Transcending Self-Interest
Psychological Explorations of the Quiet Ego

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How the Ego Quiets as It Grows: Ego Development, Growth Stories, and Eudaimonic Personality Development

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No one is born with a quiet ego. The ego starts off “noisy,” egocentric, and clamoring for selfish needs in the immediate moment. Eventually, however, the ego matures, and one learns to transcend self-interest—to think from others’ points of view; to relate present actions to future outcomes; and to identify with people and experiences in an increasingly broader, deeper manner. In this chapter, I first attempt to demonstrate that levels of ego volume are in many ways differences in not only kind but also levels in a developmental trajectory, from noisier to progressively quieter. From the standpoint of psychosocial development, and Loevinger’s (1976) model of ego development (ED) in particular, many qualities of the noisy ego are hallmarks of relative immaturity, whereas many qualities of the quieter ego characterize psychosocial maturity. I then showcase research on how growth-oriented narratives shape the self-identity of a developmentally quieter ego. Finally, I expand on the notion of a developmentally quieter ego: I propose that a developmentally quieter ego involves a balance of social-cognitive qualities of a quiet ego (which follow developmental stages) and social-emotional qualities (which do not), in addition to other kinds of balance, in constructing a self-identity. This balance constitutes a particular eudaimonic form of personality development.

In this chapter, I take the perspective that an ego’s quietness or noisiness is not a matter of how much self-esteem or self-confidence one has. Here, ego volume involves the degrees of breadth and depth by which one interprets the self and the psychosocial world. As such, a louder ego interprets the self in more individualistic, immediate, concrete, and external terms—as with an ego shouting for attention to the point that it cannot hear the voices of others or of one’s own internal dynamics. A quieter ego interprets the self in more interdependent, long-term, abstract, and internal terms. In this scenario, the ego never loses its self-identity as it becomes increasingly quieter; instead, the

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1Here the ego is viewed as that which interprets and identifies with objects (which may be people, events, abilities, beliefs, etc.). These perceived objects of identification are what constitute one’s concept of self. This is consonant with William James’s (1890/1950) “I,” which appropriates objects to the “Me.” These objects, and thus the self, may be interpreted relatively more simply or complexly, narrowly or broadly, externally or internally, exclusively or includingly, and so on.
Ego Development as a Process of Ego Quieting

Not only are people not born with quiet egos, but also, by most developmental accounts, people are born without any ego at all. The ego is commonly viewed as coemerging with the concept of the self gradually over the first 18 months or so of life (e.g., Loevinger, 1976). When the ego does emerge, it is noisy, literally incapable of taking others’ perspectives. However, jump ahead in age a couple years: Four-year-olds are still notably egocentric in the sense that they have marked limitations in taking others’ perspectives (Piaget, 1970), yet they are significantly more capable than 3-year-olds in thinking from others’ points of view (Frencipe & Zelazo, 2005). The ego, although still noisy, is at least a bit quieter than it was on its emergence—more aware of self and others, more capable of thinking how present actions have implications for the future.

Now jump ahead to later childhood and adolescence, for which Damon and Hart’s (1988) developmental model of self-understanding provides an apt overview for studying a gradual quieting of the ego in youth. In later childhood, children identify with particular peer groups and not with others. The psychosocial self is constructed largely as a product of evaluative comparisons of the self to others. Early in adolescence, the person identifies more with those particular, evaluative comparisons that he or she thinks other people (notably peers) find valuable. By later adolescence, on average, the person has begun to internalize those values into a more or less systematic set of beliefs. During this time, the ego becomes preoccupied less with appearances and more with psychosocial dynamics. More than that, however, the subjective ego gains in the ability to organize a self more complexly—to bring an increasingly greater range of psychosocial perspectives to bear on thoughts of self and others. Of course, adolescents are notoriously egocentric, but they are less egocentric than they once were and are more egocentric than they are likely to become (Westenberg & Gjerde, 1999).

