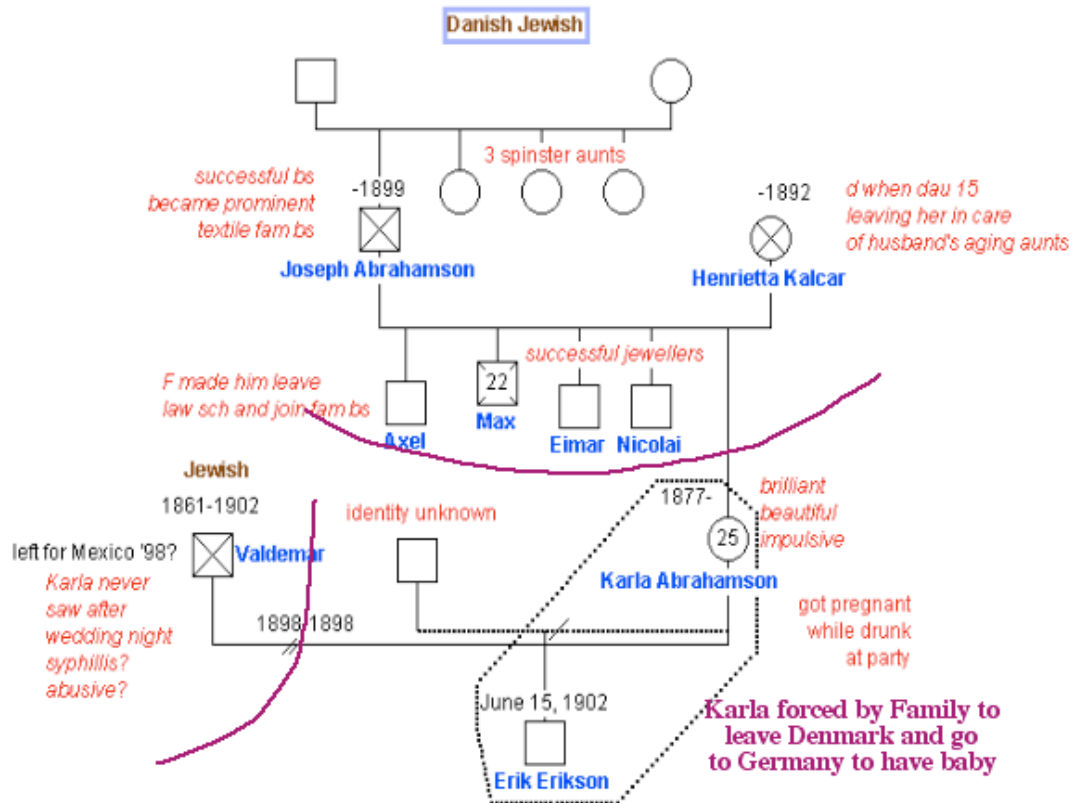


The genogram of one of the most famous human development theorists, Erik Erikson (**Genogram 1: Year of Erikson's Birth,1902**),



Erikson's widely accepted theory of human development, appears to reflect some of the particularities and weaknesses of his own family and cultural situation that played out over his life cycle (Carter & McGoldrick, 2005; Friedman, 1999). Erikson's model describes 8 stages, each with a theme contrasting and healthy with dysfunctional patterns:

- |                           |                                                                                               |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1. Infancy</b>         | <b>Trust vs Mistrust</b>                                                                      |
| <b>2. Early Childhood</b> | <b>Autonomy vs Shame &amp; Doubt</b>                                                          |
| <b>3. Play Age</b>        | <b>Initiative vs Guilt</b>                                                                    |
| <b>4. School Age</b>      | <b>Industry vs Inferiority</b>                                                                |
| <b>5. Adolescence</b>     | <b>Identity vs Identity Diffusion (Describes a Sense of Identity Apart from one's family)</b> |

|                |                                 |
|----------------|---------------------------------|
| 6. Young Adult | Intimacy vs Isolation           |
| 7. Midlife     | Generativity vs Self-Absorption |
| 8. Mature Age  | Integrity vs Despair            |

