VINCENT VAN GOGH: A PSYCHOBIOGRAPHICAL STUDY

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DECLARATION:
In accordance with Rule G4.6.3, I hereby declare that the above-mentioned treatise is my own work and that it has not previously been submitted for assessment to another University or for another qualification.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to create a psychobiography of Vincent Van Gogh who was born in 1853 and died 1890. To Van Gogh art was not merely a means for an income, he converted all his aspirations and anguish into his art works. In doing so his art became the first example of a truly personal art, to him art was a deeply lived means of spiritual salvation, which he used as a means to transform himself.

It was well known that Van Gogh was unstable and felt misunderstood in life, often asking “What is the use?” . He had a method of fusing what he saw in the world, and what he personally felt, into works of art that were revelations of himself. Van Gogh lived a lonely life, although for the last seventeen years of his life he wrote to his brother, Theo, almost daily. These letters give much insight to the thoughts and inner world of a much misunderstood individual. Most of these letters have been preserved and much else has been written about Van Gogh’s life and art. In our modern day he is deemed one of the most famous artists, yet in his lifetime he only sold one painting.

This psychobiography employs a qualitative psychobiographical research method, which aims to describe Van Gogh’s psychological development in terms of Erik Erikson’s psychosocial developmental stages. Van Gogh was chosen as the research subject because of personal interest, his value as a famous artist, and because of the unique way in which he saw and related to the world.

Key concepts: Psychobiography, Vincent Van Gogh, Erik Erikson
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DECLARATION</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SELF PORTRAIT OF VINCENT VAN GOGH</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Primary Aim of the Research Study</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Overview of the Psychobiographical Approach</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 Overview of the Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 Vincent van Gogh</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6 Data Collection and Analysis</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7 Outline of the Study</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2: ERIKSON’S THEORY OF PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Chapter Preview</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Foundation of Erikson’s Theory</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 The Development of Erikson’s Theory</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Erikson’s Definition of the Ego</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Erikson’s Eight Psychosocial Stages</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.1 Trust vs. Mistrust (Birth to about 18 months)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5.2 Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt (18 months to about 3 years of age)</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.5.3 Initiative vs. Guilt (about 3 years to about 5 years) 14
2.5.4 Industry vs. Inferiority (about 5 years to about 13 years) 15
2.5.5 Identity vs. Role Confliction (about 13 years to about 21 years) 16
2.5.6 Intimacy vs. Isolation (about 20 years to about 40 years) 17
2.5.7 Generativity vs. Stagnation (about 40 years to about 60 years) 18
2.5.8 Integrity vs. Despair (about age 60 years to death) 19

2.6 Critique of Erikson’s Theory 19

2.7 Conclusions 20

CHAPTER 3: THE LIFE OF VINCENT VAN GOGH

3.1 Chapter Preview 22
3.2.1 The Childhood Years of Vincent van Gogh (1853-1864) 22
3.2.2 Boarding School (1864-1866) 23
3.2.3 Art Dealings (1869-1877) 23
3.2.4 The Preacher (1877-1880) 25
3.2.5 The Artist (1880-1890) 26
3.2.5.1 Saint Remy (1888-1890) 28
3.2.5.2 Death (1890) 31
3.3 Conclusion 32

CHAPTER 4: PSYCHOBIOGRAPHY: A THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

4.1 Chapter Preview 33
4.2 Psychobiographies and Related Concepts 33
4.2.1 Autobiography 34
4.2.2 Biography 34
4.2.3 Case Study 34
4.2.4 Psychohistory 35
4.2.5 Psychobiography 35
4.3 Overview of the Psychobiographical Approach 36
4.4 The Advantages of Psychobiography 37
4.4.1 The Uniqueness of the Individual Case Within the Whole 38
4.4.2 The Socio-historical Context 38
4.4.3 Process and Pattern Over Time 38
4.4.4 Subjective Reality 39
4.4.5 Theory Testing and Development 39
4.5 Conclusion 39

CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

5.1 Introduction 40
5.2 Primary Aim of the Research Study 40
5.3 Preliminary Methodological Considerations 40
5.3.1 Analyzing an Absent Subject 41
5.3.2 Researcher Bias 42
5.3.3 Reductionism 42
5.3.4 Cross-cultural Differences 43
5.3.5 Validity and Reliability Criticism 44
5.3.6 Easy Genre Elitism 44
5.3.7 Inflated Expectations 44
5.4 Research Design 45
7.1 Introduction 71
7.2 Conclusions 71
7.3 Limitations of this Specific Study 72
7.4 The Value of this Study 73
7.5 Recommendations 73
REFERENCES 75
Appendix A: Chronology of Vincent van Gogh’s Life 80
Appendix B: The Data Recording Grid 84
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

1.1 Introduction

According to McAdams (1988), the best means of capturing human life situated in time is through a psychobiography. Psychobiography is primarily concerned with the study of the “finished lives” (Carlson, 1988) of prominent, enigmatic or great people. A psychobiographer systematically employs psychological theory to analyze and transform a life into a coherent and illuminating life story. The value of psychobiography thus lies in its ability to provide a description and understanding of the personal experiences of the subject. This scientific reconstruction and interpretation of a biographical subject represents an effective synthesis of psychology and biography (Fouche & van Niekerk, 2005). Psychobiographies, thus, test the implementation of psychological theories. The value of studying individuals’ lives has been recognised and also advocated by numerous scholars (Alexander, 1988; Carlson, 1988; Runyan, 1982) who understand that individual lives are rich in personality, developmental, and psycho-historical importance. A psychobiography is thus not merely a way to do a biography, but also a way in which we can conduct psychology (Elms, 1994).

1.2 Primary Aim of the Research Study

The primary aim of this research study is to explore and describe the life of Vincent van Gogh from the theoretical perspective of Erik Erikson’s (1950, 1963, 1964, 1965,
1968, 1978) theory of development. It is not the aim of this study to generalize the findings to the larger population as in with statistical generalization where a sample is used and the findings generalized to the rest of the population (Yin, 1994). Rather, this study aims to generalize the results of the research to Erikson’s developmental stages. This process is called analytical generalisation (Yin, 1994).

1.3 Overview of the Psychobiographical Approach

A psychobiography can be described as a qualitative case study of one person’s life. Psychobiography is the in-depth research of an entire life-span done within the framework of a formal psychological theory (Schultz, 2005). A psychobiography is thus both a psychological analysis of an individual’s life, and a biographical depiction of an individual’s life history and achievements used to attain an interpretation concerning the individual’s personality development.

Psychobiographical research is one approach to psychological research. Through psychobiographical research, understanding can be advanced through the in-depth study of a whole individual over time (i.e., an ideographic approach). This, after all, is one of the central concerns of psychology and social sciences (Runyan, 1982). Furthermore, psychobiography encourages growth of new conceptual insights and contributes to theory building (Carlson, 1988; Edwards, 1998; Roberts, 2002). That is to say, through illustration, the psychobiography can confirm, refine or develop existing theories.

Numerous researchers in the field of life history research such as Alexander (1988), Carlson (1988), McAdams (1994) and Runyan (1988a) emphasise the importance of psychobiographical research. Psychobiography tends to emphasize the individuality of the whole person rather than focussing on a single element of a person (Runyan, 1984).
In other words, this approach to research provides a unique and holistic description of the individual being investigated, and focuses on understanding one person’s life (Carlson, 1988; Elms, 1994). In order to gain a holistic understanding of the person, attention is thus given to the larger contextualized background within which the individual lived and emphasis is placed on the individual’s socio-historical and cultural experience, process of socialization, and their family history (Roberts, 2002). Life history material thus provides an ideal laboratory for testing and developing various theories of human development (Carlson, 1988). Erik Erikson’s developmental theory serves as a template against which the researcher can compare and analyze the data collected. This then aids in the conceptualization and operationalizing of case data within the framework of theoretical constructs, and allows for generalizing from the case study to the theory (Yin, 1994).

1.4 Overview of the Theoretical Framework

To conceptualize the personality development of Vincent van Gogh, the researcher used Erik Erikson’s psychosocial development theory. Erikson’s theory (1950) provides an intuitively appealing description of some key universal concerns of each period of life. It is a psychosocial theory which views humans as biological, psychological, and social beings that are shaped by an interactive mix of forces (Corey, 2005).

Erik Erikson built on Freud’s theory by stressing the psychosocial aspects of development beyond early childhood (Corey, 2005), postulating that human personality is determined not only by childhood experiences, but also by those of adulthood (Sadock & Sadock, 2003). Erik Erikson said: “If everything goes back into childhood, then everything is somebody else’s fault and taking responsibility for oneself is undermined”
Erikson believed that development is the result of two complex principles which occur at the same time, namely, genetic and social inputs (Erikson, 1978). Genetic factors determine development through the epigenetic principle. The epigenetic prinicle holds that development occurs in sequential, clearly defined stages and that each stage must be satisfactorily resolved for development to advance smoothly (Sadock & Sadock, 2003). Social factors refer to the demands placed on individuals by society in accordance with their current stage of development (Meyer; Moore & Viljoen, 2003). These stages of development refer to the eight interrelated stages of ego development across the life cycle of an individual, which form the centrepiece of Erikson’s life’s work. These eight stages represent points along a continuum of an individual’s life cycle and are separated by what Erikson called developmental crises (Erikson, 1978). A developmental crisis results from the interaction between genetic development and social influences. According to Erikson (1978), a crisis connotes a turning point in life, “a crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential” (Erikson, 1978, p. 5). These stages are also interrelated. The success or failure in one stage therefore determines the outcome in another (Morris, 1996). If successful resolution does not occur, all consequent stages reflect the failure in the form of physical, cognitive, social or emotional maladjustment (Sadock & Sadock, 2003).

Erikson’s theory (1963), which covers the psychosocial development of an individual’s entire life span, therefore serves as an adequate lens through which Van Gogh’s life can be assessed psychologically. Erik Erikson’s theory incudes 8 stages which will be further discussed on pp.12-19, in chapter 2. As Van Gogh died at age 37,
only the first six stages of Erikson’s theory will be further explored in chapter 6 which focussess on the Findings and discussions of this study.

1.5 Vincent van Gogh

Art seems to have dominated Van Gogh’s life. Being born into a family of art dealers brought him into early touch with art. He was born on March 30, 1853, in Groot Zundert, a village in the Dutch province of North Brabant near the southern Belgian frontier. He did not have a happy childhood as his difficult, highly strung and oversensitive temperament isolated him from his school mates (Barnes, 1994). At the age of 16, Van Gogh left school and started working in his family’s art business as an art dealer. It was during this time that Theo, his brother, came to visit him and they started writing to each other. There are 661 of Van Gogh’s letters which have been preserved (Wallace, 1969). The letters span an 18 year period, beginning in August 1872 and ending in July 1890 (Wallace, 1969). The last letter to Theo, unfinished, was found in Van Gogh’s pocket after he shot himself (Wilkie, 1990).

After six years of training as an art dealer, Van Gogh left the company to begin his training as a lay preacher in Brussels. He joined a missionary society but Van Gogh was soon dismissed as they felt he had too much zeal (Wallace, 1969). Although he loved humanity he could not communicate with individuals and at age 27 he turned to art to communicate for him (Wallace, 1969). After deciding on art as his career he pursued it single-mindedly. Through the authenticity of his work, he showed that art could reach that intimacy of the striving, loving, and anguished self (Schapiro, 1951). His career as an artist is a high religious moral drama and not only a rapid development of a style and new possibilities of art. Every stage of his art has personal meaning and it engaged him
completely (Barnes, 1994). From February 1888 until December that year he produced 90 sketches and 100 paintings, speaking of himself as a “painting engine” (Wallace, 1969, p. 91). One night after an argument with Gauguin, Van Gogh went home and cut the upper lobe of his ear off. He stopped the bleeding and took the ear lobe to a brothel where he gave it to a prostitute. Shortly after the incident, Van Gogh was hospitalized in Saint Remy (Wallace, 1969). Van Gogh, afraid to live alone, asked to be admitted to Saint Remy as a psychiatric patient (Wallace, 1969). He was admitted to Saint Remy hospital on May 8, 1889 and remained there for much of the rest of his life (Wallace, 1969). He was discharged from Saint Remy in 1890 into the care of a doctor who had treated him during his stay in the hospital. In July 1890 Van Gogh, shot himself in the abdomen. He was 37 years and four months old when he died.

1.6 Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study was obtained from several information sources. These sources included primary document(s) (documents produced by the subject such as Vincent van Gogh’s letters to his brother) and secondary source(s) (documents produced by other authors) (Berg, 1995). As Yin (1994) purports, multiple sources of data enhance the internal validity of the information collected. Reliability of the data is enhanced through the use of both primary and secondary sources as this allows for data triangulation by means of cross referencing. Data will be integrated and analyzed by means of a grid (Appendix B).
1.7 Outline of the Study

This study consists of seven chapters, the first being this introductory chapter. Chapter 2 provides an overview of human development and discusses Erik Erikson’s theory of psychosocial stages. Chapter 3 focuses on the life of Vincent van Gogh, the subject of the study. Chapter 4 is dedicated to providing the reader with a theoretical overview of psychobiography and chapter 5 describes the research design and methodology of psychobiography. Chapter 6 will focus on the results of the study. Chapter 7, the conclusion chapter, will highlight the limitations of the current study and recommendations for further research.
CHAPTER 2

ERIKSON'S THEORY OF PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Chapter Preview

Chapter two focuses on psychosocial development across the human lifespan as proposed by Erik Erikson. The foundation and development of Erik Erikson’s theory is briefly described in order to provide an adequate understanding of his theory. A thorough discussion on Erikson’s theory follows, which includes both a description and criticism.

