Transcending Self-Interest

Psychological Explorations of the Quiet Ego

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

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One way that the ego might be considered “noisy” is if it has negative elements clanging 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 heterosexist 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 *ocluders* 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-
The Ego

We conceptualize the ego as a collection of processes, primarily those concerned with regulation (of affect, self-presentation, and competing desires), synthesis (of experiences), and interpretation (of self, others, and institutions; see chaps. 1, 18, and 21, this volume). We think about the ego more in terms of what it does than what it is, and our perspective is influenced by the interrelated intellectual traditions of W. James, Erikson, and Loewingher. W. James (1890, 1892) presented a model that distinguishes the "I" from the "Me." He equated the ego with the I component of the self—the subjective thinker, the ongoing processor of experiences. The Me is the product of the selfing endeavor—the object that is known, the set of images that one has of one's self. In our scheme, we attempt to understand the manner in which the processing ego (i.e., I) of lesbians is influenced by social stigma and how this may affect ego functions, including the construction of an identity (i.e., Me).

Erikson wrote of ego and identity as separate yet interrelated facets of personality. In his life cycle model of human development, he (Erikson, 1950) tracked the movement of the ego through eight phases. Here is Erikson's (1950) description of the ego:

Between the id and the superego, then, the ego dwells. Consistently balancing and wording off extreme ways of the other two, the ego keeps tuned to the reality of the day, testing perceptions, selecting memories, governing action, and otherwise integrating the individual's capacities of orienting and planning. (p. 193)

Erikson began this description rooted in Freudian dynamics, but by the end of this quote he has credited the ego with several attributes. For Erikson, the ego is the central organizing agent; again, it is about processing. Ego development occurs as a result of both evolving cognitive-emotional capacities of the individual and emergent social expectations.

Let us use midlife (the age of our sample) ego development as an example. Erikson (1959) suggested that the ego of the midlife adult is striving for generativity (Stage 7 in his 8-stage theory of ego development), a mode that positively affects younger and future generations. An adult of this age has the cognitive-emotional ability to care for wide groups of others. Furthermore, there is a social press felt regarding expectations to engage in activities such as mentoring, creating, or passing on traditions. We believe that ego occluders, midlife lesbians with high internalized homonegativity, will be less generative than lesbians who are not dominated by these negative lesbian stereotypes. The internalization of social stigma is associated with stifled ego development and less generative modes.

Finally, Loewinger's model of ego development complements Erikson's (1950) psychosocial theory, because she charted the trajectory of the ego as an increasingly more sophisticated and accurate frame of reference (see Hy & Loewinger, 1996). For Loewinger (1976), the ego is "the striving to master, to integrate, to make sense of experience" (p. 5). As we mentioned earlier in this chapter, the ego is a collection of processes. Loewinger (1987) described a series of ego stages, each of which is characterized by a unique constellation of impulse control, interpersonal mode, and conscious preoccupations. Higher stages are marked by the acceptance of paradox, an understanding of human interdependency, and a striving for self-fulfillment over achievement (Hy & Loewinger, 1996). Within this framework, we contend that the more evolved ego is likely to be a quiet ego, free of the noisy and smothering effects of internalized homonegativity.

We have briefly highlighted the historical roots of our conceptualization of the ego. Although further discussion is well beyond the scope of this chapter, there are plenty of contemporary research programs that are congruent with our view of the ego, addressing topics such as Loewinger's (1987) ego stages (Bauer & McAdams, 2004; King & Noelle, 2005), ego defense mechanisms (Cramer, 2006), Erikson's (1950) stages (de St. Aubin, McAdams, & Kim, 2004; Georgios & Bosma, 2005; J. James & Zarrett, 2005), and affect regulation (Tamir, 2005). Given that we view the ego as a collection of regulatory, synthesizing, and interpretive processes, we believe that many methods can be used to assess the dynamics of the ego.

Internalized Homonegativity

One set of ego dynamics that must be navigated by people who belong to sexual minority groups are those involving the processing (the Jamesian "I") of relevant social stigmas, because these influence the construction of a personal identity (the Me). The concept of the looking-glass self (Cooley, 1902) applies to all individuals in that identity is, in part, based on beliefs about others' perceptions and judgments of who one is. For members of sexual minority groups, much of the "others' perceptions and judgments" in this formula is defined by prevailing societal heterosexism (Skerven & de St. Aubin, 2006). Homonegativity is an irrational hatred, disapproval, or fear of homosexual people and their culture. Internalization refers to consciously or unconsciously adopting the beliefs, values, and attitudes of others. Thus, internalized homonegativity is the extent to which a lesbian or gay man adopts these negative perspectives into views of one's self.

