

# A summary of the Constructive-Developmental Theory Of Robert Kegan<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

As the world grows more complex, those in organizations want their workforce to be able to handle complexity, ambiguity, etc. Coping well with such issues is not simply a *skill* anyone can acquire, however, but a way of living in the world. These ways of living in the world are not inborn, but rather are developed over time as we increase our capacity to take perspectives, view authority in new ways, and see shades of grey where we once saw only black and white. Just as it is vital for teachers of 6-year-olds to understand the developmentally related capacities of children at that age, it is vital for those who work with adults to understand the particular ways adults may make sense of the world. In an era marked by an effort (although not always successful) to understand individual differences, a person's current developmental capacity is a kind of diversity that is so hidden that almost no one recognizes it. Recognized or not, though, developmental capacity affects everything a person is able to think or do. Understanding adult development is a key feature in understanding and working with adults.

Robert Kegan's (1982, 1994) theory of adult development examines and describes the way humans grow and change over the course of their lives. This is a constructive-developmental theory because it is concerned both with the *construction* of an individual's understanding of reality and with the *development* of that construction to more complex levels over time. Kegan proposes five distinct stages—or “orders of mind”—through which people may develop. His theory is based on his ideas of “transformation” to qualitatively different stages of meaning making. Kegan explains that transformation is different than learning new information or skills. New information may add to the *things* a person knows, but *transformation* changes the *way* he or she knows those things. Transformation, according to Kegan, is about changing the very *form* of the meaning-making system—making it more complex, more able to deal with multiple demands and uncertainty. Transformation occurs when someone is newly able to step back and reflect on something and make decisions about it. For Kegan (1994), transformative learning happens when someone changes, “not just the way he behaves, not just the way he feels, but the way he knows—not just what he knows but the *way* he knows” (p. 17).

## Subject and Object

Of vital importance in Kegan's discussion of transformation is the distinction between that which is Subject and that which is Object.<sup>2</sup> Kegan asserts that aspects of our meaning constructing that are Subject are by definition experienced as invisible, simply a part of the self; these things cannot be seen because they are held internally. You generally cannot name things that are Subject, and you certainly cannot reflect upon them—that would require the ability to stand back and take a look at them. Kegan (1994) asserts, “We cannot be responsible for, in control of, or reflect upon that which is subject” (p. 32). People's unquestioned beliefs about the world are held as Subject by them. Because people

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<sup>1</sup> This is adapted from Berger (2002).

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this paper, I will use capital letters to distinguish words with a specific meaning in Kegan's theory. Because these words—like subject, object, particular numbers—have other meanings when used in other contexts, I hope that the capital letters signal their specific, theoretical meaning here.

assume those things to be obviously true about the world, they do not question their assumptions.

Object, on the other hand, is the opposite of Subject. Kegan (1994) writes, “We *have* object; we *are* subject” (p. 32). Things that are Object in our lives are “those elements of our knowing or organizing that we can reflect on, handle, look at, be responsible for, relate to each other, take control of, internalize, assimilate, or otherwise operate upon” (p. 32). Because of this, we can tell that “the element of knowing [when it is Object] is not the whole of us; it is distinct enough from us that we can do something with it” (p. 32). While all people necessarily have many parts of their worlds which are Subject, the part of development that Kegan is most concerned with involves the move of elements from Subject to Object. As you begin to take increasingly complex elements as Object, your world view becomes more complex because you can see and act upon more elements.

The most profound example of a move from Subject to Object is when gradually, over time, entire meaning-making systems move from Subject to Object. This shift means that what was once an unselfconscious lens through which the person viewed the world now becomes something that can be seen and reflected upon. This shift of entire systems from Subject to Object is what gives form to the five orders of mind in Kegan’s theory.

Kegan’s five orders of mind involve qualitatively different ways of constructing reality. Each order is a qualitative shift in meaning making and complexity from the order before it. Kegan explains that we do not give up what we have learned in a previous order; we move the elements of the earlier meaning-making system from Subject (where it was controlling us) to Object (where we have a new sense of control over the meaning-making system itself). In so doing, we transform, changing the actual form of our understanding of the world.

