

**Moments of Insight:
Sudden Change in Ego Development**

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B.A. Communication; B.A. Psychology (Hons)

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Psychology, Macquarie University
30 June, 2003

This work has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.

Acknowledgements

My greatest debt of thanks is to my supervisor Dr. Doris McIlwain, whose vast intellect, enthusiasm and warmth remain a constant source of inspiration. Without her ability to hold open possibilities, this particular thesis would never have come to fruition.

Thanks also to Dr. Daphne Hewson for introducing me to a love of qualitative research and to Dr. Julie Fitness for being an always comforting “can-do” presence.

I thank all 80 participants in the study for giving so much of themselves in their stories of moments of insight. Most particularly, I am deeply indebted to the 15 interview participants, who provided valuable feedback on their story analyses and were willing to put up with changes in plan. My one great regret is that all their stories were not able to feature as much as I had originally hoped.

Thanks also to the 6 questionnaire participants who gave of their time a second time over for no reward, for the sake of the “before versus after” study.

Finally, thanks to Peter, for taking over the housework in the final stages and for cheerfully putting up with me studying for a decade, instead of 3 years.

Funding from the Macquarie University Postgraduate Research Fund is gratefully acknowledged for covering costs of secretarial assistance in transcribing interviews.

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“Over time the mature person evolves the ability to tolerate and to hold strong emotion in consciousness. He or she learns to differentiate, to modulate, but never to ignore the passions.”

(Vaillant, 2002, p. 256)

Abstract

Moments of insight – dramatic shifts in perspective in how a person sees him or herself or the world – may provide us with glimpses of how accelerated change might happen in Loevinger’s (1976) stages of ego development. Identifying moments of insight as potentially being structural phenomena, and the marrying of them into ego development theory is original to this thesis.

Ego development proceeds in successive stages that Loevinger described as “self-paradigms”, somewhat like Kuhn’s (1962) view of paradigms. If this metaphor holds, then at least sometimes, people would be expected to experience sudden, revolutionary paradigm-style changes in their stage of ego development. However only one substantial theory exists as to how stage-changes happen, and that is a theory of gradual change (Kegan, 1979), which is likely the most common form of change. A theory of sudden, revolutionary, paradigm-style change, then, would seem to address a theoretical gap in the concept of how ego development proceeds. This thesis seeks to address that gap.

A total of 80 participants were tested in regard to their ego development level and a range of secondary measures, and invited to tell stories of their moments of insight: 15 through the medium of interviews (3 of whom became “case studies” and a fourth, a “counter example”), while 65 wrote their stories in questionnaires.

Analysis was conducted through theoretical argument, through qualitative analysis backed by evidence from story data, and by quantitative analysis of the common themes apparent in the moment of insight stories. Criteria were developed from the data for identifying

prototypical examples of moment of insight stories, and criteria for judging ego level change in transcripts were Loevinger's (1976) empirically derived stage descriptions.

It was shown that these prototypical experiences were those most readily linked with, and potentially indicative of the connection between moments of insight and ego level advancement. The counter example case study also powerfully revealed the conflict felt, even at a high ego level, when there is no "crystallisation of integration" afforded by a moment of insight experience.

The evidence suggests that moments of insight may indeed be times of sudden ego development change.