2.2 Foundation of Erikson’s Theory

Erikson’s (1963) theory grew out of his work; first as a teacher; then a child psychoanalyst; next as an anthropological field worker and lastly as a biographer (Meyer, Moore & Viljoen, 2003). Unlike Freud, who started with the nervous system of the individual, Erikson (1963) focused on the boundary between the child and the environment and later included the evolution of the maturing ego’s relations within an expanding social world (Sadock & Sadock, 2003).

The underlying theme that stretches throughout Erikson’s theory is that of balance (Hergenhahn & Olson, 2003). Erikson (1963) divided the life cycle of an individual into different developmental stages (Meyer et al., 1997). Each stage of development is characterized by what Erikson called a crisis; he used the word crisis as it connotes an important turning point. Each stage of development is characterized by a crisis which has a possibly positive resolution or a negative one (Hergenhahn & Olson, 2003). He believed in harmony and to achieve this he stated that one needs to experience both sides
of the psychosocial continuum. Within every developmental stage, the aim is to find a balance between the respective and opposite characteristics. A complete either/or of the psychosocial continuum was thus not what Erikson proposed. Rather, he believed that the resolution of a crisis has both positive and negative elements (Hergenhahn & Olson, 2003). Erikson’s theory (1950) provides an intuitively appealing description of some key universal concerns at each period of life. His theory is a psychosocial theory which views humans as biological, psychological and social beings that are shaped by an interactive mix of forces (Corey, 2005).

2.3 The Development of Erikson’s Theory

Initially in psychoanalytic theory, the ego was regarded as the part of the personality that had to satisfy the id drives while minimizing feelings of guilt (Meyer, Moore & Viljoen, 2003), and therefore it was regarded as subservient to the demands of the id and superego. Psychoanalytic theory focused mainly on psychosocial and psychosexual development during the first six years of life (Corey, 2001). In later years, a group of psychoanalysts who called themselves the ego psychoanalysts emerged. They focused more on the ego and not mainly on the child’s psychosexual problems (Meyer et al., 2003). Ego psychology accepts the role of intrapsychic conflicts. However, it emphasizes the ego’s striving for mastery and competence throughout the human lifespan (Corey, 2005). Erik Erikson built on Freud’s theory by stressing the psychosocial aspects of development beyond early childhood (Corey, 2005), because human personality is determined not only by childhood experiences, but also by those of adulthood (Erikson, 1978; Sadock & Sadock, 2003). Erikson (as cited in Sadock & Sadock, 2003) stated that: “If everything goes back into childhood, then everything is somebody else’s fault and
taking responsibility for oneself is undermined” (p. 211). Erikson (1965), gave the ego properties and requirements of its own. The ego according to Erikson (1965), may have initially been in service of the id, but, in the process of serving the id, it developed functions of its own. This part of Erikson’s (as cited in Hoergenhahn & Olson, 2003) theory contrasts sharply with the earlier Freudian view that the ego’s sole job is to minimize the id’s discomfort (Hergenhahn & Olson, 2003).

Erikson (1978) believed that development is the result of two complex principles which occur simultaneously, these two principles involve genetic and social inputs (Meyer et al., 2003). He further stated that genetic factors determine development through a genetically determined ground plan called the epigenetic principle, which holds that development occurs in sequential, clearly defined stages and that each stage must be satisfactorily resolved for development to proceed smoothly (Sadock & Sadock, 2003). Social factors or influences refer to the demands placed on individuals by society in accordance with their current stage of development (Meyer et al., 2003). These stages refer to the eight interrelated stages of ego development across the life cycle, which form the centerpiece of Erikson’s life’s work. These eight stages represent points along a continuum of an individual’s life cycle and are separated by what Erikson called developmental crises (Erikson, 1978; Meyer et al., 2003). A developmental crisis results from the interaction between genetic development and social influences. According to Erikson (1978), a crisis connotes a turning point in life, “a crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential” (p. 5). These stages are also interrelated. The success or failure in one stage therefore determines the outcome in another (Morris, 1996). If successful resolution does not occur, all subsequent stages reflect the failure in
the form of physical, cognitive, social or emotional maladjustment (Sadock & Sadock, 2003).

Erikson's theory, which covers the psychosocial development of an individual’s entire lifespan, therefore serves as an adequate lens through which Van Gogh’s life can be assessed psychologically.

2.4 Erikson’s Definition of the Ego

Erikson viewed the ego as an inner guide to individual development, an inner institution which guides the individual in relation to society (Erikson, 1965). Our identity is thus the result of the work of the ego. To Erikson (1965) a strong ego is an, “individual core, firm and flexible enough to reconcile the necessary contradictions in any human organization, to integrate individual differences and above all, to emerge from a long and unavoidably fearful infancy with a sense of identity and an idea of integrity” (p.179).

The ego not only produces a sense of identity, but is itself dependent on the formation of an emergent identity (Welchman, 2000). Erikson (1965) proposed that ego and identity are linked at every stage and that the healthy development of an ego-identity is dependent on both the natural instinctive drive towards individual autonomy and an appropriate social context. Erikson emphasized that three vital elements, namely, continuity, consistency and sameness of experience, provide a basic sense of ego-identity in the infant and that these three continue to be basic to an established sense of identity (Erikson, 1965). Thus, stability was vital to Erikson’s theory so that the child could become familiar with the actions of the parent in a variety of settings.
2.5 Erik Erikson’s Eight Psychosocial Stages

2.5.1 Trust vs. Mistrust (Birth to about 18 months)

In this first stage, the first task of the ego is the firm establishment of enduring patterns for the solution of the nuclear conflict of basic trust versus basic mistrust (Erikson, 1965). During the first year of life, infants are torn between trusting and not trusting their parents (Morris, 1996). Infants who grow up to trust are more able to hope and have faith that ‘things will generally be okay’. The most important social behavior is incorporation through the senses. In other words, the taking in of food, warmth, love, etc (Louw, Louw & Van Ede, 2001). The extent to which infants learn to trust their environment depends mainly on the quality of the mother-child relationship (Meyer et al., 2003). If basic trust needs are met, trust will predominate over mistrust, and if needs are not met, an attitude of mistrust towards the world and especially interpersonal relationships, is developed (Corey, 2005). The quality of the relationship as opposed to the extent of frustration or deprivation is crucial even at this first stage. Erikson (1965) states that children become neurotic from the lack or the loss of societal meaning in frustrations and not from the “frustrations” (p. 241). The relationship with the primary caregiver restores an adequate sense of self (Erikson, 1965). Erikson (1965) termed hope as the virtue resulting from a successful resolution of this crisis. The alternative to trust is mistrust. Welchman (2000) highlighted that mistrust arises out of inevitable natural frustrations, parental inadequacy and absences. It can also result from the defensive splitting which characterizes the process of differentiating the inner from the outer self, with all its accompanying distortions of reality, projections and introjections (Welchman, 2000).
2.5.2 Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt (18 months to about 3 years of age)

To Erikson, autonomy meant self-reliance - a sense of being relatively independent of external control (Hergenhahn & Olson, 2003). In other words, it refers to independence of thought and a basic confidence to think and act for oneself. Shame and doubt inhibit self-expression and the development of one's own ideas, opinions and sense of self.

Children’s growing physical development during their first three years of life allows them increasing autonomy and greater contact with their environment (Morris, 1996). During this stage, the balance between loving good will and hateful self-insistence is very important (Sadock & Sadock, 2003). This balance refers to the overprotectiveness of parents which can impede their children’s development of autonomy, to explore their own capacity to deal with the world. It is also equally important not to completely leave the child at the hands of their own lack of self-control or judgment (Sadock & Sadock, 2003). Therefore, a balance must be found for the child to explore and experiment and to make mistakes (Corey, 2005). The balance between autonomy and shame and doubt will determine whether the child experiences a sense of pride or experiences a sense of doubt and shame (Erikson, 1965). A person, who becomes fixated at the transition between the development of hope and autonomous will, may develop paranoid fears of persecution (Sadock & Sadock, 2003). The perfectionism and inflexibility of a person with an obsessive compulsive personality disorder may stem from conflicting tendencies to either hold on or to let go. Ritualistic behavior may be an outcome of the triumph of doubt over autonomy and thus the development of a harsh conscience (Sadock & Sadock, 2003).
**2.5.3 Initiative vs. Guilt (about 3 years to 5 years old)**

Initiative can be seen as the general ability to initiate ideas and actions and to plan future events that arise if the crisis in the third stage of development is resolved positively (Hergenhahn & Olson, 2003). Guilt is the feeling that it is inappropriate to instigate something of one's own design. Guilt develops in a child if the crisis dominating the third stage of development is resolved negatively (Hergenhahn & Olson, 2003). Initiative flourishes when adventure and game-playing is encouraged, irrespective of how silly it seems to the grown-up in charge. Suppressing adventure and experimentation, or preventing young children doing things for themselves inhibits the development of confidence to initiate, replacing it instead with an unhelpful fear of being wrong or unapproved. The child needs to learn to show initiative while overcoming a feeling of guilt (Louw, Louw & Van Ede, 2001).

During this stage, children become increasingly active due to their increasing mastery of loco-motor and language skills (Sadock & Sadock, 2003), undertaking new projects, manipulating things in the environment, making plans, and conquering new challenges (Morris, 1996). They should be allowed to explore and act on their newfound initiative so they can develop a positive view of self (Corey, 2005; Sadock & Sadock, 2003). If this freedom is not given, a child may develop guilt for their behavior and this guilt could then overshadow their initiative (Corey, 2005).

Erikson (1965) distinguished initiative from autonomy in that initiative adds to autonomy the quality of understanding, planning and doing a task for the sake of being active. It is also during this stage that the child’s guilt stems from wanting to compete with the parent of the same gender for possession of the other parent while at the same
time experiencing anxiety or fear of punishment (Sadock & Sadock, 2003). This stage corresponds to Freud’s phallic stage of psychosexual development (Hergenhahn & Olson, 2003). During this stage, we see the oedipal stage emerge whereby the child identifies with the parent of the same sex and forms a jealous attachment to the parent of the opposite sex (Welchman, 2000). The oedipal stage results in the oppressive establishment of a moral sense. Erikson (1978) stated that the virtue of purpose resulted from a positive, established balance between initiative and guilt. This is when a child takes initiative to want to compete outside of the family setting. Children should be allowed to explore and act on their newfound initiative so that they can further develop a positive view of themselves (Sadock & Sadock, 2003). During the previous stages, children learnt that they are people. Now, they begin to discover what type of person they can become (Hergenhahn & Olson, 2003). If a child is not given this freedom, they might develop guilt for their behavior and this guilt might then overshadow their initiative (Corey, 2005).

2.5.4 Industry vs. Inferiority (about 5 years to about 13 years)

During this stage, children develop a sense of industry by taking pride in their productions, which is a result of goals achieved due to their newly developed skills (Sadock & Sadock, 2003). According to Erikson, the opportunity to achieve success is an important part of education since it helps the child to avoid feelings of inferiority (Louw, Louw & Van Ede, 2001). The child wants to play with and compete against friends, preferably of the same sex (Louw, Louw & Van Ede, 2001). Skills are learned or acquired through the process of schooling and also relate to the development of appropriate gender-role identity (Corey, 2005). If children struggle to achieve a sense of
industry, they may conclude that they are inadequate, mediocre or inferior and lose faith in their ability to become industrious in life (Morris, 1996). A danger in this stage is that children may later over-value their positions in the workplace. For these kinds of people, work is equated to life, and they are thus blinded to the other aspects of human existence (Hergenhahn & Olson, 2003). The virtue which Erikson (1978) proposed resulting from successful crisis resolution within this stage is competence.

2.5.5 Identity vs. Role Confusion (about 13 years to about 21 years)

With the onset of puberty, the adolescent becomes preoccupied with the question of identity (Sadock & Sadock, 2003). This stage is also well known for what Erikson (1968) called the identity crisis. In Erikson’s (1968) view, identity is achieved through the integration of multiple roles: son, scholar, friend, etc, into a coherent pattern that provides a sense of inner continuity (Morris, 1996). Up until this stage the individual has not yet had to determine a full identity. This is the stage where an individual forms a lasting identity which is more than the sum of childhood identifications (Erikson, 1965). It was to Erikson (1968) the stage which represents the transition period between childhood and adulthood (Hergenhahn & Olson, 2003). During this stage, emphasis is placed on an individual’s occupation. If young adults do not leave this stage with an identity, they leave it with role confusion or with a negative identity (Hergenhahn & Olson, 2003).

Role confusion is characterized by the inability to choose a role in life. This in turn prolongs the psychological moratorium indefinitely or to make superficial commitments that are soon abandoned (Hergenhahn & Olson, 2003). Negative identities are those roles that children are warned not to assume by their parents (Hergenhahn & Olson, 2003).
Erikson (1959) defined negative identity as, “an identity perversely based on all those identifications and roles which, at critical stages of development, had been presented to the individual as most undesirable or dangerous, and yet also as most real” (p. 131). Falling in love during this stage is also seen as an attempt to arrive at a definition of the adolescents’ own identity. Erikson (1987) identified fidelity as the virtue resulting after the complete resolution of this stage; its negative counterpart being cynicism. He defined fidelity as “the ability to sustain loyalties freely pledged in spite of the inevitable contradictions of value systems” (Erikson, 1964, p. 125).

