity theory the ego and the I as two distinct concepts. Erikson’s (1968 and 1981) implicit differentiation between I as the seat of awareness and ego as the seat of agency may have seemed to him to be a reasonable compromise.

7. Summary of Erikson’s Identity Theory

Erikson extended the definition of “identity” beyond the bounds of prior definitions by focusing on the quality of human experience rather than the fact of this experience. In doing so, he abandoned the familiar territory of personal identity – as “I exist” – so that he could explore more freely some uncharted regions of identity; such as, “I exist in relation to others.” Although he preferred to think in terms of identity processes (e.g., experiencing psychosocial equilibrium), Erikson described two basic types of identity content: ego-identity and self-identity. Despite some significant changes over time in Erikson’s thinking, he ultimately differentiated between the content of ego-identity and self-identity by reference to the two “frontiers” upon which the ego functioned in its gatekeeper capacity: the external realm of social environments and the internal realm of self-images. For Erikson, the ego-as-agent is responsible, on both frontiers, for monitoring, selecting, and synthesizing identity elements into a coherent configuration.

In the waning years of his career, Erikson went on to explore the concept of I, particularly as it relates to the concept of ego. In an effort to bring the best of
psychodynamic and psychological theory together into a single framework for understanding human identity, Erikson complemented his theory of ego- and self-identity as objects governed by the activities of ego-as-agent by incorporating the concept of I as the seat of awareness about, and reflectivity on, the ego-identity and self-identity objects. In this way, Erikson provided a sketch of human identity that included reference to the four primary quadrants described by James in terms of the subjective and objective features of psychological content and processes. Unfortunately, after developing his concept of I, Erikson did not integrate this concept back into his core theory of identity and psychosocial development. Consequently, it is not entirely clear how Erikson would have us understand the combined set of subjects (i.e., “I” & ego) and objects (i.e., self-identity and ego-identity) as an integrated system. Nevertheless, the holistic, integrative model implied by this combined set of subjects and objects suggests a useful framework for evaluating contemporary identity theories.

8. Contemporary Neglect of Erikson’s Concepts of Self-Identity and Ego-Identity

Despite their frequent use, the terms ego-identity and self-identity are seldom defined explicitly or how Erikson defined them. For example, the identity status paradigm is a useful developmental perspective that has obviously stimulated an enormous amount of research (Berzonsky & Adams, 1999), but this approach invariably neglects the distinction between ego-identity and self-identity as described by Erikson. For example, Marcia (2006) defined ego-identity as “an individually-constructed sense of who one is, based upon who one has been, and who one can realistically imagine oneself to be in the future” (p. 585), a definition that would appear to be more appropriately applied to the term self-identity than ego-identity. However, rather than using Erikson’s concept of self-identity, Marcia (2006) defined self in terms of “the ongoing awareness that one is, that one exists” (p. 585). This definition sounds like Descartes’ concept of Cogito, ergo sum and James’s concept of the abstract numerical principle of identity, neither of which corresponds very closely to Erikson’s concept of self-identity.

Berzonsky (1994) focused on conceptualizing various cognitive processing styles individuals use to construct their “self-identity” (p. 453) but neither explicitly defined the term self-identity nor described it in terms of Erikson’s work. Rather, Berzonsky described self-identity in terms of individual-level attributes characterized by the concepts of personal identity, social identity, and collective identity as popularized in the social psychological literature. In later work, Berzonsky (2005) omitted the term self-identity, linked the concept of ego-identity to James’ concept of I (or, “self-as-knewer,” p. 129), and defined ego-identity as “how individuals manage to construe themselves as being reflexive, purposive, volitional, thinking, self-regulating individuals” (p. 129). Similarly, Schwartz’s (2001) review of neo-Eriksonian identity theory failed to include a single mention of Erikson’s concept of self-identity.