Loevinger’s Ego Development as Ego Quieting

Loevinger’s (1976) theory of ED provides a stage model of this kind of development that extends from infancy through adulthood. Although in this chapter I address several models of psychosocial maturity, ED theory is widely acknowledged as one of the most comprehensive and empirically studied theories of personality development (Westenberg & Block, 1993). Thus, it is difficult to state simply what is developing in ED. For the present purposes, however, what develops in ED is the increasing capacity to think about the self and others from more differentiated and more integrated perspectives. In Loevinger’s theory, the ego is best thought of as a frame of reference or a lens for interpreting and understanding the psychosocial world. ED is concerned not as much with what one thinks about as with how one organizes experience. ED involves several dimensions that characterize a quieting ego, notably, the increasing capacities to think from others’ perspectives and to integrate them with one’s own; make meaning of one’s inner experience; reason morally in terms of rights, principles, and contexts; control impulses and defenses; relate to others with mutuality and a sense of interdependence; respect the autonomy of both the self and others; address conflict directly instead of defensively (or instead of with immature defenses); identify with increasingly broader social groups (e.g., from one’s ingroup to humanity), and value psychosocial growth.

There are, in essence, eight stages beyond the pre-egoic stages of infancy (see Figure 18.1). The personality characteristics of each level of ED function as individual sets of routinely expressed traits, yet they are arranged in a progressive hierarchy of increasing complexity and psychosocial depth. For example, at the self-protective level the individual has little capacity to understand others’ points of view, views others as either for or against him- or herself in a dog-eat-dog world, and is preoccupied with getting what he or she wants

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Figure 18.1. Levels of Loevinger’s ego development. Approximate frequency percentages are representative of several sources (Cook-Greuter, 2000; Cramer, 1999; Manners, Durkin, & Nesdale, 2004; McCrae & Costa, 1980; Truluck & Courtenay, 2002; Westenberg & Gjerde, 1999). From Ego Development (pp. 24–25), by J. Loevinger, 1976, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. Copyright 1976 by Jane Loevinger. Adapted with permission.
and not getting caught. In contrast, the conformist level involves a respect for others and group loyalty. However, the conformist mind-set also guides the individual to identify predominantly with the ingroup, to accept the values of those in authority of that group, to aggrandize its values, and to look down on those who do not fit that mold. Although a conformist ego can have quiet moments (e.g., when interacting with members of the ingroup), the routine mode of functioning is to exclude much of the social world, pass judgments on the basis of appearances, and define the self largely in terms of appearances and group affiliation. These are, generally speaking, characteristics of a noisy ego (although not as noisy as at the self-protective level). More quiet than that conformist is the conscientious mind-set, which keeps open the possibility that one’s personal views might not be the best ones and strives toward understanding the underlying motives of the ways things appear and actively seeks alternative perspectives. Still, even at this stage, the ego has much quieting to do: The person still exhibits intolerance for conformity (indicating remnants of conformist-level thinking) and has an exaggerated sense of control over his or her own destiny as well as over the destiny of others (Loevinger, 1976). Quieter still is the autonomous level, at which the person interprets the self and others more in terms of growth processes than at previous levels and more as an interdependently developing dynamic. The person routinely seeks to understand the mutual dynamics of broad principles, personal characteristics, and contextual idiosyncrasies. The person is cognizant of apparent behaviors and their motivations and the myriad and largely unconscious developmental forces from which those motivations and behaviors emerge in the present situation as well as generally. Yet even here the ego makes its noise: For example, the person’s emphasis on growth is so valued and identified with that the perceived lack of it—in the self, in relationships, with society—can yield anxiety and interpersonal discord.

Thus, as the ego develops, it interprets the self and others differently and in a manner befitting a progressively quieter ego. The developmentally immature ego is noisier; it is full of itself (read: full of its self). It is more prone toward valuing the self’s autonomy over the autonomy of others. As the ego matures and becomes quieter, it becomes more likely to seek a balance or mutual dynamic between the self and others. In addition, the developmentally noisier ego is more preoccupied with and evaluates the self and others on the basis of mere appearances and group affiliation. In contrast, the developmentally quieter ego focuses more on and evaluates the self and others on the basis of the subtler qualities of human experience, such as people’s motivations, intentions, and subjective interpretations of those appearances. However, as long as the ego identifies with people and experiences, the ego has room for quieting, or to use Buddhist terminology, as long as one forms attachments to the self, there will be suffering.