### **Caveats**

While this transformation increases our capacity to take perspective on a variety of things, and thus may increase our capacity to feel in control of our lives, there are three key things to remember when using Kegan’s theory as a lens through which to examine the world. First of all, Kegan’s theory looks at a single slice of what makes us human—a thing I call “self-complexity.” Self-complexity doesn’t deal with myriad aspects of even the internal human experience; it doesn’t obviously correlate with issues of intelligence, morality, psychological wellness. It never attempts to examine issues of class or culture or action in general. It is a lens through which to view a piece of human meaning-making that is nearly always hidden, but with its careful focus on that one thing, it relegates to the background much of what makes humans as complex and interesting as they are.

Secondly, while this is an unabashedly hierarchical model (Kegan uses numbers to describe the orders of mind), it is not simplistically so. The numbers describe a journey that all people are on. They imply that some ways of making meaning are not just *different* than but *more complex* than other ways. Yet it is vital to remember that while some people travel the path more quickly than others, development is a process, not a race. There are costs to movement just as there are costs to stillness; a person’s current place in the journey is a measure of the opportunities she has been given and which costs she has chosen to pay along the way.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember is that, while they become more complex with time, there is no order that is inherently *better* than any other order (just as a more complex idea is not necessarily more valuable than a simple one). People can be kind or unkind, just or unjust, moral or immoral at any of these orders, so it is impossible to

measure a person's worth by looking at his or her order of mind. The key reason for understanding this journey is not to examine the self-complexity of individuals for the sake of labeling them or putting them into a restrictive box, but to be able to see the ways that the experiences people have might be more supportive of their current meaning-making system and also of their growth. Using this theory also allows us to examine the *fit* between people's capacities and the demands made upon them. Kegan (1994) explains that when people do not have the capacity to meet the demands in their lives, they may feel unhappy, undervalued, and "in over their heads."

While these caveats are important things to remember about the limitations of constructive-developmental theory, there are some points of criticism that people sometimes have that are actually less about inherent limitations of the theory and more about limitations to people's understanding of the theory. Kegan's theory has sometimes been criticized for privileging a more traditionally Western, traditionally male kind of orientation to autonomy over more traditionally Eastern, female kinds of orientations towards connection or community. This theory, I hope to show, does not judge as more complex any particular *kind* of orientation—either more connected or more separate forms of acting in the world. Instead, it looks at the *structure* of that orientation. Kegan's theory shows the ways that people can be embedded in and made up by the role of autonomous separation (like the archetypal lone cowboy image) or can be more self-authored on behalf of their deepest connections.

## **The Orders of Mind**

While there are five orders of mind, the First order describes the meaning making of small children and the Fifth order describes a mostly theoretical stage of development highly unusual in any population and never found in people before midlife. While evidence suggests that most adults will be in the Second through Fourth orders of mind, I will give descriptions of each order to set a context and to emphasize the rhythm of the movement. I will spend more time, however, discussing the Third and Fourth orders because those are the orders at which research suggests the majority of adults make meaning.

While every order is a complete description of a meaning-making system, much of our lives are spent in the spaces in-between each of the orders—on our way from one place to the next. In fact, four distinct—and measurable—stages have been identified along the continuum between each of the numbered orders. I do not think it is necessary to understand each of these four substages in detail; however, understanding the basic framework of these transitional substages points to the process of growth from one order to the next. Because of this, I will briefly describe the process of moving from one numbered order to the next.

### *The First Order, the Magical childhood mind*

In Kegan's First order, young children cannot yet hold the idea of "durable objects"—which is the notion that things in the world retain the same qualities over time. When they look out of an airplane and see how small people look, they believe the people actually *are* small. They believe that others can share in the full imaginary life that's constantly in play for them, and they are mystified when others hold different opinions or can't pick right up on a game in an imaginary world. When water is poured from one container to a differently-shaped container, and the quantity of the water looks different, they believe the water actually has grown (or shrunk), and no amount of persuasion will

convince them otherwise. They believe they can slip down the drain in the tub because they can't hold themselves as different from the water which slips away. Children in this order need to be reminded of the rules over and over, because they can't hold the ideas in their mind for very long; the rule that existed yesterday about drawing on the walls might not seem to apply today—or might apply to the walls in the kitchen but not the bedroom. The First order is a time of magic and mystery as the world inexplicably changes from moment to moment.