Empirical studies have demonstrated many negative correlates of internalized homonegativity, including shame (Allen & Oleson, 1999), depression and anxiety (Igartua, Gill, & Montoro, 2003), substance abuse (Amadio &
Chung, 2004), demoralization (Herek, Cogan, Gillis, & Glunt, 1997), and lower perceived social support (McGregor et al., 2001). We used the Lesbian Internalized Homophobia (LIH) Scale (Szymanski & Chung, 2001, 2005; Szymanski, Chung, & Balsam, 2001) to assess internalized homonegativity in our sample (Skerven & de St. Aubin, 2006).

Missing from this research literature is a larger edifice of theory that elucidates the complex self-society link. We believe that the ego lies at the crux of this link. Building theory concerning ego processes will help us to see the connection between internalized homonegativity and related concepts, such as stereotype threat, the felt risk of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype (Steele, 1997). Our attempt to begin that theory construction begins here, as we examine internalized homonegativity in a sample of lesbians as it relates to other ego functions and psychosocial quality of life. Along with the measures we describe later, we administered the LIH to a sample of 225 self-identified lesbians in the greater metropolitan area of a moderately large midwestern city (for details, see Skerven & de St. Aubin, 2006).

The Psychosocial Health of Transcenders and Ocluders

We start with the fundamental question of whether the quiet lesbian ego is associated with psychosocial health. Instead of examining mental illness or pathology as indexes of maladjustment, we draw from the spirit of positive psychology and focus on wellness. Along with the LIH, all participants completed four measures of psychosocial health: the Psychological Well-Being Scale (Ryff, 1989), the Social Well-Being Scale (Keyes, 1998), the Overall Happiness Measure (de St. Aubin & McAdams, 1995), and the Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985).

There is a relatively strong and consistent relation between internalized homonegativity and psychosocial well-being (see Table 19.1). The t values reported in the far right-hand column of Table 19.1 are based on a median split. Ocluders are participants who scored above the median on the LIH; transcenders scored below the median. There is solid evidence that the quiet ego of the transenders, an ego with less internalized homonegativity, is associated with psychosocial health. These women, compared with the ocluders, are more likely to report happiness and satisfaction with their lives, to find vital social coherence and integration, and to believe that one is creating a meaningful life.

The Generativity of Transcenders and Ocluders

As noted earlier, the hallmark of the healthy midlife ego for Erikson (1950) can be seen in generativity. Much of the current scholarship on generativity stems from the seven-faceted model proposed by McAdams and de St. Aubin (1992, 1998; see also de St. Aubin et al., 2004) and the quantification methods stemming from it. Two scales that target different components of the model were used in our study: the Loyola Generativity Scale (which measures generative concern) and the Generativity Behavioral Checklist (which measures generative action). Reviews of generativity scholarship can be found in McAdams (2001) and de St. Aubin et al. (2004).

Included in his list of possible causes of stagnation (thwarted generativity), Erikson (1959) discussed "faulty identifications with parents" and a lack of a "belief in the species" (p. 103). Most lesbians have heterosexual parents, so total identification is not possible and, in fact, not ideal. Erikson (1950) also discussed the importance of role repudiation, that is, selective negation of certain aspects of adult role models. It may be that the women we describe as transcenders have been able to process the identification disconnect surrounding sexuality within a balance of other positive parental identifications. Ocluders, plagued by a negative selfing process, may be unable to move beyond this disconnect. Likewise, the ocluders may struggle with this "belief in the species" that Erikson (1959) and others (Van De Water & McAdams, 1989) posed as central to generativity. Faith in the worthwhilness of the human enterprise would be difficult to maintain for a person whose salient ego elements capture the self-condemning and heterosexist views of society.

As can be seen in Table 19.1, ego transcenders did score significantly higher than ocluders on these two indexes of generativity, particularly on the Loyola Generativity Scale. Although the particular causal links are not clear, lesbians who were low in internalized homonegativity seemed better able to successfully negotiate the generative path of adulthood. It appears that lesbi-
ans high in internalized homonegativity, those with noisy egos, were not as successful in meeting this psychosocial hallmark of adult productivity.