Empirical Evidence of Ego Development as Ego Quieting

This conceptual description of ED has found considerable validation and extension in research. Higher levels on measures of ED (as assessed with the Sentence Completion Test; Hy & Loevinger, 1996) are known to correlate empirically with a range of personality measures that suggest a quieter ego. Among the Big Five personality traits, Openness to Experience stands out as a quiet-ego candidate, given its tendency to value universalism, to seek alternative perspectives, and its relative lack of need to preserve current conditions and viewpoints (Roccas, Sagiv, Schwartz, & Knafo, 2002). Openness to Experience is a quality of several quiet-ego constructs, such as perspective taking, mindfulness (see chap. 7, this volume), self-compassion (see chap. 9, this volume), compassion (see chap. 15, this volume), autonomy (see chaps. 10 and 11, this volume), authenticity (see chap. 8, this volume), and humility (see chap. 5, this volume). Another Big Five trait, Agreeableness, might also fit the quiet-ego mold with its concern for helping others, but a significant portion of Agreeableness also involves conformity, compliance, and lack of self-direction (Roccas et al., 2002). As it turns out, only Openness to Experience exhibits a consistently significant correlation with ED (Bauer & McAdams, 2004b; Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005b; Einstein & Lanning, 1998; McCrae & Costa, 1980; Morros, Pushkar, & Reis, 1998).

Higher levels of ED also correlate with a range of prosocial (i.e., less selfish) abilities and concerns. Adults with high levels of ED have been found to have high levels of responsibility, tolerance, and psychological-mindedness (Helson & Roberts, 1994), as well as ego resilience and interpersonal integrity (Westenberg & Blok, 1993). Adults (especially in midlife) with high levels of ED, as well as other markers of psychosocial maturity, tend to have greater concerns for generativity, or caring for the development of future generations and society (de St. Aubin, McAdams, & Kim, 2004).

With its emphasis on cognitive complexity, ED also has strong ties to intelligence, yet intelligence probably has little to do with many qualities of quieting the ego, beyond the lowest levels of ED. A review of research on ED and intelligence suggested that the two are consistently independent compared with various personality measures (Cohn & Westenberg, 2004). Whereas intelligence generally deals with complexity of thinking in general, ED deals with complexity of psychosocial thinking specifically. It is psychosocial thinking, not thinking in general, that seems more crucial to quieting the ego.

ED is widely known as a form of psychosocial maturity. Helson and Roberts (1994) found some especially relevant longitudinal patterns for women from ages 21 to 43 in the Mills College Study. The authors found not only that higher ED levels correlated with higher levels of tolerance (as noted earlier) but also that participants who were at what the authors labeled the Conscientious and Individuated levels at age 43 showed increased levels of tolerance for the beliefs and values of others from ages 21 to 43, whereas participants who were at the Self-Aware level showed marginal decreases in tolerance over that period. Social responsibility followed a largely similar pattern. Thus, the developmental quieting of the ego (i.e., the transcendence of self-interest) seems to coincide with longitudinal increases in tolerance and responsibility. It is interesting that participants who were at the Conscientious and Individuated levels also showed an increase in achievement through independence from ages 21 to 43, whereas those who were at the Self-Aware level did not. This last finding supports the idea put forth in the present volume that a developmentally
A Fuller Portrait of the Developmentally Quieter Ego

The presentation so far of a developmentally quieter ego has focused on one of two broad facets of personality development—that of social-cognitive development (see Bauer & McAdams, 2004a). However, the developmentally quieting of the ego also involves a social-emotional facet that, unlike the social-cognitive facet, does not seem to emerge in sequential stages of capacities for organizing one’s experience. In this section, I compare these two facets or paths of development, show how they operate in the development of narrative self-identity, and integrate the two facets under the label of eudaimonic personality development.

