

Mature Ego Development: A Gateway To Ego Transcendence?

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This paper explores whether the highest stage in ego development is indicative of ego transcendence as I initially surmised. Overall, I will review some of the similarities and differences between rational awareness of the limits of representational thought and genuine post-symbolic knowing. I will present the research territory with a linear and a non-linear model of human development. Both models can accommodate both Eastern and western self theories including ego development theory and Alexander's levels of mind. Next, I will outline an alternative developmental trajectory based on Alexander's notion of the shifts in the dominant mode of processing from person-verbal-discursive to transpersonal-postsymbolic. Then, I will present ego development theory as I conceive of it now and outline the important characteristics of the highest stage (Cook-Greuter, 1999). Finally, I will consider the question of whether and in what way the Unitive ego stage is related to higher consciousness and introduce two testable propositions to clarify the issue. I'll add the distinctions between structure stages and state stages not yet made clearly on first publishing of this article.

KEY WORDS: Ego development,; levels of mind; modes of processing; different models of human development; Unitive ego stage.

BACKGROUND

This article grew out of a dialogue with Skip Alexander that began in 1988 when we first encountered each other's ideas. Our relationship blossomed from shared research interests into a warm and supportive friendship. Although Skip is no longer among us,² I still feel his influence, and this paper mirrors the topics we discussed. We were both interested in the role of language in meaning making, especially at the threshold between ordinary waking consciousness and ego-transcendent ways of knowing. Yet beyond psychology, we also addressed our different spiritual journeys, especially regarding the challenges they posed to our roles as disciples and researchers.

As to our mutual research interests, both of us worked with Loevinger's *Washington University Sentence Completion Test* (SCT) (Loevinger & Wessler, 1970; Loevinger, Wessler & Redmore, 1970): Alexander as an SCT end-user, I as an expert scorer and researcher of the test. Building on Flavell's observation of the fundamental shift in consciousness from preverbal to verbal processing in the young child, Alexander suggested a second, similarly monumental transformation from the personal-verbal to transpersonal-postsymbolic processing in adulthood (1990, p. 288). At the same time, I had noticed that people at the high end of ego development tend to become aware of what I call the language habit (Cook-Greuter, 1995)³. They describe how the personal-verbal or discursive frame of mind prevents them from remaining in the open, non-evaluative witnessing stance they enjoy during peak moments and altered states of consciousness.

Briefly, the language habit has the following attributes:

1. It constitutes a universal, all-pervasive dimension of human existence
2. It is innate but needs activation and modeling by expert speakers in early childhood to emerge
3. It is a learned behavior that becomes automatic and unconscious once acquired
4. It bundles the flux of sensory input and inner experience into labeled concepts shared with one's speech community
5. It is so deeply engrained that speakers of any given language are not aware of the reality construction imposed on them by their language
6. It can become a barrier to further development if it remains unconscious, automatic and unexamined.

Thus, the determination of how high-end ego development stages fit into a full-spectrum model of consciousness depends in part on whether people can become aware of the language habit and on the possibility of postrepresentational ways of knowing.

Before I met Alexander, I theorized that ego development - if it reaches its highest potential - is one path to ego-transcendence, a rational road to the Divine so to speak. I speculated that the highest ego stage I had observed, the Unitive⁴ stage, might be an early form of ego transcendence, akin perhaps, to Cosmic Consciousness in the Vedic model. I based this inference mostly on rare responses that occurred on SCTs. These unusual completions demonstrated a level of openness and a preference for witnessing experience, rather than trying to evaluate and label it, not explained by Loevinger's *Ego development Theory* (1976). Thus, I tentatively attributed such responses to ego-transcendent awareness. The purpose of this paper is to revisit and reevaluate my earlier thinking.

In the following, I will explore some of the similarities and differences between rational awareness of the limits of representational thought and genuine postsymbolic knowing as experienced at higher stages of consciousness. I will do this by first presenting the research territory by means of a four-tier model of human development (Miller and Cook-Greuter, 1994). Such a model can accommodate both Eastern and Western self theories including Loevinger's and my ego stages and Alexander's levels of mind (Alexander & Boyer, 1989). These I will briefly introduce. Second, I will also outline a different parsing of the developmental trajectory, one based on Alexander's notion of the shifts in the dominant mode of processing from (1) preverbal to verbal-personal, and (2) from verbal, discursive to transpersonal-postsymbolic. Third, I will introduce a useful distinction between "stages" and "states" of consciousness. Fourth, I will outline ego development theory as I conceive of it now and address important characteristics of high-end ego development (Cook-Greuter, 1999). Finally, I will consider the question of whether and in what way the highest ego stage is related to higher consciousness and introduce two testable propositions.

A FULL-SPECTRUM, FOUR-TIER MODEL OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

According to constructivist, bottom-up developmental stage theory (Piaget, 1938, 1954; Kohlberg & Armon, 1984; Basseches, 1984; Commons & Richards, 1984) mental growth follows a predictable trajectory. People move through an invariant, hierarchical sequence of

increasingly complex and coherent stages of reasoning from birth to adulthood. Each higher stage follows the next lower in a predictable order. Each higher stage not only follows, but also transcends and integrates the content of the lower into a more complex mental model of reality. In other words, each higher stage can understand and coordinate the stage below it while the reverse is not true. Instead, the lower tends to reduce whatever it gleans from above to its own level (Fisher, Hand & Russel, 1984).

The whole trajectory of human development can be parsed in many different ways. One useful way is to subdivide it into four tiers (Miller & Cook-Greuter, 1994). The first two – pre-conventional and conventional development – cover mental growth from infancy to adulthood. About 90%⁵ of the general adult population function within these first two tiers of development.