The Ego Maturity of Transcenders and Ocluders

Loevinger developed the Washington University Sentence Completion Test for Ego Development to classify individuals into a maturity stage (Hy & Loevinger, 1996). This semiprojective technique, based on completion of sentence stems, was included in Phase 2 of our project, in which we administered additional measures to 86 of the original (Phase 1) participants. For these women, the average ego development score was 5.4, with a range of 4 to 7 and a standard deviation of 0.73. Table 19.1 reveals that our predictions here were supported: There is a significant negative relation between internalized homonegativity and ego development. Furthermore, the 41 women classified as transcenders scored significantly higher on ego development than did the 42 ocluders (3 protocols were not used because of missing data). All but 5 women scored within either Stage 4, 5, or 6, so it makes sense to explore the distinctions among these stages as we discern what separates a quiet ego from a noisy one in terms of ego maturity.

Level 4 is the conformist stage. The frame of reference is a conventional one in which rules and the authorities that impose them are viewed as acceptable without question. Major strivings are toward loyalty and social approval. In the self-aware stage (Level 5), the image of "what I am" is untied from "what I ought to be." There is a focus on the inner life of individuals; interpersonal modes are understood in terms of feelings as well as actions that dominated Level 4 perspectives. Finally, the defining features of Level 6 (the conscientious stage) are self-evaluated standards. The adult is now postconventional in that judgments regarding right and wrong, good and bad, and so on, originate from internal standards, not social mores. Participants who were classified as ego ocluders were, on average, between the conformist and self-aware levels of ego development. The transcenders were more firmly rooted in the self-aware level, with some heading toward the conscientious stage.

The Locus of Control of Transcenders and Ocluders

The concept of internalized homonegativity seems closely aligned to locus of control. Building on Rotter (1966), Levinson (1981) wrote of the extent to which one believes that life experiences and outcomes are determined by internality (i.e., one's own agency), powerful others, or chance. His measure, which we used in Phase 2 of our study, includes subscales for each of these three constructs. We hypothesized that ego ocluders would score higher on the powerful-others dimension, whereas transcenders would score higher on internality. Lesbians who are strongly influenced by the negative stereotypes held by others (occluders) are more likely to operate under the assumption that others exert control over their life experiences. Conversely, lesbians who assume that they determine their own courses (internality) are likely to have ego dynamics that operate free from social stigma (transcenders).

Here, our predictions were not completely supported (see Table 19.1). We were correct in our thoughts regarding the relation between internalized homonegativity and the powerful-others dimension of locus of control. However, there was no significant relation for the internality (self-agency) dimension. It is interesting that the construct of chance—the belief that random forces determine one's experiences—was associated with internalized homonegativity such that ego ocluders scored significantly higher than ego transcenders. One possible explanation for this is that ocluders tend to possess a lower sense of self-agency; in turn, lower levels of self-agency may lead these women to feel affected by an oppressive environment, thus increasing their vulnerability to feeling that chance factors are more influential than internality.

The Identity of Transcenders and Ocluders

Recall that W. James (1890, 1892) wrote about one function of the I (ego) being the construction of a me (identity). We follow McAdams (2006a, 2006b; see also chap. 21, this volume) and other narrative psychologists in looking to self-defining life stories as a window into the adult identity.

For example, Lori, a 32-year-old 1 participant in our study, scored second highest of all 225 women on the LIH measure, marking her as an ego ocluder. When asked to write a story about a turning point in her life, Lori wrote the following:

My turning point was when I stopped people from saying just anything to me. . . . You can only feel like a punch in the face when someone tells you your (sic) kind of mother, you're a pervert, or you need to do this or that. . . . Which pissed me off to the point where I cursed out everyone, because I was tired of my feelings being hurt, so I made that final stand and gained my respect as a person. It may say it taught me to be a better person inside, and out. To be not only even smarter, but also yet the more wiser; and to speak up so I may be heard.

Given the same prompt, 43-year-old Sandi, an ego transcender who scored extremely low on the LIH scale, responded with the following:

This is one specific to the ending of a 12-year relationship, one which I had considered a lifetime commitment. . . . When it ended, I was in shock, despair, everything seemed to slip away [and] I just wanted to go . . . as far away as I could from everything that was "our" life [and] start over. After about a year of being a recluse. . . I started to go out, meet people, I found that I could be myself without her. . . . Some friends told me that I looked so happy, I thought I had been before, but I knew that I was in a "new place," I have felt more resolved to improve each day, make better of my relationships.

1Names and identifying information of study participants have been altered for anonymity.
and cherish each day as I now understand how easily it can all slip away if you do not pay attention.

Note that there are some similarities in the stories. Both end with a decidedly positive remark—about becoming wiser (her words) for Lori and being more enlightened for Sandi. There are differences as well, however. Lori’s tone is bitter, and the content of her story speaks to how the antipathy of others has harmed her. Sandi’s story is more reflective, centering on complex internal states such as security, despair, escapism, and resolve. Her ego is quiet in that it operates without the clanging distraction of negative social stereotypes and the resulting self-loathing that characterizes ego ocluders.