### *The Second Order, the Self-sovereign mind*

Kegan's Second order was once thought to belong exclusively to older children and adolescents, but there is increasing evidence that adults can spend many years in this order as well (Adult Development Research Group, 2001). Demographic evidence shows that between 13% and 36% of adults aged 19-55 (depending on the study population) make meaning at this order or in the transition between this and the Third order.<sup>3</sup>

When people learn that objects stay the same no matter what their own relationship is to the object (e.g., when I walk away from the car and it looks smaller, the car isn't actually shrinking), their world becomes less magical and more complex. They discover that they have beliefs and feelings that also remain constant over time (e.g., I love chocolate but hate mashed potatoes; I'm good at math even if I can't do this problem). This insight lets them know that other people have opinions and beliefs that remain constant, too. Their concrete understandings let them know that a rule yesterday is probably a rule today, too. If the rule feels problematic, their orientation is to worry about the consequences of breaking it or to figure out how to get past the rule if it is in their way.

While they are aware that others have feelings and desires, they cannot hold both their own perspective and the perspective of another at the same time. Mostly other people's interests are important only if they interfere with the interests of the person at the Second order. When friends do not lie to each other, it is because of a fear of retaliation or loss or because it costs them nothing to be truthful. People at this order may appear extremely rule-bound, following along with various philosophies or mandates because of the possibility of external rewards or punishments. They might appear self-centered and might see others as helpers or barriers on the road to get to their desires.

### *The Third Order, the Socialized mind*

*Theoretical description.* People can begin to enter into the Third order during adolescence, and there is a great deal of evidence that they can live much or all of their lives at this order. Studies have shown that there is a large percentage of adults—of all ages, occupations, and socio-economic classes—who inhabit this world. Studies reported in Kegan (1994) show that between 43% and 46% of adults aged 19-55 make meaning at the Third order or in the Third-Fourth transition.

At the Third order, people no longer see others as simply a means to an end; they have internalized one or more systems of meaning (e.g. their family's values, a political or national ideology, a professional or organizational culture). As a result, they have developed

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<sup>3</sup> These, and all demographic numbers, are extracted from Kegan (1994) who looks across many smaller studies using the Subject-Object Interview and forms composites of study samples to create larger sample sizes. The range I offer is from the two main composites—one a relatively highly educated, high SES group and one more mixed educationally and socio-economically. For more on the implications of these differences, see Kegan (1994).

the ability to subordinate their desires and be guided by the norms and standards of their meaning system(s). Their impulses and desires, which were Subject to them in the Second order, have become Object. They now internalize the ideas or emotions of others who represent their meaning system and are guided by the ideologies, institutions, or people that are most important to them. They are able to think abstractly, be self-reflective about their actions and the actions of others, and be devoted to something that's greater than their own needs. It is as if, in their growth from the Second order, those at the Third order have welcomed a Board of Directors (Kegan, 1994) into their decision making and now have the ideas or voices of important other ideologies, institutions, or people with them as they make their decisions.

The major limitation of this order is that, when there is a conflict between important ideologies, institutions, or people, those at the Third order feel torn in two and cannot find a way to make a decision; there is no sense of what *I* want outside of others' expectations or societal roles. If, for example, someone at the Third order has internalized—and now holds as his own—some of the ideology of his progressive teacher education program (e.g., that all students can learn at high levels if given the opportunity and therefore heterogeneous groupings are better for students and tracking is undemocratic) and has also internalized some part of the ideology of his conservative school culture (e.g., that some students are lazy or stupid and should not be allowed to get in the way of smarter, more motivated students), he will likely feel stuck if he has the opportunity to give his opinion about whether heterogeneous or tracked classes are better. He may turn to others to tell him how to best resolve this conflict, and will be increasingly bewildered if there is no consensus about the resolution or if others counsel him to decide for himself, telling him that there is no one right answer.

Acting at this order is generally admirable, even *responsible* in teenagers, but, in adults, it can often seem like a personality flaw, an *irresponsible* way of being in the world. As Kegan (1982) notes:

When I live in this balance as an adult I am the prime candidate for the assertiveness trainer, who may tell me that I need to learn how to stand up for myself, be more 'selfish,' less pliable, and so on, as if these were mere skills to be added on to whoever else I am. The popular literature will talk about me as lacking self-esteem, or as a pushover because I want other people to like me. (p. 96)

Kegan goes on to point out that the very notion of "self-esteem" as it is generally constructed is inappropriate at this order because this construction of self-esteem requires an *internal* source for feeling good about oneself. Although they themselves do not experience it this way, those at the Third order do not have an independently-constructed self to feel good about; their esteem is entirely reliant on others because they are, in many ways, made up of those around them. A student making meaning at this order may not know whether he has successfully mastered a particular concept until he sees his grade on a test; an executive at this order may not know whether a particular meeting was successful or not until her colleagues tell her it was.