We start our life journey as undifferentiated newborns, unconsciously fused with our surround. We grow through childhood into adolescents through biological maturation & through systematic socialization within a given speech community. A shared language is crucial for mastery of the object world, for self-conceptualization, for integration as a member of a group, and for cognitive growth in any field of knowledge. Indeed, beginning instruction in meditation is also likely to be in part given verbally.

Table I. The Hierarchical, Four-Tier Model Of Development

Tier	Four Tiers of Development <i>(Miller/Cook-Greuter)</i>	% of pop.
IV	Postpostconventional, Ego-Transcendent	<1%
III	Postconventional, Postformal	9%
II	Conventional	80%
I	Preconventional	10%

Conventional Western psychology views the construction of a permanent, separate self identity as an important goal of healthy human development. According to this view, adulthood is achieved when people can successfully use abstract reasoning to deal with their everyday experience, and when they see themselves as independent, goal-oriented, responsible agents of their own lives while granting others the same right to separate personhood. Mental development up to this point establishes increasingly more clearly defined boundaries between subject and object world, between knower and known, between observer and observed in an effort to construct an ever more accurate, objective map of reality based on scientific, rational criteria.

A society's definition of what constitutes adult behavior and cognition constrains the kinds of worldviews most of its members will develop. In the West, the current conventional "adult" perspective is this linear, rational model of reality, or, in Piaget's framework, the achievement of abstract or formal operations. Most people process experience throughout their adult years from the highest conventional perspective they are capable of – which they have usually reached by early adulthood.

At present, mental growth to the postconventional tier and beyond is rare in part because it is not supported by society's prevailing mindset, practices and institutions. As indicated, these are based on objective, rational-scientific tenets. Our public school system, for instance, has the mandate to prepare children to become independent meaning makers who can function in a modern democratic society as well as to teach them the basic values and skills to enable them to enter the contemporary adult work world.

In contrast, the higher two tiers, the postconventional and the transcendent, describe rarer and more complex ways of how adults make sense of experience. The third tier is called postformal or postconventional because it goes beyond the modern, linear-scientific Western mindset and beyond the conventions of society by starting to question the unconsciously held beliefs, norms and assumptions about reality acquired during socialization and schooling.

Both Loevinger (1976) and Alexander (1982, 1994) formulated influential lifespan self theories that delineate stages of meaning making from infancy into mature adulthood. They move from coarse to subtle, from earlier more local and egocentric forms of meaning making towards more complex, integrated and global views. Both theories postulate development beyond the conventional tier. Loevinger called her sequence ego stages (1970) or ego levels (1996) while Alexander defines his as changing levels of mind based on Vedic Science (Maharishi, 1972). Ego development theory (Loevinger, 1976, Cook-Greuter, 1990) describes the growth of the self from undifferentiated early infancy to self-actualized mature adulthood. It proposes ten distinct mental models of reality, four of which are postconventional.

Table II. A Four-Tier Model of Human Development

Correspondence of Levels of Mind and Ego Stages in the Four-Tier Model

4 Tiers of Development (Miller & CG; Wilber)	Levels of Mind (Alexander et al.)	Ego-Development Stages (Loevinger; Cook-Greuter)
IV. Postpostconventional Ego-Transcendent	Unity Consciousness	<i>Transcendent Self</i>
	Refined cosmic consciousness	
	Cosmic consciousness	
III. Postconventional or Postformal	Ego	Unitive
	Feelings/intuition	Construct-aware
		Autonomous/Integrated <i>Mature, connected self</i>
II. Conventional	Intellect	Individualistic
		Conscientious <i>Separate, individual self</i>
	Mind	Self-aware
I. Preconventional	Desires	Conformist <i>Communal self</i>
	Behavior/Senses	Self-protective
	Physical world	Impulsive Presocial <i>Undifferentiated self</i>

In contrast, the Vedic model is top-down (Alexander, 1990, 1994) which postulates a sequence of seven levels of increasing materialization. It starts in the purely spiritual, non-material Unity Consciousness at its most fundamental level and ends at the bottom with the body consciousness of infancy as the most material, gross form of mind. Alexander identifies two levels of mind at the third, postconventional tier. He refers to the earlier postconventional level as the Feelings/intuition level. It more or less parallels Loevinger’s Individualistic, Autonomous, and Integrated stages as shown on Figure 1; Alexander’s second postconventional, the Ego level, corresponds to my two postautonomous ego stages, the Construct-aware and the Unitive. At the fourth tier - which has no equivalent in ego development theory - Vedic science places the ego-transcendent or the three higher states of Consciousness: Cosmic Consciousness, Refined Cosmic Consciousness and Unity Consciousness.⁶

The adult stages in postconventional ego development are situated in the personal, rational-symbolic domain. Thus, ego development theory ranges over three tiers out of the four-tier, full-spectrum model of consciousness as shown in Table II. Alexander’s Vedic theory on the other hand, also covers the fourth tier and thus, counts as a full-spectrum developmental model. Figure 2 indicates which tier each stage of these two theories approximately occupies in the four-tier model. Overall, this paper focuses on the third tier of development, especially the transition zone between third and fourth tier.

As mentioned above, there are many different ways in which one can divide the developmental trajectory depending on one’s focus. Alexander suggested that we pay special attention to the dominant mode of mental processing or “knowing” as an important criterion in mapping human development as shown in Table III.

