

What iConscious Stages Measure — Construct Definition and Validation Plan

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Companion to the one-page - *Why iConscious* - for research partners, collaborators, and VCs.

In Brief

iConscious Stages describe the Center of Identity: what we identify with, and what we are defending against. Complexity and identity grow together through the early stages of development; iConscious stages strongly correspond conceptually to validated models of meaning-making such as Cook-Greuter and Kegan -- up through Stage 5, and partially at Stage 6. They are defined and assessed differently, and that correspondence is a prediction we can test. Beyond Stage 6, the models intentionally diverge. Meaning-making (rare and thinly evidenced) does keep growing more complex in the next few later stages. iConscious stages, meanwhile, track something else: the dissolution of identity with release of resistance and control, and eventually identification with awareness itself. iConscious' five Domains, similar to Wilber's lines of development, show how each aspect of experience manifests differently at each stage, because different parts of us evolve at different rates. The Domains are not yet validated; that's a next phase of research.

Summary

Working definition: iConscious stages describe the **Center of Identity**: what a person identifies with, and what they are defending against.

The Center of Identity is the model's spine; hence they are the main Stage headers. Its two faces — what "I" includes and what "I" defends against — are tracked by the stage identity statements. Further threads move with it: dominant need, control, relationship to duality, relational orientation, integration of conditioning, uniqueness, and embodiment. Across the fourteen stages these describe one arc; the *Arc of Identity*: the separate self is built, loosened, disidentified from, reintegrated, and finally dissolved. In language, each stage shows up through three markers: who "I" am, what I am reaching for, and what I am protecting against.

This is a different construct from developmental altitude. The *Measuring Altitude* white paper (Dempsey, 2026) shows that canonical stage models of meaning-making share one underlying dimension, hierarchical complexity, and anchors Wilber's colors to the Lectical scale. That said, complexity and identity grow together through the early stages (1-5+), so iConscious closely lines up with that dimension through Stage 5 and partially at Stage 6. Beyond Stage 6, iConscious mostly measures what a person no longer needs to hold — resistance, control, self-reference, either/or splitting — *rather than what they can construct*, so a different pattern is predicted.

That yields a testable validation plan: convergence with complexity and ego measures closely through Stage 5 and partially at Stage 6, divergence beyond Stage 6, stage-specific shifts on established measures of each thread, and a test of whether iConscious predicts outcomes (stages 7+) such as wellbeing and psychological flexibility beyond what the validated scales already predict.

A note on terminology

In iConscious, **consciousness** refers to identification with awareness itself, and a stage is defined by the Center of Identity: what a person identifies with and what they are defending against. It is not defined by the structure of meaning-making. The word "consciousness" is used in at least three senses across the developmental literature:

Usage	What "consciousness" means	What it tracks
Kegan, <i>orders of consciousness</i>	The organizing principle of how a person knows: what they are subject to versus what they can take as object	Structure of meaning-making; aligns with complexity measures. Kegan's later work mostly says "orders of mind"
Wilber, integral theory	Awareness, which has both structures (altitude) and states	Two separate axes: structure-stages and state-stages
iConscious, Consciousness domain	Identification with awareness itself, from fusion with needs to witness awareness and beyond	Center of Identity relative to awareness; closest to the contemplative sense

When reviewers refer to "validated stages of consciousness," the validated models use the word in Kegan's sense – of which he later changed to "orders of mind". iConscious shares the word, not the construct: it measures something adjacent to these models rather than competing with them on their own ground.

The spine: Center of Identity

Every stage is anchored by its Center of Identity, expressed as an identity statement. The book's Stage Overviews give one for each of Stages 1–12 (for example, "I'm a separate person" at Stage 2, "I'm sometimes infinite, sometimes finite" at Stage 8) and none from Stage 13, because the authors hold that a personally constructed self is no longer needed there. The authors describe the model as focused on how identity shifts and how those shifts change human needs, capacities, and development in every domain.

The three Phases are named for the person's relationship to separation itself: **Dual** (Stages 1–8), **Unified** (9–12) and **Singular** (13–14). The book describes them as three fundamentally different orientations to self, others, and life.

