



Quiet Ego Exploration: Implications for Future Aspirations and Life Narratives in Emerging Adulthood

Anara Adylbekova¹, Minh Ngoc Nguyen¹, Cade Mansfield¹, & Leigh Shaw²

Department of Psychology, Franklin & Marshall College¹ & Psychological Sciences Department, Weber State University²



Introduction

Quiet Ego

- Quiet Ego (QE) is a self-identity construct that fosters self-awareness, balance, and compassion, promoting a less defensive, growth-oriented approach to oneself and others (Wayment et al., 2015).
- Research suggests that QE is associated with eudaimonic well-being, emphasizing personal growth and meaningful relationships over external rewards (Bauer & Wayment, 2018).

Future Aspiration

- Aspirations serve as a window into an individual’s motivational framework, future expectations, and pathways toward well-being.
- Intrinsic (e.g., personal growth, meaningful relationships) & Extrinsic Aspirations (e.g., wealth, fame).
- Prioritizing extrinsic aspirations has been found to negatively correlate with future well-being (Kasser et al., 2014) → potential psychological costs of materialistic goals.

Quiet Ego and Positive Future Expectations

- Some research suggests QE serves as a mediator in cultivating positive future outlooks (Dincer & Akbulut Kılıçoğlu, 2023) → potential association between QE and positive future expectations.
- However, there has been little empirical evidence to explain this relationship, partially because most research on QE uses self-reports, which limits our understanding.

Narrative

- Life stories shape self-concept and psychological development (McAdams, 2001).
- Future narratives assess how individuals frame their future selves. For the current study, we are interested in how agency and communion themes are expressed in future script narratives.
 - Agency → The extent to which individuals express control and goal-setting (McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2020).
 - Communion → The degree to which individuals prioritize social connection (Pals, 2006).

Research Objectives

- This study explores how QE is associated with differences in self-reported future aspirations, aspects of future narratives, namely agency and communion themes and linguistic markers for emotional tone.
- Including future life script narratives is especially useful because it will allow us to examine how young adults construct meaning about their future selves.

Hypothesis

1. QE scores will positively correlate with intrinsic aspirations.
2. QE scores will negatively correlate with extrinsic aspirations but with lower magnitude.
3. Individuals with higher QE scores will demonstrate greater agency and communion in their future life scripts.

Methods

Participants

126 young adults ($M = 19.83$ year, $SD = 3.31$, 65.9% = Female, 53.7 = White, 13 = Other/Multiple ethnicities, 12.2 = Latino/a/x/Hispanic, 11.4 = Asian American/ Pacific Islander, 7.3 = Black African American, 1.6 = Not prefer to say, 0.8 = Middle Eastern/ Arab American) were recruited from Weber State University and Franklin and Marshall College and were compensated for their participation.

Procedure & Measures

All participants provided consent and completed a battery of measures in a Qualtrics including the Quiet Ego Scale (Wayment et al., 2015, $\alpha = .75$).

The Aspirations Index assessed intrinsic (Kasser & Ryan, 1996; e.g., “To grow and learn new things”, $\alpha = .68$) and extrinsic life goals (e.g., “To be a very wealthy person”, $\alpha = .84$).

After completing self-report measures participants engaged in the Future Life Script task, where they narrated the “next chapter” of their life, describing anticipated meaningful goals or events.

Coding

Narratives were coded for agency and communion themes referring to the frameworks developed by Adler, Skalina, & McAdams (2008) and McAdams’ Coding Manual (2002). We systematically identified and coded individual phrases within each narrative that expressed distinct agentic (e.g., autonomy, self-mastery) or communal (e.g., connection, belonging) themes. These coded phrases were then categorized into five agency and five communion categories based on thematic similarity. For analysis, we used the numbers of distinct agentic and communion themes coded from each narrative. To assess emotional tone, we used LIWC-22 (Pennebaker, 2022).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Category	M	SD	Range
QE	4.96	.72	3.14 – 6.86
Intrinsic Aspirations	6.22	.68	3.57 – 7.00
Extrinsic Aspirations	4.16	1.23	1.25 – 6.88
Count of Agency Themes	1.68	.79	0-5
Count of Communion Themes	.79	.84	0-3

Hypothesis:

1. QE is positively correlated with intrinsic aspirations ($r = .52$, $p < .001$)
2. QE is negatively correlated with extrinsic aspirations with lower magnitude ($r = -.23$, $p = .01$)
3. There was no relationship between QE and the number of agency themes ($r = -.8$, $p = .39$), there is trend towards significance between QE and number of communion themes ($r = .15$, $p = .09$)

Exploratory Question:

QE is positively correlated with emotional tone ($r = .19$, $p = .05$)

Results of Narrative Coding

Communion Theme	n	%	Agency Theme	n	%
Family	24	19.83	Professional Achievement	94	77.69
Generativity	15	12.40	General Goal	14	11.57
Romantic Relationship	22	18.18	Deliberation	20	16.53
Non-romantic relationships	23	19.01	Self-expansion	55	45.46
Social Support	5	4.13	Impact	8	6.61
Total narratives	121				

Narrative Example

High Agency and High Communion

“I will be going to law school and passing the bar. This will allow me to pursue a career as a prosecutor hopefully specializing in violence against women. This is important to me because I want the power to keep myself and other women safe while punishing the systems and the people that hurt us. I want to live in a major city with maybe some roommates or friends. I don't want to have to rely on people but rather have the choice to support each other. Life should be one big sleepover where you have fun with your friends and do what you want.”