Côté and Levine (1987, 2002) described an integrative interdisciplinary framework for addressing individual- and context-level aspects of identity and their interactions. However, instead of focusing explicitly on ego-identity and self-identity as described by Erikson, Côté and Levine (1987) defined ego-identity in terms of “self-concepts” (p. 275) and neglected completely the concept of self-identity. Similarly, Côté and Levin (2002) focused on the terms personal identity, social identity, and ego-identity; but these terms – as defined by either them
or Goffman (1963) – do not map very well onto Erikson’s definitions of these terms nor to Erikson’s definitions of ego-identity and self-identity. For example, Côté and Levine (2002) defined personal identity as “concrete aspects of individual experience rooted in interactions” (p. 8) but Erikson, who rarely used the term persona identity, referred to it as the conscious sense of the fact (1950) and continuity (1968) of one’s existence. Côté and Levine (2002) defined social identity as “the individual’s position(s) in a social structure” (p. 8), but Erikson rarely, if ever, used the term social identity. Finally, although Erikson (1968) defined the sense of ego-identity not in terms of the subjective fact of continuity but in terms of the subjective quality of this continuity, Côté and Levine (2002) defined ego-identity in one place as the “subjective sense of continuity” (p. 8) and in other places as “a sense of ‘self-self’ continuity” (p. 16) and the “psychological sense of temporal-spatial continuity” (p. 16). Again, recall that Erikson avoided defining ego-identity in terms of self-images; rather, he used the term self-identity where referring to self-images.

In summary, contemporary uses and extensions of Erikson’s identity theory tend to neglect completely the distinctions and interrelations between ego-identity and self-identity that Erikson labored so diligently to formalize. Where contemporary investigators do make such reference, for example by using a term such as ego-identity, the correspondence between the contemporary and historical definitions of these concepts tends to be absent or rarely specified in enough detail to provide a basis for evaluating either the extent of correspondence or the extent to which the contemporary definitions can be properly viewed as extensions of the original definitions. Consequently, Eriksonian identity theory could be advanced considerably by attending more rigorously to the definitions of, and distinctions between, ego-identity and self-identity or, at minimum, by stating explicitly why such definitions and distinctions are omitted.

9. Moving Eriksonian Identity Theory Forward

Erikson’s identity theory – and, in particular, the concepts of ego-identity and self-identity – differed, in part, from James’ identity theory by focusing explicitly on the quality of experience and the inner and outer sources of identity-related information that stand in relation to the ego and the I. Erikson highlighted the compelling idea that there is a fundamental distinction between relatively-enduring self-system content generated through (a) encounters with external social reality and (b) reflections on internal self-images. Consequently, one way to distinguish between ego-identity and self-identity might be to define ego-identity in terms of individuals’ beliefs about the world and self-identity in terms of individuals’ beliefs about their self. This would probably be a step in the right direction simply because it would provide a contemporary theoretical basis for using and extending Erikson’s concepts of ego-identity and self-identity.

9.1. Dual Systems. Given that Erikson’s (1968) description of self-identity sometimes included reference to role-images, which suggest beliefs about the world, and given that his description of ego-identity invokes the concept of psychosocial fit, which suggests beliefs about the relations between the self and world, the world-theory versus self-theory interpretation of ego-identity and self-identity may be too blunt. For example, the relatively simple world-theory versus self-theory interpretation of ego-identity and self-identity reflects the standard ‘single-system’ model by assuming a single form of representational structure (e.g., beliefs)
in which different subsets of structure are distinguished according to whether their referents point to objects within the self versus social system.

An alternative way to distinguish between ego-identity and self-identity might be to define them in terms of two distinct information-processing systems, each of which might include reference to the self and world. Despite the neglect of the ego- and self-identity concepts in contemporary identity theories, the idea that these two conceptually distinct aspects of the personality system implicate two different forms of information processing is consistent with a growing body of theoretical and empirical work on “dual-process” models (Barnard, Duke, Byrne, & Davidson, 2007; Chaiken & Trope, 1999; Epstein, 1990, 2003, 2010; Evans, 2008; Lieberman, 2003; McClelland, Koestner, & Weinberger, 1989; Sloman, 2014; Smith & DeCoster, 2000; Strack and Deutsch, 2004).

Classic concepts reflecting a dual-process perspective include Wundt’s (1897) concepts of impulsive versus voluntary behavior; Freud’s (1911/1953) concepts of primary process and secondary process thinking; and Jung’s (1923) concepts of holistic and analytic information processing. Contemporary concepts reflecting a dual-process perspective include Barnard et al.’s (2007) implicational and propositional meaning; Epstein’s (2003) experiential and rational information processing systems; Lieberman’s (2003) reflexive and reflective judgment processes; and Strack and Deutsch’s (2004) impulsive and reflective information processing systems. In each of these examples, the former system has been described as nonconscious, spatial, affective, imagistic, procedural, holistic, fast processing, slow learning, or slow to change, whereas the latter system has been described as conscious, linear, rational, symbolic, analytic, declarative, rule-based, slow processing, fast learning, or quick to change (cf. Evans, 2008; Epstein, 2003).