Erikson introduced two further ideas, namely: psychosocial moratorium, and ideology which emerge during the adolescent’s identity crisis (Welchman, 2000). The psychosocial moratorium implies a socially sanctioned period in which an adolescent is allowed to explore and to experiment between childhood and adulthood before settling on a more permanent identity (Erikson, 1963). The second idea, ideology, can be defined as a world image by which the adolescent or young adult finds a sense of order and orientation. These ideas give the adolescent a world view rather than simple commandments. However, it also excludes those individuals who do not think as they do (Erikson, 1963).

2.5.6 Intimacy vs. Isolation (about 20 years to about 40 years)

The identity established in the previous stage allows for the individual at this time to share that identity with another person without the fear of losing one’s identity (Meyer et al., 2003). Erikson (1965) defined intimacy as the capacity to commit even when the commitment calls for significant compromises or sacrifices. During this stage, geniality is expressed in the mutuality of relationships (Erikson, 1965). Failure to commit to such
a relationship may lead to identity confusion and also to feelings of alienation and isolation (Corey, 2005). Apart from isolation, Erikson further noted that as a result of inadequate intimacy the individual may turn to self-absorption. This isolation may extend into wider social relationships through what he called distantiation (Erikson, 1965). Erikson (1965) defined distantiation as “the readiness to isolate and, if necessary, to destroy those forces and people whose essence seems dangerous to one’s own” (p. 256).

Erikson (1965) said that the person who is not able to tolerate the fear of ego loss arising out of experiences of self abandonment (e.g. sexual orgasm, aggression, inspiration, moments of intensity in friendships and intuition) are apt to become deeply isolated and self-absorbed (Sadock & Sadock, 2003). Freud once said that a person should be able to work and love (Hergenhahn & Olson, 2003). Erikson often cited this in his discussion of this stage and it is thus no surprise that the virtue resulting from a positive resolution of this stage is love (Sadock & Sadock, 2003). Erikson describes love as an intimate relationship with a member of the opposite sex with whom one shares trust, reproduction and relaxation (Louw, Louw & Van Ede, 2001).

**2.5.7 Generativity vs. Stagnation (about 40 years to about 60 years)**

Generativity is above all the concern for establishing and guiding the next generation (Sadock & Sadock, 2003). This does not necessarily only refer to the next of kin or the subject’s own children, but to the more general humanity (Meyer et al., 2003). Erikson believed that adults need to feel that others need them, and that this need finds expression in wanting to care for other people (Meyer et al., 2003). The resulting virtue from successful resolution of this crisis Erikson (1978) termed ‘care’. He further termed the
destructive counterpart to care as ‘rejectivity’ resulting from an unresolved crisis. When people can not develop true generativity, they may restrict their focus to the technical aspects of their roles, becoming highly skilled and taking on more responsibility. However, this failure of generativity can lead to personal stagnation, masked by a variety of escapisms, such as alcohol and other infidelities. Often mid-life crisis may occur during this stage (Sadock & Sadock, 2003).

2.5.8 Integrity vs. Despair (about age 60 to death)

During this stage, individuals look back at their own life in satisfaction, with a sense of a productive and worthwhile life containing few regrets. Erikson (1978) refers to the ego strength flowing from a successful resolution of the crisis as wisdom, which he describes as a detached concern with life itself, in the face of death. Individuals who have not dealt with previous crises and feel dissatisfied with their almost completed life cycle develop despair, which is characterized by a fear of death and the desire to live their lives over again (Meyer et al., 2003).

2.6 Critique of Erikson’s Theory

Roazen (1976) criticized the work of Erik Erikson saying that he was an idealist. He highlighted that he appreciated Erikson for his originality, humanity and comprehensive concepts and vision but he claimed that he felt Erikson’s work was distorted by his idealism. He felt that Erikson ignored the darker side of human nature. Roazen (1976) also believed that Erikson was ignorant of the basic conflicts in society. Erikson (1978) admitted that his theory derived from clinical interpretation might have succumbed to either fatalism of the psychopathologist or the optimism of the therapeutic utopian.
Welchman (2000) denounced this criticism by highlighting that Erikson’s theory involves a crisis of conflict and struggle.

Kovel (1988) criticized Erikson’s ideas for remaining fixed and not including compensation to political and societal change in his theory. Kovel believed that Erikson avoided exploring sex and economic/political power. Erikson (1978) however speculated about the possibility of his view being period and class bound.

Another criticism of the work of Erikson is his gender assumptions. Roazen (1976) saw Erikson as having accepted traditional Western male and female stereotypes too readily. Erikson also acknowledged how his suggestion that women may yet contribute something specifically feminine to a so-far masculine field could have been seen as a form of discrimination (Evans, 1964).

2.7 Conclusion

Erik Erikson was one of the leading figures in the field of human development. He was the first psychoanalyst to develop a developmental model for the complete life cycle of human beings. He realized the integral part that adult life plays in human development and how past problems could still be overcome by a healthy adult phase of life. Due to personal conflict in finding purpose in life, much of his theory is centered on the concept of identity. However, this does not negate the fact that other stages of life were also seen as necessary. The essential component of Erikson’s theory which attracted the researcher is the continuous nature of his stages. The psychosocial phases recur throughout life as the conflicts play out in similar roles and in different areas in the individual’s life. The more mature stages are also alluded to in order to show their traces in earlier stages. Erikson’s theory appears to be an apt theory for a psychobiographical study as indicated
by similar studies such as Claasen’s (2007) psychobiographical study on Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd which was executed utilizing Erikson’s theory, and which contributed to the present researcher’s motivation (Claasen, 2007).
CHAPTER 3

THE LIFE OF VINCENT VAN GOGH

3.1 Chapter Preview

This chapter provides a brief overview of the life of Vincent van Gogh. Van Gogh was born in 1853 and died in 1890 at the age of 37.

3.2.1 The Childhood Years of Vincent van Gogh (1853-1864)

Vincent van Gogh was born on March 30, 1853, in Groot Zundert, a village in the Dutch province of North Brabant near the southern Belgian frontier. His father, Theodorus, was a pastor of a small Dutch Reformed Church. He was called “the handsome dominie” (Wallace, 1969, p. 8), but was reportedly not very intelligent or eloquent. His mother, Anna Cornelia Carbentus, was a lively woman with a sense of humour (Wilkie, 1990). Biographers often dismiss Van Gogh’s parents as having been narrow-minded and focused on outward appearances (Wallace, 1969).

Although Vincent was the eldest of the Van Gogh children, he was not the first. One year before his birth, to the day, his mother gave birth to another child, a boy whom she named Vincent Willem van Gogh. He was stillborn and buried near the church door, which the second Vincent, with identical name and date of birth walked past every day on his way to church (Wallace, 1969).

As a result, when Van Gogh was born, his mother was very protective of him. Van Gogh had two other brothers and three sisters. However, only Theo, his younger brother, played a significant role in his life (Wilkie, 1990). Vincent van Gogh’s brother, Theo,
was born on the 1st of May 1857 and was four years younger than his older brother (Wallace, 1969).

As a young boy, Van Gogh was said to be stubborn and given to strange behaviour (Wilkie, 1990). He once moulded a small elephant in clay and made a pencil sketch of a cat, however, when his parents praised them he immediately destroyed them (Wilkie, 1990). Later in his life we see a similar pattern of feeling shame when praised for his work (Wallace, 1969).

3.2.2 Boarding School (1864-1866)

From 1864 to 1866, Van Gogh attended boarding school at Jan Povily in Zevenbergen (Wallace, 1969). When Van Gogh was 12, he was sent to boarding school 15 miles away as his parents felt that he was becoming too rough associating with the peasant boys of Groot Zundert (Wallace, 1969). He was the only Van Gogh child separated from his family at that stage. Wallace (1969) reports that separation from his family at such a young age left its mark on Van Gogh.

Little is known of his school days apart from that he acquired a love for books, often reading books that dealt with the destitute and downtrodden (Wilkie, 1990). He did not have a happy childhood as his difficult, highly strung and oversensitive temperament isolated him from his school mates (Barnes, 1994). He attended the state secondary school, King Willem II, at Tilburg from 1866 through 1868. At age 16, Vincent left school, most likely due to financial pressure (Wallace, 1969).

3.2.3 Art Dealings (1869-1877)

After leaving school, Van Gogh went to stay with an uncle where he started helping in the family’s art dealing. In 1869, he started working as a junior clerk for the art firm of
Goupil and Company in the Hague (Wallace, 1969). It was there that Theo came to visit him and they started writing to each other. According to Wallace (1969), 36 of Theo’s letters, and 661 of Van Gogh’s letters to Theo have been preserved. The letters span an eighteen year period, beginning in August 1872 and ending in July 1890 (Wilkie, 1990). The last letter to Theo, unfinished, was found in Van Gogh’s pocket after he shot himself (Wallace, 1969).

In 1873, at the age of 20, Van Gogh was transferred to the London branch of Goupil’s. Here he stayed with Sarah Ursula Loyer, a family friend, and fell in love with her daughter, Eugenie (Wilkie, 1990). However, a year later when confessing his love, he realised that the thought of loving him had never entered Eugenie’s mind (Wallace, 1969). In 1874, he learnt that Eugenie was engaged to be married.

The blow to Van Gogh was terrible and he moved to live in another area where he lived alone, rarely seeing anyone and writing seldomly. When he did write to Theo, his letters contained biblical quotations and melancholy poetry (Wallace, 1969). His family became concerned about his increased isolation and they had him transferred to Paris against his will (Wallace, 1969). Stone (1973) speaks of Van Gogh’s yearning to connect with another and describes Van Gogh as one of the “world’s loneliest souls” (p. 53), who spent the greater part of his life living alone without any friends or companions.

In Paris, his religious interests grew and he started to become careless in his art dealings (Wallace, 1969). During this time his brother, Theo, started working for the same art company. It was later that year that Van Gogh, after 6 years of training as an art dealer, left the company (Wallace, 1969). He was almost twenty three years old and unemployed (Wallace, 1969). He returned to England and worked as a teacher, later a
biblical teacher and also preached in some churches. In December 1876, Van Gogh went home and his family, concerned about his health, convinced him to stay on in Holland (Wallace, 1969). People who knew him at the time reported that he always had a abstracted expression, pondering, deeply serious and melancholy (Wallace, 1969).

3.2.4 The Preacher (1877-1880)

In 1877, at the age of twenty four, Van Gogh started studying theology (Wallace, 1969). During this time he seemed to punish himself, often sleeping on a wooden board with no blankets during the winter (Wilkie, 1990). It was after a year of studies that he gave up and in August 1878 (then twenty five years old), enrolled in a training school for lay preachers in Brussels (Wallace, 1969). They sent him to work in the mining areas in the Borinage, a very poor mining region of southern Belgium. However, Van Gogh seemed to have too much zeal and was later dismissed by the missionary society (Wilkie, 1990). It was reported that he would give away all of his clothes, leave the coal on his face and tear his clothes when he needed a bandage (Wallace, 1969).

After being dismissed, Van Gogh remained in the Borinage, living on bread crusts and continuing to preach to the peasants (Wallace, 1969). When he did emerge out of the Borinage, his religious fanaticism had disappeared and it seemed to be replaced by wrath against the organised church (Wallace, 1969). Van Gogh rejected the church but drew closer to God during his time in the Borinage. It was during this time which he called his “molting time” that he decided to become an artist (Wallace, 1969).

In November 1883, he wrote to Theo: “The germinating seed must not be exposed to a frosty wind- that was the case with me in the beginning” (Wilkie, 1990).
3.2.5 The Artist (1880-1890)

During his time in the Borinage, Van Gogh started making charcoal sketches of the coal miners and their surroundings (Wallace, 1969). Through the authenticity of his work, he showed that art could reach that intimacy of the striving, loving, and anguished self (Schapiro, 1951).

His career as an artist began as a highly religious moral drama and remained one throughout his career (Barnes, 1994). Every stage of his art had profound personal meaning and it engaged him completely (Barnes, 1994). He was drawn to art not as a skill or means of livelihood, but as a communication of the “good” (Wallace, 1969). He had a great love for the peasants and chose to paint portraits of them rather than of people in powerful positions (Wallace, 1969). Van Gogh wrote to his brother during this time, “I prefer drawing human eyes to painting cathedrals. For deep in a human eye there’s something that a cathedral does not have - however impressive and solemn it may be. I am more interested in the human soul, be it the soul of a poor devil or that of a harlot, than in structures” (Lieser, 1963, p. 3). Although he wanted to help and love mankind he could not communicate with people and turned to art as a means to communicate (Wallace, 1969). At the age of twenty-seven, Van Gogh became an artist (Wallace, 1969).