Compromised Agency and Little Communion

“In the next chapter of my life I think I will be still living at my parents house doing a menial job while I try respark the creativity I once had as a youth. I would like to think I am working on a script or slowly becoming famous enough to be asked to professional events, maybe my podcast that I never do has really took off. Prob not. I have no drive and am continously (sic) put down when i (sic) try to get up. Realistically I will not be doing something I like but I hope it gives me a lot of money.”

Discussion

Intrinsic Aspirations

- QE’s correlation with intrinsic aspirations supports its hypothesized role in fostering a mature identity integrating individual fulfillment with social concerns.

Extrinsic Aspirations

- QE’s weak negative correlation with materialistic goals supports the idea that QE represents a balanced self-concept rather than one of complete self-denial (Wayment et al., 2015).

Narrative

- Individuals who scored higher on Quiet Ego may be more likely to construct future stories emphasizing connection and relational fulfillment.
- This qualitative insight further reinforces the correlation between QE and self-reported intrinsic aspirations.
- This aligns with research showing QE fosters prosocial values and a sense of interconnectedness (Bauer & Wayment, 2008).

Limitations

- Self-reports for Quiet Ego might be subjected to each participant’s biases in answering.
- Our coding might not reflect all the nuances in the narratives.
- The future life script prompt asking participants to describe a personally significant goal or event may unintentionally prime them to think in terms of agency, potentially limiting the expression of communion.
- The majority of our participants are college students so education comes up frequently in our narratives Were we to conduct this research with people from more varied background, we might be able to establish a more expansive list of agency themes.

Future Directions

- Our findings strengthen the case for QE as a developmental construct that guides young adults toward self-transcendent aspirations and life goals centered on meaningful connection rather than self-enhancement. Future research could further explore how QE influences goal-setting over time, particularly in the context of major life transitions.
- Although we found a correlation between QE and emotional tone, emotional tone was calculated by LIWC by counting the positive/negative words which provides an interesting perspective but may not be equivalent to a concrete representation of emotional tone of a narrative. Future research could attempt to address this by coding emotional tone at the narrative level.
- We need a more comprehensive way of measuring Quiet Ego that finely illuminates distinctions between people with highly developed Quiet Ego and people with less developed Quiet Ego.

Conclusion

Our findings supports the notion that QE reflects a mature form of identity development, wherein individuals integrate self-interest with broader prosocial concerns. Higher QE scores align with intrinsic aspirations, integrating personal growth with social connection. Our qualitative data suggests that those with higher QE are more likely to construct stories around communion themes, further solidifying this correlation we found between QE and self-report intrinsic aspirations. Additionally, QE’s weak negative correlation with extrinsic aspirations suggests that a quiet ego does not necessarily reject material success but rather approaches it with less self-centered perspective. There was no correlation between QE and agency themes from our narrative coding which supports this characterization.

References

- Dincer, D., & Akbulut Kılıçoğlu, N. (2023). The Direct and Indirect Effects of Positive Future Expectations on Psychological Well-Being of College Students: Quiet Ego as A Mediator. *Journal of Human and Social Sciences*, 6(Education Special Issue), 185-207. <https://doi.org/10.53048/johass.1358124>
- Kasser, T., Rosenblum, K. L., Sameroff, A. J., Deci, E. L., Niemiec, C. P., Ryan, R. M., Arnsdóttir, O., Bond, R., Dittmar, H., Dungan, N., & Hawks, S. (2014). Changes in materialism, changes in psychological well-being: Evidence from three longitudinal studies and an intervention experiment. *Motivation and Emotion*, 38(1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-013-9371-4>
- Kasser, T., & Ryan, R. M. (1996). Further Examining the American Dream: Differential Correlates of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Goals. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 22(3), 280-287. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167296223006>
- McAdams, D. P. (2002). Coding Autobiographical Episodes for Themes of Agency and Communion.
- McLean, K. C., Syed, M., Pasupathi, M., Adler, J. M., Dunlap, W. L., Drustrip, D., Fivush, R., Graci, M. E., Lilgendahl, J. P., Lodi-Smith, J., McAdams, D. P., & McCoy, T. P. (2020). The empirical structure of narrative identity: The initial Big Three. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 119(4), 920–944. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000247>
- Pennebaker, J. W. (2022). Computer-based language analysis as a paradigm shift. In M. Dehghani & R. L. Boyd (Eds.), *Handbook of language analysis in psychology* (pp. 576–587). The Guilford Press.
- Wayment, H. A., & Bauer, J. J. (2018). The quiet ego: Motives for self-other balance and growth in relation to well-being. *Journal of Happiness Studies: An Interdisciplinary Forum on Subjective Well-Being*, 19(3), 881–896. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-017-9848-z>
- Wayment, H. A., Bauer, J. J., & Sylaska, K. (2015). The Quiet Ego Scale: Measuring compassionate self-identity. *Journal of Happiness Studies: An Interdisciplinary Forum on Subjective Well-Being*, 16(4), 999–1033. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-014-9546-z>