Identity and defense across Stages 1–6

The Center of Identity has two faces, and they move differently. What a person identifies with does not widen steadily: it moves from the body (1) to the separate self (2), the group (3), the individual achiever (4), all people (5) and all parts of oneself, including shadow (6). What a person defends against shrinks steadily:

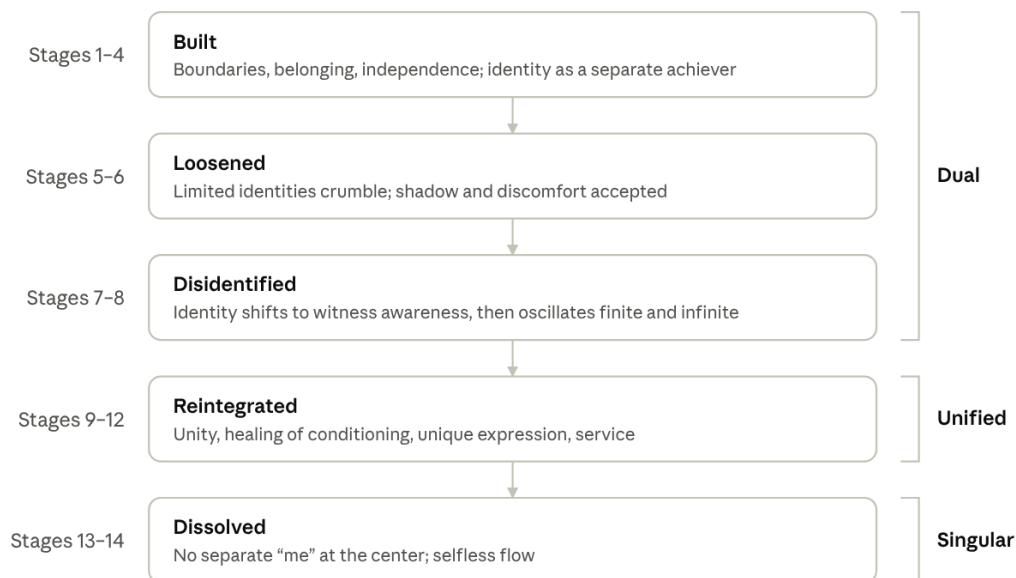
Stage	Embraces	Rejects or defends against
1 Survival	The pleasant	The unpleasant, instinctively

Stage	Embraces	Rejects or defends against
2 Self-Centric	What serves "me"	What threatens "me"
3 Conforming	What others approve	What risks disapproval
4 Rational Striving	Pain that serves goals	Discomfort without payoff
5 Equality Harmony	Connection and depth, with some pain for those ends	Disharmony and hierarchy
6 Inclusive	Begins accepting pain and pleasure alike	The limits of rejecting anything

Complexity and identity grow together through these stages — closely through Stage 5, partially at Stage 6 — which is the convergence the validation plan predicts. The difference is the question asked: meaning-making models ask how a person constructs their world; iConscious asks what they identify with and what they are defending against.

The arc of the separate self

The separate self is built, then progressively released



Arc of the separate self · 5 movements across 3 Phases

Read together, the threads describe one movement: the separate self is constructed through Stage 6, then progressively released.

Relation to developmental altitude: the *Measuring Altitude* findings

Dempsey (Institute of Applied Metatheory, June 2026) scored more than 540 original interview performances from five canonical stage models with the Lectical Assessment System, a calibrated, domain-general measure of hierarchical complexity of meaning-making. Stage assignments in every model tracked this complexity:

Model	n	Correlation with Lectical score
Moral development (Kohlberg, Walker)	403	$r = .85$
Evaluative reasoning (Armon)	61	$r = .82$
Faith development (Fowler)	54	$\rho = .72$
Ego development (Loevinger, Cook-Greuter)	20	$\rho = .60$
Orders of consciousness (Kegan)	5	consistent trend; illustrative only

Equivalent stages across models landed at equivalent scores, which let the paper anchor Wilber's colors: Magenta near 875, Red 950, Amber 1025, Orange 1100, Green 1175, Teal 1200 and Turquoise 1250.