We have started to examine the life stories of all of our participants and to focus on the differences between those written by transenders and ocluders. Although this work is still in the preliminary stages, we are beginning to discern demarcations. Ocluders seem more likely to write stories that pit self against other (individuals or generalized groups). The transenders tend not to do this, writing stories characterized by an awareness of coping and defense mechanisms and what we refer to as experiential digestion (i.e., an author’s tendency to connect the episode to a change in perspective or behavior). Often, the episode is understood as transformative, changing the author in an enduring way. Our goal is to systematically content-analyze the self-stories for additional themes. At this nascent stage of that work, we consider our ideas about these differences as speculative.

Discussion

One frustrating aspect of our work has been the inability of language to capture the complexity of ego functioning as it applies to our sample of lesbians. There is a disappointing reification that occurs when one begins to place labels on such amorphous phenomena, and this is exacerbated as we move to the level of numbers. Referring to a woman as an “occluder,” or to one’s ego maturity as a “5” feels a bit absurd, and definitely disrespectful. At the same time, we move forward, fully aware of the limitations of our approach.

Lesbians who tend to internalize heterosexist stereotypes differ from those who do not. The psychological portraits we are beginning to paint of the ocluder, one with a noisy ego, depicts a lesbian who is relatively low in psychosocial health, generativity, and ego maturity. She is also relatively high in the belief that powerful others and chance determine her experiences and outcomes. Finally, she is likely to have constructed an identity life story defined by dark tones, antagonistic tensions between self and other, and a rather concrete understanding of the human experience. This is a very different portrait than the one emerging for ego transenders. These lesbians tend to be low in the belief that others and chance control one’s destiny. They relate self-defining narratives that incorporate an awareness of multifarious internal states, and a self-context dialectic that depicts experiences as advancing self development. Their experience of self development is based around processes consis-

tent with a quiet ego, including psychosocial health, generativity, and higher levels of ego maturity.

The research reported here is based on our study of self-identified lesbians. Although there are several good reasons to examine lesbians, our approach is based on the logic that this group represents an intensified microcosm by which to understand the self–society connection. We examine lesbians to better understand the universal dynamics of ego—that which lies at the intersection of self and society. The noisy ego, in this view, contains a cacophony of negative images and sentiments drawn from one’s perception of how others view them. Such self-damaging dynamics occur in lesbians (occluders), and in any person for whom the perception of how others view them paralyzes their self-enlightenment. For example, to what extent does an Asian American man incorporate negative social stereotypes of his sex and ethnicity into his image of self? And how might that process be related to psychosocial health and adult maturity? The quiet ego, however, is relatively unencumbered by an individual’s perception of how others view him or her. Our lesbian transenders are an amazingly resistant group. Even within this heterosexist society, the transenders thrive, enjoying psychosocial health and adult maturity. The quiet ego, in our view, is one that muffles the swirling social stigma and gets on with the business of living a healthy life.

References


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**Self-Development Through Selflessness: The Paradoxical Process of Growing Wiser**

*Monika Ardelt*

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled
As to console;
To be understood, as to understand;
To be loved, as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

—The Peace Prayer of St. Francis, by an anonymous Norman, c. 1915

If wisdom is defined as a combination of cognitive (an understanding of life and the desire to know the truth), reflective (the ability and willingness to look at phenomena and events from different perspectives), and affective (sympathetic and compassionate love for others) personality qualities (Ardelt, 1997, 2003, 2004; Clayton & Birren, 1980; Manheimer, 1992), then truly wise people, such as Jesus Christ or the Buddha, can also be described as the most psychologically developed persons. They are mature; psychologically healthy; autonomous; fully liberated from all outside and inside forces; and are, therefore, the masters of their own fate (Ardelt, 2000; Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1990; Kekes, 1983; Levenson & Crumpler, 1996; Pascual-Leone, 1990). Because people who grow in wisdom gradually come to accept reality as it is (and not as they would like it to be), including the negative side of their personalities, they are able to learn from their experiences, which allows them to overcome their negative tendencies and to gain inner peace through the development of equanimity (Hart, 1987). Hence, they tend to be less affected by external events and internal drives than other people, which results in greater autonomy and control (Ardelt, 2005; Kekes, 1983; Levenson & Crumpler, 1996; Pascual-Leone, 1990). Yet wise individuals are also selfless; that is, they have transcended the egotistical self and feel more part of the ocean instead of an