While Erikson's first stage focuses on an interpersonal task, mother-child trust vs mistrust, as the primary task, from there on until young adulthood the focus is entirely on the ability to manage for oneself, rather than on the development of interpersonal relationships or communication: Autonomy, Initiative, and Identity apart from one's Family. Even the task of Adolescence is defined as developing a sense of self *apart from* rather than *in relation to* one's family. The skills of "Intimacy," the theme of young adulthood will surely be difficult to achieve if one has been focusing on initiative, industry and identity apart from family for the previous 20 years. Furthermore, the values that are considered dysfunctional in healthy development: shame, doubt, guilt, a sense of inferiority, and identity diffusion, are actually essential to a healthy interpersonal ability for intimacy. Closeness requires the recognition that we:

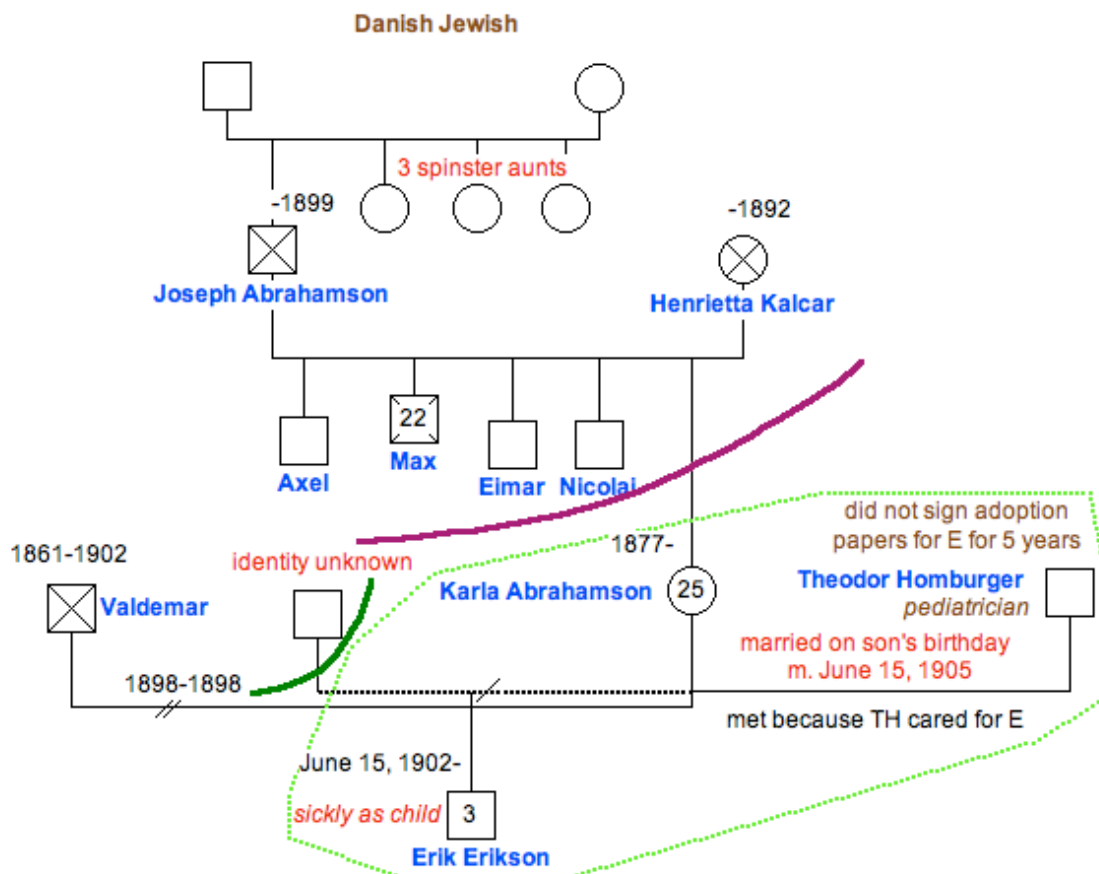
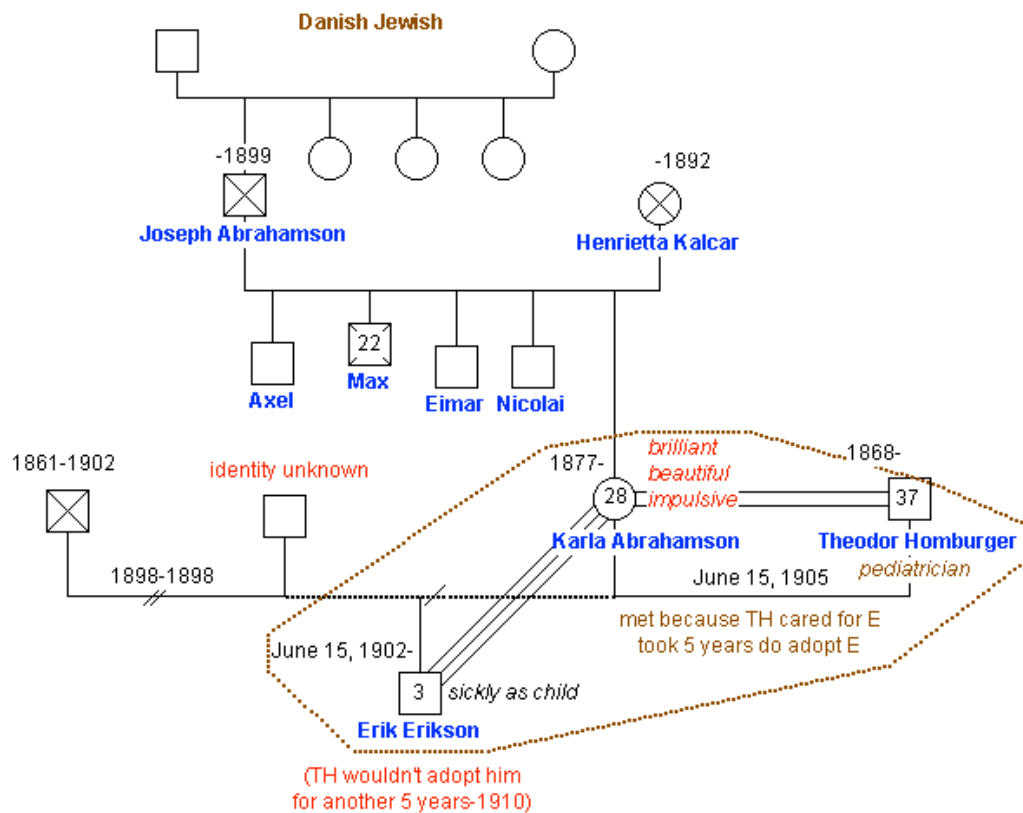
- a) Don't know everything (a healthy sense of interdependence and inferiority),
- b) Will at times do the wrong thing (causing shame and guilt, which can motivate us to change our behavior),
- c) Will need to leave room for doubt in our ideas and actions in order to learn from others, and
- d) Will need to have an interdependent sense of our identity in relation to our families and others, not just *apart from* them.

Many have critiqued Erikson's scheme as meant only for men, but even for men, his stages posit an ideal that is incompatible with intimacy. If all one's developmental energy has been focused on autonomous striving, one would not have developed interpersonal skills for dealing with doubt, shame, or a healthy sense of human inferiority and the need for interdependence and reliance on others.