Table III. Mode of Knowing, Ego Stages, and Levels of Mind

Realm	Mode of Processing or knowing	Ego stages (Cook-Greuter)	Levels of mind (Alexander)	Tier
Transpersonal	Postsymbolic, direct, immediate knowing	↑	Higher stages of consciousness	IV
Personal	Symbolic representational, language-mediated, discursive	Unitive	Ego	III
		Construct-aware		
		Autonomous	Feeling and intuition	
		Individualistic		
		Conscientious	Intellect	II
		Self-aware		
		Conformist	Mind	
		Self-protective	Desire	I
		Impulsive		
Prepersonal	Preverbal, presymbolic	Symbiotic	Senses	

While the shift from preverbal to symbolic processing of reality occurs for most children as a natural aspect of maturation during the first three years of life, the second transformation to postsymbolic, transpersonal apperception seems to occur rarely, if at all. The two changes in mode of processing represent quantum shifts in development unlike most stage transitions

within the personal domain indicated in Figure 2, which follow a regular, predictable pattern of differentiation-integration. Whereas Western psychology has specialized in researching the presymbolic and representational or personal modes of knowing, Eastern psychologies have often pointed to the non-symbolically mediated, or immediate ways of knowing as the only kind of knowing that can lead to enlightenment or true insight into human nature. In fact, they consider our addiction to language-mediated, discursive thought as a major hurdle in realizing the true or divine Self, or union with the Ground.

After the shift to symbolic processing of reality or entry into the personal domain, mental growth can be described to a large degree as the continual differentiation and hierarchical integration of one's knowledge of the world and one's ability to communicate this understanding through ever more finely nuanced language. Most adults believe that language is a tool that describes the world as it is, made up of separate properties, people, physical and mental objects, and events. According to Whorf (1956) we do not realize that language maps reality in culture-specific ways, and that, as members of a speech community, we become parties to a hidden agreement to organize experience in that specific way. This is so because natural language is acquired unconsciously in early childhood and then continuously reinforced throughout life (Cook-Greuter, 1995). Moreover, we are generally not aware that every concept and its label is an enormous simplification of the experienced phenomenological flux, and that there is no unambiguous correspondence between symbol and that which is symbolized by it.

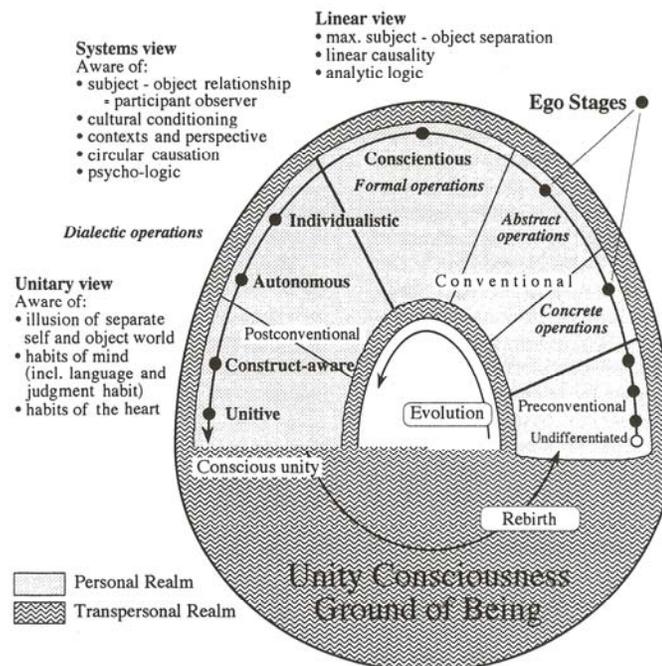


Fig. 1. Non-linear model of ego development.

Distinguishing Between States And Stages Of Consciousness

It is not surprising then that within the discipline of developmental psychology, one of the main problems is the lack of agreed upon terms for describing what is variously called - stage, position, level, order of consciousness, or state in hierarchical theories. In particular, the terms

stage and state are often treated both as synonyms and as distinct concepts. Figure 1 presents an alternative representation of development that is meant to illustrate the complex relationship between states and stages.

According to this model, the potential for access to the non-ordinary, spiritual or transpersonal realm is possible at all ages and from every developmental stage as indicated by the outer shell in the illustration. It surrounds the developmental growth path of the self on its way to self-actualization and beyond. However, such contact is generally fleeting during personal development. Those who enter the non-ordinary states always slip back into their own familiar mode of processing reality during regular waking activity. They then interpret the transpersonal experience through the filter of their current personal understanding. When access to the transcendent realm is temporary, it is useful to think of this experience as a state of consciousness that one can enter, but leaves upon returning to ordinary reality. In everyday usage, we refer to sleep, daydreaming, flow or peak moments also as such “altered, non-ordinary” states of consciousness. For instance, we may comfort our children, when they are upset by frightful dreams, by insisting that dreams are not real. What is considered as real in most Western people’s mind is what belongs to ordinary waking consciousness. An important aspect of altered states of consciousness is that they are partially identifiable by physiological characteristics (such as brain wave activity) which can be measured with laboratory equipment.

In developmental psychology, on the other hand, we talk of stages when we refer to the different, consistent ways of how people make coherent sense of experience. Thus, stage is a purely abstract, psychological construct that has no correlate in the brain. In ego development theory, a person’s ego stage is, by definition, that view of reality that he or she most routinely and automatically uses to deal with experience. In other words, people’s ego stage is defined as their preferred stance, their home base for relating to and digesting experience, or their center of gravity.

If we define stages as stable positions from which an individual habitually processes experience, the higher states of consciousness in Vedic theory are, by definition, also stages if they become stable positions from which reality is experienced.. They follow each other in a hierarchical sequence and they become the automatic perspective for those who fully develop them after they have traversed the personal development trajectory.

Practice in Transcendental Meditation is one way in which people can learn to experience self-transcendence regularly, although temporarily at first. With habituation, the center of gravity is said to shift, and the higher can become a constant position or stage from which the person embraces reality. As mentioned earlier, Vedic psychology postulates two transpersonal stages, Cosmic Consciousness, and Refined Cosmic Consciousness. The state beyond states, Unity Consciousness or the Ultimate Ground of Being, underlies all other stages. It must be apprehended as something fundamentally “other” from either a state or a stage because these terms belong to the dualistic, discursive realm of thought. Named concepts are always abstracted or split off from the underlying seamless Reality. Hence we face the inevitable paradox of trying to express with words that which is ineffable and beyond any conjecture we can make about it from our limited perspective.

