

How Consciousness Develops Adequate Complexity to Deal With a Complex World: The Subject-Object Theory of Robert Kegan

Robert Kegan's (1982, 1994) theory of adult development examines and describes the way humans grow and change over the course of their adult 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. 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 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, or 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 human 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 implies 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 or female kinds of orientation 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.

A quick overview of the top three orders

- In the third order of consciousness, opinions and expectations of others (the "psychological surround") are primary, forming the basis for how one behaves, thinks, and feels. One believes that one can be "made" to feel in particular ways by others.

- In the fourth order, one has the ability to know one's own mind independent of cultural expectations or "assumed truths", to be able to set limits, maintain boundaries, and be cooperative and collegial. There is also the capacity to explore thoughts and feelings, creating one's own sense of authority or voice.
- In the fifth order, one's sense of self is not tied to particular identities or roles, but is constantly created through the exploration of one's identities and roles and further honed through interactions with others. One is both self-authoring and willing to work with the authority of others. One is able not only to question authority, but also to question oneself. (Kegan states that the fifth order of consciousness is not commonly achieved.)

First and Second Order Consciousness

Young children in Kegan's First Order are made up by their perceptions. Reality for them *is* what they see, so that a quantity of water that *looks* different to them, perhaps because it is in a differently shaped container, actually *is* different. When children come to conserve volume, they find a way to coordinate their perceptions at different points in time within a larger frame. The structure of this new meaning-making system—Kegan's Second Order—is one of "durable categories" in the physical and social worlds. People at this Order can coordinate their impulses to describe their own and others' enduring dispositions and preferences: "I'm a friendly person not just because I feel happy or have a friend today, but because I've noticed that's true about me in lots of situations and circumstances." They can coordinate their changing perceptions across time to conserve concrete qualities. They develop a point of view because they now know (where before they did not) that not everyone sees the world the same way. They care about how others perceive them because those perceptions may have concrete consequences for them.

Third Order Consciousness

Most people gain some perspective on these "durable categories" to construct an understanding that can coordinate and integrate them within larger cognitive and social principles—Kegan's *Socializing* Third Order—though many adults (roughly 1/8 to 1/3) continue to make meaning in whole or in part in Second Order ways. In the Third Order, people can coordinate several points of view within a sense of their own role within a social structure. They can internalize others' perspectives and thus, care about others' opinions of them as such, not just for how those opinions shape

others' actions towards them. People at this Order can use abstractions and inference to coordinate concrete data, and can develop hypotheses and respond to abstract ideals and values. The idea of doing things “because it’s the right thing to do” even if it’s not in your own self-interest makes sense at this Order of Mind. Kegan describes this meaning-making structure as “Traditionalist” or “socializing” in that it includes an internalized sense of mutual reciprocity in social relationships, and therefore enables people at the Third Order to be responsible for their own role within a larger social structure. Most adults (between 5/9 and 2/3) make meaning in whole or in part in this way and, given contexts which provide appropriate external models for belief and action, adults using this meaning-making system can be quite successful.

Fourth Order Consciousness

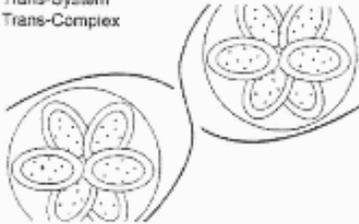
However, Kegan (1994) argues that our society often demands something more from adults, and these demands serve to move people towards the Fourth Order. In this “Self-Authoring” Order of Mind, adults come to coordinate their multiple roles and the different expectations others hold for them within their own self-generated, relationship-regulating frameworks. Someone at the Third Order might be torn apart by competing roles or expectations from important external others—unsure how to act, for example, as both a good parent and a good worker if his children and an important project both need time and attention. At the Third Order, people maybe “made up by” others’ expectations, responding either by cooperating or rebelling, but clearly in reaction to these expectations. Those at the Fourth Order have more options because they have a larger perspective from which to judge, make sense of, and negotiate among expectations. They can identify different internal parts of themselves that may be in conversation with one another, and can take responsibility for their own inner states and emotions—“I feel angry because I *interpret* what you did as a violation of important values of mine, and if I interpreted your actions differently I might feel sad instead.” People at the Fourth order internally mediate among abstractions through abstract systems and ideologies and can have some perspective on culturally or socially mediated definitions of reality. Kegan calls this Order “Self-authoring” in that an individual constructing reality in this way can identify her own role in generating her understanding of the world and is not unduly shaped by the context in which she finds herself. This way of making meaning is also a primary one for most adults (between $\frac{3}{4}$ and $\frac{1}{2}$).

