

Career Crisis and Adaptation in Middle Adulthood

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As the baby boomers start to step into the retirement and the birth rate has been decreasing, the shortage in the labor force is a significant issue around the world. The postponement of retirement has become one of the strategies to compensate the shortage of the labor force. The midlife employees are facing the challenges to extend their career to cope with this trend. The purpose of the study is to explore the phenomena of careers crisis and the actions taken by the midlife professionals to solve the crisis. Guided by Erikson's (1959, 1994; Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1994/2000) psychosocial development theory and P. B. Baltes' (1987, 1997) selection, optimization, and compensation (SOC) strategies, this phenomenological research study interviewed nine adults aged between 35–50 to understand their career development when encountered crisis. The research findings show that the participants' career development stages are similar to Erikson's psychosocial developmental stages, and the career crisis is the turning point to the next psychosocial developmental stage. For those participants who have successfully completed school age psychosocial development stage, their career crisis themes are related to personal abilities. For those participants who have successfully completed adolescence psychosocial development, their career crisis themes are related to the relations between self and the profession. The research findings conclude three actions for adaptation of the career crisis: looking for another job, learning and seeking help from other professionals, which corresponding to the three strategies: loss-based selection, optimization, and compensation, respectively. Each of the participants applied at least two or more actions to cope with the career crisis, but only the actions that are optimization- or compensation-oriented would help to move into the next psychosocial development stage. The study findings support Erikson's crisis hypothesis in the career psychosocial development and found three adaptive actions to optimize or to compensate the participants' crisis-related issues at the work. Implications for the career counselors, adult learning educators, and human resource (HR) division are discussed.

Keywords: *SOC strategies, psychosocial development theory, career crisis*

Summary

As baby boomers gradually move into retirement while the birth rate decreases, the labor force shortage has become a significant global issue. Due to the disparity in the labor force, many countries have required their professionals postpone retirement to compensate for the labor force shortage. Midlife employees are also facing challenges to extending their careers. As a result, compared to their parents' generation, current midlife professionals are being forced to work longer.

Many physical and psychological changes begin during midlife. For example, many people may start to

experience physical decline or memory deterioration. The average age at first marriage has become higher, and many people get married or start a family in midlife instead of early adulthood. These age-related physical and psychological changes might influence their career-related decisions. Further, midlife workers have to compete with late-retiring baby boomers who might still hold higher positions and have more experience, while younger employees in early adulthood have greater flexibility for salary negotiation. In recent years, the Taiwan government released several policies related to delayed retirement that have raised discussions in different labor, career, and human services fields.

Now that delayed retirement has become a policy in Taiwan, it is vital for midlife employees to think about and plan their future career trajectories more carefully. To help midlife professionals have strong career trajectories in Taiwan, this study was conducted to explore actions taken by midlife adults facing career crises, from the perspective of developmental psychology.

Theory and Research Questions

When facing a career crisis, some people change their career path while others maintain their career focus. What are the differences between these two populations? Is there any relationship between career-related behaviors and personality? Munley (1977) suggested that Erikson's psychosocial development theory is an excellent framework for studying career development. One of its implications is the relationship between the development of personality and vocational behavior.

Erikson (1959, 1994; Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1994/2000) believes that a person can continue to grow even until old age. His psychosocial development theory suggests eight stages of personality development from infancy to death. These stages correspond with a series of psychosocial crises that an individual must face to develop different personality strengths. According to Erikson, an individual either adapts or maladapts to these crises. Those who adapt well and find the resolution to the crisis gain strength from getting through the crisis, develop healthy personalities, and move to the next stage. Those who do not adapt well and fail to find the resolution have unhealthy personalities and less ability to complete further stages. These crises reemerge later in life, and people have the chance to deal with them again.

Erikson believed that "it is primarily the inability to settle on an occupational identity which disturbs young people" (Erikson, 1959: 97). Munley (1975) explored the relationship between psychosocial development and career maturity and found that career maturity has a strong linear relationship with the ability to resolve crises in the first six psychosocial development stages. Munley (1977) further suggested that identity development in the adolescent stage and generativity development in middle

adulthood are the two critical stages of developing career maturity.

Erikson's (1959, 1994; Erikson et al., 1994/2000) psychosocial development theory has been widely used to explore career-related issues. Many researchers have explored the theory and its relationship with careers. Savickas (1985) and Skorikov and Vondracek (1998) found that vocational (occupational) identity play an important role in the process of identity formation. Erikson's psychosocial development theory has also been a framework for exploring the process of identity formation. For example, Marcia (1966, 1980) elaborated on Erikson's theory and proposed the four dimensions of ego identity status formation. Many studies have also assessed Erikson's identity formation concept based on Marcia's theory, and found that most people have not completed identity formation by early adulthood (Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2010; Luyckx, Duriez, Klimstra, & De Witte, 2010; Negru-Subtirica, Pop, & Crocetti, 2015).