People at this order are excellent followers of strong cultures because they have internalized the ideas and philosophies of others and work out of their loyalty to a larger group. It is not fair to assume, however, that these people are necessarily chameleons who change their ideas and philosophies to fit in with the dominant ones as they move from place to place; instead, there are *particular* ideologies, institutions, or people to which they

remain loyal and with which they remain identified. Someone whose surround supported a very earth-conscious, vegetarian lifestyle might himself be very uncomfortable if he spent much of his time around a group of carnivores, but might not find himself *changed* by those opinions at all. Indeed, he might become *more* certain of his choice in the face of opposition as he drew clear and unmistakable dichotomous lines between his way and the wrong way. This is because the pulls to these cultures of embeddedness can often help those at the Third order look very ideological and sure of themselves as they strongly defend a particular right way of doing things. And the *contents* of these cultures are not connected in any way to any particular order of mind. A person could be firmly embedded in a Third order way in a conservative or liberal culture, in a progressive or traditional philosophy.

It is the *way* the people have a relationship to their ideology or institution that is reflective of a Third order meaning-making system. At the Third order, people are unable to develop their own philosophies or to combine the best parts of several different ideas into their own new one. Similarly, at the Third order, people are often embedded in a role orientation and have a hard time managing multiple roles simultaneously (it's hard, for example, for teachers at the Third order to also have leadership positions that require them to be both teachers and also supervisors because they cannot coordinate those multiple roles).

Because in the modern world there are many demands on people that require them to mediate between different ideologies, institutions, and/or key people in their lives, Kegan (1994) suggests that many people at the Third order feel “in over their heads” much of the time. It is important to remember, though, that post-Third order demands are not for *skills* that anyone can learn; these are demands for new and different ways of knowing the world. Similarly, the Third order is not a personality flaw to be corrected with appropriate intervention—it is a necessary point on a developmental continuum. Those who recognize this can have a vastly different perspective about their colleagues, clients, etc. who are at the Third order—as well as a more extensive set of tools with which to support them and their development (See Berger & Fitzgerald 2002 or Joiner & Josephs, 2006 for more on this).

*Case study.* Walter is an excellent example of a Third order meaning-maker. A responsible, hard working teacher, Walter is strongly invested in teaching as a career and in the success of his students. He is intelligent, highly educated, and knowledgeable about his certification area of science. He is also very reflective and curious, and he works hard to be a better teacher through continuing staff development, discussions with his colleagues, and reading books that help him make sense of the complexities of a difficult profession. He is strongly invested in being a success as a teacher, and he wishes he were confident about “doing the right thing.”

Walter's Third order meaning system means that he finds himself over his head, though, when he is faced with issues or decisions that require him to make independent judgments. To know whether he's doing a good job as a teacher, Walter turns to others. He wants a class where “there's not any more argument from the students” and barring that, wants at least “to find support from the...other teachers or...[be able] to relay a story and to have them say, ‘I thought you handled that well.’” Without such positive feedback, he asks, “What's the meaning of life here?” Part of the necessity for the feedback is that without it Walter has no way to decide whether he was a successful teacher. “It's just a mystery,” he says.

The meaning system Walter is embedded in is his role as a teacher. While someone at the Fourth order might be able to coordinate multiple views of himself simultaneously (“I am a teacher, but I'm also a father and an athlete”), Walter finds that the single role of

teacher defines his life. It is, of course, true that anyone can be a parent, a teacher, and an athlete at any order of mind. The difference is that in the Third order, people tend to make a single role their *defining* role (I am a teacher who also happens to be an athlete). In the Fourth order, the roles become more permeable and multiple. Walter, who at other times in the interview speaks of his commitment to an athletic discipline, seems not to hold on to both roles simultaneously. Instead, he says, “I mean, my job is kind of my identity,” and if he fails at that job he will “feel crushed.”

Walter names some of the limits of his own understanding—some of the feeling of being in over his head—when he speaks of disliking this single role and wishing he could find a way to get away from it to “somehow strike a balance” in his life. While a teacher at any order might find himself working too many hours and frustrated about that situation, the thing that makes Walter’s frustration Third order is his seeming lack of control over it. He describes himself as “a slave” to “the restrictive life style” of his teaching and feels “angry...that I have to be in a profession that...just demands so much of me.” He is frustrated with himself for his deficiencies admitting, “I don’t know how to strike that balance yet.” Kegan’s theory predicts that as Walter continues to grow toward the Fourth order, he will find himself better able to gain perspective on his teaching and its place in his life.