Although he kept writing to Theo, he had told him that he felt that words were not as vivid as pictures (Wallace, 1969). After deciding on art as his career he pursued it single-mindedly. He relied on a small allowance from his parents and soon fell in love with Kee, a woman who soon rejected him (Wilkie, 1990). She was Van Gogh’s first cousin and a widow who had a young son who Van Gogh enjoyed entertaining (Wallace, 1969).
However, when he told Kee of his feelings she moved to go and stay with her parents (Wallace, 1969). During this time, Van Gogh’s letters to Theo were of Kee and his love for her. He could not accept that she did not have feelings for him (Wallace, 1969). Kee’s rejection of Van Gogh only increased his desire for warmth and compassion and he wrote to Theo that he went to the Hague and found himself a prostitute (Wallace, 1969). He wrote that he did not want to be “stunned by that feeling” (Wallace, 1969, p. 32). He further wrote: “I need a woman, I can not, I will not live without love. I am a man and a man with passions. I must go to a woman, otherwise I shall freeze or turn to stone” (Wallace, 1969, p. 32). The name of the prostitute was Christine, however, he called her Sien. He later contacted her and had her come stay with him. She was a drunkard, had one illegitimate child and was pregnant with another (Wilkie, 1990). He drew many studies of her of which the most famous was a nude with the title, “Sorrow”, written boldly on the page (Wallace, 1969). He never told Theo of the relationship, only that he had found an inexpensive model.

At the time, Theo was sending him money every month. His family found out about his relationship with Sien and were very angry with him, saying that he had betrayed his social class (Wilkie, 1990). Sien lived with him for several months and eventually he told Theo about their relationship. Meanwhile, he continued to make progress with his art. Eventually Sien was forced by her mother to leave Van Gogh and live with her (Wilkie, 1990).

After the break up with Sien he moved to Drenthe, then to Nieuw Amsterdam. During this time, he had a love affair with an older woman, Margo Begemann, which led to a scandal and her attempted suicide (Wallace, 1969).
In 1886, his father died and Van Gogh moved to Paris where he became acquainted with the impressionists. The previous dark figures he had drawn were replaced with vivid close-ups of friends and himself. He was 32 when he came to Paris and when Theo started to sense a tragedy (Wallace, 1969). Theo is said to have remarked that he was sure “Van Gogh would either go mad or leave us all far behind. I did not know then that he would do both” (Wallace, 1969, p. 52).

It was in 1886 that Van Gogh first met Gauguin and began a friendship with him (Wallace, 1969). Van Gogh’s art had changed and so did his relations with others (Wilkie, 1990). His previously somber palette became more colourful as he was associating more with the impressionists. Van Gogh had begun to drink excessively and was struggling to contain his nerves (Wallace, 1969). He was exhausted and went to live with Theo with whom he quarreled frequently (Wilkie, 1990). In February of 1888, on the verge of a complete breakdown, he left Theo’s house and moved back to Paris (Wilkie, 1990). From February until December that year he produced 90 paintings and 100 sketches referring to himself as a “painting engine” (Wallace, 1969, p. 91). He spoke of decorating a house in which he would live and wanted Gauguin to live with him. Eventually they moved into what they called the “yellow house” where they lived and painted together (Wilkie, 1990).

3.2.5.1 Saint Remy (1888-1890)

During 1888, Van Gogh started to have emotional outbursts which became more frequent and he and Gauguin often disagreed (Wallace, 1969). However, one night after an argument with Gauguin, Van Gogh went home and cut off the upper lobe of his ear (Wilkie, 1990). He stopped the bleeding and took the earlobe to a brothel which he and
Gauguin often visited. There he handed it to a prostitute, saying that she must keep it like a treasure (Wallace, 1969). Schultz (2005) reports that there are many interpretations of the incident. After the incident, Gauguin left Paris and Van Gogh was hospitalised in December 1888. He had driven himself to a limit of emotional and physical exhaustion (Wallace, 1969).

During this time, Theo had become engaged to a woman and went to visit Van Gogh in hospital. He stated that Van Gogh would behave normally and then wander into philosophy and theology (Wallace, 1969).

A month after his discharge from the hospital in February 1889, Van Gogh suffered a relapse (Wallace, 1969). He became paranoid that someone was trying to poison him, and he was terrified by unearthly sounds and voices (Wallace, 1969). However, he recovered fast and soon resumed work on his art. Sources state that at this time he started to suffer from seizures of some kind (Schapiro, 1951; Wallace, 1969).

Van Gogh, afraid to live alone, asked to be admitted to Saint Remy as a psychiatric patient (Wallace, 1969). He was admitted to Saint Remy Hospital on May 8, 1889 and at the time the register read that the patient “is suffering from acute mania with hallucinations of sight and hearing which have caused him to mutilate himself by cutting off his ear” (Wallace, 1969, p. 141). A later entry in the register states, “my opinion is that Mr. van Gogh is subject to epileptic fits at very infrequent intervals” (Wallace, 1969, p. 141).

It is hard to determine what exactly his diagnosis was, however, the diagnosis which many doctors have since questioned, is paranoid schizophrenia. Others believe he was an
advanced alcoholic and that his brain was damaged by syphilis, and there are others who believe that he suffered from epilepsy (Schapiro, 1951; Wallace, 1969; Wilkie, 1990).

While at Saint Remy, he was treated by hydrotherapy, where he was soaked in a bath of water twice a week (Wallace, 1969). There is no other mention of treatment given to him during his stay. While in Saint Remy, Van Gogh had two rooms, one in which he stayed and the other in which he painted (Wilkie, 1990). He stabilised well and was allowed to go on day visits into town to paint (Wilkie, 1990).

During his time in Saint Remy, he was drawn especially to objects in strain: “to landscapes, unstable, and convulsed; restless shapes; to the wild spaces of thick undergrowth; to rain; to agitated trees - writhing, flaming, trees bent, tormented, with tossing masses of foliage and broken branches” (Schapiro, 1951, p. 53).

Shortly after the news of Theo’s wife falling pregnant, Van Gogh had another attack where he tried to kill himself by swallowing his paints (Wallace, 1969). Van Gogh stayed at Saint Remy for a year during which he produced about two paintings a week (Wallace, 1969). On the 31st of January 1890, Theo’s first son was born, whom he named Vincent Willem van Gogh (Wallace, 1969).

Van Gogh wanted to leave Saint Remy and Dr Gadget agreed to try to find him a place to stay. It was just before he left Saint Remy that he heard that his first painting had been sold. An article had also been written about him praising his art and intensity (Wallace, 1969). The article bothered Van Gogh as he felt he had been praised too much and asked that no more articles be written about him (Wallace, 1969). The news of the article and the sale of his painting caused him distress and he suffered another attack which he took several weeks to recover from (Wallace, 1969).
At the time he wrote to his mother that as soon as he heard of his success he felt he would be punished (Wallace, 1969). After recovering, he left Saint Remy and before going to stay with Dr Gadget, Van Gogh visited Theo to meet his wife and son. After the visit, he went to live at a home which Dr Gadget had arranged for him (Wallace, 1969).

Dr Gadget had treated him in Saint Remy and also enjoyed painting in his spare time (Wallace, 1969). A few months later, Van Gogh’s nephew became ill and this affected him very badly. During this time, he wrote to Theo of his sadness and loneliness (Wallace, 1969).

3.2.5.2 Death (1890)

On Sunday, the 27th of July 1890, he began a letter to Theo speaking about how he was a part of his canvasses and how they will “retain their calm even in the catastrophe” (Wallace, 1969, p. 165). Van Gogh never finished the letter which was later found in his pocket (Wallace, 1969; Wilkie 1990). He walked into the wheat fields and shot himself in the abdomen (Schapiro, 1951; Wallace, 1969; Wilkie, 1990). He then walked back to his room in the inn where he was staying. The landlord later found him lying on his bed, with his face turned to the wall (Wilkie, 1990). The landlord sent for Dr Gadget who thought it was unwise to attempt to extract the bullet (Wallace, 1969; Wilkie, 1990). He was still alive when he was found and is said to have told Theo the next day, “Do not cry, I did it for the good of everybody” (Wallace, 1969, p. 166). On Tuesday morning, nearly 36 hours after shooting himself, Van Gogh said in Dutch, “I wish I could go home now,” and died (Wallace, 1969, p. 166). He was 37 years and four months old.

Theo never recovered from his brother’s death and died less than six months later, at the age of thirty three (Schapiro, 1951; Wallace, 1969; Wilkie, 1990). Shortly after Van
Gogh’s death, Theo wrote to his mother, “One can not write how grieved one is nor find any comfort. It is a grief that will last and which I certainly shall never forget as long as I live, the only thing one might say is that he himself has the rest he was longing for…. Life was such a burden to him; but now, as often happens, everybody is full of praise for his talents…. Oh Mother! He was my own, own brother” (Wallace, 1969, p. 181).

The doctor at the time reported that Theo suffered from “overstrain and sorrow, he had a life full of emotional stress”. Wilkie (1990) reports that Theo was admitted to a clinic at Auteuil, near Paris, where on the evidence of Dr Frederik van Eeden, Theo was certified insane. Theo was buried in Holland. However, twenty three years later, his widow had his remains transferred to Auves where he was buried next to Van Gogh (Barnes, 1994).

### 3.3 Conclusion

This chapter gave a brief description of the life of Vincent van Gogh. The following chapter will focus on a theoretical overview of the psychobiographical approach.
CHAPTER 4

PSYCHOBIOGRAPHY : A THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

4.1 Chapter Preview

The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of the use of psychobiographical methods of life-history research. In order to do this, the following components will be explored and examined: definitions, related terms and descriptions of psychobiography; an overview of psychobiography; responses to criticism and lastly the value of psychobiography.

4.2 Psychobiographies and Related Concepts

Psychobiography is a combination of both psychology and biography. It generally focuses on lives which have already been lived and thus the entire life of the individual may be studied (Alexander, 1988). Runyan (1988a) stated that psychobiography is one of the main areas of study in which the aim is to achieve an in-depth understanding of an individual’s life. Life stories and histories of famous figures have long captivated and intrigued scholars of biography and scientific psychology (McAdams, 1988).

Biographical information has been primarily used by numerous psychologists to obtain insight into individuals through following their development. Thus, biographers have made use of psychodynamic theorizing associated with psychobiography (Runyan, 1984).

Psychology makes use of reliable evidence and utilizes a conceptual framework of theory and personality psychology in order to explain the typical patterns of human behaviour as well as human development. Findings are based on unique inferences and
are not always backed up by existing research and thus, the end results do not necessarily contribute to findings that can be generalized (Fouche, 1999). Nonetheless, personality psychologists have shown increased interest in autobiographical approaches (Elms, 1988). “Psychobiography is not only a way of doing biography, it is a way of doing psychology” (Elms, 1994, p. 5). To clarify the differences in similar fields to psychobiography, a brief description of six relevant research methods will follow.

4.2.1 Autobiography

Autobiography is the documentation of a specific individual’s life, or parts of his/her life authored by the individuals themselves. Autobiography tends to be biased and selective and written from a subjective perspective (Bromley, 1986).

4.2.2 Biography

Bromley (1986) describes biography as the structured account of an individual’s life written by someone other than the individual being studied. Biographies in general focus more on specific areas of an individual’s life, such as the reasons for their fame. Due to the specific focus, biography’s methodology has been considered subjective and thus lacking structure for a comprehensive and precise scientific approach. Nonetheless, Jacobs (2004) notes that biographies can be profoundly informative.

4.2.3 Case study

Case study deals with documentation of specific events or emotional episodes within specific periods in an individual’s life. This is done by using evidence which is available to reconstruct and interpret said life (Louw & Edwards, 1993). Case studies are often
used when researchers need to answer questions concerning an individual as it pertains to a significant event in the individual’s life.

**4.2.4 Psychohistory**

According to Jacobs (2004), psychohistory attempts to apply psychological theory to interpret events of a political, social and cultural nature. Thus it is primarily a historical exercise (Berg, 1995). Historical psychology researches the history of psychological phenomena and the history of thought about psychological development and the life source (Runyan, 1988a).

**4.2.5 Psychobiography**

McAdams (1988) defines psychobiography as the “systematic use of psychological (mostly personality) theory to transform a life into a coherent and illuminating story” (p. 2). Thus, psychobiography can be seen as the specific application of psychology to biography. A psychobiography is both a psychological analysis of an individual’s life, as well as a biographical depiction of an individual’s life history and achievements used to attain an interpretation concerning the individual’s personality development.

The application of theory must be explicit in order to distinguish psychobiography from biography and other similar genres (Runyan, 1982). The aim is to formulate the central life story of an individual and then to structure the life story according to a psychological theory.

Through psychobiographical research, understanding can be advanced through the in-depth study of a whole individual over time (i.e., an idiographic approach). This, after all, is one of the central concerns of psychology and social sciences (Runyan, 1982).
Furthermore, psychobiography encourages growth of new conceptual insights and contributes to the building of theory (Edwards, 1998; Roberts, 2002). That is to say, through illustration, that psychobiography can confirm, refine or develop existing theories.

Consequently, because learning about the experiences of other human beings may be interesting and instructive, psychobiography research is becoming a fast developing discipline (Jacobs, 2004).

The next section will further explore the history of the psychobiographical approach.

### 4.3 Overview of the Psychobiographical Approach

From the Middle Ages up until the 19th century, biographies of people considered exceptional historical figures were undertaken. These biographies did not however take into account individual’s feelings or psyche. With the emergence of psychoanalysis, this changed and researchers started to do more than merely state facts about a subject’s life (Jacobs, 2004).

Psychobiography began in the early 20th century (Scalapino, 1999). Lytton Strachey (1880-1932) was a well-known biographer during this time and according to McAdams (1988), created the change that converted biography into pathography during the 20th century. Pathography differs from biography in that pathography was a method of exposing the anxieties of the individual being studied and this later lead to psychobiography.