Loevinger’s Integrated Stage Revised

In 1985,⁷ I first proposed to replace Loevinger’s vaguely defined highest Integrated stage with two new distinct stages. Based on thousands of SCT responses, I had found evidence of

two reality views that seemed cognitively more differentiated than Loevinger's Integrated stage. These two views followed the same pattern of alternating between differentiation and integration that is a hallmark of the prior stage sequence. I called the differentiation from the Autonomous/Integrated stage, the *Construct-aware* ego stage because it is at this juncture that people first become aware of how reality is both perceived and constructed through the filter of patterned thought and language. People at earlier postconventional stages do not exhibit any awareness that the concept of "ego" is itself a construction, a term for an immaterial, subjectively felt experience. They are not yet conscious of the language habit. It is the language habit which allows us to categorize and label the field of awareness by reifying (= making into things) and objectifying (= making into objects) not only phenomena with physical properties available to the senses, but abstract concepts that have no correlates in the outer world. The reification process is so deeply ingrained, we rarely realize its enthralling and all-pervasive power.

Even more rarely, I also found signs of ego-transcendent thought in people's responses to the SCT. Such completions were rated at a hypothetical "*Unitive*" stage. (See Endnote 4). Protocols at this most refined ego stage for which there is evidence on the SCT are characterized by a high acceptance for life-as-is. They express their appreciation for the preciousness of existence and show a mental flexibility and openness that derives from being able to let go of the judgment habit.

Originally, I assumed that the highest ego stage indicated a genuine form of ego-transcendence.⁸ At the same time - as a linguist - I was keenly aware of the irony of trying to capture fine differentiations in the postrepresentational sphere of experience with a brief paper-and-pencil test. Thus, I considered the unitive stage an undifferentiated, catch-all stage for whatever one could glean of ego-transcendence from a sentence completion test.

Since those early explorations, I have formulated a more definite theory of higher stages of ego development (Cook-Greuter, 1999). It is based on a SCT data set collected over fifteen years of research. Yet the question about the relationship of the Unitive stage to higher stages of consciousness remains. To better frame this dilemma, a brief summary of ego development theory as I conceive of it currently follows.

Summary Of Current Ego Development Theory

Figure 1 does double duty. It represents aspects of ego-development not evident in the linear, hierarchical representations of the tables. In its shortcomings, it also exemplifies the inescapable limits of all symbolic representations. One can not ever adequately illustrate the all-pervading Ground of Being with a diagrammatic figure.

Representations are always partial and incomplete maps of the underlying experiential territory, highlighting some aspects of the conceptual space and omitting others (Cook-Greuter, 1995).

Figure 1 shows the trajectory of ego development during the first two tiers of development as one of overall separation and individuation from the undifferentiated, unconscious fusion of the newborn with the mother followed by a stepwise reintegration during the latter two tiers towards the most differentiated, complex, and integrated view of reality and an increasing awareness of the ego-transcendent Ground of Being.

Conventional Development

As mentioned earlier, people reach the conventional “adult” worldview at the Conscientious stage, which is the highest of the conventional stages in ego development theory. Because it represents the culturally privileged norm, it acts as a kind of ceiling or barrier. Thus moving beyond it is difficult. It represents the frame of mind that is most attached to rationality and tends to defend most against the intrusion of material from non-rational whether from mythical, preconventional sources of influx from more integrated, later perspectives. If it accepts the transpersonal at all, it often does so as a belief system or an ideology, and adheres to its letter and mechanics rather than its spirit. This tendency has been observed in SCTs from long-term, TM meditators and people on other spiritual paths who scored at the conventional stages of ego development.

Postconventional Ego Development

Based on evidence from my research, postconventional development reverses the overall process of separation and differentiation of the earlier ego stages. The rigid boundaries between knower and known are gradually deconstructed and merged. The dismantling occurs in two steps. The first step is generally referred to as the *systems view* (Bertalanffy, 1968; Bateson, 1972; Koplowitz, 1984; Senge, 1990); the second step is called the *postautonomous* (Cook-Greuter, 1990) or *unitary view* of reality (Koplowitz, 1984, 1990).

Overall, Western developmental theories, that recognize some form of mental development to the third tier, do not agree on the number of postconventional stages, but most propose at least a systemic or dialectical stage of reasoning. To see reality as well as the self as an interconnected whole or system rather than an aggregate of separate, well-defined elements is the first step towards a more holistic view of reality.

The main advantage of the systems over the conventional, linear view is that people now realize that their perspectives are local, partial, context-dependent and culturally conditioned. Systems thinkers are aware of themselves as participant observers, or as inevitably part of the problem space. In other words, they realize that each person sees a slightly different aspect of the underlying territory. While they no longer hold that complex problems can eventually be solved by refining the existing linear scientific methods, they do assume that such problems will yield to systemic approaches that take context, observer and circular causation into account. Thus, they still believe in a rationally knowable reality and rely on logically derived solutions and procedures. Systems thinkers, or Autonomous persons in ego development theory, are aware of interpretation as an inevitable aspect of all meaning making. Because they consider networks of interacting variables and multiple points of view, they become interested in how we know what we know, that is, they become intrigued with questions of epistemology. As a result, they begin to explore the dynamics and processes of meaning making themselves. However, systems thinkers do not yet understand how profoundly all humans are conditioned into the language habit (Cook-Greuter, 1995). They are not aware how they automatically privilege some aspects of experience by being part of a language community and ignore, or are oblivious, to others regardless of the social-political context.