According to Erickson (1959, 1994; Erikson et al., 1994/2000), individuals must develop generativity in adulthood, which involves fertility, productivity, and creativity for bearing, nurturing, and guiding the next generation. Both the family and the workplace provide good social contexts for developing generativity. Research has explored the relationship between generativity and vocational behavior. These studies have found that generativity grows with age and can help with career development, such as developing leadership qualities (Zacher, Rosing, Henning, & Frese, 2011), arranging succession in a family business (Zacher, Schmitt, & Gielnik, 2012), or improving the quality of interactions between older workers and young workers (Henry, Zacher, & Desmette, 2015).

Because identity and generativity—called a "healthy personality" by Erikson—are important for career development, strategies for adapting to the crises in each stage of psychosocial development are important. Erikson posits the theory, but does not provide strategies for adaptation. P. B. Baltes and colleagues (B. B. Baltes & Dickson, 2001; M. M. Baltes & Carstensen, 1996; P. B. Baltes, 1987, 1997; Freund & Baltes, 2002; Wiese,

Freund, & Baltes, 2000) proposed selection, optimization, and compensation (SOC) as strategies for successful aging from a lifespan perspective. Vondracek and Porfeli (2002) suggested that the application of one or all of the SOC strategies can also be helpful for workplace development. Numerous studies have found that employees who use SOC approaches as adaptive strategies have better work performance while adapting to other issues, whether aging-related or not (Bajor & Baltes, 2003; B. B. Baltes & Dickson, 2001; Freund & Baltes, 1998, 2002; Müller, De Lange, Weigl, Oxfart, & Van Der Heijden, 2013; Ouwehand, de Ridder, & Bensing, 2007; Weigl, Müller, Hornung, Zacher, & Angerer, 2013; Wiese, Freund, & Baltes, 2000; Zacher & Frese, 2011).

As most research has focused on the relationship between psychosocial development during adolescence and adulthood and vocational behaviors, this study explores career crises and coping strategies in the midlife population. The research goals of the study are (1) to understand the psychosocial changes and adjustments in career aspects during midlife, (2) to explore the phenomena of career crises, and (3) to examine the actions taken by midlife professionals to adapt to these crises.

Methods

Participants

Guided by Erikson's (1959, 1994; Erikson et al., 1994/2000) psychosocial development theory and P. B. Baltes' (1987, 1997) SOC strategies, this phenomenological research study interviewed nine adults aged between 35 and 50 to understand their career-related behaviors or decisions when they encountered crises. The target population of this study was people who are mature in their occupation, who had experienced career crises and did not plan to retire yet. Therefore, we chose employees aged between 35 and 50 years old as our study group.

The participants were chosen using purposive sampling and snowball sampling. All nine participants' current work positions were related to their training. Five participants' positions required them to have a

professional licence; of these five, three were social workers and two nurses. Three other participants worked as engineers or consultants in information technology (IT) industries. The last participant had worked as an art designer in different sectors since graduating from college.

Procedure

Data were collected via semi-structured interviews. Each participant was interviewed for 1 to 1.5 hours. The participants were asked about the context when they chose their career direction (before they entered college or university), their educational experiences, their reasons for accepting their current position, their reasons for maintaining their career trajectory when facing crises, and the context and their personal experiences when they encountered their career crises. The interviews were transcribed and then analyzed for recurrent emergent themes related to the decision point in the process of career development and career crises. The data analysis was informed by psychosocial development theory (Erikson, 1959, 1994; Erikson et al., 1994/2000) and SOC (P. B. Baltes, 1997).

Results

The research findings demonstrate that the participants' stages of career development are similar to Erikson's (1959, 1994; Erikson et al., 1994/2000) stages of psychosocial development, and a career crisis prompts the move into the next psychosocial development stage. For the participants who had successfully reached the school-aged psychosocial development stage, their career crisis themes were related to their personal abilities. For the participants who had successfully achieved adolescent psychosocial development, their career crisis themes were connected to the relations between the self and the profession.

Three actions for adapting to career crises were found: looking for another job, learning, and seeking help from other professionals. These correspond to three strategies: loss-based selection, optimization, and

compensation, respectively. Each of the participants applied at least two or more actions to cope with their career crises, but only optimization- or compensation-oriented actions helped them move into the next psychosocial development stage.

Implications and Limitations

This study has considerable implications for both theory and practice. Regarding theory, the findings support Erikson's (1959, 1994; Erikson et al., 1994/2000) crisis hypothesis for career psychosocial development and find three adaptive actions to optimize or compensate for crisis-related work issues. Regarding practical implications, the SOC-oriented adaptive action most frequently used by the participants was learning.

Many organizations, industries, or unions provide in-house training programs. This finding demonstrates that training should correspond to employees' psychosocial development stages, to assist them to grow not only professionally but also psychologically. For example, people who have completed school-aged psychosocial development could take programs related to skills, and those who have completed adolescent psychosocial development could benefit from programs related to management or communications.

Several limitations of this study must be considered. First, this study had a qualitative research design, and our participants were not randomly selected from Taiwan's entire working population. Thus, selection bias may have influenced the results. Second, the unique workplace culture in Taiwan should be taken into account.