



Key Concepts for Understanding the Work of Robert Kegan Jennifer Garvey Berger

General Rationale and Approach

In over our heads: Robert Kegan believes that the constantly changing demands of modern life may be developmentally inappropriate for many—perhaps even most—adults. We should no more blame or punish adults for their inability to meet the challenges of their lives than we would punish an infant for not being able to turn over, or a five-year-old who had not mastered abstract thinking. Instead of blaming adults for simply being unable to meet these demands, Kegan asks that we learn how to support development—and have the patience to wait for it to come. He says, “The expectations upon us...demand something more than mere behavior, the acquisition of specific skills, or the mastery of particular knowledge. They make demands on our minds, on *how* we know, on the complexity of our consciousness” (Kegan, 1994, p. 5).

Constructive-developmental: Kegan is a constructive-developmental psychologist. This is a term which joins together two different schools of thought. **Constructivists** believe that the world isn’t out there to be discovered, but that we create our world by our discovery of it. Humans make meaning of their surroundings, and that meaning *is* the surrounding; two people who see the same picture differently may actually, in their seeing of it, be creating two different pictures. **Developmentalists** believe that humans grow and change over time and enter qualitatively different phases as they grow. Cognitive, moral, and social development, however, unlike physical development, isn’t a matter of simply waiting for nature to take its course. Development can be helped or hindered (and in some severe cases arrested) by the individual’s life experiences. **Constructive-developmentalists** believe that the systems by which people make meaning grow and change over time.

Information: In-form-ation is new knowledge that you add to the current *form* of your mind. New skills or knowledge may be important for keeping up with the newest technology or the latest cutting-edge work in your profession. Information, while helpful, is generally by itself not a sufficient kind of growth for adults, however. All adults, as growing and changing people, need more than simply information; they need *transformation*.

Transformation: Transformation is more than simply adding information into the container (your mind, for example) that already exists. Transformation is about changing the very *form* of the container—making it larger, more complex, more able to deal with multiple demands and uncertainty. Transformation occurs, according to Kegan, when you are newly able to step back and reflect on something and make decisions about it. There are many ways that transformation can happen; one of them is the movement of things from “Subject” to “Object” (see below). Kegan (1994) says 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: Things that are Subject are by definition experienced as unquestioned, simply a part of the self. They can include many different things—a relational issue, a personality trait, an assumption about the way the world works, behaviors, emotions, etc. Things that are Subject to you can’t be seen because they are a part of you. Because they can’t be seen, they are taken for granted, taken for true—or not even taken at all. You generally can’t name things that are “Subject,” and you certainly can’t reflect upon them—that would require the ability to stand back and take a look at them. You don’t *have* something that’s Subject; something that’s Subject *has you*. Kegan (1994) describes Subject as “those elements of our knowing or organizing that we are identified with, tied to, fused with or embedded in” (p. 32). For example, I once thought that all people learn things in basically the same way—the way I learned them. When students came to me with difficulty about an assignment or test, I thought the problem was *theirs*; I was being so clear and they were still not learning. I struggled and struggled to help them learn, but to no avail. My own teaching and learning styles were Subject to me. I didn’t know different styles existed (because I figured everyone taught and learned like me), so I was powerless to change my style to meet the needs of diverse learners.

Object: Object is the opposite of Subject. Again, something that is Object can be a relational issue, personality trait, or a belief about the world. While things that are Subject *have you*, you *have* things that are Object. 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” (Kegan, 1994, p. 32). While every person necessarily has many parts of their world which are Subject (if you gave much conscious thought to your assumptions about gravity, you might not have time to go to sleep at night!), one part of development is about moving more and more things in your perception of your self from Subject to Object. The more in your life you take as Object, the more complex your world view because you can see and act upon more things. In the example above, as I struggled to help my students learn, I found out about teaching and learning styles—especially as they relate to personality type. For the first time I could examine something I hadn’t even known existed before—my own teaching and learning styles—and I could take action to help my students be more successful. What was once unknown and unnamed—Subject—became within my ability to reflect on—as Object. The most profound example of a move from Subject to Object is when the entire meaning-making system moves from that which unquestioningly runs the person involved to that which the person can actively control and take charge of. This shift of entire systems from Subject to Object is what gives form to the five Orders of Mind in Kegan’s theory.



