Differential Language Use at the Highest Stages of Ego Development

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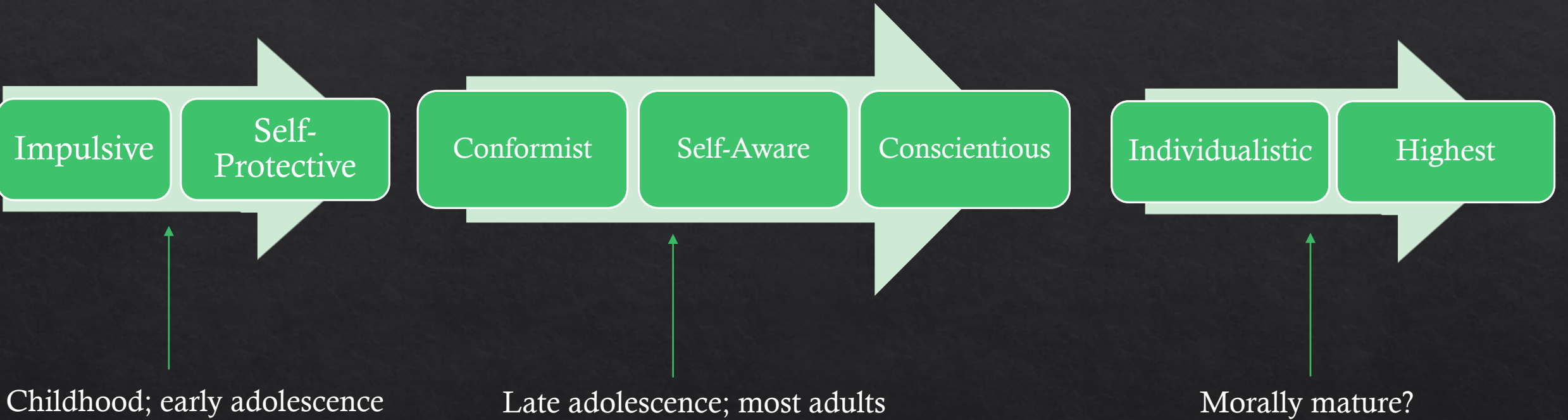
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What is Ego Development?

◈ A well-validated personality construct (Loevinger, 1979)

  ◇ Developmental sequence

  ◇ Language use as indicative of personality

  ◇ Linked to IQ, moral reasoning, positive relationships

◈ Measured using the Washington University Sentence Completion Test (WUSCT)

Developmental Stages

| Impulsive | Self-Protective | | Conformist | Self-Aware | Conscientious | | Individualistic | Highest |

Childhood; early adolescence

Late adolescence; most adults

Morally mature?

The WUSCT

- Participants respond by completing a sentence

- "Rules are…"

- "A girl has a right to…"

- "My conscience bothers me if…"

- Responses for each stem coded with a score of 2 (*Impulsive)* to 9 (*Integrated)*
  - High scores = high ego development

"Rules Are..."

"rules" "stupid"

"made to be broken" "acceptable when commonly agreed upon"

"necessary, but so are exceptions" "to provide structure within which freedom abides"

Childhood; early adolescence

Late adolescence; most adults

Morally mature?

Theoretically…

- Conceptual complexity = higher ego level
  - More words per response = higher ego level
  - Bigger words in a given response = higher ego level

- Qualitative data suggests this may be true (Hy & Loevinger, 1996)

- *Need for empirical, expanded sample*

Our Study

Data	Excluded language features	*Primary Research Questions*	Analyses
• Exemplar data (Hy & Loevinger, 1996) • Various empirical data sets (1989-2014) • Over 34,000 responses • Over 167,000 words	• Punctuation • "Stop" words (e.g., "and", "but")	• *Are correlations higher between adjacent than non-adjacent stages?* • *Are words at higher stages consistent with greater cognitive complexity?*	• <u>Quantitative:</u> Correlations between ego levels in word use • <u>Qualitative:</u> Pull out the 25 words with the greatest relative frequency at a given stage compared to the entire sample

The Data

Ego Level	No. of Responses		No. of Total Words	
	Exemplar Data	**Empirical Data**	**All**	**Frequently Occurring (n > 5)**
Impulsive	141	187	845 *(≈2.57 words per response)*	775
Self-Protective	418	1045	4655	4237
Conformist	1044	6747	25434	24151
Self-Aware	2180	9933	54543 *(≈4.50 words per response)*	51596
Conscientious	2364	7081	55703	52023
Individualistic	1106	1407	20235	18679
Highest	333	159	5902 *(≈11.99 words per response)*	5342
All Stages	7586	26559	167325	156811