#### *The Fourth Order, the Self-authored mind*

*Theoretical description.* The Fourth order seems familiar to those who work with adults because it is the order that looks the most like modern images of the way adults are *supposed* to be in North American culture at the turn of the millennium. The most surprising thing about this order, in fact, is that there are so many adults who have not yet reached this level of complexity. Research shows that between 18% and 34% of adults between 19 and 55 make meaning at this order (Kegan, 1994).

Adults at the Fourth order have achieved all that those at the Third order have, but now they have created a *self* that is the author of its connections to the ideologies, institutions, or people which they were previously written by. The perspectives, opinions, and desires that they were Subject to when they were making meaning at the Third order are now Object to them. They are now able to examine those various rule-systems, opinions, and expectations and are able to mediate among them using an internal set of rules and regulations—a self-governing system. These are the people we read about in the literature who “own” their work, who have articulated their personal theories, who are self-guided, self-motivated, self-evaluative, self-correcting. The Board of Directors that was welcomed in the Third order now has a startling transformation. While the voices and ideas of important others are still internalized at the Fourth order as they were in the Third order, the great achievement of the Fourth order is that the person herself becomes the Chair of the Board.

This does not in any way suggest that those at the Fourth order necessarily abandon the previous ideologies, institutions, or people that were so important to them at the Third order. Instead, they transform their relationship to these ideologies, institutions, or people. For example, a teacher at the Third order might be strongly identified with a particular theory of teaching—one that he learned in his teacher education program and is supported in his current school. As he becomes Fourth order, he may find that he has more questions about that theory and about his previous status as a kind of unquestioning devotee of that particular theory. He may decide after great reflection, however, that he *does* believe in his previously-held theory and that his questions are adequately answered by the robustness of

the theory itself. Others around him might still even think of him as a kind of devotee, but they are less likely to accuse him of being “unquestioning.” They may find him *more* persuasive about the theory rather than less because he now has a more complex understanding of it and will sound less like he is giving a party line.

Unlike those at the Third order, Fourth order adults don’t feel torn apart by the conflicts of different meaning systems because they have their own system with which to make decisions. Instead, they may feel torn apart by disagreeing pieces of themselves which are both working in service of a larger, self-authored (but relatively unquestioned) goal. For example, at the Fourth order, Walter’s conflict about striking the right balance between being a teacher and “having a life” might be reinterpreted in this way: “Part of me wants to spend all my free time working on my teaching because I think teaching is so hard that it takes all of my energy to do it well. Another part of me, though, knows that if all I ever do is work as a teacher, there will be less richness to the experience that I bring into the classroom in general which will limit my effectiveness as a teacher. I feel frustrated with myself for not being able to strike a good balance” It is not the role itself which is creating the tearing in this conflict. Instead, it is the *self-authored system itself* which is feeling torn apart.

As is true with every qualitatively different order of mind, the gains one makes from a previous order also describe the limits of the new order. The gain of the Fourth order meaning-making system is that the person has a self-authored system, a way to generate larger goals, principles, and commitments that transcend any one particular culture of embeddedness. The limit of the Fourth order meaning-making system is that a person becomes embedded in (and is Subject to) this self-authored system. In the example above, notice that both parts of this tearing are in service of the larger goal of being an effective teacher. If this teacher were farther along the developmental journey beyond the Fourth order, she might question the very goal of “effective teaching” as one that rules over her decision-making process. While she might well value effective teaching just as much, it would lose its place as that which unquestioningly determined what her choices would be.

*Case study.* José, like Walter, is a committed and competent teacher. While he, too, is occasionally frustrated with the complexities and uncertainties of the teaching profession, José understands his role as a teacher through his Fourth order meaning-making system. Like Walter, José spends much of our interview time discussing a particularly frustrating incident from his teaching—a recent experience when a group of his most advanced students cheated on their midterm exam. Of course, that situation has nothing to do with order of mind—a teacher at any order might find himself angry and frustrated. It is the *way* José feels frustrated that is the mark of a Fourth order teacher.

