

# Developmentalist Intro

A generation ago, developmental psychologists focused on infants, children and adolescents because it was assumed that by the time we reached our early twenties, the mind was fully developed. Several decades of research later, this premise has been proven to be false; the adult mind does continue to develop, albeit in different ways for different people.

The term “Constructive-Developmental Theory” derives its name from: “developmental”, as in cognitive development; “constructive”, as in we construct meaning about the world around us; “constructive-developmental”, as in the way we construct meaning can develop.

Building on the work of [Jean Piaget](#), [Lawrence Kohlberg](#), [William Perry](#), and others, psychologist [Robert Kegan](#) developed a theory of adult cognitive development that defines five stages of mental complexity or “orders of mind”. These developmental stages are not about higher intelligence or IQ, nor are higher orders intrinsically “better”. What they represent are five levels of qualitatively more complex ways of thinking.

**The Subject/Object Relationship:** A key concept in understanding these orders of mind is what is known as the subject/object relationship.

There are those aspects of experience which we can perceive, take responsibility for and problem-solve around. These can be thought of as what we are able to hold *as object*. For example, a small child may be aware of the brightness of the sun, the scratchiness of his clothes, and the pull of his mother’s hand. Meanwhile, there are also aspects of experience which we are not aware of, which we cannot take responsibility for and can therefore not problem-solve around. These aspects of experience we can consider being *subject to*. For example, when the child is angry, his expression of anger is transparent; when he experiences joy, he smiles. He has no emotional filters. He is developmentally incapable of seeing emotions *as object* and is therefore *subject to* them. Meanwhile, an adult might feel angry, identify the emotion as anger, but choose to suppress expressing his anger until he comes home from work. In this way, the adult is holding emotion *as object*. As a result, the adult is no longer *subject to* his impulses the way the child was. Of course the adult may also express his emotion in the moment, but a more complex order of mind gives the adult a choice that the child does not have—yet.




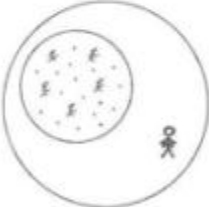

We can therefore think of the subject/object relationship as describing what we *have* in our perceptions, versus what *has us*. What can be seen as *object* represents the *content* of one’s knowing. Meanwhile, what one is *subject to* provides a clue about the underlying *structure* of one’s knowing. Each order of mind is subject to its underlying structure, which will be described next. As a result, the subject/object relationship is fundamental to understanding this stage theory.

Kegan’s theory describes five developmental stages or orders of mind: the Impulsive Mind, Instrumental Mind, Socialized Mind, Self-Authoring Mind, and Self-Transforming Mind. The mechanism behind developing from one stage to the next is taking what we were once *subject to*

and making it *object* (see the chart below). This is known as the “subject/object reversal”. Another way to say this is that the process of development is learning to look *at* what before we were unknowingly looking *through*.

A more detailed explanation of the three highest stages follows the chart. Note that each stage represents a plateau in one’s development which, in reality, is a continuous process with gradations between each stage.

### Kegan’s Five Stages of Development

| Developmental Stage/<br>Order of Mind<br>(typical ages)                        | What can be seen as <i>object</i><br>(the content of one's knowing) | What one is <i>subject</i> to<br>(the structure of one's knowing) | Underlying Structure of Meaning-Making   |
|--|---|---|--|
| <b>1st Order:<br/>Impulsive Mind</b><br>(~2-6 years-old)                       | one's reflexes  | one's impulses, perceptions                                       | Single Point<br>        |
| <b>2nd Order:<br/>Instrumental Mind</b><br>(~6 years-old through adolescence)  | one's impulses, perceptions   | one's needs, interests, desires                                   | Categories<br>         |
| <b>3rd Order:<br/>Socialized Mind</b><br>(post-adolescence)                    | one's needs, interests, desires                                     | interpersonal relationships, mutuality                            | Across Categories<br> |
| <b>4th Order:<br/>Self-Authoring Mind</b><br>(variable, if achieved)           | interpersonal relationships, mutuality                              | self-authorship, identity, ideology                               | Systemic<br>          |
| <b>5th Order:<br/>Self-Transforming Mind</b><br>(typically > ~40, if achieved) | self-authorship, identity, ideology                                 | the dialectic between ideologies                                  | System of Systems<br> |

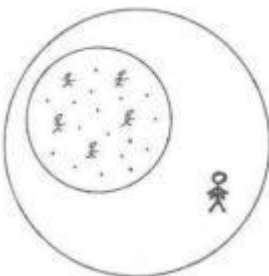
Adapted from Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: the Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 314-315 by Peter W. Pruvn. <http://developmentalobserver.blog.com>.



**The Socialized Mind** takes as object one's own needs, interests and desires. Meanwhile it is subject to its social environment, that is, how one is socialized. At this level of consciousness, one's identity is tied to living in relationship with others in roles determined by one's local culture. Such a person is subject to the opinions of others and is therefore strongly influenced by what she or he believes others want to hear. Such a stance tends to be reliant on authority for direction and less likely to question, making one a loyal follower.

The Socialized Mind is drawn to seeking alignment between itself and its surroundings. As a result, its underlying structure of meaning-making can be described as operating "across categories". A major fear of such a person would be falling out of favor with one's "tribe".