Although dual-process theories are absent generally from the identity literature and specifically from the neo-Eriksonian identity literature, the vast majority of the descriptive attributes associated with these two systems map fairly well on to Erikson’s concepts of ego-identity and self-identity. For example, self-identity can be defined in terms of Epstein’s (1990, 2003, 2010) rational system – in which past, present, and future self-in-world images are integrated consciously and deliberately – and ego-identity can be defined in terms of Epstein’s experiential system, in which self-in-world images are integrated nonconsciously and automatically. Contemporary identity theories sorely need these kinds of theoretical applications, particularly where attempting to address the complexity of Erikson’s personality and identity theories.

9.2. Multiple Systems. In addition to these neglected yet well-established possibilities, there is the equally compelling possibility that assuming only two different systems of information processing or representation is “oversimplified and misleading” (Evans, 2008, p. 270; cf. Barnard et al., 2007; Deutsch & Strack, 2006; Peck, 2007). Various features of many dual-system theories can be combined to further elaborate each of the two traditional systems in terms of several more specific subsystems. For example, rather than viewing the rational system (Epstein, 2003), or the reflective system (Deutsch & Strack, 2006), as a single form of representation or processing, it may be useful to distinguish among symbolic representations defined as relatively-enduring propositional knowledge structures existing in long-term memory, phenomenological representations defined as relatively-fleeting knowledge structures existing in working memory, and
awareness defined similarly to how James (1890) defined I as Thought and Erikson (1981/1996) defined I as the “most elusive endowment of creatures with consciousness” (p. 293) (cf. Peck, 2007, 2009; Roeser & Peck, 2009). In these terms, the complete description of the structures and functions constituting the rational or reflective system requires reference to symbolic representations (e.g., beliefs about my past, present, and future) that have been activated as phenomenological representations (e.g., by exposure to environmental stimuli) and then re-activated (or not) by selectively focusing awareness on some of these representations but not others.

With these distinctions among three aspects of the rational or reflective system, we can (a) define self-identity as the subset of symbolic representations whose referents are past, present, and future self-images (i.e., beliefs about me); (b) define the sense of self-identity as the conscious experience generated by past and present symbolic self-images that have been activated simultaneously as phenomenological representations and become objects of awareness; and (c) distinguish self-identity from I, ego-identity (defined below), and ego (partially, as discussed below). For example, in these terms, the sense of personal identity as defined by James (1890) and the sense of self-identity as defined by Erikson (1968) are two terms referring to the same phenomenon: the conscious experience of selfsameness and continuity generated specifically by the reflective relation between I and that subset of Me defined as phenomenologically-activated past, present, and future symbolic self-images (Peck, 2007).

Similarly, rather than viewing the experiential system (Epstein, 2003), or the impulsive system (Deutsch & Strack, 2006), as a single form of representation or processing, it may be useful to distinguish among several qualitatively distinct forms of representation or processing. Specifically, it may be useful to distinguish among (a) symbolic representations with relatively low activation thresholds (e.g., relatively accessible to awareness), (b) symbolic representations with relatively high activation thresholds (e.g., relatively inaccessible to awareness), and (c) iconic representations defined as relatively-enduring, non-symbolic knowledge structures (i.e., sensory-affective-motor schemas) existing in long-term memory as part of the me-self system (cf. Peck, 2007; Roeser, Peck, & Nasir, 2006). The concept of iconic representation is similar to Barnard et al.’s (2007) implicational meaning, Epstein’s (2003) experiential system, Deutsch and Strack’s (2006) impulsive system, Bowlby’s (1988) working model, Baldwin’s (1992) relational schema, and Izard’s (2009) emotion schema. In these terms, we can (a) define ego-identity as iconic self-in-world representations that are automatically differentiated and integrated in response to environmental stimuli (cf. Case, 1991; Fischer, 1980; and Piaget, 1954) and (b) define the sense of ego-identity as the conscious experience generated by iconic self-in-world representations that are activated as phenomenological representations and become objects of awareness. We could also extend this definition of ego-identity by including also the set of all symbolic beliefs about the world (e.g., the social frontier) and the set of all cross-level associations that may integrate or compartmentalize various subsets of these iconic and symbolic world representations.