Two Paths of the Developmentally Quieter Ego

Contrary to common sense (Flanagan, 1991), ED and other measures of meaning making are generally not related to measures of well-being (e.g., Bauer & McAdams, 2004b; Bauer et al., 2005; Helson & Roberts, 1994; Helson & Wink, 1992; King & Raspin, 2004; King, Scollon, Ramsey, & Williams, 2000; Westen & Block, 1993). In other words, people with a developmentally quieter ego (as presented earlier) are about as likely to be happy as they are unhappy. Furthermore, it seems that personality qualities in general tend to map onto either ED (and other maturity-related phenomena) or well-being, but not both. For example, the trait of Openness to Experience typically correlates with ED but not with well-being, whereas Neuroticism and Extraversion typically correlate with well-being but not with ED (Bauer et al., 2005b). Thus, I argue that the development of personality, and self-identity in particular, follows two broad paths that have some overlap but are readily distinguishable (Bauer & McAdams, 2004a, 2004b; Bauer et al., 2005b). One path is relatively more social-cognitive and leads toward psychosocial maturity, that is, how complexly or integratively one thinks about the self and others. The other path is relatively more social-emotional and leads toward well-being and psychological health: how good one feels about the self in a world of others as well as how deeply one experiences (not how complexly one thinks about) relatedness. Similarly, I suggest that the quieting ego has its relatively social-cognitive and relatively social-emotional facets. The first facet can be thought of as the path of the head, whereas the second might be more the path of the heart.

However, should not a quieter ego be a happier ego? The research points to a divided answer, suggesting that the developmentally quieter ego as presented earlier does not capture the entire scope of ego-quieting. For example, quieting the ego involves an acceptance of self, flaws and all (as with self-compassion; see chap. 9, this volume), as well as a sense of interpersonal security (Mikulincer, Shaver, Gillath, & Nitzberg, 2005), both of which are an essential part of well-being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Indeed, many of the chapters in this book discuss direct correlations between ego-quieting phenomena and well-being, including the allo-inclusive identity (see chap. 13, this volume), ecosystem goals (see chap. 6, this volume), self-compassion (see chap. 9, this volume), stereotype transcendence (see chap. 19, this volume), self-determination (see chap. 10, this volume), authenticity (see chap. 8, this volume), and perceived similarity to less fortunate others (see chap. 15, this volume). These quiet-ego phenomena and others, such as gratitude (Emmons & McCullough, 2004) and forgiveness (which has correlated with Neuroticism and Extraversion but not with Openness to Experience; Brose, Rye, Lutz-Zois, & Ross, 2005), tend to be operationally defined in terms of affect-laden phenomena such as positive self-regard and positive relations with others.
However, in cases in which ego-quieting phenomena are defined more strictly in terms of complexity of perspective taking and psychosocial reasoning, a quieted ego is likely not to correlate with well-being.

Growth Narratives and the Two Facets of the Quieted Ego

The division of quiet ego qualities into two facets is readily seen in recent research on narrative identity and life stories. Life stories reveal narrative patterns of self-interpretation that reflect how quieter and noisier egos interpret psychosocial experience and construct a self-identity (see McAdams, in press). One such pattern is an orientation toward growth. Such personal narratives have been called growth narratives or growth stories—personal narratives that emphasize progressive development (Bauer, McAdams, & Pals, in press). Growth stories are not just about any kind of progress; they deal with psychosocial growth. Maslow (1968) claimed that people interpret life events in terms of either growth or safety. A safety orientation involves a preoccupation with protection, conservation, security, and defending—characteristics of a developmentally noisier ego. A growth orientation involves a preoccupation with developing, learning, exploring, and deepening—characteristics of a developmentally quieter ego. Growth narratives correlate with a host of quiet-ego characteristics, providing a window into how people with these characteristics interpret and create meaning in their lives—that is, the sense of identity—namely among psychosocial and social-emotional dimensions.