What the paper establishes that matters here

- **Altitude is complexity.** The paper concludes that altitude is not an occult property of consciousness, but the measured level of hierarchical organization a person brings to meaning-making tasks. It does not claim altitude is unrelated to consciousness; Wilber defines altitude as the complexity *available to* consciousness.
- **Complexity is not the whole story.** It explains roughly 72% of variance in moral stage, leaving room for content, affect and context.
- **Description-matching is unreliable.** Integral charts aligned stages whose descriptions sounded alike; the paper notes two such descriptions can sit at quite different complexity levels. That caution applies to any iConscious crosswalk built the same way, including the iConscious' own comparison chart.
- **Upper levels are thin.** There were no Kohlberg Stage 6 interviews, no scored Kegan fifth-order texts, and one Universalizing faith case, so the Teal and Turquoise anchors carry wider error.

What this implies for iConscious

iConscious Stage	Nearest altitude	Predicted relation to complexity
2 Self-Centric	Magenta to Red (875–950)	Converges
3 Conforming	Amber (1025)	Converges
4 Rational Striving	Orange (1100)	Converges

iConscious Stage	Nearest altitude	Predicted relation to complexity
5 Equality Harmony	Green (1175)	Converges
6 Inclusive	Teal (1200), partial	Weakening
7 and above	None	Not defined by complexity; a floor is possible, not a rise

Comparatively through Stage 5, and partially at Stage 6, iConscious and Wilber's Altitude describe largely the same territory. Beyond Stage 6, meaning-making does keep growing more complex, but those later stages are rare and thinly evidenced as noted previously. The iConscious threads there measure release — of identity, resistance, control, self-reference and either/or splitting — which a complexity scale is not built to detect. Whether higher stages require a minimum level of complexity is an open question.

The need for Domains

What happens when Domains don't evolve together? Someone might show stable witness identity (Stage 7) while still controlling outcomes heavily (a Stage 4 pattern). The model's current answer has two parts: development proceeds separately in five Domains, and unmet needs leave "parts behind" as shadow. The current assessment scores all 5 Domains; showing various degrees of development in each Domain.

Validation plan

The plan answers two questions in turn. **Convergence** asks whether iConscious measures something real: where its theory overlaps with validated instruments, scores should rise together. **Divergence** asks whether it adds anything: where the theory says the constructs differ, iConscious should capture variation those instruments miss.

The central prediction. iConscious stage should correlate with the SCTi-MAP and Lectical scores closely through Stage 5 and partially at Stage 6, and diverge beyond it. If it does not diverge, the Center of Identity is not a new construct, and the program will have learned that honestly.

Thread	Established measure	Prediction
Complexity (comparison)	Lectical Assessment System	Rises with stage through 5; flattens from 6
Center of Identity	Ego development (WUSCT or MAP); Kegan's Subject-Object Interview	Converges closely through 5, partially at 6; plateaus above
Resistance to experience	Experiential avoidance (AAQ-II); Nonattachment Scale	Avoidance falls and nonattachment rises, most sharply from Stage 6

Thread	Established measure	Prediction
Disidentification	Decentering (Experiences Questionnaire); Nondual Awareness Dimensional Assessment (NADA)	Step increase from Stage 7
Self-transcendence	Self-Transcendence Scale	Rises across stages; already an exploratory correlate in Kairos I
Duality	Dialectical thinking (Basseches framework)	Rises from Stage 6, peaking around 8–9
Self-reference	First-person singular pronoun rate in conversation	Declines in later stages; can be read directly from Kairos transcripts

The decisive test. Compare people at the *same* Lectical score whom iConscious rates at different stages, for example 5 versus 7. If they also differ on decentering and nondual awareness, iConscious captures a dimension complexity does not. Divergence alone is not enough, because a meaningless rating would also fail to track complexity; the higher-stage ratings must be reliable and must predict these independent measures.

Incremental validity. This is the claim researchers weigh most. Does an iConscious score predict outcomes such as wellbeing, psychological flexibility (measured with the BEAQ or AAQ-II) or equanimity beyond what the SCTi-MAP or Lectical scores already predict? If it does, iConscious earns a place alongside the validated scales.

Study design and milestones. The program is preregistered and gated by milestones. Study 1 answers within 12 months whether the instrument works: whether its ratings are reliable, whether they show the predicted convergence and divergence, and whether they add predictive value. Each answer is decisive whichever way it comes out, and later studies proceed only on the strength of earlier results.