Postautonomous Ego Development

Only a small percentage of people develop a reality perspective that goes beyond the fully equilibrated systems view or Autonomous/Integrated stage. Few theories of development

postulate forms of reasoning that are even more differentiated and abstract than the systems view. Commons and Richards' (1984) *General Model of Hierarchical Complexity*, for instance, includes stages of metacognitive and cross-paradigmatic reasoning in its scheme. However, the higher stages in this latter model remain wedded to symbolic codification. Complex cognitive behavior is represented as mathematical formulas (operations upon operations upon operations - almost *ad infinitum*). Purely cognitive models (Commons and Truudeau, 1994; Stein, in progress), for instance, do not realize and/or acknowledge the incommensurability between symbol and that which is symbolized. Their creators do not recognize the limits of rational analysis and of symbolic representation, and thus, they cannot discover the hidden assumptions and paradoxes that they enact in their models.

In contrast to this, self-inquiring, full-bodied developmental theories, which focus on meaning rather than mechanics of cognition, and which include cognitive, affective and behavioral components, tend to assess their own methods and arguments for hidden assumptions and limitations. Kegan (1982, 1994), Basseches (1984), and Cook-Greuter (1990, 1994, 1995, 1999) comment on the fundamental language problem inherent in meaning making and scientific theorizing no matter how many systems are integrated and at what level of hierarchical complexity.

Except for those who study the limits of language professionally, only individuals at the second level of postconventional differentiation seem to appreciate the magnitude of humanity's automatic and unconscious dependence on the language habit for all aspects of living. Less than 1% of representative respondents to the SCT score at the two postautonomous ego stages, slightly more in non-representative, professional subsamples. As indicated earlier, the Construct-aware stage continues in the discursive vein, whereas the Unitive stage shows signs of a perception of reality that is reminiscent of transcendent ways of knowing. Let me now elaborate on the developmental gains and limitations of these most advanced ego stages.

THE CONSTRUCT-AWARE EGO STAGE

In the postautonomous step of deconstruction, individuals come to reject the overall stance of the systems thinker. By turning further inward, they start to see through their own thought and language habits, and become aware of the profound splits and paradoxes inherent in rational thought. In many ways, they individually rediscover Korzybsky's (1948) dictum that "the map is not [never] the territory." The linguistic process of splitting into polar opposites (dualism) and the attending value judgments can become conscious as well. Good and evil, life and death, beauty and ugliness may now appear as two sides of the same coin, as mutually necessitating and defining each other – at least on logical grounds.

Unlike earlier stages, Construct-aware individuals consciously experience the ego's clever and vigilant machinations at self-preservation. Because it is the first time in development that some people's ego becomes fully aware of its own defensive maneuvers, that is, because ego becomes transparent to itself, I have also called this form of meaning-making as Ego-aware.

Construct-aware persons generally have a more dynamic and multi-faceted understanding of human nature (its innate as well as culturally-transmitted aspects; its strengths and vulnerabilities) and the complexities of human interaction. They become concerned with uncovering and facing their own habits of mind and heart—those automatic behaviors that are based on memory and life-long cultural reinforcement and amplification. Realizing the bankruptcy of one's automatic way of meaning making can be profoundly distressing and frustrating. The

disquiet at the Construct-aware stage runs much deeper than merely recognizing that one's perceptions are partially culturally conditioned - an insight that is typical for the first step of postformal insight. Although systems thinkers may have intimations of the ramifications that arise when one begins to conceive of the self and reality as constructed, they fend, at the same time, automatically against any knowledge of their own impermanence and insubstantiality.

As the process of self-awareness deepens and reasoning becomes further differentiated at the Construct-aware stage, access to intuition, bodily states, feelings, dreams, archetypal and other transpersonal material increases. Towards the end of the growth trajectory in the personal, representational realm, people welcome insights from these experiences rather than defending against them (Vaillant, 1977). More than that, these sources of knowledge can become as important as rational deliberation for making sense of experience and for finding meaning in life.

Most importantly, the regular practice of turning inward and observing one's own mental processes can also lead to the spontaneous discovery of a direct mode of experiencing in which knower and known momentarily merge, and the personal self-sense disappears. These states are variously called peak moments, flow states, or bliss experiences. Maslow (1971) and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) give excellent profiles of the nature and consistently positive qualities of these states.⁹

Individuals report watching or witnessing the parades of thoughts and feelings come and go without trying to direct them. Thus, they experience moments of freedom from the ego's constant efforts at control and self-affirmation. Yet, such experiences are short-lived. As soon as one evaluates and judges the inner proceedings, the magic is broken. Our egos are naturally reluctant to relinquish the familiar mode of functioning. We do not want to give up the illusion of our enduring separate selfhood, which we so laboriously learned to define, cultivate, and rely on for most of our conscious lives. Even if we understand that letting go of our attachment to the known will bring freedom from suffering, attempts at doing so deliberately and on one's own are mostly ineffective and always lead to intractable paradoxes. The more one becomes attached to the idea of non-attachment, the more firmly one remains fettered. The more one is conscious and proud of one's psychic powers and ego-transcending quest, the more clearly one's ego is still enthroned. Trungpa (1987) in *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* has perhaps given one of the most cogent analyses of how the ego can usurp transpersonal episodes for its own glorification.

When a person sees through the filter of the symbolic construction and mapping of reality, his or her disposition towards the language habit can change profoundly. In general, individuals at the Construct-aware stage try to be conscious of the difference between symbol and the underlying phenomenon it symbolizes at all times. They try to remain aware of the pseudo-reality created by words. They realize that the pursuit of objective self-identifications and rational, value-free explanations of the universe are futile -- artifacts of our need to make permanent and substantive that which is in flux and immaterial. I observed at least two distinct responses to this dilemma. Some Construct-aware individuals remain indebted to and try to perfect conscious discursive rationality; others seem drawn to move beneath or beyond it. In both cases, individuals are courageously committed to realizing the desired goals despite understanding their predicament.