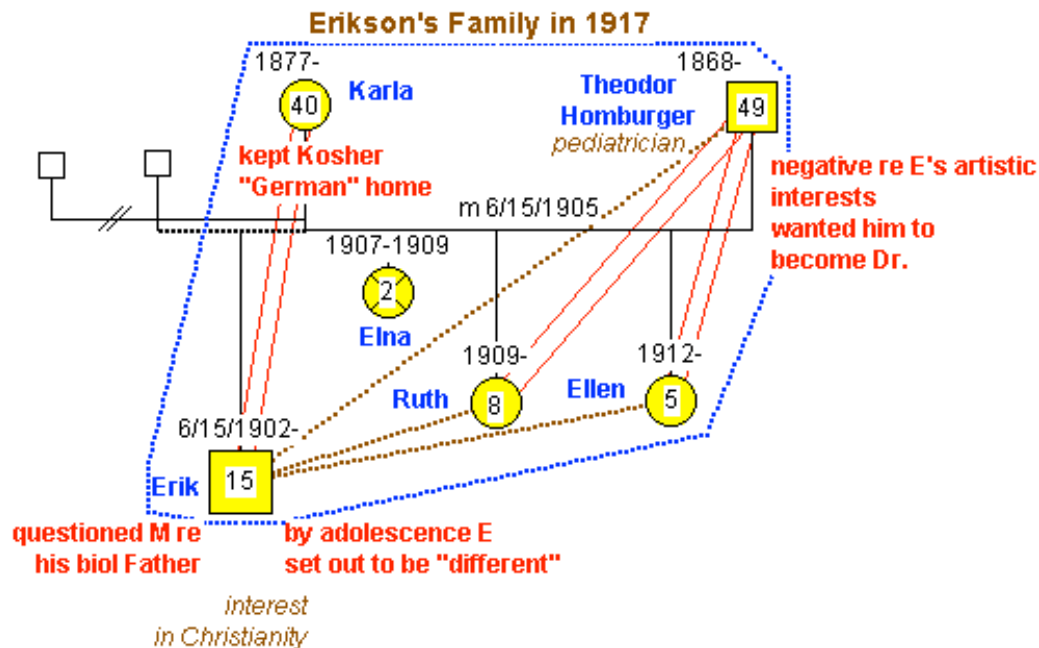
Erikson's genogram (**Genogram 1**) may help us understand the limitations of his schema. Erikson said the primary issue in the first two years of life was developing a trusting relationship with one's mother. Erikson's mother, a Danish Jew, discovered she was pregnant while on a trip to Germany, and was told by her family, supposedly to avoid disgrace and scandal, not to return to Denmark, but to have the baby where she was. Her family then urged her to remain in Germany to raise him. It is not clear that she herself even knew who the father was. It has been said that she had become drunk at a party given by her brothers and was either asleep or too drunk to recognize what happened when someone had intercourse with her (Friedman, 1999). In any case, she never told the truth about what had happened to Erikson, though he was obsessed with this question throughout his life. As Erikson's daughter later wrote of this:

My father never knew ...even who his father was. One of the saddest things about that, from my point of view, is that his mother refused throughout her life to tell him the identity of this all-important person. Her stated reason was that she had promised the man she married when my father was three that she would never divulge this information. But her explanation conveys a greater concern for someone else's wishes than for my father's aching need to know. (Erikson, 1999, pp 56-57).

The maternal family basically extruded Erikson's mother from the family until three years later, in 1905 (**Genogram 2**), when she married a German Jewish pediatrician, Theodor Homburger, on her son's 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday.



Homburger required of Karla only one promise: that Erik be told he was his biological father, which Erikson never fully believed. He later said “ (I) felt all along...doubt in my identity. . . all through my childhood years. . . I was quietly convinced that I came from a different background...” (cited in Friedman, 1999, p. 33). Homburger's ambivalence about taking on this relationship perhaps revealed itself in his taking 5 years to actually complete the adoption papers to make Erik legally his son. Erikson's closest childhood friend, Peter Blos, said that “Adoption was the great theme of Erikson's existence” (cited by Friedman, 1999, p. 28). Figure 8.1 is a woodcut illustration Erikson later did of himself, his mother and her new husband on their honeymoon, which they took with him. Obviously, in his view he had lost his beloved mother to her new husband and was not happy about it. It is perhaps not surprising that Erikson's theory of human development placed so much emphasis on autonomy and individuation rather than on interconnection. His mother was forced by circumstances to manage on her own without the support of her family just as she became his parent, and he had to accept losing her to her new husband and learn to manage for himself in early childhood, as the woodcut shows. For the rest of his childhood, it is probably not surprising that Erikson focused on autonomy, initiative, and industry as the stepchild in a remarried family, where three half sisters followed over the next 7 years.