The remaining construct, Erikson’s concept of the ego, is the most difficult to define. In his final analysis, Erikson considered the ego and I as separate aspects of the personality system. The multilevel systems model described here suggests some ways of building on this view by distinguishing...
the observing I (i.e., awareness) from the screening and synthesizing ego (e.g., subsets of me-self content that filter threatening information from awareness). Distinguishing I from the screening and synthesizing ego, rather than lumping these qualities together within the I as did James (and as do many who use organismic developmental theory, developmental systems theory, and many other otherwise advanced approaches to understanding human functioning and development) may help clarify some of the subtler aspects of the overall self/identity system.

Further, given Côté and Levine’s (2002) observation that “Erikson’s concept of the ego appears to subsume many of the traits and capacities investigated in personality theory and social psychology” (p. 104), it may be useful to conceptualize the distinctions among ego, I, ego-identity, and self-identity by means of subtraction, or what ego is not. For example, despite Erikson’s explicit objections to referring to the ego as object (see quote on my page 13), to the extent that symbolic self-images (i.e., self-identity) and iconic self-in-world images (i.e., ego-identity) can be viewed together as “a self-regulatory system which functions to direct attention, filter or process information, manage impressions, and select appropriate behaviours” (Adams & Marshall, 1996, p. 433), it may be wise to restrict our definition of ego specifically to the screening function, by which environmental input is selected and synthesized but not re-represented phenomenologically as objects of awareness. However, given that such a screening function can be conceptualized in terms of specific configurations of structured iconic and symbolic content – that is, some form of higher-order latent inhibition conceived as “a preconscious gating mechanism in the brain, screening from conscious awareness ongoing stimuli earlier experientially established as task-irrelevant” (Block, 2010, p. 18) or, in this case, painful or threatening – it may be possible and useful to define the term ego in terms of such cross-level identity configurations.

In summary, Erikson’s (1968) descriptions of ego, I, ego-identity, and self-identity can be organized by reference to an extension of dual-systems approaches involving multiple interacting subsystems characterized by distinct, level-specific, units of analysis. For example, during the early years of his work on identity theory (i.e., 1946 to 1959), Erikson tended to describe ego-identity at the phenomenological level of representation by referring to it as the quality of emotional experience. By 1968, he had begun describing ego-identity at the iconic level of representation by referring to “the result of the synthesizing function…[in relation to] that ‘environment’ which is social reality” (p. 211). In almost every case, Erikson (1968) described self-identity at the symbolic level (e.g., by referring to “the integration of the individual’s self- and role-images” [p. 211]).

One of the many implications of this analysis is that ego-identity and self-identity, as defined by Erikson, constitute two distinct aspects of the overall self/identity system that function as “hidden persuaders” (Koestler, 1967, p. 108) in relation to individuals’ conscious awareness and behavior. In other words, as relatively-enduring and semi-autonomous internal representations that exist and function largely outside of awareness, ego-identity and self-identity function automatically to select available sensory and interoceptive information for further processing. This selective processing, in turn, provides the basis for both (a) the contents of conscious experience, hence the raw material upon which experiences of continuity depend, and (b) behavioral responses to ongoing events, regardless of the extent to which these response are also phenomenological
objects of awareness. Viewed in this way, ego-identity and self-identity provide the basis for, but should not be confused with, the *sense* of identity nor any form of behavior hypothesized to bolster or defend cherished aspects of ego- or self-identity. Further, given the distinction between phenomenological representation and awareness mentioned above – that reflects James’ (1890) distinction between ME and I, respectively – elements of ego-identity and self-identity that have been re-represented phenomenologically can nevertheless remain outside of *focal awareness* (cf. Müller & Hübner, 2002). Consequently, me-self contents – in the form of either ego-identity or self-identity – that have been activated phenomenologically, yet remain outside the focus of awareness, function as hidden persuaders by both (a) contextualizing ongoing thinking (e.g., functioning as the *ground* to the *figure* that occupies focal awareness) and (b) nonconsciously influencing ongoing behavior.