The rationally-inclined valiantly construct an ever more precise account in real-time of their complex and dynamic theories about how the world and their minds work, only to deconstruct them as soon as they become aware of doing so. Although they see through the

reification habit and the limits of reasoning, they can do no other. In Kegan's (1994, p. 330) view, arriving at a "Complete Theory" would more likely be experienced as a kind of "death" rather than a "victory" by people of this frame of mind. They draw vitality from the very process of surfacing the constant temptation to "capture" and reify experience.

In contrast, more intuition-directed individuals yearn so deeply to make the transpersonal experience permanent, they may find themselves in a seeming no-man's¹⁰ land. The old way of mediating experience no longer satisfies while the new mode of processing has been glimpsed at peak moments or during temporary transcendence, but is not yet fully or consistently available. It seems that for some people, once awakened, the desire to go beyond the judging mind becomes all-powerful. They want to be free of endlessly categorizing and labeling experience. Instead, they simply wish to witness life as it unfolds. They hope that – with enough perseverance, courage, and practice – they will eventually be transformed and know their deeper nature or attain permanent enlightenment.

Asked, in coaching sessions, whether they would prefer to be more naïve and ignorant again, all Construct-aware participants so far clearly did not want to go back to less complex, more limited stages of awareness. On the contrary, they affirmed the meaningfulness of becoming aware of their own reasoning in ever more subtle and profound ways and of discovering those fundamental aspects of experience that unite us in a common humanity.¹¹

THE UNITIVE EGO STAGE

There are also indications on the SCT that some individuals do eventually learn to accept themselves and reality simply "as is." Their responses show a tolerance of the continuously changing experience which is different in quality from that described in the Construct-aware stage. People at the Unitive stage no longer give the impression of trying so hard to construct ever more all-encompassing theories or to escape the inevitable contradictions and infinite loops created in the rational, representational domain. They can embrace polar opposites on an affective level and not just cognitively. Good and evil, joy and regret, closeness and separateness are valued as natural and meaningful aspects in the dance of life, or as part of the eternal cycle of creation, destruction and re-creation. The openness to ongoing experience combined with empathy for beings at all stages of development distinguishes the Unitive from the previous stage. Moreover, people at this stage are more at ease with a fluid, open-ended self-identity, that is, with "not-knowing" who they are, whereas those at all earlier ego stages show stage-specific anxieties when their present self-sense becomes threatened or unclear.

At the Unitive stage, unlike the Construct-aware, one's capacity for rational analysis is no longer experienced as a limitation to be struggled with or overcome, but as a valued resource that assumes foreground or background depending on one's present intentions. Unitive stage SCT protocols sound less hyper-rational and tormented (more accepting and serene) than those at the Construct-aware stage.

DISCUSSION

To sum up, at the Construct-aware stage, individuals recognize the limits of language and analytic rationality. While they see through the earlier illusion of the separateness of knower and known, they cannot reliably replace the discursive way of meaning making with direct, unfiltered experience. However, deep examination of one's automatic habits can lead to more

frequent peak experiences and moments of ego-transcendence and to cognitive insights into the process of meaning making itself.

At the Unitive stage, individuals can integrate and make use of their transcendent experiences more often. They tend to witness rather than to label and judge experience. They often express a simplicity and joy because the need to identify everything and to measure up to any expectations of self or others has lessened. They are awake to their changing states of consciousness and express the pure wonder of being in life. Thus, what comes across in Unitive SCTs is a profound and compassionate understanding of the human condition.

Does this mean, then, that people can reach the fourth, transcendent tier of development on their own by a conscious deconstruction of the previously constructed permanent self and object world as I speculated in the early phases of my research? Does the experience of the limits of the rational mind and of discursive thought at the highest ego stages invariably lead to the attainment of genuine ego transcendence?

Perhaps. Although a dispassionate attitude and openness to life as it unfolds are common to both the Unitive ego stage and transcendent stages, further qualitative & quantitative research is needed to explore their phenomenological similarities and differences. As Orme-Johnson and S. Nidich & R. Nidich, and J. Alexander (in this issue) report, much research emanating from the Maharishi University of Management shows that higher states/stages of consciousness correlate with subtle changes in physiology, body chemistry, and brain activity. Indeed, each ego-transcendent stage seems to have a unique, identifiable footprint of such indices. Thus, we would benefit from using a multi-method approach. A combination of personality tests, self-assessment, and reports by observers who know the subject, as well as physiological and other measures are needed to ascertain whether an individual operates from a stage of consciousness beyond the personal realm. What one can glean from the empirical evidence on the SCT alone is not sufficient to determine whether adults at the Unitive stage have reached any of the higher stages of consciousness. It doesn't preclude it either.

One person at the Unitive stage commented in a personal dialogue (1994) that she was aware of the transcendent realm and searched for ways to establish a more permanent presence in it. One way to move towards ego-transcendence is to enter on a spiritual path. Unitive individuals are likely to persist as seekers for different reasons than those at earlier ego stages. They actually understand and consciously witness the enormous investment of the ego to remain in charge and to sabotage the striving for ego-transcendence.

To summarize, I currently wonder whether developing to the Unitive stage in ego development represents an early form of higher consciousness. I also question my earlier hypothesis that successfully evolving through the whole personal realm constitutes a rational road to ego-transcendence or enlightenment. Thus, based on empirical findings, I offer two propositions that could be substantiated with further research:

Proposition 1:

Conscious, ego-transcendent experiences tend to become more frequent with increasing ego development at the postconventional tier because ego boundaries need less defending,¹² and the person is more open to non-rational sources of input.