José names his frustration in clear ways. Instead of taking responsibility for his students’ actions, José has perspective on them. He says, “I didn’t feel as kind of *personally* betrayed but rather like they had stepped off this track of working hard, working honestly, kind of maximizing their potential.... And it didn’t feel so much like a personal affront but rather I thought that this was the kind of student you were and you showed me differently...” At the Third order, a teacher would be embedded in a particular ideology or institution—or even in the relationship with students or colleagues. Because he is in the Fourth order, José can hold on to a separate feeling of self while simultaneously feeling that the students betrayed the contract of the classroom. If he were more Third order, he might be embedded in the contract and feel that the students were betraying *him* by their actions and not just betraying themselves.

Similarly, José has a complex orientation to the conflict this particular betrayal caused in his relationship with the students. He says the conflict showed him, “That yes, it is a real



relationship that's taking place in the class and part of a relationship is conflict and sometimes betrayal." As he continues to discuss this idea that conflict is a necessary condition of a "true relationship," it becomes more and more clear that he is not *embedded* in the relationship with the students, no matter how important that relationship is to him. While he names the worst thing that might come from this incident as a case where the relationship was broken beyond repair, where there was the "least possible human connection happening," this outcome would not tear at the fabric of José's own sense of self as it might for someone who was making meaning at the Third order. Were he more Third order, José might talk about being "crushed" by their betrayal or in some other way give the students the responsibility for his own feelings or reactions. He might say, for example, "They made me question why I'm even a teacher if they're going to act this way when I give them my trust." Our interview has none of those kind of ideas, though. Instead, he maintains his focus on his larger goal as a teacher, "to be able to make connections that go beyond just being in the classroom," and while their actions make him question the way he went about that particular assignment, he keeps the incident in perspective to his large view.

José is also not embedded in a single-role orientation; instead, he can coordinate among roles simultaneously, letting them enrich and inform one another. He speaks of the way his role as a parent shapes his role as a teacher and seems to coordinate all of the roles of his life (parent, partner, teacher) into one larger whole.

#### *The Fifth order, the Self-transforming mind*

Finally, Kegan offers a Fifth order, which is never seen before midlife and is seen only rarely then, although development beyond the Fourth order into the transition between the Fourth and the Fifth orders is more prevalent. Kegan (1994) reports that between 3% and 6% of adults aged 19-55 make meaning in the transition between the Fourth and Fifth orders; no adults in the studies Kegan reports made meaning fully at the Fifth order (but since the age range of these studies is relatively young, it is likely that there would be more people in the Fifth order in a more mature population).

Adults at the Fifth order have achieved all that those at the Fourth order have, but in addition they have learned the limits of their own inner system—and the limits of full identification with any one inner system in general. Instead of viewing others as people with separate and different inner systems, those at the Fifth order can look across inner systems to see the similarities that are hidden within what used to look like differences. Adults at the Fifth order are less likely to see the world in terms of dichotomies or polarities. They are more likely to understand and deal well with paradox and with managing the tension of opposites. They are also more likely to believe that what we often think of as black and white are just various shades of gray whose differences are made more visible by the lighter or darker colors around them. While they still make use of their Fourth order Board of Directors, those at the Fifth order now recognize the inherent frailties of such Boards. They are more likely to consider the advantages not just of other opinions (which the Board might entertain) but of entirely different forms of governing systems. They may realize that their internal system itself contributes to their inability to perceive a wide enough field of alternatives.

*Case study.* By the time Kathleen was in her early 50s, she had become chief counsel for in a large government agency. During her fast rise through the early years in her profession, she was "much more willing, for the sake of prestige, status, intellectual challenge" not to have what she would later think of as her "whole self" engaged in her

work. While emphasizing the “whole person” and being “a leader in doing that” with her staff, Kathleen “was much less in touch with what that actually meant to me.” While her work “mattered to me a lot and was important to do,” Kathleen never “felt like it was an expression of who I was.” A professional development program designed “to bring the contemplative into the world of executives” was “the first shift” for her, raising her awareness that “it’s possible to bring an integrated self to work” which she says “was a totally foreign concept to me.” After that experience, she decided “life was out of my control,” and she applied to take a sabbatical and spend a year as executive-in-residence at a leadership development institute.