10. Conclusion

The relation of the identity concept to human experience appears to have been formalized initially by philosophers. Questions about the fact or fiction of identity as a human quality, and about the relation of self-reflective thought to these purported facts or fictions, highlighted several key issues that would be addressed by subsequent psychological analyses. Discussions about self-reflectivity, as the subjective process of experiencing (and interacting with) self-system content as objects of awareness, highlight the need to consider the relation of the subject-object distinction to the experience and definition of identity. Discussions about the fact or fiction of identity, as engendered by the observation of being in the midst of a perpetually changing stream of experience while otherwise experiencing significant amounts of personal continuity, highlight the need to consider the relation of the content-process distinction to the experience and definition of identity. Taken together, the early philosophical analyses of identity highlighted the need for social scientists to address clearly the subjective and objective features of identity contents and processes yet provided very little in the way of formal theories about the self or personality in context.

James’ (1890) description of identity was focused mainly on the subjective experience, or sense, of personal continuity or selfsameness. The experience of personal identity was clarified by reference to the I-self, or Thought, and its basic capacity for the subjective synthesis of past and present me-selves. This formulation provides the basis for distinguishing clearly between personal identity as embodied in the contents and processes of the me-self and the *sense* of personal identity as embodied in the relations between the I-self and the me-self contents and processes. These distinctions were clearly and consistently articulated in James’ descriptions of identity and self and, consequently, still provide a strong basis for theoretical frameworks that are capable of resolving many of the terminological problems that plague contemporary (and historical) identity theories.

Erikson did not often refer to James’ self or identity theory nor use the terminology that was fundamental to James’ thinking about self and identity. Instead, Erikson brought a psychodynamic background of thinking and language to bear on identity-related questions and explored a wide variety of identity-related phenomena that went well beyond the classic focus on self-reflectivity and experiences of selfsameness. Foremost among these explorations was Erikson’s focus on the emotional quality of experience, which he described in terms of ego-identity, and on the role of ego and
social context as prime determinants of this experience. His analysis of identity and identity-related experiences was far less circumscribed than James’ analysis, yet he shared with James an affinity for process-orientated concepts (e.g., the sense of identity) and subject-object distinctions (e.g., ego versus ego-identity).

During the process of developing his theory of identity, Erikson attempted to reconcile psychodynamic thinking about personality with philosophical and more contemporary psychological theories about self and identity. As a result, he recognized the need to describe identity by reference to both the internal dynamics of self-representations (in terms of self-identity) and the external demands of social reality (in terms of ego-identity). Similarly, although their solutions differed, Erikson wrestled with the concepts of ego and I in much the same way that James had wrestled with these concepts. Together, Erikson’s descriptions of identity and ego revealed a distinction between identity-related contents and processes that is very similar to James’ distinction between identity as content and the sense of identity as process.

The diversity of identity concepts generated by James and Erikson compel us to look beyond the typical one-level perspective on the self-system that is implicit in many psychological theories and see that multiple levels of the self (e.g., identity as symbolic representation and sense of identity as phenomenological representation) exist and interact. This shift in perspective may have been impossible or impractical for theorecticians of the 19th and earlier centuries, but the 20th and 21st centuries have provided the conceptual and empirical tools sufficient for elaborating this more differentiated (and integrated) theoretical model of the multilevel person developing in multilevel contexts. In this paper, I have attempted to clarify Erikson’s concepts of ego, I, ego-identity, and self-identity and show how they can be understood, defined, and elaborated using multilevel systems theory.

Although we lack consensus on what identity is and what it is not (particularly in relation to concepts like personality, self, and self-concept), we exert relatively little effort in reconciling current definitions (where they are supplied at all) with past definitions and contemporary alternatives. If there is any scientifically productive future for the identity concept in general, or Eriksonian identity theory in particular, then we must confront these challenges by taking seriously the depth and extent of our collective terminological confusion about the meanings of terms like personal identity, social identity, ego-identity, self-identity, I, and ego. In my view, identity theory will move forward productively only when consistencies and deviations from prior work are communicated clearly (and never assumed) so that we (the researchers and consumers of research) know exactly what is and is not meant by any given term (both within and across papers). Only when such terminological clarity becomes standard practice will we avoid further confusion and truly advance identity theory.

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