Growth stories that express quiet-ego phenomena tend to correspond to ED or to well-being, but not both. People with higher levels of ED and psychosocial maturity tend to construct narratives that emphasize the elaboration and accommodation of meaningful life events (King & Noelle, 2005; King et al., 2000; King & Smith, 2004); causal connections between life events and one's broader concept of self (Pals, 2006a); psychosocial meaning-making, especially in stories of conflict (McLean, 2005; McLean & Thorne, 2003); memories about psychosocial exploration and learning important lessons in life (Bauer & McAdams, 2004b; Bauer et al., 2005b; Pals, 2006b; Thorne, McLean, & Lawrence, 2004); and life goals aimed toward exploration and learning (Bauer & McAdams, 2004a). Also, older adults are more likely than younger adults to tell life stories that emphasize psychosocial meanings instead of merely life facts, good times, or social status (Bauer et al., 2005b; Pasupathi, 2001; Pasupathi, Alderman, & Shaw, 2007), suggesting that egos quiet (at least in a social-cognitive sense) with age.

Progressive levels by which people (especially not adults) acquire quiet-ego phenomena such as forgiveness, gratitude, humility, intimacy, empathy, altruism, helping, and bonding with others. The degree of complexity by which people think about these phenomena is another matter and has received far less empirical attention (although see Labourie-Vief, 2006).

*Many people wish to develop abilities and resources to increase their power over others, exclude others, and gain status. This is characteristic of neither a quieter ego nor growth stories as I have defined them. I find it compelling that research has generally not examined this extrinsically motivated (Deci & Ryan, 2000) kind of growth in personal narratives. Research has instead focused on the kinds of growth that promote psychosocial maturity and self-understanding.

Other kinds of growth stories, those with more social-emotional bases, correspond to well-being but not to ED. These tend to emphasize various quiet-ego phenomena: avoiding counterfactual thinking in difficult times (King & Raspin, 2004; King et al., 2000); major life decisions motivated more by deep desires than by defensiveness (Bauer, McAdams, & Saksena, 2005a); and memories and goals that are intrinsically motivated, that is, focused on the importance of meaningful relationships and doing meaningful work instead of status seeking, appearances, material gain, and gaining others' approval (Bauer & McAdams, 2004a, 2004b; Bauer et al., 2005b; Kasser & Ryan, 1993). These intrinsic memories and goals were also more likely to be found in the narratives and other goal measures of older adults than in those of younger adults (see Bauer & McAdams, 2004a; Sheldon & Kasser, 2001), suggesting that egos seem to quiet with age in the more social-emotional sense as well.

On the basis of these studies it is perhaps easier to see how the quieter ego has two, relatively distinct processes of interpreting psychosocial life, one focused on seeking and integrating new perspectives on the self and others and the other focused on deepening the meaningfulness of and compassion in relationships and activities.

Eudaimonic Personality Development

Some personality characteristics and growth stories contain a combination of social-cognitive and social-emotional qualities. Many quiet-ego characteristics such as generativity—that is, concern for future generations, which has been found to correlate with both ED and well-being—seem to fall in this category (McAdams, Ruetzel, & Foley, 1986). In the present volume, the transcendence of sexual orientation stereotypes in personal narratives have been shown to correlate with both ED and well-being (see chap. 19, this volume). Narratives expressing self-transformation in difficult times were also found to correlate with both ED and well-being (Pals, 2006b). In a recent longitudinal study, a colleague and I found that narratives that expressed self-transcendence—a kind of growth story conveying an explicit sense of unity with humanity—predicted both ED and well-being 3 years later (Bauer & McAdams, 2007). Many other quiet-ego phenomena seem to combine social-cognitive and social-emotional qualities, such as compassion, self-compassion (see chap. 9, this volume), meaningfulness (see chap. 7, this volume), authenticity (see chap. 8, this volume), self-determination (see chap. 10, this volume), autonomy motivation (see chap. 11, this volume), wisdom (see chap. 20, this volume), and ecosystem goals (see chap. 6, this volume). Whether they would actually correlate with both ED and well-being is a matter of how those phenomena were operationally defined.