However, such transpersonal encounters remain relatively undifferentiated even when equanimity and witnessing life-as-is become established enough at the Unitive ego stage to

shine through on the SCT. Perhaps, the Unitive stage in ego development can be conceptualized as a threshold stage. It is an ending as well as a new beginning. On the one hand, the Unitive stage represents what Maslow (1971) described as self-actualized individuals, men and women who - by all criteria of conventional evaluation - have reached a kind of summit of personal growth and cognitive insight within the current state of human evolution. Such persons are in tune with body and mind, intuition, and rational thought, self and Umwelt. Their perspective on reality is dynamic, global, and inclusive. They know the power of unconditionality, and, in the witnessing state, they experience self-transcendence. Their peak experiences, in turn, deepen their sense of embeddedness and belonging.

Thus, the Unitive stage is conceived here as a potential gateway to the transpersonal or spiritual realm of knowing. As far as I can tell, merely yearning for transpersonal illumination is not enough. Reading the spiritual literature and contacting the higher stages of consciousness on one's own, rarely leads to a fundamental self-transformation and further unfoldment of consciousness as described in the wisdom literature of the East.

Eastern religions have developed practices to systematically prepare, teach, and "correct" the willing student in their respective traditions of cultivating higher consciousness.¹³ Only in the twentieth century, emissaries of various Eastern spiritual disciplines were sent to the Western world and began teaching their meditation techniques and esoteric knowledge to ordinary people. No longer did one have to enter a monastery and renounce family and commerce in order to partake in the ancient daily practices. In fact, by now, there are Westerners fully trained and initiated to be teachers (gurus or wayshowers) in non-Western spiritual traditions. They can guide a seeker to discover his or her true Divine Self because they have been tested and sanctioned by the gatekeepers of their particular path.

Ideally, such teachers are securely at home in the Divine Current and capable of unconditional love and impersonal service to others. They are aware of the potential pitfalls and temptations awaiting the novice along the road towards final awakening or Unity Consciousness. When necessary, they can accelerate, expand, confirm, validate, and/or challenge the student's transpersonal experiences, as well as test and evaluate his or her progress towards enlightenment. The teacher seems to be as crucial for the permanent evolution to transcendent stages of consciousness in the beginning stages of meditation as are devotion to the path and faith into the process on the side of the pupil.

Of the many meditation schools and yoga technologies that exist, the most widely known in the West are Zen Buddhism and Transcendental Meditation. Zen Buddhism has developed a methodology, the so-called "koan," by which students are confronted with their attachment to discursive reasoning. Essential to the koan is paradox, i. e., that which is "beyond" (Gk., *para*) "thinking" (Gk., *dokein*), and transcends the logical or conceptual. Since the koan eludes solution by means of reasoning, it requires an quantum leap to another level of comprehension beyond the logical contradictions and the dualistic splits inherent in language. The koan makes the experience of paradox and the infinite regress in discursive thought palpable. Eventually the student begins to see things as they are - undistorted by desires and preconceptions, and free from the tyranny of automatic trains of thought.

The Transcendental Meditation Technique (TM) employs a different method. It initially teaches a form of deep relaxation that uses a simple mantra (a sound sequence that is repeated over and over) and an injunction to return to the mantra whenever the mind wanders. TM provides the beginning student with a consistent experience of the egolessness and stillness of

the transcendental state of mind. Advanced techniques are available for the student who wishes to progress deeper on the TM path.

Alexander (1990) was an enthusiastic Western teacher and proponent of the benefits and transformational power of Transcendental Meditation. As mentioned at the beginning of this inquiry, he first made me aware of the difference between the monumental shifts in mode of processing and the shifts of perspective from stage to stage within the discursive mode. When the child begins to speak, the representational, discursive, personal, or mental self is born out of the sense-dominated body-self. Although we completely forget, learning to speak is a laborious, long-term endeavor that requires extensive modeling and instruction by others. The second major shift, the leap from the personal to the transcendent tier, or from the language-mediated, discursive mode of processing to a stable, postrepresentational, immediate apperception of reality, is rarely achieved before mature adulthood. In light of this observation, I began to wonder how much further the parallels between acquiring language and postsymbolic understanding can be drawn. What if both symbolic and postsymbolic mode of processing were innate potentialities that are dependent on extensive training and conditioning in the respective modes of apperception to become fully manifested? I propose that we consider the following at least as a hypothesis worth considering:

Proposition 2:

Similar to the acquisition of language, ordinary people require systematic instruction and careful guidance by qualified teachers as well as regular, long-term practice to become permanently established in higher states of consciousness. Unlike the automatic acquisition of language, however, competence in ego-transcendent modes of reality perception requires a seeker's conscious devotion to a specific spiritual path and in many cases the surrender to a guru.

According to Alexander's research (Alexander, 1990, 1994), regular practice of Transcendental Meditation, for instance, moves the student systematically upward through the levels of mind until consciousness stabilizes in the fourth, transcendental tier. Whether and to what degree individuals at conventional ego stages can be grounded in these higher consciousness states has not yet been sufficiently explored.

Some TM advocates argue that ego stage is not decisive in the achievement of stable transcendent consciousness. Alexander also suggested that, according to Vedic science, people who have established themselves in the higher states of consciousness need not necessarily be fully developed in the personal realm. Consistent access will inevitably enhance and accelerate growth along the personal developmental trajectory. On the other hand, without rejecting such a possibility, Alexander has also concurred with my postulate that, in general, (a) one's current ego stage will color one's experience, expression, and understanding of the higher consciousness stages, and (b) that those most advanced in ego development are more emotionally and cognitively ready to follow a spiritual path. They are more likely to have a healthy skepticism towards received knowledge while they have faith that such knowledge can be gained and internally verified. They are also aware of how easy it is to fool oneself regarding one's achievement of ego-transcendence while they trust that long-term regular spiritual practice, under expert guidance, can deliver one from one's illusions.

