



‘Levels’, Meaning and Maturation

Part Two of Two
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In my previous article, I described some of the unconscious complexity and outside of awareness limitations found in formulating outcomes and making decisions. I showed how every outcome and decision involves several ‘levels’ of experience, and that these levels seldom correspond to the ‘Neuro-Logical Levels’ with which NLP trained readers are familiar. To model this variety of levels I introduced the difference between the scope of an experience and category of that experience. I offered several examples of different kinds of categories and showed how these categories formed very different kinds of ‘logical levels.’

For example, someone who is determined to ‘win’ in business is formulating their outcome within a category that presupposes scarcity and competitiveness – perhaps the metaphor is Business is a Game. This individual organizes his or her actions – on a lower level – in order to achieve this. Outside of the awareness of this individual is consideration of what category the category containing ‘win’ is an element? The higher level category could be ‘Ways of Relating’ or ‘Forms of Expression’ or even ‘Encourages Aggressiveness’ to name only a few. Within a ‘Ways of Relating,’ category, win is one element along with cooperate, assist, serve and others. Within a ‘Forms of Expression’ category, win/game is one element along with create/art, perform/script, prepare/meal and others. Within ‘Encourages Aggressiveness,’ win/game is one element along with beat opponent/fight, triumph/battle, and win/war among others. There’s no judgement here. It is simply the case that experiences are categorized. And there are many possibilities though most of them go unexamined and therefore almost empty – both of elements and potential. Exceptionally talented individuals are most often those who fill their higher level categories with examples as thoroughly as they fill their lower level action categories with detailed alternative scenarios. The article concluded with a suggestion of a new outcome direction for the development minded.

In this article I will describe how exceptional individuals develop and utilize their multiple levels of experience. I

will show how this parallels the emergence of the three key developmental categories of the self, and makes sense of how Transformational Technologies like est and The Forum work as well as why fundamentalism is so prevalent nowa days. That so much can be described and explained by multiple level modelling demonstrates the importance of this emerging approach. The following draws on research in developmental psychology, neuroscience and linguistics from well-established researchers in highly regarded institutions. My goal here is to “reduce to practice” that research with the work Steve Andreas and I have done modelling the structure of generalization.

When I was originally thinking about this, a Time Magazine story appeared entitled “Secrets of the Teen Brain.” It was a report on research done with MRIs and it confirmed what other researchers have already documented through other means. That is, that human brains continue to develop and change in ways that can be described as distinctly different levels or stages. Some of these researchers went so far as to suggest that these stages are constructed out of our everyday life experience and can be encouraged or discouraged by the ways we learn to interact with our world. I agree.

Any discussion of development psychology must begin with the famed researcher Jean Piaget. Most students of psychology are familiar with the Piaget experiment in which a child of 3 or 5 is asked which container has more liquid - a tall pitcher or a low flat tray. The child indicates the pitcher. The liquid is then poured from the pitcher to the tray and back, demonstrating it is the same amount, but the child insists there is more in the pitcher. Ask this same question of an 8 or 9 year old, and the answer is they have the same amount of liquid. Piaget called the latter the “conservation of matter”. The human brain had developed sufficiently and changed qualitatively to make this generalization. The moral values researcher Lawrence Kohlberg noticed along with this development, the child changed from responding impulsively to immediate desires to a sense of his or her preferences over time. This could be called the “conservation of intention.” Just as objects begin to retain their constancy in

the children, so did their sense of self. Piaget named this Era III: Concrete Operational Thought. Kohlberg named it Stage 2: Instrumentalism. Regardless of the names, both had noticed that impulsive, pre-logical had been replaced by a distinctly different set of patterns of perception and evaluation.

The extensive observations and experiments of Piaget, Kohlberg, Kegan and others show that our sense of self takes time to develop and does so through distinct stages. Each stage involves increasing cognitive complexity and substantial changes in the actual structures of the brain. Each stage involves generalizing across emerging categories of interest including sex, friendship, capabilities, preferences and so on, as well as recursively refining one's changing sense of self.

In this article, I am interested in self development after the initial sensorimotor, impulsive, pre-logical stages most often associated with the ages 0-5. While certainly important, in order to function independently in our society, we must achieve at least the 'Concrete Operational Instrumentalism' that Piaget and Kohlberg found in the typical 6-10 year old. And this leads to my first observation and claim. That is, these stages are not achievements or permanently transcended. Rather, we develop more or less competence with each of them based on the number and richness of the experiences we have related to them. Less experience means one's mental models are based on few examples and are likely to be sketchy and uncertain. More experience means a richer store of diverse examples from which to draw more accurate or at least applicable generalizations. The importance of this is that we can deliberately develop these levels or stages of the self. By providing the appropriate kinds of experiences, we can increase the robustness of earlier developmental stages and create the conditions for the emergence of higher level stages.

To observe the 6-10 year old is to observe a Self-interested Self in action, and s/he should be. This is their own personal developmental psychology project - to create a sense of self. To find out who they are based on what they want and what they are capable of. They are testing personal limits, exploring alternatives, and often self absorbed.