Orders of Mind

Orders of mind: These are Kegan's ideas about the qualitatively different ways of constructing reality. This is a constructive-developmental theory because it is concerned both with the *construction* of reality, and with the *development* of that construction to more complex levels over time. There are five Orders of mind, ranging from a two year old to a (mostly theoretical) person well into the second half of life.¹ Each Order is a qualitative shift in the meaning-making and complexity from the Order before it. We do not give up what we've learned in a previous Order; we transform, changing the actual form of our understanding of the world. Perhaps the most important thing to remember about the Orders 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 isn't 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. What is more important is the *fit* between the Order of mind and the task each person is required to do. Each of the five Orders is described briefly below, but the ones to pay closest attention to are the ones where the majority of adults spend most of their lives—the Third and Fourth Orders of mind. To help understand this system, I'm going to offer a fictional tribal village made up of members from all five Orders. I'll give the people in the village "jobs" based on the strengths of their particular Order of mind.

First Order (mostly young children): 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 an airplane and see how small people look, they believe the people actually *are* small. They believe that others in their lives can live in their minds and are mystified when others hold different opinions (about bed time, for instance) or can't pick right up on a game in an imaginary world. When water is poured from one container to another, 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. The First Order is a time of magic and mystery as the world inexplicably changes from second to second. If we imagine a member of our village at this Order, we'd see someone who needs constant supervision and is not yet ready to police himself because he simply can't

¹ Two caveats. First of all, while every Order sounds like a complete description, most of our lives are spent in the spaces in-between each of the orders—on our way to the next place. In fact, four distinct stages have been identified along the continuum of each of the numbered Orders (which adds a level of complexity we won't even begin to get to). Secondly, this system actually begins at birth with babies and toddlers at a kind of Zero Order which has its own way of constructing the world.



remember the laws from moment to moment (we'd keep him firmly under adult supervision). His job is to learn about the world.

Second Order—the “Sovereign” Mind (older children—seven to ten—and adolescents, but also some adults): When children learn that objects stay the same no matter what their own relationship is to the object (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 remain constant over time, as well (I love chocolate but hate mashed potatoes; I'm great at ice skating). 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. Their orientation is to figuring out how to get past the rule if it is in their way. While they are aware that others have feelings and desires, empathy isn't possible for them yet because the distance between their minds and other minds is great. Mostly other people's interests are important only if they interfere with the interests of the person at the Second Order. When rules are not broken, it's because of a fear of being caught; when friends don't lie to each other, it's because of a fear of retaliation. Children—and adults—at this stage are self-centered and see others as helpers or barriers on the road to get to their desires. A villager at this Order follows the laws because she's afraid of punishment; if the laws don't seem to meet her needs and she can find a way to break them with minimal risk, she will. We can count on her to work in her own best interests, so we'll give her a job that is in her own best interests (like tending a garden for her family) that has clear boundaries and limited scope. We'll also make sure that she is fairly well supervised by others.

Third Order—the “Socialized” or “Traditional” Mind (older adolescents and the *majority* of adults): People at this Order no longer see others as simply a means to an ends; they have developed the ability to subordinate their desires to the desires of others. Their impulses and desires, which were Subject to them in the Second Order, have become Object. They internalize the feelings and emotions of others and are guided by those people or institutions (like a church or synagogue or a political party) that are most important to them. They are able to think abstractly, be self-reflective about their actions and the actions of others, and are devoted to something that's greater than their own needs. The major limitation of this Order is that, when there is a conflict between important others (or between a single important other—like a spouse—and an institution—like a political party), people 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. This is generally admirable in teenagers, but, in adults, it can often seem like a personality flaw. 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” is inappropriate at this Order because self-esteem implies an *internal* source for feeling good about oneself. Those at the Third Order don’t 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 villager at this Order is a model citizen² and follows the laws out of loyalty to the others in the village (or his religion or his place of business or his family). He tries hard not to break the rules because he wouldn’t want to feel he had let others down. In our small, homogenous, tribal village, a Third Order villager can hold nearly any position that doesn’t require independent leadership. He can be a teacher, have his own business, or be a member of the military. As long as he has someone whom he respects to help him make difficult decisions, he can do nearly anything in this village.

Fourth Order—the “Self-Authored” or “Modern” Mind (some adults): Adults at the Fourth Order have achieved all that those at the Third Order have, but now they have created a *self* that exists even outside of its relationship to others. The opinions and desires of others which they internalized and which had great control over them when they were making meaning at the Third Order are now Object to them. They are now able to examine those various rule-systems and opinions and are able to mediate between them. Those at the Fourth Order have an internal set of rules and regulations—a self-governing system—which they use to make their decisions or mediate conflicts. Unlike those at the Second Order, those at the Fourth Order feel empathy for others, and take the wishes and opinions of others into consideration when making decisions. Unlike those at the Third Order, though, Fourth Order adults don’t feel torn apart by the conflicts of those around them because they have their own system with which to make decisions. These are the people we read about in the literature who “own” their work, who are self-guided, self-motivated, self-evaluative. A villager at this Order would make a good chief because she has her own internal governing system. She could create the rules from her internal system and fight hard to protect those rules. This guidance would help the village run smoothly according to her inner vision of village life. The Fourth Order chief may not be an excellent diplomat, however, because when other people don’t understand or see the need to follow her rules, she may be so invested in her own way of doing things that she cannot easily see connections between her ideas of what is Right and more foreign ideas of what is Right.