Fifth Order Consciousness

Finally, Kegan claims that a small percentage of adults primarily in mid-life or beyond move towards the theoretically posited Fifth Order, where they come to see the Fourth Order's personally created ideologies themselves as constructed objects from a "dialectical" or "self-transformational" perspective. At the Fourth Order, a person can take a perspective on externally imposed values and expectations but cannot see how his own personal system for mediating among these is limited by historical, cultural, psychological, personal, and other forces. Such a perspective on the constructed nature of one's meaning-making system is gained at the Fifth Order. Conceptual frameworks in this view embrace contradiction and paradox. Social relationships are characterized by an integration of self and other—that is, "any aspect of what I used to see as 'my' identity is in part defined by the contrast and relationship with what I used to see as 'yours.'" This perspective is really quite rare, with only a small percentage of people showing any Fifth Order thinking and none being fully Fifth Order in studies thus far.

In Kegan's framework, development does not occur all of a sudden, though particular incidents can be important catalysts for change. Rather, Kegan argues that people move from fully constructing their understanding in a way that is consistent with a particular Order, towards building a bridge to the next Order by constructing meaning in two ways at the same time, though perhaps preferring one over the other, and eventually towards stepping fully beyond the earlier Order by incorporating it into the larger frame of the later Order. There are four such steps between any two pure Orders—steps which have been instantiated in the subscales of the Subject-Object Interview (Lahey, Souvaine, Kegan, Goodman, & Felix, 1988.) Kegan describes these changes over time as occurring in "holding environments" for evolution—environments in which people can be affirmed for where they are, challenged to move beyond it, and supported and nurtured in the growth of a new way of meaning making. An environment can fail to promote development through inappropriate amounts of either support or challenge.

Appendix A. Constructive-Developmental Orders of Consciousness

	SUBJECT	OBJECT	UNDERLYING STRUCTURE
1	PERCEPTIONS <i>Fantasy</i>	Movement	Single Point/ Immediate/ Atomistic 
	SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS IMPULSES	Sensation	
2	CONCRETE <i>Actually</i> Data, Cause-and-Effect	Perceptions	Durable Category 
	POINT OF VIEW <i>Role-Concept</i> Simple Reciprocity (tit-for-tat)	Social Perceptions	
	ENDURING DISPOSITIONS Needs, Preferences Self Concept	Impulses	
3 TRADITIONALISM	ABSTRACTIONS <i>Ideality</i> Inference, Generalization Hypothesis, Proposition Ideals, Values	Concrete	Cross-Categorical Trans-Categorical 
	MUTUALITY/INTERPERSONALISM <i>Role Consciousness</i> Mutual Reciprocity	Point of View	
	INNER STATES Subjectivity, Self-Consciousness	Enduring Dispositions Needs, Preferences	
4 MODERNISM	ABSTRACT SYSTEMS <i>Ideology</i> Formulation, Authorization Relations between Abstractions	Abstractions	System/Complex 
	INSTITUTION <i>Relationship-Regulating Forms</i> Multiple-Role Consciousness	Mutuality Interpersonalism	
	SELF-AUTHORSHIP Self-Regulation, Self-Formation Identity, Autonomy, Individuation	Inner States Subjectivity Self-Consciousness	
5 POST-MODERNISM	DIALECTICAL <i>Trans-Ideological/Post-Ideological</i> Tasting Formulation, Paradox Contradiction, Oppositeness	Abstract System Ideology	Trans-System Trans-Complex 
	INTER-INSTITUTIONAL <i>Relationship between Forms</i> Interpenetration of Self and Other	Institution Relationship-Regulating Forms	
	SELF-TRANSFORMATION Interpenetration of Selves Inter-Individuation	Self-Authorship Self-Regulation Self-Formation	

Source: Kegan, R. (1994) *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 314-315

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