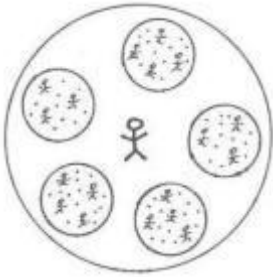
Approximately 58% of the adult population is below the level of Self-Authoring.



**The Self-Authoring Mind** is able to take a step back from its environment and hold it as object, regarding his or her culture critically. The Self-Authoring mind is able to distinguish the opinions of others from one's own opinions to formulate one's own "seat of judgment". The result is a "self-authoring" of one's own identity that is independent from one's environment. Guided by their own internal compass, such a person then becomes subject to his or her own ideology. These individuals tend to be self-directed, independent thinkers.

The Self-Authoring mind is drawn towards problem-solving around meeting its own personal agenda. In the course of such problem-solving, the Self-Authoring Mind is holding the surrounding social system as object. Therefore its underlying structure of meaning-making can be said to be operating at the level of systems. Major fears of such an order of mind would be falling short of one's own standards or being subject to others' definitions.

Approximately 35% of the adult population is at this plateau of development.



**The Self-Transforming Mind** is the highest level of consciousness in Kegan's model. The Self-Transforming Mind is able to take a step back from the act of self-authoring and hold it as object. From this point of view, one is able to regard multiple ideologies simultaneously and compare them, being wary of any single one. Driving questions would include, "What am I missing?", "How can my outlook be more inclusive?" As [Susanne Cook-Greuter](#) likes to say, such a person tends to move away from "either/or" thinking towards thinking that is more "both/and". This mindset is problem-seeking. This multi-frame perspective is able to hold the contradictions between competing belief systems and is therefore subject to the dialectic between systems of thought. Underlying this perpetual quest is an acceptance of the incompleteness of wholeness.

Because of its interdependent meaning-making, the underlying structure of the Self-Transforming Mind can be thought of as operating at the level of a system of systems. Fears of this order of mind would be having a sense of complacency regarding one's own identity or the sense that one has finally "learned it all".

Less than 1% of the adult population is at this level of development.

### **But It's Not That Simple**

At this point, you might well have some very valid concerns about what the hierarchy in this theory implies, as well as be wondering where you and others you know might fall on it. We live a society that frequently assumes that "bigger is better", but I don't think that's the way we should approach theories of human development. This theory is not about intelligence, IQ or whether a person is "good" or "bad"—or even happy. All it describes are varying degrees of complexity of thinking. As one of my professors, [Richard Reilly](#), likes to say, "The problem with theory is...it's theoretical!" In other words, no one theory can hope to explain the multi-dimensionality of human experience. Hence, it is critically important to understand any one theory's limitations.

Kegan likes to make the analogy of comparing drivers who can drive a stick-shift with drivers who only drive an automatic. Can we say that someone is a "better driver" simply because they can drive a stick? Of course not—any more than we can say that they'd be better company on a long trip. Now what we can say is that the driver who can drive a stick will be able to drive certain cars under certain conditions that the driver who can only drive an automatic cannot. But if someone's driving their automatic to and from work everyday, there's nothing wrong with that. As [Jennifer Garvey Berger](#) has written, this isn't a theory about "bigger is better"; it's a

theory about “bigger...is bigger”.

The only place where it might be appropriate to bring judgment into such a theory is in comparing a particular person’s capacities with the mental demands placed upon them. If a person’s capacities meet the everyday demands placed on them, there’s a good chance that they’re going to be effective in their life and maybe even happy. If, however, the demands placed upon them are greater than their capacities to meet them, they will most likely feel, as Kegan has written, “in over their heads”. For example, consider the case of a 3rd Order employee who is promoted to a senior management position (Kegan, 1994: 147-151). Without their own internal seat of judgment, they may feel paralyzed by the conflicting opinions of subordinates and desperately yearn for direction from a more Self-Authoring superior.

Another subtlety to keep in mind is that each of these three stages is a theoretical ideal. In reality, most of us will spend most of our lives in transition between these three plateaus rather than precisely at any one. For example, someone who is in transition between 3rd Order and 4th Order thinking might frequently experience feeling torn between pleasing those around them versus listening to “that little voice in the back of their heads” that is telling them what *they* value. And this inner voice may be getting progressively clearer over time. Meanwhile a person who is somewhere in the transition between 4th Order and 5th Order thinking might frequently experience feeling torn between what they consider to be their core personal values and a growing sense of curiosity about other ways to approach any given situation.

Such transitions can takes years, decades, or not happen at all depending on our life experiences. Not only that, we typically develop at different rates in different parts of our lives. I therefore urge you to resist the temptation of trying shove yourself and everyone you know into one of these three pigeon-holes. There are as many paths in development as there are human beings.

A person is a *process*, whether that person is an infant, a child, an adolescent or an adult. What this theory does say is that at least part of this on-going process is about developing wider and wider circles of perspective-taking, perspective-taking on one’s own thinking, as well as the thinking of others.

This summary merely scratches the surface of a vastly complex topic. If you’d like to learn more, I invite you peruse the other posts on this blog as well as explore [these additional resources](#).