According to Elms (1988), Freud was not a follower of pathography, and attempted to differentiate his work from that of Strachey’s. Freud named his work ‘psychobiography’ (Scalapino, 1999). According to Runyan (1988a), the first psychobiography was written
by Freud in 1910 and titled, *Leonardo da Vinci and a memory of childhood*. Freud and Strachey’s work differed in that Strachey only applied psychological concepts to his biographies, while Freud applied a systematic theory of personality to the life span of the individual and was thus able to explain failures as well as successes in his subject’s life (Scalapino, 1999).

The director of the Harvard Psychology Clinic proposed that psychologists embark on the thorough study of individuals. He referred to this process as personology. His main interest lay in studying life narratives, and thus he called on psychologists to analyse autobiographies in order to discern and explore what was underlying the subject’s life story (McAdams, 1988).

During the mid-1960’s, much more work was done in the social sciences relating to human lives (McAdams, 1988). During this time, more attention was also given to psychobiography and there was an increase in published psychobiographies (Runyan, 1988b). In South Africa, psychobiography as a method of study has been neglected and few psychobiographies have been published on the lives of significant leading South African figures (Vorster, 2003). Nonetheless, psychobiography has been receiving much more attention in the South African context in the last decade and there has been an increase in psychobiographies such as Stoud’s (2004) psychobiography on the life of mother Theresa and Vorster’s (2003) psychobiography on the life of Balthazar Johannes Vorster.

### 4.4 The Advantages of Psychobiography

Numerous researchers in the field of life history research such as Alexander (1988); Carlson (1988); McAdams (1994); and Runyan (1988a) emphasize the importance of
psychobiographical research and point out its advantages. The advantages of psychobiographical case studies and life history research rest within the following five areas.

**4.4.1 The Uniqueness of the Individual Case Within the Whole**

Psychobiography tends to be morphogenic in nature, emphasizing the individuality of the whole person rather than the individuality found in a single element (Runyan, 1984). This approach to research provides a unique and holistic description of the individual under investigation, and focuses on understanding one person’s life (Carlson, 1988; Elms, 1994).

**4.4.2 The Socio-historical Context**

In order to gain a holistic understanding of the person, attention is given to the larger contextualized background within which the individual lived and emphasis is placed on the individual’s socio-historical and cultural experience, process of socialization, as well as their family history (Roberts, 2002). Through this judicious choice of life history materials, the detailed consideration of a variety of socio-historical contexts is made feasible (Carlson, 1988).

**4.4.3 Process and Pattern Over Time**

As psychobiographies concentrate on finished lives, the researcher is able to trace patterns of human development over the entire course of a person’s life and experience. Fiske (1988) claims that it becomes possible to form a more comprehensive understanding of personality in action which enables the researcher to document different
dimensions and processes of an individual’s functioning at any point in time and in any specific situation.

4.4.4 Subjective Reality

Through the researcher’s in-depth exposure and study of the subjective reality of the chosen subject, he or she develops a certain level of empathy for the person, which can be translated into a vivid and emotionally compelling life story later conveyed to the reader (Carlson, 1988).

4.4.5 Theory Testing and Development

Life history material provides an ideal laboratory for testing and developing various theories of human development (Carlson, 1988). The theory serves as a template against which the researcher can compare and analyze the data collected. This then aids in the conceptualization and operationalizing of case data within the framework of theoretical constructs, and allows for generalization from the case study to the theory (Yin, 1994).

4.5 Conclusion

The objective of psychobiography according to Runyan (1988a), is to gain a better understanding of individuals. Through this better understanding of people, psychological case studies can add meaning and value to research in general. In the following chapter we will discuss and explore research design and methodology.
CHAPTER 5

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the methodological considerations, research design and procedures involving data collection, reliability, trustworthiness and the validity of the data. The ethical considerations to be aware of while undertaking psychobiographical study will also be explored.

5.2 Primary Aim of the Research Study

The primary aim of this research study was to explore and describe the life of Vincent van Gogh from the theoretical perspective of Erikson’s (1963) theory of development. It was not the intention of this study to generalize the findings to a larger population. Rather, this study sought to apply Erikson’s (1963) developmental life stages theory to the life of Vincent van Gogh through the process known as analytical generalization (Yin, 1994).

5.3 Preliminary Methodological Considerations

Psychobiography has its advantages. Judicious choice of materials permit the researcher to consider various socio-historical contexts, avoid the inconveniences of informed consent, and achieve a degree of consensual validation beyond the best hopes of clinical case studies (Carlson, 1988). However, certain difficulties related to the effective execution of psychobiographical studies have also been identified (Anderson, 1981;
Carlson, 1988). The researcher must take notice of these possible shortcomings before a psychobiographical study is undertaken.

These shortcomings, as well as the mechanisms for reducing their influence, are discussed in the following section:

5.3.1 Analyzing an Absent Subject

There is a belief held by some researchers that the psychobiographer is at a disadvantage to a psychotherapist in the sense that the psychobiographer seldom has direct contact with the subject, and therefore less information is available. Runyan (1982), agreed that a criticism of psychobiography is that the biographical interpretations are based on inadequate facts, as the subject is usually deceased. Furthermore, there is often very little information available on an individual’s childhood which is vital in fully understanding an individual. It can be said that the information is either insufficient or from the wrong period in time, reducing the psychobiography’s credibility.

It is, however, argued that a psychobiographer should learn about the context of his or her subject. Anderson (1981) refuted that psychobiographers are disadvantaged as they are able to access various information sources and they have the opportunity to analyze events in the light of their eventual effects. He further stated that a psychobiographer is thus able to create a more balanced and accurate view of the individual’s life. The researcher is able to gain information regarding the subject from numerous sources, such as diaries, paintings, family, colleagues, letters written, photographs and other creations (Anderson, 1981).
5.3.2 Researcher Bias

The result of the relatively in-depth and long-term nature of a psychobiographical approach is that counter-transference is often experienced (Stroud, 2004). There may be times that the researcher idealizes the subject (Fouche & Van Niekerk, 2005); however, this can be counteracted by examining one’s feelings about the subject and developing empathy with the subject (Anderson, 1981). By working so closely with a subject, the researcher might lose objectivity. Runyan (1988a) argues that losing objectivity is not problematic in psychobiography as it adds value to the research method. By spending so much time studying the subject, the researcher develops a sense of empathy and sympathy for the individual being studied. By doing so, the researcher is better equipped to convey to the reader of the study a feeling of having met the individual.

The pursuit of a psychobiography is delicate and treacherous and can go wrong even for the most well meaning investigator (Elms, 1994). The researcher of this study consulted with her supervisor, Professor Hoelson, on a regular basis to receive independent feedback on her relationship with the subject. The researcher engaged in research triangulation whereby she consulted with other psychobiographical researchers for objective commentary on her relationship with her chosen subject (Anderson, 1981).

5.3.3 Reductionism

Another possible shortcoming of the psychobiographical approach is that psychological factors may be overemphasized at the expense of the external social and historical factors (Runyan, 1984). Runyan (1984) also noted other criticisms being that psychobiography focuses on pathological processes rather than normality and health, and that later formative influences are neglected for early childhood experiences. Elms
(1994) noted that psychologists who look at people as a bundle of nerve fibres will soon realize that reductionism is not the correct method. Thus, it is emphasized that the psychologist needs to deal with the person as a whole (Elms, 1994; Howe, 1997). Alexander (1990) argues that as people are all unique and complex in their own way, it may be difficult, if not impossible, to scientifically understand a person in his or her totality.

McAdams (2000), reports that the task of the psychobiographer is to systematically employ psychological theory to understand and analyze an individual’s life. Thus, the researcher can trace patterns of the individual’s development over his/her life’s continuum and in this way the researcher achieves a more comprehensive understanding of the person’s behaviour (Jacobs, 2004).

### 5.3.4 Cross-cultural Differences

Psychobiographical studies can be considered a form of cross-cultural research, in that the culture in which the subject lived would have differed from our present-day culture (Anderson, 1981). It is therefore recommended that the psychobiographer studies the subject’s religion, historical, cultural, moral, economic, social and political background.

According to Runyan (1982), it is very important to integrate the psychological aspects of the individual with the various contexts in which that person lived. Anderson (1981) also recommends that the researcher undertake extensive and in-depth historical research in order to develop a culturally empathetic understanding of the subject. According to Berg (1995), in an attempt to create this understanding, the researcher should consult a variety of data, ranging from primary sources (e.g., original letters and
documents written by Van Gogh himself) to secondary sources (e.g., published documents, newspaper editorials and books written by people other than Van Gogh).

5.3.5 Validity and Reliability Criticism

Lastly, psychobiographies have been criticized for being too subjective to be classified as a scientific method, lacking in reliability and validity (McAdams, 2000). Construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability can assess the quality of a research design involved in any empirical social research (Yin, 1994). These will be discussed later in this chapter in section 5.6.

5.3.6 Easy Genre Elitism

Some researchers argue that psychobiographical research is both easy and elitist. Runyan (1988) stated that a superficial biography might be written quickly and easily. However, a good biography demands consultation with numerous sources, extensive knowledge of the subject’s socio-historical context, psychological knowledge, as well as good literary skill.

As for the argument that psychobiographies focus too heavily on kings, queens, political leaders and the privileged, Runyan (1988b) warned that it is the level of aggregation, rather than the social class that should be the issue under consideration. Psychologists who studied normal people from a non-pathological point of view have accumulated useful data (Elms, 1994).

5.3.7 Inflated Expectations

As the psychobiographical approach has its shortcomings, explanations should be recognized as speculative (Anderson, 1981). Therefore, psychobiographers need to be
aware of the shortcomings and they must recognize that the psychological explanations do not replace, but add to other explanations (Vorster, 2003).

5.4 Research Design

This study of the life of Vincent van Gogh may be described as life history research (Runyan, 1988a) with a qualitative single–case research design (Yin, 1994). More specifically, the research design may be classified as a psychobiographical study of a single-case over an entire lifespan. The design therefore serves as a means of enquiry into an individual case through the systematic use of psychological theory to transform a life into a coherent and illuminated story (McAdams, 1988). This design is used to confirm, challenge or extend a theory with a specified set of propositions and circumstances under which these propositions are believed to be true (Yin, 1994).

The research method that was utilized in this study can be described as qualitative-morphogenic (Elms, 1994). This method emphasizes the individuality of the whole person instead of the individuality encountered in single elements (Runyan, 1988a). The person is thus described qualitatively and holistically within a particular socio-historical setting (McAdams, 1988).

5.5 Research Subject

The proposed study is a single-subject qualitative psychobiography, with the subject having been selected via purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is based on the judgement of the researcher to select a case that provides experiences, which will aid in developing an idea (Berg, 1995; De Vos, 1998). Case studies are typically directed at gaining an understanding of the uniqueness and idiosyncrasy of a particular case in all its
complexity (Huysamen, 1994). The psychological study of greatness provides the biographer with a scientific approach to understand why and how certain children develop into unusually creative men and women (Howe, 1997).

McLeod (1994) noted that the results yielded from the study of an individual should also enable some feature of a theory to be either confirmed or refuted. Vincent van Gogh serves as the single individual selected for study in this qualitative case study. Vincent van Gogh was selected as the subject on the basis of interest value, uniqueness, and significance of his life achievements.

5.6 Validity and Reliability

5.6.1 Trustworthiness:

Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose that trustworthiness of a qualitative research study is important in terms of evaluating its worth. Trustworthiness involves establishing credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability. Credibility concerns confidence in the 'truth' of the findings. In the current study this was done by means of triangulation of the sources which included published articles, numerous books written on Van Gogh as well as letters he wrote from which the data was collected. The researcher also ensured credibility by having regular supervision while working on this psychobiographical study. Transferability refers to the extent that the findings have applicability in other contexts. Psychobiography’s aim is not to generalize the findings to the larger population; however, the findings of this study could through the process known as abduction (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) be applied selectively where appropriate to other similar research contexts, such as studying other artistic individuals. Dependability
refers to the consistency of the findings and whether or not they can be repeated. The researcher used a grid which indicates how the life of Van Gogh was analyzed based on the developmental theory of Erik Erikson. Finally, conformability refers to the degree of neutrality, or the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents as opposed to researcher bias, motivation, or interest. It is difficult to ensure conformability within qualitative studies however regular research supervision ensured a level of conformability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

5.6.2 Construct Validity

This refers to establishing correct operational measures for the concepts being studied. According to Yin (1994), the researcher should carefully select and conceptualize the constructs and variables that are to be considered. These should be in keeping with the original objectives of the study and the use of multiple sources of evidence is required in order to increase the study’s construct validity. To ensure construct validity the researcher used multiple sources of data as well as a grid. The researcher constructed a grid (Appendix B) which enabled the relevant data from the life of Van Gogh to be mapped onto Erik Erikson’s theory. The grid is a visual representation of how the researcher integrated and examined the research data.

5.6.3 Internal Validity

To ensure internal validity, triangulation by means of referring to multiple sources of data was utilized. In this study, two types of triangulation were used. The first is data triangulation, which is based on using different sources of data (Sokolovsky, 1996). In this study, this was done by using both published journal articles as well as books during
data collection. The sources included both primary and secondary sources. The second type of triangulation that was used is investigator triangulation, which refers to research being evaluated by independent researchers (Sokolovsky, 1996). In this psychobiography, the researcher’s findings were not evaluated by independent researchers but the research was supervised by a qualified and experienced psychobiographic researcher ensuring investigator triangulation (Sokolovsky, 1996).