While she was on sabbatical, there was a change in the administration, and Kathleen found herself out of work. She negotiated a second year at the leadership development institute, and began to figure out what her next steps were, but while the impact of the loss was “huge, huge,” she did not feel panicked or rudderless. Instead, of hoping that this difficult time would quickly pass away, she believed :

I think *this* is the journey. I think *this is* the journey. And I could stay in this, I think, forever. You know, I could never hold another job again, I could, you know, start doing Hospice work, I could you know, spend time with my husband, I could...I don't know.... I don't know what to say. It just feels like it will emerge. But no, where I am right now feels very much like...it doesn't feel like a hiatus. It feels like it is the journey and that work will emerge from this place. That's what I think. I think work will emerge from this experience.

At this same time, Kathleen’s mother became terminally ill. Spending time with her dying mother and making decisions about her medical care with her brothers and sisters, Kathleen had ample time to reflect upon the inter-connections of the events and relationships in her life—and about endings and beginnings. As she struggled with her siblings to gain consensus about when to remove their mother from life support, she found herself in disagreement with her brother whose dissenting opinion others in the family wanted to disregard. While this was an enormously painful issue, Kathleen discovered that this disagreement was not an uncomfortable conflict for her. She reflects:

I was not in a position to put my experience of [my mother’s illness] ahead of [my brother’s] experience of her. I wasn’t going to say, “I know what’s best for her,” even though I felt I did from my perspective. ... I didn’t think it was better or worse. I think it was part of the mix....So I don’t think it was that he was right and I was wrong or that I was right and he was wrong. It was that he expressed a valid point of view that as long as he held it would...I mean, as long as he held it, he held it. And I wasn’t going to override it.

Her experience of the loss of her job and her mother has not demoralized her, although it has changed her. Instead of focusing on the losses, Kathleen finds herself open to the new connections and new possibilities she has found:

So much has happened in my life in the past year that I had absolutely no control over, could not have predicted, and if it had turned out the way I intended, it would not have turned out as wonderful as it has. So at least for the time being, whatever emerges is what emerges. That is how I feel about it. And it doesn’t feel scary.

At the Fifth order, the ground constantly shifts and changes, but rather than feeling such seismic changes as an earthquake, those in the Fifth order expect them and lean into them the way one might lean into playful rapids on a river.

*The movement in between*<sup>4</sup>

Because of the limited range of orders of self-complexity in this study, and because people spend much of their lives in the transition spaces between the numbered orders, it is important to understand both the basic rhythms of development and also the particular transition space between the Third and the Fourth order.

While there is a kind of coherence that each order individually displays, the pattern of motion from one order to the next can both give a sense of the process of growth generally and can also point to specific ways that growth between the orders can be understood. Upon first glance, a reader might think that everyone makes meaning wholly from one or another of these orders. You might guess that the process of growth is like the process of aging—even though everyone knows that it takes 365 days to become a year older, we label that change on the day the numbers roll over—your birthday. One day you are thirty-one, the next day you are thirty-two. Some (mostly young) people, however, track the change more exactly; they will tell you that they're eight years-old, and then "eight-and-a-quarter" then "eight-and-a-half" then "eight-and-three-quarters" (a really mathematically inclined young person might say "eight and seven-twelfths") so that the process of going from eight to nine has several nameable steps. In Kegan's theory, the process of growth is measured in ways that are much closer to the eight-year-old's phrasing than our typical launching straight from thirty-one to thirty-two.

It turns out, in fact, that growth from one stage to another is measured by indicating how far along a person is in the journey from one numbered order to the next. Like the process of aging, development is slow with the movement from one order to the next taking years or even decades.

As another way of getting a sense of what this transitional space means, think about taking a close look at the colors of the rainbow. While we can all name the main colors of a rainbow, part of what gives it its beauty is the way the colors overlap and merge into one another. The transitional spaces have similar characteristics. At each of the numbered poles, there is a single color. In the transitional spaces, the colors merge and blend. Towards one pole that color is most central; towards the other pole, the new color is most evident.

When people are firmly anchored in a specific order (let's take for example, the Third order), they tend not to have much of a sense that they could be making meaning differently; they are embedded in their own meaning making system and cannot take it as Object. In their first (measurable) steps toward the next place (for the purposes of this example that would be the Fourth order, although this pattern is similar between any two orders), they may have just a vague sense that something is missing or something is beginning. This early part of the journey can be either exciting (as in "I can see that there's something new on the horizon and I can't wait to figure it out") or scary ("I can see that the way I have been understanding the world is insufficient and yet I can't find another way to understand it").