Correlations Among Adjacent Levels in Word Use

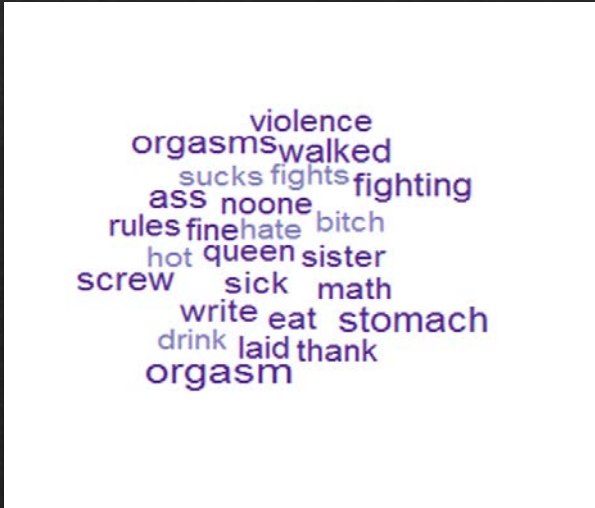|	Impulsive	Self-Protective	Conformist	Self-Aware	Conscientious	Individualistic	Highest
Impulsive	--	.80	.63	.67	.65	.59	.53
Self-Protective		--	.77	.80	.79	.73	.68
Conformist			--	.91	.87	.80	.74
Self-Aware				--	.97	.93	.96
Conscientious					--	.96	.91
Individualistic						--	.95
Highest							--

Decreasing similarity between non-adjacent stages. *Ego development occurs in a predictably ordered sequence.*

Exception: Conformist stage more similar to subsequent non-adjacent stages than previous adjacent stage. *May indicate qualitative "leap" in development.*
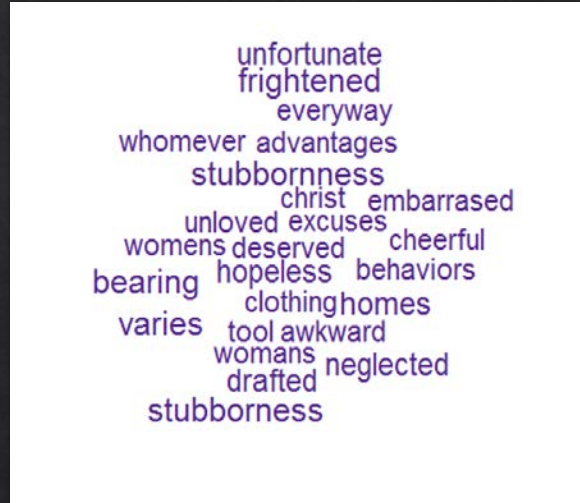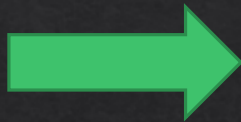
Word Use: Qualitative Differences

◈ Examining the 25 most common words at each stage (relative to the entire sample)

◈ Examining ten "emergent" and "less frequent" words at each stages (relative to adjacent stages)

◈ *Do people at different stages use different words?*

Comparing the Stages

Impulsive Stage Themes:

- Sex

- Aggression

- Consumption

Self-Aware Stage Themes:

- Introspection

- Doubt

- Questioning of a just world

Highest Stages Themes:

- Identity

- Perspective-taking

- Concern for equality

Why We Care

- WUSCT stems provide limited (and maybe outdated) context for language
  - "A woman's place…"
  - "A girls has a right to…"
  - "When they talked about sex…"

- BUT, word use is measurable outside the context of the WUSCT!!
  - Autobiographies?
  - Personal correspondence?
  - **Social media posts!!!**

Next Steps

Use *language*, rather than the WUSCT to predict ego development

→

Examine the relationships between language, morality, and personality

Compare with words used outside the context of the WUSCT

Develop a "dictionary" of words used at each stage

A Potential Application…

"One of the problems when you become successful is that jealousy and envy inevitably follow. There are people—I categorize them as life's losers—who get their sense of accomplishment and achievement from trying to stop others. As far as I'm concerned, if they had any real ability they wouldn't be fighting me, they'd be doing something constructive themselves."

"I stopped thinking and slipped into can't: the point at which the denunciations of capitalism or American imperialism came too easily, and the freedom from the constraints of monogamy or religion was proclaimed without fully understanding the value of such constraints, and the role of victim was too readily embraced as a means of shedding responsibility, or asserting entitlement, or claiming moral superiority over those not so victimized."