5.6.4 External validity

External validity refers to establishing the domain to which a study’s findings can be generalized (Runyan, 1984). Within a psychobiography the researcher’s aim is to generalize the findings to the theory being used and not to other case studies or the larger population. This is done through the method of analytic generalization, in which the empirical results of the study are compared to a previously developed theory. The single-case psychobiography can then be used to determine whether a theory’s propositions are correct and if it could be further refined (Yin, 1994). In this case, the researcher compared the life of Vincent van Gogh to the developmental theory of Erik Erikson.

5.6.5 Reliability

This refers to demonstrating that the operations of a study, such as data collection procedures can be repeated, with the same results (Yin, 1994). As psychobiography is qualitative in nature, the same results are unlikely to be found. However, in order to increase reliability, all data gathering, analysis and procedures were documented in detail. The psychobiography was also supervised to ensure that all findings were based on valid data. The nine principles of salience will also be applied to the data to increase the
reliability of the study. The nine principles of salience are listed in Appendix C. Reliability of the data was further enhanced through the use of both primary and secondary sources. This allows for data triangulation by means of cross-referencing.

5.7 Data Collection

Data for this study was obtained from several information sources. These sources included primary document(s) (a document produced by the subject such as Vincent van Gogh’s letters to his brother) and secondary source(s) (documents produced by other authors) (Berg, 1995). As Yin (1994) reports, multiple sources of data enhance the internal validity of the information collected. This is because published data are stable resources that can be frequently and repeatedly reviewed and also allow for cross-referencing of biographical information.

5.8 Data Analysis

Yin (1994) described the analysis of case study data as a process of examining, extracting, categorizing, and recombining of evidence. He further stated that every investigation should start with a general analytical strategy - yielding priorities of what to analyse. He proposed two general strategies:

5.8.1 Relying on Theoretical Propositions

Relying on the theoretical propositions, on which the original objectives and design of the case-study are presumably based. These propositions in turn reflect a set of research questions that will provide insight into the objectives of the study and the content of the theoretical approach.
Alexander (1988) proposed two major strategies, similar to those of Yin, for the analysis of personal data: (a) letting the data reveal themselves, and (b) asking the data a question. The major approach to the published materials on, and by Vincent van Gogh, in the current study involved ‘asking the data questions’. This method emphasizes the extraction of “core identifying units” also referred to as “themes” or “schemas” by asking appropriate questions relating to the objectives of the study. The following questions were asked:

- **Question 1:** What body or section of the data will allow for the exploration and description of psychosocial development over the lifespan of Vincent van Gogh?
- **Question 2:** How will a dialogue be created between the data extracted on Vincent van Gogh and the content of Erik Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development?

Vincent van Gogh’s psychological development was primarily structured through the utilization of Erikson’s psychosocial development stages which served as a guide for answering Question 1. The implementation of analytical generalization guided the attempt at answering Question 2. A dialogue was also created by the grid which helped integrate the theory and the subject.

Alexander (1988) reported that during the examination and extraction of collected data, the primary concern is the method of extracting the most meaningful units of personality structure and development from the productions of an individual. He identified nine principal identifiers of salience which serve as guidelines to extract salient data. These
guidelines aided the researcher in identifying information deemed most significant and are listed in Appendix C.

The nine identifiers of salience provided the researcher of this study with guidelines to approach the collected materials in a relatively consistent and systematic fashion. This procedure further enhanced the reliability of the collected data.

5.8.2 Developing a Case Description

This refers to the development of a descriptive framework for the organization and integration of the case study, in accordance with the original purpose of the study (Yin, 1994). In the data analysis, use was made of two types of triangulation namely, data triangulation and investigator triangulation which were discussed previously in the section on internal validity (5.3.5.3). To help create case description, the grid in Appendix B was used to integrate the data and give a visual representation of the life of Van Gogh as well as Erik Erikson’s eight developmental stages.

5.9 Ethical Considerations

Elms (1994) highlighted the limited existence of ethical guidelines for psychobiographies, but suggested that all intimate knowledge obtained, be treated and documented with respect. Runyan (1984) noted the following ethical issues namely, the invasion of privacy, the potential embarrassment or harm to the subject, or to his or her relatives and associates. Elms noted certain guidelines for psychobiographical studies which were issued by the American Psychiatric Association:
• Psychobiographies may be done on deceased persons. These individuals should preferably be long dead and should have no surviving relatives close enough to be embarrassed by unsavoury revelations.

• Psychobiographies may not be done on living persons, unless they have freely consented to be studied, interviewed and written up for publication.

Van Gogh died in 1890 and has no close relatives who are still alive and thus there are no foreseeable ethical problems with regards to confidentiality. To further ensure ethical standards, all sources and quotations within this study were referenced to avoid plagiarism.

5.10 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a clear description of the key methodological considerations relevant to psychobiography. The researcher also identified strategies to avoid or address these pitfalls. Chapter Five further gave a description of the research design and methodology of this study. Data collection and analysis, validity and reliability, as well as the ethical considerations which were taken into account were discussed.
CHAPTER 6

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings that emerged following the exploration of Vincent Van Gogh’s lifespan from the perspective of Erik Erikson’s (1950, 1963, 1964, 1965, 1968, 1978) developmental theory. The discussion will follow the chronological stages of Vincent Van Gogh’s life as outlined in chapter 3. Erikson has proposed eight psychosocial stages of development; each embodying an alternative crisis, which were superimposed on Vincent van Gogh’s life.

According to Clandinin and Connelly (1994), the most important task in narrative is the retelling of stories that allow for growth as well as change. Biographies document and report on the history of a person’s life, they work outward and inward from the personal history of the individual under study. They are related and examined simultaneously in four directions: (a) inwardly (i.e., the internal conditions of feelings, moral depositions and hopes), (b) outwardly (i.e., existential conditions and environment), (c) backwards (i.e., temporality or history), and (d) forwards (i.e., present or future). People live stories, and in the telling of them reaffirm them, modify them and in doing so create new ones (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). Much insight can be gained from the life of Vincent van Gogh as he painted what he felt and he wrote constantly about his feelings to his brother Theo. As noted in Chapter 3, 661 of Van Gogh’s letter to Theo have been preserved (Wallace, 1969). There are also a multitude of books written
on the life of Van Gogh and much research has already been completed on this famous figure’s art and life.

Within the next section the researcher aims to retell the story of Vincent van Gogh’s life in accordance with that of Erik Erikson’s developmental stages. The researcher integrated the developmental stages with the life of Van Gogh in the form of the grid in Appendix B. The discussions below will proceed in a chronological manner starting with Erikson’s first stage of trust versus mistrust.

6.2 Trust vs. Mistrust (Birth to about 18 months)

Erikson’s first stage of psychosocial development concerns the conflict between the dual characteristics of trust versus mistrust. This stage covers the child’s first 18 months of development in which the child depends largely on the primary caregiver (mostly the child’s mother) for establishing a meaningful relationship. The degree of resolution between the trust versus mistrust crisis is directly equal to the nature and quality of the relationship between the primary caregiver and the infant. If this crisis is successfully resolved, a resulting virtue of hope is instilled within the child (Erikson, 1965; Erikson, 1978). This hope manifests itself through the child’s exhibited belief in the supporting structure of his environment. This quiet confidence is rooted in the environmental consistency provided by the primary caregiver which in turn gives meaning to the infant’s experience (Erikson, 1963; Erikson, 1965). It is thus not frustration itself which fuels an infant’s neuroticism, but rather lack of meaning in their frustrations (Erikson, 1965).

Due to limited information regarding van Gogh’s first eighteen months of life, the inferences drawn by the researcher are highly speculative. As mentioned in Chapter 3,
Vincent van Gogh was not the first child born to the Van Gogh’s. His mother gave birth to a son one year before Van Gogh was born. Unfortunately, the child was stillborn. Wilkie (1990) reports that due to this child’s death, Van Gogh’s mother was very overprotective of him as an infant. This could have caused Van Gogh to develop trust in his mother, however, her over-protectiveness could have caused him to have a general mistrust in others and the world.

Trust needs to be established with a primary caregiver before it can transcend and be created between a child and the outside world. Van Gogh and his mother seemed to have a good relationship in his first few months. It is thus likely that Van Gogh would also have had general trust instilled in him. However, later in life, Van Gogh became mistrustful of others and never developed deep relationships with other people except for his brother, Theo. According to Erikson’s (1969) theory, the psychosocial phases recur throughout life as the conflicts play out in similar roles, and in different areas in the individual’s life. Erikson believed that the adult life plays an integral role in human development as he believed that past problems could still be overcome by a healthy adult phase of life. The stages of development can therefore be seen as having a continuous nature (Erikson, 1978).

Thus, the researcher concludes that the first psychosocial crisis between trust and mistrust had been relatively successfully resolved developing the virtue of hope within Van Gogh.

6.3 Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt (18 months to about 3 years of age)

As stated in Sadock and Sadock (2003), the over-protectiveness of a parent could impede a child’s developing autonomy, and exploration of his inherent capacity to deal
with the world. On the other hand, a parent who is distant and leaves a child to rely exclusively on his own lack of judgement could be just as harmful (Sadock & Sadock, 2003). Thus, the decisive ration between over-protectiveness and distance as a parent, determines whether a child will develop a “lasting sense of goodwill and pride” or if they will “form a sense of loss of self control…a lasting propensity to doubt and shame” (Erikson, 1965, p. 246). A positive outcome of a successful crisis resolution within this stage is the development of autonomy as well as the ego virtue of will (Erikson, 1978).

The strength of the individual’s will is dependent on the driving force of the virtue of hope (the virtue attained from the previous psychosocial stage of trust versus mistrust) to force the will into action. In order to experience initiative (the positive outcome of the next psychosocial stage of development) the individual is dependent on their will to be put into action. Initiative is dependent on will to exist as a constant will, however, hope forms the backbone of will. Therefore, it is pointed out that a successful resolution in the first stage is essential in providing the strength of the child’s will in the form of hope (Erikson, 1963). The child’s will is therefore justified and aids in the confidence to produce initiative. The converse is also true, a lack of hope and a lack of autonomy result in doubt. An action which is performed by a weaker will, inevitably cause a suspicion that overrides initiative, which in turn may give birth to guilt.

Due to the fact that the inferences regarding the success or failure of autonomy versus shame and doubt are so interdependent on the initiative versus guilt stage, the researcher addressess this psychosocial stage next.
6.4 Initiative vs. Guilt (about 3 years to 5 years old)

According to Erikson (1963), children become increasingly more active from the age of three to five years. Children start to explore their environment more with their newly acquired locomotor and language skills. Initiative can be understood as the capability to devise actions or projects, and having confidence and the belief that it is okay to do so, even with a risk of failure or making mistakes (Erikson, 1963). Guilt can be understood as the feeling that it is wrong to instigate something of one's own design. Guilt results from believing that something is wrong or likely to attract disapproval. Initiative flourishes when adventure and game-playing is encouraged, irrespective of how silly it seems to the adult in charge. Suppressing adventure and experimentation, or preventing young children from doing things for themselves inhibits the development of confidence to initiate, replacing it instead with an unhelpful fear of being wrong or unapproved of by parents or other individuals (Sadock & Sadock, 2003). Children should be allowed to explore and act on their new-found initiative so that they can develop a positive view of self (Corey, 2005; Meyer et al., 2003; Sadock & Sadock, 2003). If this freedom is not given, a child might develop a sense of guilt for their behaviour; the same guilt which later overshadows their initiative (Corey, 2005). As a young boy, Van Gogh was said to be stubborn and given to strange behaviour (Wilkie, 1990). Wallace (1969) reports that Van Gogh had a great deal of charm as a young boy and was often found collecting beetles and inventing games. This indicates that he took initiative as a child without being overcome by fear or guilt. However, these activities seem more introverted and imaginary than social and extroverted.
Biographers often dismiss Van Gogh’s parents as narrow-minded and focused on outward appearances (Wallace, 1969). Thus we can deduce that he was acting contrary to what his parents deemed normal as his behaviour as a child has been described by Wilkie (1990) as weird and strange. Their concern with outward appearances was the opposite of what Van Gogh believed and lived (Wallace, 1969). His parents did not understand him, his ideas, nor the way in which he chose to live his life (Wallace, 1969). Wilkie (1990) reports that as a young child (age unknown) Van Gogh would mould small figures from clay and draw sketches. A very autonomous action which would have needed will, inspired by the hope, which was instilled in him in the previous stages. However, when his parents praised his works of art and creations he immediately destroyed them. Later in his life, we see a similar pattern of feeling shame when praised for his paintings (Wallace, 1969). It is clear that Van Gogh took initiative, behaved in a manner considered to be out of the ordinary for the time, took risks, and invented games, yet, when praised he seemed to have displayed some form of guilt which caused him to destroy his creations. This could once again indicate more of an introverted personality as it seems he did not create art for recognition from others but rather as something which brought him pleasure.

If a child is not given freedom, he might develop guilt for his behavior and this guilt might then overshadow his initiative (Corey, 2005). The virtue that results from the ability to strive for goals confidently with initiative and without feelings of guilt is, purpose (Louw, Louw & Van Ede, 2001). It is thus difficult to state whether he overcame this stage of development successfully as he displayed both initiative as a child and then later as an adult. There seemed to be a certain degree of guilt and shame
consistently present in his writing as an adult. Although both seem to be present, initiative seems to have won over guilt as it never prohibited Van Gogh from trying new things and exercising his creative initiative. He is said to be the first artist to develop an art that is truly personal (Meyer, 1951). He never conformed to the norm and pushed boundaries in his personal life as well as his professional life. Thus, I think it is safe to conclude that he mastered this stage with a sense of initiative in relation to creativity and imagination and that he had the virtue of purpose instilled in him.