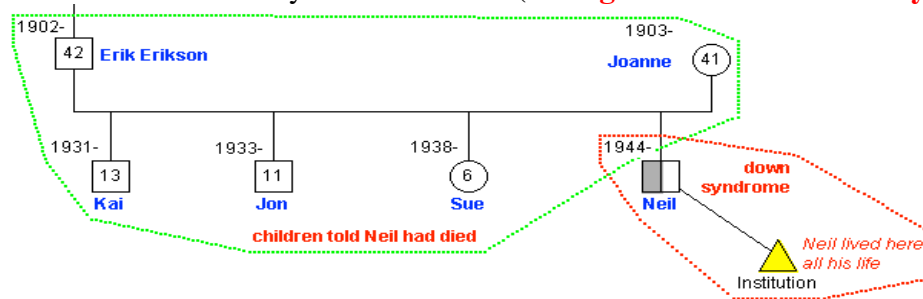


In the years of his childhood (See Genogram 3: Erikson's family in 1917), Erikson remained close to his mother, but did not become particularly close to his sisters, who

were 7 and 10 years younger than he. (The sister closest in age to him had died at age 2). The family were required to speak German in the home, which created a lifelong regret in Erik, that he had forgotten how to speak Danish. As he grew up, Erikson repeatedly questioned his mother about his paternity. At 14 she told him he was the son of her first husband, but he sensed this wasn't true either. He talked constantly with his friend Peter Bloss of the characteristics he thought his father might have. Through his life his mother gave him a variety of different stories, but never the truth. He said of the search, "if my father hadn't cared enough about me to want me...why should I look him up now" (Friedman, 1999, p. 39), but he could not stop wondering, even though he feared to know the truth.

### Later Life Cycle Phases In Erikson's Theory and His Own Life Cycle

Later in Erikson's life he seems to have repeated the secret keeping that his mother and stepfather had forced on him. Such secret keeping in his personal life cycle might lead one to wonder about other aspects of Erikson's life cycle theory as well. His theory describes the phase of "generativity" as occurring after the phase of childrearing, a task others would see as our most generative! Erikson and his wife Joan developed this part of the theory at a difficult time in their lives, following the birth of their 4<sup>th</sup> child Neil, who was born with Down Syndrome in 1944 (**Genogram 4: Erikson Family 1944**).



Erik and Joanne Erikson made the decision to keep the existence of their fourth child, Neil a secret. He was put in an institution and they decided to tell their other children he had died, although, in fact, he lived to the age of 21. They rarely visited him and when he died, they left their other children alone to handle his burial and to deal with never having met him before. One cannot help wondering how this terrible secret of their family history influenced the parents' ideas about the life cycle. Might this tragic experience have influenced the Eriksons' concept that generativity does not refer to the period of the life cycle when one is bearing and raising children, but rather to the midlife period after that? The Eriksons apparently characterized Neil as "a developmental aberration and wished that he had never been born" (Friedman, 1999, p. 22). The Eriksons' sad story is not just about their personal failure to deal with the truth of their family's history, but reflects our society's pressure for success, which often leaves families with disabled children to feel invalidated, alone, and abandoned, pressured to lie about their lives in order to preserve an image of normality. The Eriksons' dreadful story tells us a lot about our society's insidious pressure on families to distort their lives with lies and secrecy regarding any experiences that lie outside the society's life cycle norms. Their story should surely lead us to question the assumptions of "normality" laid out by Erikson in the years when he was living a lie, pretending that he had a "perfect" family of 5, while secretly excluding the 6<sup>th</sup> member, who didn't fit in. Erikson was a leading theorist about children and his views of human development are still the most widely

taught. The limits of his theory make clear the value of assessing families in life cycle context and especially of tracking the power of secrets in families. Secrets may distort family process for generations and lead to imbalances in functioning between the external picture presented to the world and the internal realities of family relationships.