The combination of ED and well-being has been called the good life (King et al., 2000) as well as eudaimonic well-being or eudaimonic personality development (Bauer et al., 2005b), in a tradition dating at least to Aristotle's (trans. 1925) notion of eudaimonia. People who have cultivated eudaimonic personality development interpret their sense of identity and happiness as grounded not only in satisfaction or pleasure but also in long-term psychosocial growth,
concerns for social responsibility and virtue, and the pleasure of bonds with other people and humanity. Such people seem to have struck a balance with the social-cognitive and social-emotional facets of a quieter ego. The notion of balance is seen throughout the present volume as a quality of the quieter ego, notably in a balance of agency and communion in one’s interpretations of psychosocial life (e.g., see chaps. 2, 3, 5, 6, 12, 15, and 16, this volume) and a balance of positive and negative self-appraisals (e.g., see chaps. 4 and 14, this volume). To the balancing of agency and communion and positivity and negativity I would add the balancing of more cognitive and more emotional interpretations of self and others. In fact, the combination of social-cognitive, social-emotional, agentic, and communal forms of growth in narratives of life transition was an especially strong predictor of both ED and well-being, more so than individual forms of growth themselves. People with such narratives also conveyed a range of quiet-ego characteristics, such as high levels of gratitude, generativity, humility, and compassion (Bauer & McAdams, 2004b).

Perhaps most impressive is the fact that people who have cultivated a balance in these three domains—that is, people who characterize optimal forms of personality development and the good life as defined by the field of psychology—have in common the transcience of self-interest and characteristics of a quiet ego. In other words, the quieter ego seems to represent a human ideal from the standpoint of psychology. Furthermore, these quiet-ego qualities have long been hallmarks of a life well lived for religious and philosophical systems around the world (Haidt, 2006). Indeed the eudaimonic, well-balanced, developmentally quieter ego may represent a pan-cultural ideal for living life.

References


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Homonegativity and the Lesbian Self: Portraits of the Ego as Either Transcender or Occluder of Negative Social Stereotypes

Ed de St. Aubin and Kim Skerven

One way that the ego might be considered “noisy” is if it has negative elements clinging around within it that stifle one’s psychosocial health, productivity, and maturity. In this chapter, some negative elements of the noisy ego are conceptualized to stem from social stigmas and stereotypes that partly shape one’s understanding of self. We are interested in the self–society link in terms of how the individual ego processes social stigmas within its mix of ingredients and how this influences ego functioning. Focusing on lesbians, we examine the extent to which society’s homonegativity becomes internalized at the individual level of ego functioning. We chose to focus on lesbians, in part, because this population is ideal for highlighting the complex connection between self and society. Because lesbians are stigmatized in our heterosexual society, they may be faced with potentially stifling stereotypes. The ego must negotiate the manner in which social stigmas are processed and possibly incorporated into one’s self-image.

For our sample of self-identified lesbians, we posit that a quiet ego is relatively free of the raucous negative stereotypes. The quiet lesbian ego does not deny or avoid the stigma being hurled at it; instead, it has processed and moved past such negativity. These women can be considered ego transenders, because their egos operate above or beyond societal homonegativity. The noisy lesbian ego, however, is rife with such negative facets. Societal homonegativity has been internalized into discordant components of the ego that darken one’s image of self. We refer to these women as occluders because the ego has absorbed the negative lesbian stereotypes, becoming blocked from moving toward psychosocial health.

In this chapter, we empirically examine these postulates. First, we test whether ego transenders (i.e., lesbians who scored low on a measure of internalized homonegativity) are indeed relatively more healthy (as measured by four indexes of quality of life), productive (as measured by two measures of generativity), and mature (in terms of ego developmental level) than ego occluders (i.e., lesbians who scored high on internalized homonegativity). We also exam-