6.5 Industry vs. Inferiority (about 5 years to about 13 years)

Erikson (1978) characterized the resulting virtue of Industry vs. Inferiority stage as competence. During this stage children develop a sense of industry when they take pride in their productions (Meyer et al., 2003). This is as a result of goals achieved because of their newly developed skills (Meyer et al., 2003). As mentioned in the previous section, Van Gogh is said to have destroyed sketches he made as well as an elephant he moulded as a child (Wilkie, 1990). Morris (1996) highlighted that feelings of inadequacy might be internalized if a child appears mediocre or insufficient in assuming a sense of industry. According to Erikson, it is important for children to play and compete with children of the same sex (Louw, Louw & Van Ede, 2001). Erikson (1963) further noted that starting to have a sense of ideology is important during this stage. Erikson (1965) defined the concept of ideology as a distinct world image by which the young adult finds some sense of order and orientation within the world. Ideology will be further discussed in the next stage of development.

Van Gogh was the son of a pastor, and was brought up in a religious and cultured atmosphere (Mishaud, 1989). Mishaud (1989) reports that Van Gogh was a highly
emotional child and lacked self-confidence. Wallace (1969) reports that as a child, Van Gogh was serious, silent and thoughtful. Van Gogh’s family have been reported to have had closed minded ideas (Wallace, 1969). He was 12 years old when his parents sent him to boarding school 15 miles away as they felt that he was becoming too rough associating with the peasant boys of Groot Zundert (Wallace, 1969). It is clear that his family did not approve of the company he chose to keep. His parents did not like the friends he associated with and this could very well have had a negative impact on Van Gogh’s development. He was the only child separated from the family at that time and restrained from mixing with other children in boarding school, rather he began to read more books (Wallace, 1969). Once again we see how Van Gogh was more introverted than extroverted and this possibly also indicates a sense of mistrust in others. Reportedly, he was distressed to leave his family home, and recalled this even in adulthood (Mishaud, 1989). In November 1883 at the age of thirty, he wrote to Theo: “The germinating seed must not be exposed to a frosty wind- that was the case with me in the beginning” (Wilkie, 1990, p. 25). Wallace (1969) reports that separation from his family at such a young age left its mark on Van Gogh. The separation could have caused him to doubt his identity and therefore induce confusion about his place in the world. If this confusion dominated over the concept of an integrated identity, the resulting ego virtue of cynicism would have been instilled (Erikson, 1965). Cynicism stands as competence’s counterpart. Events such as a dispute between Van Gogh and his parents concerning his choice of friends, or being sent to boarding school could have had a negative impact on him. This could have resulted in him doubting his competence as well as his choices and instilled a sense of inferiority. Barnes (1994) further reports that Van Gogh did not have a happy
childhood. His difficult, highly strung and oversensitive temperament isolated him from his schoolmates (Barnes, 1994). Thus, in the light of what has been said about Van Gogh, I think it would be safe to conclude that he developed a sense of inferiority during this stage of development.

6.6 Identity vs. Role confusion (about 13 years to about 21 years)

According to Morris (1996), until the age of thirteen the child has adopted many identifications from the outside world. At this point, the ego starts to learn to integrate these already existing roles, thus establishing an inner sense of continuity between the different roles (Morris, 1996). Erikson (1965) states that the young adult tries to find some sense of order and orientation within the world during this stage (a sense of ideology). He noted that this search is easily misunderstood and often it is only vaguely understood by the individual himself (Erikson, 1963). Erikson (1963) further wrote that adolescents must test extremes before settling on a constant course, especially during times of ideological confusion and widespread marginality of identity. Art and religion were the two occupations to which the Van Gogh family gravitated. His family came from a long heritage of art dealers and his father was a preacher in the Dutch Reformed Church (Meyer, 1951). Thus it was no surprise that Van Gogh started working as a junior clerk for the art firm of Goupil in 1869 when he was 17 years old. It was there that Theo came to visit him and they started writing to each other. Thirty six of Theo’s letters to Van Gogh have been preserved and 661 of Van Gogh’s letters were kept by Theo (Wallace, 1969). The letters span an 18 year period, beginning in August 1872 and ending in July 1890 (Wallace, 1969; Wilkie, 1990). Van Gogh worked for the family’s art company training as an art dealer for six years (Wallace, 1969).
Erikson (1963) noted that in youth, ego strength emerges from the mutual confirmation of individual and community in the sense that society recognizes the young individual as a bearer of fresh energy. The individual then recognizes society as a living process which inspires loyalty as it receives it (Erikson, 1963). Identity is a new reality which the individual wishes to be reborn with, choosing their own ancestors as well as their new social group. This is often misunderstood as rebellion against the childhood environment (Erikson, 1963). Van Gogh was sent to boarding school at the age of 12 to prevent him from associating with the peasant boys (Wallace, 1969). His parents could have seen his associating with peasants as rebellion. Little more is know about Van Gogh’s school days, apart from the fact that he developed a great fascination with books which continued for the rest of his life (Wallace, 1969).

To Erikson (1965), identity is achieved through the integration of multiple roles—student, brother, son, artist, friend, etc. These roles are integrated into a coherent pattern that provides a sense of inner continuity. The result of this particular crisis resolution is the establishment of a more lasting identity by integration of the multiple roles previously seen as separate. These roles are integrated into an identity which is solidified in an ever-changing external world (Erikson, 1965). Ideology also gives the adolescent’s life more meaning (Hergenhahn & Olson, 2003). An identity can not surface until all previous ego functions are integrated, and commitment to an ideology allows such integration (Hergenhahn & Olson, 2003). A chosen ideology could be religious, political, or philosophical (Hergenhahn & Olson, 2003). After working as an art dealer for six years, Van Gogh decided to leave the family business. He then decided that he wanted to
become a preacher like his father (Wallace, 1969). He was almost 23 years old when he left the Goupil art company (Wallace, 1969).

A trend which Erikson (1965) noted during this developmental stage is the exaggeration of rituals within ideology which results in the ritualism of what he called totalism (Hergenhahn & Olson, 2003). He understood totalism as the unquestioning commitment to overly simplistic ideology (Hergenhahn & Olson, 2003). Erikson further noted that it is the need for ideology that makes adolescents susceptible to the exploitation of totalitarian ideas (Erikson, 1963).

During this phase of Van Gogh’s life, we see him developing competence, becoming an art dealer and reportedly doing well in the business (Wallace, 1969). However, he was never happy as a art dealer and felt unsatisfied. People who knew him at the time reported that he always had a abstracted expression, pondering, deeply serious and melancholy (Wallace, 1969). It was in his early twenties that he started to want to leave the business and become a preacher.

The researcher concludes that Van Gogh developed a sense of industry during this stage of development (identity vs role confusion). It is proposed that Van Gogh did not develop a sense of identity, being the goal of this stage of development. Rather, during this stage of development he developed role confusion. Van Gogh had not yet integrated the different roles (art dealer, preacher and friend) in his life. At this stage of his development he was still displaying role confusion rather than a sense of identity. His behaviour was that of a person searching for an identity and not yet having found one.
6.7 Intimacy vs. Isolation (about 20 years to about 40 years)

Identity which should be established in the previous stage allows the individual to share that identity with another person in an intimate relationship (Erikson, 1978). Erikson (1965) defined intimacy as the “capacity to commit … and to develop ethical strength to abide by such commitments, even though they may call for significant sacrifices or compromises” (p. 255). Failure to commit to an intimate relationship may lead to identity confusion and also to feelings of isolation (Corey, 2005). Erikson added that besides isolation because of inadequate intimacy, the individual might turn to self-absorption. According to Erikson (1965), this isolation or self-absorption extends into wider social relationships. Erikson called this distantiation and defined it as “the readiness to isolate and, if necessary, to destroy those forces and people whose essence seems dangerous to one’s own” (p. 256). Erikson (1965) proposed that for any psychosocial crisis to be successfully resolved, an adequate balance between opposing psychosocial states needs to be achieved. The virtue resulting from a positive resolution of this stage is love (Sadock & Sadock, 2003). Erikson describes love as an intimate relationship with a member of the opposite sex with whom one shares trust, reproduction and relaxation (Louw, Louw & Van Ede, 2001).

In 1877, at the age of 24, Van Gogh started studying theology (Wallace, 1969). He later entered into a missionary school and was sent to work in the Borinage, a very poor mining region of southern Belgium, where he worked as a mission preacher with mining families. During that time, he was described as having unconventional behaviour and was dismissed as a missionary in 1879 (Wilkie, 1990). None the less, he continued to work as a missionary of his own accord (Wilkie, 1990). During this time, he started
painting the peasants. He called this time his moulting period and when he left the Borinage he rejected the Christian church, felt that he had drawn closer to God and decided that he wanted to be an artist. In 1880, he left the Borinage and registered at the Royal Acadamy of Fine Arts (Wilkie, 1990).

The researcher postulates that this was when he resolved much of his role confusion and after experimenting with two different careers, finally settled and wholeheartedly pursued art as a career. In this way, the researcher concluded that he resolved the previous developmental crisis and developed a sense of identity as an artist. He never seemed to fully integrate his different roles and many sources speak of his spiritual struggle expressed through his art works (Wallace, 1969). Van Gogh also never seemed to be at peace with one ideology and seemed to search for meaning in many sources as well as different points of view. As an artist, he experimented with Japanese art, and later associated with the group of artists known as the impressionists (Wallace, 1969). However, it is the researchers opinion that he never fully identified with any of these movements.

To Van Gogh, art was not merely a means for an income, rather, he converted all his aspirations and anguish into his art works. In doing so, his art became the first example of a truly personal art. Meyer (1951) reports that to Van Gogh art was a deeply lived means of spiritual salvation, used as transformation of the self. He desired to connect and communicate with others but seemed to have struggled to do so from a young age and thus he turned to art to communicate his feelings and desires (Meyer, 1951).

Van Gogh had very few relationships with others and was said to be a difficult man (Wallace, 1969). He once said that the world was something God had put together “in a
hurry on one of his bad days” (Wallace, 1969, p. 8). Thus, he engaged himself completely in his art and every stage of his art had personal meaning (Meyer, 1951). His only lasting relationship was his relationship with Theo, his brother to whom he regularly wrote. Van Gogh lived a lonely life, although for the last seventeen years of his life he wrote almost daily to his brother Theo.

It is well known that Van Gogh was unstable and felt misunderstood in life, often asking himself, “What is the use?” (Wallace, 1969). Despite having a supportive relationship with his brother, Theo, it seems Van Gogh achieved isolation and self-absorption instead of intimacy. Mishaud (1989) reports that all Van Gogh's "madness" is connected to this extreme and painful knowledge that his very existence as a painter required separation from others. He wrote to Theo that he loved him as much or more than himself and in another letter, he wrote that it is, better to be ruined than to ruin someone else (Mishaud, 1989). The letter indicates Van Gogh’s drifting towards isolating himself and moving away from others. In a later letter to Theo he said, "People matter more than things, and the more trouble I take over pictures, the more pictures in themselves leave me cold. The reason why I try to make them is so as to be among the artists" (Mishaud, 1989, p. 25). This quotation shows not only his feelings of isolation but his desire to belong to a community of artists. Yet, as mentioned before, Van Gogh only sold one painting in his lifetime and only became well-known after his death. Today, he is widely regarded as one of history's greatest painters and an important contributor to the foundations of modern art.

Thus, we can presume that he was not very well known as a painter in his lifetime and his art was often misunderstood. His unique fusion of form and content is powerful,
dramatic, imaginative and emotional. Mishaud (1989) reports that Van Gogh was completely absorbed in the effort to explain either his struggle against madness or his comprehension of the spiritual essence of man and nature.

Van Gogh had numerous failed relationships with women, falling in love with his cousin, living with a prostitute and later with an older woman. None of these relationships ever lasted. None were ever approved of by his family (Wallace, 1969). His family found out about his relationship with Sien (a prostitute) and were reportedly angry with him as they felt that he had betrayed his social class (Wilkie, 1990). Failure to commit to a relationship may lead to identity confusion and also feelings of alienation and isolation (Corey, 2005). His romantic relationships never lasted and neither did his friendships.

It was in 1886 when Van Gogh first met Gauguin and began a friendship with him (Wallace, 1969). During this time, Van Gogh’s art had changed, as did his relations with others (Wallace, 1969; Wilkie, 1990). He was drinking excessively and struggling to contain his nerves (Wallace, 1969). It was during this time that Van Gogh moved into a house with Gauguin. Van Gogh’s emotional outburst became more frequent and he and Gauguin often disagreed (Wallace, 1969). In 1888, Van Gogh cut off the lower part of his ear and took it to a brothel that he and Gauguin often visited.