CONCLUSION

Genuine, lasting ego transcendence is not the rule for ordinary folks given the current, everyday cultural context. Consistent, unflinching, open attention to one's habits of mind and heart can bring about insights into the processes of meaning making as well as more frequent contact with transpersonal states of consciousness. Although individuals at the Construct-aware and the Unitive ego stages have deconstructed the earlier illusion of the separateness of knower and known, they are still mostly grounded in the symbolically-mediated way of knowing. For permanent development to the postsymbolic higher stages of consciousness to occur, people seem to need conditioning and consistent immersion similar in kind, duration, and intensity as that which was necessary to acquire the language habit.

The mandate for long-term practice runs counter to many of the practices of the contemporary New Age enterprise. There, we find personalities who guide and teach others in transpersonal matters based on their own idiosyncratic experiences and partial understanding of mystical paths or esoteric knowledge. Such teachings are often delivered in brief workshops or published in self-help books. Consumers can follow their own fancy and predilections for personal growth experiences by choosing from a smorgasbord of spiritual offerings, growth modalities, "sacred" objects, and ritual practices. And yet, on the whole, I see this widespread yearning for something greater than the self, something beyond the de-spirited rational approach, as a hopeful sign for society. The sheer number of people who are aware of the unintended threats to survival that are the legacy of our unbridled enthusiasm for the technological advances of modern science, can become a force in changing the tide towards a more integrated view of human nature and more mindful, responsible choices. Although the path to enlightenment may demand dedication beyond the capacity of many seekers, there is no reason to despair. The ordinary, personal plane of action offers human beings myriad opportunities to grow in tolerance, love, wisdom, and depth of understanding.

Whatever wisdom individuals achieve on their own, through ego development and self-actualization in the personal realm, is different from the transformations in consciousness that are possible at the fourth tier of development and constitute enlightenment. Contemporary personal wisdom results from an awareness of the profound limits of what we can know and the hubris of the scientific modern stance in relying on rationality as the sole arbiter in matters of consciousness. Instead, personal wisdom allows one to regard with compassion humanity's struggle for meaning and its evolving, but persistent quest for greater knowledge and insight about itself and its place in the universe.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am very grateful to Joel Funk, Carol Hoare, and Mel Miller for their careful reading and insightful comments on earlier drafts of this article. It is dedicated to the memory of my dear friend, spiritual advisor, and research colleague Skip Alexander, and reflects his many influences on my life.

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² An earlier version of this paper was presented in October of 1998 at a conference called *What is the Psychology of the New Millennium: On Consciousness and The Future of Psychology*. It was organized by the Maharishi University of Management in Fairfield, Iowa,

in memoriam of Skip Alexander. It brought together scholars from many academic disciplines to expand and deepen the interdisciplinary dialogue and connections that Skip had cultivated with his inimitable charm and deep conviction.

³ I named this phenomenon, the language habit, in part to contrast it with Pinker's *The Language Instinct* (1995). Pinker mobilizes an arsenal of research to show that the propensity for language and language acquisition is hardwired in human beings. However, the language habit becomes such a powerful human dimension because it is not only innate, but habituated and constantly reinforced throughout our lives. Thus, in my view, culture and conditioning play as important a role as evolutionary biology in shaping who we are.

⁴ In earlier publications, I have also used the terms "Integrated" and "Universal" (1990, 1994) to label the highest stage measurable with the SCT. Maslow (1971) coined the term "unitive" for people who have the ability to: "... simultaneously perceive in the fact – the is—its particularity, and its universality. To see it simultaneously as here and now, and yet as eternal" (p. 111). Since unitive ability is a significant marker for the highest ego stage, I am now using this term instead.

⁵ I reported that 9% of SCTs (N = 1996) (Cook-Greuter, 1990) were scored at the postconventional tier. Kegan (1994 p. 192) reported from 0% to 10% postconventional scores based on 13 studies (N= 342) using the Subject/Object Interview (Lahey et al., 1988).

⁶ Wilber (1999) outlines many more ways in which the fourth tier has been parsed in various spiritual traditions East and West. He mentions Brown and Engler's (1978) cross-cultural studies that found similarities that suggest an "underlying common invariant sequence of stages, despite vast cultural and linguistic differences as well as style of practice." In addition, Wilber has given the most comprehensive, lucid and all-embracing analysis of human affairs from an evolving consciousness perspective and has now contributed to social science a new book *Integral Psychology* (in press) that addresses and attempts to integrate past and current advances and controversies in the sciences regarding the quest for knowledge and enlightenment.

⁷ Paper presented at the second symposium of the Society for Research in Adult Development, Cambridge, MA.

⁸ By ego transcendence, I mean the disidentification with the representational or personality self not the synthetic function of the ego, which likely continues as noted by Funk, 1994, and Cook-Greuter 1994.

⁹ I am not saying here that all contact with the transcendent realm is blissful, only that flow states tend to be so, and thus, beckon the traveler to yearn for more such experiences. The process of dismantling the vestiges of the conditional self can also be harrowing.

¹⁰ "Man" in this expression should be read as encompassing men and women.

¹¹ In the cheerful words of Michael Sky "We are all bozos on the same bus" (verbal communication, 1985).

¹² In addition, I suggest that the lower a person's ego stage, the more likely he or she is to adapt or distort transpersonal experiences to fit into their existing mental model of reality.

¹³ “Unfreezing” of the deeply entrenched, discursive mode of knowing or “liberating” oneself from the exclusive dominion of the rational mind are goals in the preparatory stages of many forms of meditation.

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