As people continue to move from one order to the next, they find themselves in a place I name as fully "Transitional" where they use both orders at the same time. In the rainbow image above, this part of the journey is neither yellow nor blue but a combination of both—green. In the move from the Third to the Fourth orders, this means they have both a self-authored system and are *simultaneously* embedded in the surround. Often these

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<sup>4</sup> There are actually four measurable places between each numbered pole. See Lahey et al. (1988) for a full description.

different ways of making meaning coexist peacefully as they rely sometimes on one meaning making system and sometimes on the other. From time to time, however, the very fact that there are two meaning-making systems becomes problematic. Just as those who are fully Third order can feel torn when important others are in conflict, those who are Transitional can feel torn when their own self-authored system is in conflict with other meaning systems in which they are embedded. For example, a person might find herself disagreeing with a particular element of a theory she had once accepted without reservations, and that disagreement may leave her feeling uncertain about the entire theory. Sometimes this can feel like a betrayal as she behaves in ways that are inconsistent with her previous beliefs, but perfectly consistent with her emerging, more nuanced, self-authored beliefs.

Finally, people leave behind the previous way of making meaning—in this case the Third order—*almost* entirely, and that former way shows up as hints or pulls backwards. This backwards falling can sometimes make those at this stage appear allergic to or afraid of the previous structure; it takes some energy to maintain the new structure on its own, and they may fear that they could be pulled back to the previous meaning-making place. For example, when someone is newly making meaning at the place which is almost entirely Fourth order, he may choose not to consult with important theories or people about their opinions—shutting himself off to the voices of others because of his fear that those voices will drown out his own newly-emerging voice. As he becomes fully Fourth order, though, he no longer has to worry about being taken over by the power of other voices and he can listen to important theories or people while still retaining the self-authored power to make decisions from his own internal system.

### **A final caveat**

Many people take exception to the idea of using a hierarchical model to describe the development of adults. It is a common critique that naming differences as a function of “capacity” is limiting and potentially dangerous. My assumption is slightly different, but that slight difference changes my perspective enormously. Instead of seeing the ways that discussions of adult capacity are limiting, I see the ways that understanding different capacities can be supportive and liberating. This is not a stagnant typology of complexity; instead, it is dynamic, and it suggests that capacity grows and changes in important ways over time.

Those to whom I’ve taught this theory have asked me whether I really believe that there is not some kind of a value judgment I’m making as I use a hierarchical model as a lens through which to think and talk about others. They ask whether I really believe that Walter would not be better off were he farther along developmentally. As I write and think about this key question, my four-and-a-half-year-old daughter Naomi and six-month-old son Aidan clamor for my attention. Would Naomi be “better off” were she farther along developmentally, if she had a greater sense of the difference between imagination and reality? Would Aidan be “better off” if he could walk already? In some ways, the answer is a clear yes. It’s sometimes frustrating for Aidan that he cannot move around, and Naomi is occasionally afraid of the monsters her magical meaning-making system produces. Still, it is also clear that childhood is a journey, and that children grow from places of innocence and wonder and into places of greater sophistication and understanding. Because the growth of children is so obvious to us (especially because of the work of those who study children’s development), we provide support for them so that they can be happy in their current meaning-making systems. We do not say that a four-year-old who talks and runs is *better*

than a six-month-old who doesn't. We do not say that the four-year-old is happier or that she is more moral or more successful in any way. In fact, it is even possible that she has the capacity to be more unhappy, more immoral, and get into more trouble (although she does not necessarily do these things, either). What we say is that the four-year-old and the six-month-old need very different environments, different kinds of support, and different kinds of challenges.

And yet, it seems clearly true from my description that Walter *would* be better off if he were farther along developmentally. This, I argue, is far less about the inherent value of development and far more about the environments in which people spend their time. Because Kegan's theory describes a process of growth that all humans—children and adults alike—naturally engage in (to a greater or lesser degree), Kegan would argue that it is likely that Walter—and the millions of other adults who, like him, are likely to make meaning at the Third order—will grow to have more complex capacities over time. It may also be true that various forms of professional development can support—and perhaps accelerate—the growth of such capacities; Kegan's theory may help us think in new ways about creating growthful environments (see Baxter Magolda, 2006, Berger 2002, Berger& Fitzgerald 2002) for more on such strategies). But if it is true that development is a slow and painstaking process, trying to hurry Third order adults along is not a strategy that, by itself, is sufficient. A second central strategy for those of us who would support all adults is to create contexts that support their current capacities. It is in this spirit that I bring this theory as a lens with which reexamine professional development opportunities for adults.

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