There are numerous theories as to why he cut off his ear. It is likely that Van Gogh was experiencing auditory hallucinations during this time. Thus, some researchers postulate that Van Gogh cut off his ear in a psychotic state in order to cut off and silence the disturbing sounds (Schultz, 2005). A psychoanalytical explanation of the incident is in terms of his oedipal complex. According to this theory offered by Schultz (2005), Van
Gogh and Gauguin were living together and Gauguin represented Van Gogh’s father. Gauguin is said to have had a very powerful personality. Schnier (1950) reports that Van Gogh threatened Gauguin the day before he cut off his ear. According to Schnier’s interpretation, Gauguin represented Van Gogh’s hated father and that failing in his initial threat, Van Gogh “finally gratified his extraordinary resentment and hate for his father by deflecting the hatred on to his own person. In doing so, Van Gogh committed, in phantasy, an act of violence on his father with whom he identified himself and at the same time he punished himself for committing the act” (Schnier, 1950, p. 153). Then “in depositing his symbolic organ at the brothel he also fulfilled his wish to have his mother” (Schnier, 1950, p. 153-154).

After the incident, Gauguin left Paris and Van Gogh was hospitalized in December 1888. Wallace (1969) reports he had driven himself to a limit of emotional and physical exhaustion. Theo had during this time become engaged to a woman and went to visit Van Gogh in hospital. He stated that Van Gogh would act normally and then wander into philosophy and theology (Wallace, 1969).

A month after his discharge from the hospital in February 1989, Van Gogh suffered a relapse (Wallace, 1969). He became paranoid that someone was trying to poison him, and was terrified by unearthly sounds and voices (Wallace, 1969). He recovered fast and soon resumed work on his art. However, Van Gogh had become afraid to live alone, and asked to be admitted to Saint Remy as a psychiatric patient (Wallace, 1969). Once again, hospitalization only increased his isolation. According to Erikson (1965), isolation or self-absorption extends into wider social relationships. Erikson called this distantiation
and defined it as “the readiness to isolate and, if necessary, to destroy those forces and people whose essence seems dangerous to one’s own” (p. 256).

It was just before he left Saint Remy that he heard that his first painting had been sold, and also that an article had been written about him. The article praised his art and the intensity of it (Wallace, 1969). The article bothered Van Gogh as he felt he had been praised too much and asked that no more articles be written about him (Wallace, 1969). The news of the article and the sale of his painting caused him distress and he suffered another attack which took him several weeks to recover from (Wallace, 1969). He wrote during that time to his mother that as soon as he heard of his success he felt he would be punished (Wallace, 1969). This seemed to be similar to the guilt or shame he displayed as a child when his works of art were praised.

After recovering, he left Saint Remy, Van Gogh went to live with Dr Gadget who was also a painter (Wallace, 1969). Prior to that Van Gogh visited his brother to meet Theo’s wife and son. A few months later, his nephew became ill which affected Van Gogh badly. During this time, he wrote to Theo of his sadness and loneliness in his letters (Wallace, 1969). In the letters, he once again expressed feelings of isolation.

On Sunday the 27th of July, 1890, he began a letter to Theo about how he felt Theo was a part of his canvasses and how the paintings will “retain their calm even in the catastrophe” (Wallace, 1969, p. 165). Van Gogh never finished the letter and it was later found in his pocket (Wallace, 1969; Wilkie, 1990). After starting the letter, he walked into the wheat fields and shot himself in the abdomen (Schapiro, 1951; Wallace, 1969; Wilkie, 1990). He was still alive when he was found and reported to have said to Theo the next day, “Do not cry, I did it for the good of everybody” (Wallace, 1969, p. 166).
On Tuesday morning, nearly 36 hours after shooting himself, Van Gogh said in Dutch “I wish I could go home now,” after which he died (Wallace, 1969, p. 166). He was 37 years and four months old.

Thus, to conclude Van Gogh’s final stage of life as well as Erikson’s sixth stage of development, it would be safe to conclude that Van Gogh never achieved intimacy with another person except for his relationship with his brother Theo. However, when Theo got married and had a son of his own, Van Gogh felt more isolated and alone (Wilkie, 1990). Van Gogh never developed intimacy with another and developed a sense of isolation instead. And then he ended his life by committing the ultimate solitary act of suicide.

6.8 Conclusion

Van Gogh is most famous as a post modernist artist who cut off his ear. In this chapter, the researcher aimed to describe Van Gogh’s psychological development in terms of Erik Erikson’s psychosocial developmental stages. In doing so the researcher also hoped to illustrate his humanity, his desire to communicate with others, and search for meaning and expression in all he did. He was not a conformist and was often misunderstood. According to Eriksons’ developmental stage theory, we see how he developed the virtues of trust, will, purpose and later in life, competence as an artist. However, he never developed intimacy and with that the virtue of love and died a lonely man, his art only truly appreciated many years after his death.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Introduction

Chapter 6 reviewed the findings regarding the life of Vincent Van Gogh from Erik Erikson’s psychosocial developmental stages. Chapter 7 will now present the conclusions, specific limitations, the value of the study, and recommendations for further research.

7.2 Conclusions

The primary aim of this study was to present the reader with Van Gogh’s psychological development in terms of Erik Erikson’s psychosocial developmental stages. In order to do so, Van Gogh’s life was explored in chapter 3 and Erik Erikson’s developmental theory in chapter 2. The life of Van Gogh was then integrated with the developmental theory of Erik Erikson by means of a grid and the findings discussed in chapter 6.

Van Gogh often wrote in his letters to Theo of his struggles in life, he none the less followed his search for purpose and belonging. Although he had a difficult childhood he was able to attain the following virtues of hope, will power, purpose and later in life competence as an artist. Van Gogh desired to communicate with others but wasn’t able to develop intimate realationships and lived most of his life as a solitary man. He became an artist and never conformed to the norm. Today he is seen as one of modern arts most influential artists. Van Gogh died a lonely man never having experienced true long term intimacy with another.
7.3 Limitations of this Specific Study

Limitations of psychobiographical studies were discussed in chapter 5 therefore this section will focus on this psychobiography’s limitations.

This study explored and described Van Gogh’s life through the application of Erik Erikson’s (1963) psychosocial developmental theory. By utilizing other existing theories that focus on different areas of analysis, a more detailed and holistic view could have been achieved regarding diverse aspects of Van Gogh’s personality and life.

Another limitation was the tendency that the psychobiographer had to idealise the subject. This is a known limitation for psychobiographers and the researcher addressed this by discussing the relationship with the subject with her supervisor.

The researcher also felt that the information on Van Gogh’s childhood to be lacking in depth. Most of the sources the researcher reviewed focussed on Van Gogh’s art and his adulthood. Very little information was found concerning Van Gogh’s childhood years. The psychobiographer could also not interview the subject or any close relatives as Van Gogh has been dead for over a hundred years which further limited information on his childhood. This was seen as a limitation as the first three stages of Erikson’s psychosocial developmental theory focus on childhood development.

Much has been written about Van Gogh’s art especially concerning the interpretations of his art. This was seen as a limitation by the psychobiographer as some texts contradicted each other indicating that many of the interpretations were subjective and not what Van Gogh necessarily intended to portray through his works of art. The researcher thus tried to focus mostly on what Van Gogh wrote about his works of art in his letters and not on what secondary sources interpretations were. Lastly, all of Van Gogh’s letters
had been translated to English which could have caused the letters to lose some of their original meaning and authenticity.

7.4 The Value of this Study

Numerous books and articles have been published on Van Gogh’s life as well as his works of art. His letters have been published and incidents in his life have been analysed psychologically. However, to the researchers knowledge no psychobiography has yet been completed on the life of Vincent Van Gogh. This is thus the first psychobiographical study that has been written on Van Gogh’s life, utilizing the psychosocial developmental stages of Erik Erikson. Erikson’s (1963) theory covers the development of individuals throughout their entire life span. According to Erikson’s (1963) theory an individual’s life is like a designated path that forks at certain points and to some extent most people have similar forks in their path (Claasen, 2007). Therefore, as much as people can be different, they are also alike. Thus by following the different stages of development the researcher was able to develop a more comprehensive picture of the life and development of Vincent van Gogh, yet displaying his life as a unique life.

7.5 Recommendations

The researcher suggests that this study be considered as a basis on which to build more comprehensive description of Van Gogh’s personality. Thus this study should not be considered as an absolute product in the understanding of Vincent van Gogh’s development and life. This study specifically highlighted Van Gogh’s life span development within Erikson’s psychosocial developmental stages. There are various theories with different focus to Erikson’s theory that may provide diverse information on
different aspects of Van Gogh’s life such as Carl Jung’s (1958) personality theory. Carl Jung’s theory focuses mainly on personality type and not as much on development. Thus it is recommended that this study be built on and expanded by utilizing different theories of personality and development. Researchers undertaking more in-depth psychobiographical research on Van Gogh may also consider enlisting the assistance of a historian, as this will provide more information regarding possible influences of the time period in which Van Gogh lived. It is also recommended that a language translator be used who could assist in gaining more insight into Van Gogh’s original letters written in his own language.
REFERENCES


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Appendix A

Chronology of Vincent van Gogh’s Life

1853
Vincent Willem van Gogh born on the 30th March, Groot-Zundert, the Netherlands

1864-68
Attends boarding school at Jan Povily in Zevenbergen (up until 1866)
Attends the state Secondary School King Willem II at Tilburg (up until 1868)

1873
Van Gogh is transferred to the London branch of the art firm Goupil and Co.
Lodges with Sarah Ursula Loyer and falls in love with her daughter Eugenie.

1874
Learns that Eugenie is engaged to be married, and then returns home to Holland for 3 weeks.
Moved to the Paris branch of Goupil’s temporarily against his will.

1876
Van Gogh returns to England.
Works as a teacher at a boys’ school in Isleworth, Van Gogh also works at a parish and sometimes preaches.
Prepares for entrance exams for the faculty of theology in Amsterdam
1878
Quits theological studies to enroll in a preparatory course for evangelists in Brussels.
Fails to qualify at the mission school in Laeken and returns home to his parents.
Van Gogh moves to the Borinage, a coal mining district of Belgium and begins missionary work.

1879
Dismissed as a mission preacher in Wasmes after 6 months.
Van Gogh continues to do missionary work on his own.

1880
After abandoning evangelical work Van Gogh begins to draw with passion and has serious ambitions of becoming an artist.

1881
Returns to Etten (where his parents are) and falls in love with his widowed cousin Kee Vos Stricker but she denies his affections.

1882
Moves into a small studio in The Hague with a pregnant prostitute, Clasina Maria Hoornik (Sien) and her five year old daughter.

1883
Van Gogh and Sien break up and he moves to Drenthe, then returns to his parent home for 2 years, (now in Nuenen).

1885
26th March, Van Gogh’s father dies.

1886
Van Gogh enrolls at the Academy at Antwerp and studies painting and drawing.

He experiments with colors, abandoning his previously somber palette.

1888

Van Gogh cuts off the lower part of his ear after an argument with Gauguin. He then presents his ear to a prostitute.

Admitted to a hospital after being found in a critical state by the police and is attended to by Doctor Felix Rey

1889

Van Gogh is hospitalized for 10 days after having hallucinations and fearing that he is being poisoned.

Theo van Gogh marries Johanna Bonger

Van Gogh admits himself to a mental asylum in Saint Remy and is diagnosed as having an epileptic disorder.

Paints in the gardens and environs of the hospital.

1890

Six of Van Gogh’s paintings exhibited in the exhibition of Les Vingt in Brussels.

31 January, Birth of Theo's first son, Vincent Wilhelm van Gogh.

Van Gogh suffers a severe attack during a 2 day visit to Arles and is then brought back to hospital.

Van Gogh leaves the asylum on May 16 and spends several days in Paris with his brother Theo and his family.

Moves to Auvers where Dr. Paul Ferdinand Gachet (1828-1909) looked after Van Gogh.

On the 27th of July, Van Gogh shoots himself in the countryside in Auvers.
Struggles back to the inn where he was staying.

29th July, Van Gogh dies with Theo by his side.

Buried on the 30th of July.

Theo becomes seriously ill.

1891


(Artquotes.net, N.D)
## Appendix B

### The Data Recording Grid

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Erikson’s Developmental stage and Virtue</th>
<th>Trust vs Mistrust Hope</th>
<th>Autonomy vs Shame Willpower</th>
<th>Initiative vs Guilt Purpose</th>
<th>Industry vs Inferiority Competence</th>
<th>Identity vs Role confusion Reliability</th>
<th>Intimacy vs Isolation Love</th>
</tr>
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<td>18mths – 3yrs</td>
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<td>21yrs-40 yrs</td>
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Appendix C

Alexander’s (1988) Nine Principles of Salience

- Primacy relates to the link established between the first concept and its importance. The information presented first is commonly perceived as being most important.
- Frequency refers to the assumption of a direct positive relationship between repetition and importance or certainty (Elms, 1994).
- Uniqueness refers to events or information which are singular, unusual or abnormal (Alexander, 1988).
- Negation refers to the importance of events turned opposite or denied in explanation. This usually represents unconscious or repressed material (Elms, 1994).
- Emphasis refers to the importance of events which are overemphasized (attention focused on something typically considered ordinary) and underemphasized (little attention paid to something important).
- Omission refers to what is missing. Of many descriptions of events listed, Alexander (1988) pointed out that the omission of appropriate affect rather than cognition is common.
- Errors of distortion include forms of mistakes which can be seen as hidden motives such as distortions and miscommunications.
- Isolation refers to something that does not fit or stands alone (Elms, 1994).
• Incompletion occurs when an event is explained according to a sequence which is following a course and then suddenly terminated without explanation, thus no closure is reached. In other words, it refers to a topic that is introduced, but terminated without closure (Fouche & van Niekerk, 2005).