Practical requirements

- **Recruitment.** The Kairos I sample was concentrated at Stages 4–5. A validation study must deliberately recruit people at Stages 6 and above.
- **Scoring format.** The Lectical system is normally applied to interviews and written responses. Whether conversational transcripts can be scored needs confirming with Lectica.
- **Instrument versions.** The measures above exist and target roughly these constructs; final versions should be confirmed before preregistration. The pronoun-rate marker is a hypothesis, not an established measure of stage.

Evidence status and caveats

What exists for iConscious. Kairos I (preregistered) showed that AI stage ratings agree with expert human raters: $\kappa_w = 0.828$ (95% CI 0.670–0.985) on a 40-person out-of-sample test set, within one stage

90% of the time. Self-transcendence correlated with assessed stage in exploratory analyses. This establishes reliability, not construct validity, and the sample was concentrated at Stages 4–5 (likely a high percentage of population in the area).

What does not yet exist. No study has measured iConscious alongside ego-development, complexity or awareness instruments in the same people.

Upper stages. Stages 8–14 are structured hypotheses from decades of practice and historical zen stage descriptions, not established findings. The program begins to test them.

Caveats on the white paper (Dempsey; Institute of Applied Metatheory, June 2026).

- It is an institute white paper, not a peer-reviewed publication.
- The ego-development result rests on 20 people, using interviews as a stand-in for the sentence-completion test.
- The Kegan analysis uses 5 texts and is illustrative only.
- Green (1175) and Teal (1200) sit only a quarter-level apart, and the upper anchors carry wider error.

Sources

- *Approved Locations 12-23-25* (iConscious) — stage descriptions and Consciousness-domain Locations, Stages 1–14.
- *The Spectrum of Embrace*, v1.1 (iConscious).
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Appendix: Center of Identity across all 14 stages

Drawn from the *Approved Locations* stage summaries and the *Spectrum of Embrace*.

Phase	Stage	Center of Identity	"I am..."
Dual	1 Survival	The body and its immediate needs, not yet separate from	"I am this hunger, this comfort, this safety."

Phase	Stage	Center of Identity	"I am..."
		caregivers or surroundings	
	2 Self-Centric	Impulses and wants, held as a separate self that pushes against control	"I am what I want and feel."
	3 Conforming	The group: its roles, beliefs and belonging	"I am who we are."
	4 Rational Striving	One's own competence, achievements and independence	"I am what I accomplish and know."
	5 Equality Harmony	Shared ideals and connection with others	"I am my ideals and my connections."
	6 Inclusive	The whole authentic self, including shadow, as fixed identities loosen	"I am all of me, even what I hid."
	7 Awakening	Awareness itself: the spacious container in which experience appears	"I am the awareness noticing all this."
	8 Oscillating	Moves back and forth between the human self and limitless awareness	"I am this person... and I am awareness... both?"
Unified	9 Embodied Unity	One seamless reality, form and formless, landed in the body	"I am this body and everything, as one."
	10 Transforming	Unified being, while old duality-based conditioning surfaces to be healed	"I am wholeness, clearing what I'm not."
	11 Individuating	Unique essence, freed from family and cultural conditioning	"I am a unique expression of the whole."

Phase	Stage	Center of Identity	"I am..."
	12 Living Potential / Serving	Purpose in service of the whole, as the last of the separate self is surrendered	"I am what life gives through me."
Singular	13 Singular Realization	No center: life functioning without a separate "me"	"There's no 'I' here, just this."
	14 Flow	A node in universal intelligence; the personal and universal are one	"Life is living as this."

Two things stand out:

- **The center moves in a clear arc.** It starts in body, impulse, group and self. At Stage 7 it shifts to awareness. Stages 9–12 are an identity that includes everything. At 13–14 there's no center at all. The "Center of Identity" label holds up through 12. At 13–14 it describes the center dissolving, which works as long as the chart says so outright.
- **The Unified phase seems to echo the Dual phase at a higher level.** Stage 10's healing echoes Stage 6's facing of shadow, Stage 11's individuation echoes Stage 4's independence, and Stage 12's service echoes Stage 5's ideals, now without a separate self driving them.