Indeed, genograms can be very helpful in tracking the specific nodal points in a family's history. Genogram software will soon be able to help us track families through the life cycle, offering a snapshot of particular moments in time to help us understand these nodal points, such as the time when Erikson was born, the point of remarriage, or the time when his son Neil was born.

For example, we do not have all the information to understand the point when his mother became pregnant with him, though this moment would be most interesting to understand. Were there stresses in her family that led them to extrude her when she became pregnant, rather than supporting her and her baby? What stresses might have influenced her to become drunk and pregnant at a young age? Karla's mother had died when she was 15 and her father and older brothers appear not to have felt confident to care for her themselves and left her to the father's aging sisters. The father died when she was 21, that same year she married and was traumatically abandoned on her honeymoon; her older brother Alex had to come to Rome to get her. Alex himself had had to give up his law studies because of the father's pressure to join his business, so the family, though successful, seems to have been under some emotional pressure. The story that Karla had become pregnant at a party given by the older brothers would appear to implicate them in her pregnancy. Did they indirectly contribute to her being abused and then blame her for shaming the family?

How did the parents die and what was the impact of their early loss on Karla and on the brothers? Did the brothers feel their own social status was threatened for some reason other than their sister's pregnancy? Or did they mistreat her because of gender imbalances of power in their family, which would have been typical at that time? Were the three "spinster" aunts the ones who made the decision to pay her to stay out of sight? And did their stresses continue over the next few years, leading them not to let her come back after the baby was born, even though she was alone with her child in a foreign country? At the point of remarriage (**Genogram 2**) we can see that Erikson, by 3, was too old not to know that Homberger was not his father.

If we look at the later moment of decision to keep the secret about Neil in 1944 (**Genogram 4**), we see the tragic difficulty the family must have experienced as the immigrant parents of three other little children, making their dreadful decision to keep Neil's existence a secret. The reality of the war going on and the fact that Erikson was a half Jewish immigrant could have figured into the decision. Genograms for a given moment in a family's history can highlight the family's stresses at that point by showing who lived in the home and how old they were then, allowing you to track details of family history at key points in time.

It is very interesting that Erikson's daughter, Sue, who struggled all her life with her father's difficulty with intimacy, came to the conclusion that mature development requires one to be capable of having "authentic interpersonal encounters," in which you are "acceptable for who you are." (**Erikson, 1999, p. 61**). She herself pointed out the disadvantage of having to live a life where shame, doubt, guilt, a sense of inferiority, and identity diffusion must be viewed as indicating developmental failure. She said her



mother had told her neither she nor Erikson could seek help because of his public reputation. His theory made him unable to admit inadequacy, and thus be open to receiving help when needed. Sue says

When you have created a public image that denies your private experience of yourself—one that is, in important ways, the reverse of the shameful self—the contrast between the two creates feeling of personal fraudulence. I think my father suffered terribly because he could not in his intimate relationships be what his image suggested he would be... My longing to connect with my father was thwarted by his need to avoid feelings of inadequacy—by the defenses he had developed early on to ward off shame and depression.” (Erikson, 1999, p. 61).

She makes very clear in using the example of her father, how essential these issues are for a healthy interpersonal ability for intimacy- to know that you don't know everything (inferiority), will make mistakes (guilt), and will need be able to doubt your ideas and actions, and have a sense of your identity in relation to your family and others, not just apart from them, unlike the tragic life cycle that had required Erikson's mother, Karla to survive completely on her own.

As we have seen with the Erikson family, the genogram of critical nodal points in the life cycle can help us understand the future evolution of the family. The genogram can track family patterns as people move through each phase of the family life cycle.