² In our tribal village, there isn’t a lot of disagreement about what the rules are and where they come from. In a more diverse society, however, a citizen at this Order could easily be a “model” parent and employee or a “model” gang member or a “model” white supremacist; he would be “following the rules” of his particular society, even if that society was very different from the mainstream of the community or nation.



Fifth Order—the “Self-Transforming” or “Postmodern” Mind (very few adults):

Adults at the Fifth Order have achieved all that those at the Fourth order have, but they have learned the limits of their own inner system—and the limits of having an inner system in general. Instead of viewing others as people with separate and different inner systems, those at the Fifth Order see across inner systems to look at the similarities that are hidden inside 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 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. A villager at this Order might be an elder whose job it is to mediate conflicts between the many villages. While he generally follows the laws set by the chief, he sees that the many different villages have a variety of laws that are basically designed to do similar things, and that the differences are much more like similarities than any of the chiefs will admit. He helps the chiefs find a common ground and reminds them that they are all members of a larger community—the community of human beings, perhaps, or of members of our planet.

The Demands—or Curricula—of Various Forms of Society

The demands of society: Kegan points to the demands made by societies at different points in human history as being helpful for understanding why so many of us are now “in over our heads.” While it’s clear that this is a theoretical model (not everyone in a Traditionalist society followed those notions or was at the Third Order), it’s helpful to look at the society at large and see how it makes demands upon its citizens. Kegan thinks of these demands as the “curriculum” of the society, and he looks for the developmental “fit” between this “curriculum” and the adults within it.

Traditionalism: This has been the typical form of human societies around the world for much of human history (and is the form of the tribal village above). The requirements of this society are loyalty to the group and the ability to put the needs of the group before needs of the self. People in Traditional societies tend to live in the same place for long periods of time (perhaps even generations) and tend to live around people who are very similar (from the same tribe, religion, nationality, socioeconomic background, etc.). Because of this, there are group leaders—such as religious or philosophical leaders, doctors or healers, political leaders, or even leaders in the workplace—who are part of their group. Members of this society look to these leaders (or to external theology or philosophies, for example) for the right answers to all kinds of problems. These leaders have the authority to help people raise their children, heal their sick, do their jobs, and live their lives. The demands of this society on most of its members are suited to adults at the Third Order.



Modernism: The Modern era began when people became more mobile, and society transformed from small, relatively homogenous groups to larger, more diverse groups. Instead of being a part of and committed to a small group, people living in Modern societies are focused on Big Ideas—Science, Democracy, Freedom, Truth. No longer tied down to a single place or job, people move around more and have more exposure to new ideas and different kinds of people. With the increase in diversity, as well as the increase in communication, it is less clear who the group leaders are—one of many competing doctors? one of a variety of religious leaders? one of the increasingly mistrusted political leaders?—and it is less clear what to do when those leaders disagree. There is a general disillusionment with external leaders and anyone called a hero, because these leaders and heroes are soon shown to be the flawed human beings they are. Because they don't have leaders whom they trust, people in a Modern society must find other ways of knowing how to raise their children, do their jobs, and be citizens in the world. In this era, employers begin to demand that people own their own work, become self-motivated, make their own decisions. "Self-help" is a growing section of the bookstores as people search for guidance. People at the Fourth Order (remember, less than half of all adults) are well suited to the demands of the Modern age. The rest of us are in over our heads.

Post-modernism: Some say Post-modernism is now here, others say that we're still firmly in the Modernist world. Those who argue for Post-modernism say that the Big Ideas have failed us, that Truth doesn't exist. Subjectivity is the way of life, they say, and these objective Facts simply privilege one way of life over another. Rejecting both the old tribal systems and the search for Big Ideas, this kind of society brings with it an awareness that we all belong to greater systems which are all tied to one another and to this planet in important ways. People at the Fifth Order (which is extremely rare in anyone, never shows up before mid-life, and is at least partially theoretical) are well suited to the demands of the Post-modern age. Almost all of us are in over our heads.

Kegan, R. (1982). *The evolving self*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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