By the early teen years, this Self-interested Self is sufficiently developed to take on the next big project - getting along with others and the world. Part of getting along with others is having an appreciation of what others expect of you, and responding to these expectations appropriately. Now, anyone who really remembers being a teenager, or has had a teenager at home knows respect for others' expectations are slow to emerge. This can be understood in terms of the structure of expectations being created through changes in brain matter and experience. This is done through years of practice with others as well as with school studies that in various ways highlight cause-effects and consequences. We practice this in NLP by taking different Perceptual Positions, but much more is meant here. It is the process of incorporating others' expectations into oneself. Taking different Perceptual Positions is a useful precursor to this, but not the same or sufficient. Researchers from Robert Kegan to Ken Wilber have noted that the basic structure of interpersonal expectations is shared with the structure of

inference - an important ability for getting on in the world. From this perspective, adolescent education can be seen as an effort to develop these important abilities and create a qualitatively different brain.

This new sense of self is distinctly different from the younger Self-interested Self. This older self is more relational. S/he carries others within her/him, and with that experiences expectations and self-consciousness, and consequently feelings as guilt and/or shame. Guilt and shame are relational feelings. They only occur within our relational selves and have signal value to these selves. Younger self interested selves can not have these feelings as they do not have the structures for them. A younger self can be induced to have experiences that can be mislabelled guilt and shame, but similar to studying a foreign language in school, these advanced forms can be "memorized" for a test, but are not part of the student's natural performance. Like language acquisition, there is a natural order of acquisition of selves - one emerging out of the other.

For a long time, the post-adolescent brain was considered the developmental conclusion. So, we need to take a moment to describe the relationship between relational selves and their surrounding culture. In various ways, Gregory Bateson noted that traditional homogeneous cultures impose overarching structures on the relational selves within them that these include rules for their interactions. The Ten Commandments are an example of this. In Bateson's thinking, the culture is a super-ordinate mind or self to these relational selves. They have feelings of relationship with this culture, and with its divine representatives which represent absolute authority and certainty about everything. So, when different cultures interact with each other, such as is happening almost everywhere in the world today, this too often demonstrates the viability of contrary cultural values. The structure of expectations that served the relational selves so well within their homogeneous culture now become a liability as the competing desires and values of different cultures are presented. (This is the lament and call to arms of fundamentalists of all persuasions, "Back to homogeneity," though they might not use these exact words.)

As these larger cultural minds/selves break down, their function as necessary super structures for the relational selves needs to be taken over by these selves within themselves, or by another imposed super structure. Today, with the exception of deliberate communities, often fundamentalist, this is mostly done by happenstance, so efforts at creating this next stage of self tend to be incomplete and inconsistent. What characterizes this next stage of self is that it makes decisions for and about itself; its actions, its values, and its beliefs. It is a Self-authoring Self - one that decides which rules will apply to it. This means having the meta-cognitive ability to determine rules for rules, meanings of meanings, and which self, among many possible selves, is most desirable.

This is a real jump of logical levels. Described in detail only a century ago by Bertrand Russell, turns out to be required for successful executives today. Business professor and author Jim Collins provides multiple examples of this in his recent best-selling book: *Good to Great* (2001). He

describes his Level 5 Executive as needing to be both a self within the organization which s/he is leading and a self observing that organization. Collins expresses surprise that the leaders he studied are “a blend of personal humility and professional will”. This is the surprise of a Relational Self trying to understand the mind and actions of a Self-authoring Self.

Collins writes that as a Level 5 Executive, you will “confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be AND at the same time retain faith that you will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties.” Again, Collins marvels at this ability, which a Self-authoring Self accomplishes by having the past, present and future as elements of the category of time which s/he can both observe and act within - same as himself. This also contrasts a Relational Self’s sense of “the-future-as-not-yet” verses a Self-authoring Self’s sense of “the-future-as-real”.

Good to Great has at its centre the “Hedgehog Concept” which is the intersection of “What are you passionate about?” “What can you be best in the world at?” and what “What drives your economic engine?” There is a degree of self-reflection in each of these questions that implies a Self-authoring Self. There has to be a category of passions from which to choose. They need to know the elements of the category of what they could do well (the-future-as-real) in order to determine what is best. Collins describes several examples of what he calls an Economic Engine. Each one requires meta-cognitive skills to make the formulations. For example, “we’re not in the pharmaceutical business, we’re in the cost-effective health care business,” [Abbott] jumping up to another level of abstraction. “We’re not in the pharmacy business, we’re in the convenience storebusiness” [Walgreens]. Their original understanding of their business became an example in a new, and more inclusive, category of business. To hold the business in these different level categories and take action on the implications of this categorizing are the same processes a Self-authoring Self performs on her/himself.

Those with NLP training will have recognized this meta-cognitive skill as ‘chunking up.’ Who knew such a simple Practitioner exercise could have such profound effects. But wait, there’s more.

This meta-cognitive skill is also evident in the language of Werner Erhard and his creations est and The Forum. While much has been made of the restrictions and confrontations of the est training, note that it claims to lead to a “different level of thinking”. Werner often talked about “creating a space of possibility”. Like so many of Werner’s statements, these are the remarks of a Self-authoring Self.

Landmark Education, the corporation formed when Erhard sold his company to his employees, describes The Forum in its own course syllabus in part as:

“Here we propose the view that in all human endeavours, context is decisive. That is, the hidden contexts from which we live determine what we see and what we don’t see; what we consider and what we fail to notice; what we are able to do and what seems beyond our reach. In this view, all behaviours, all ways of being and acting - are

correlated to the contexts from which we live our lives.

“When the contexts become apparent and known, we can begin to see the unwitting process by which they were assembled and the degree to which they govern our everyday lives. We are left, possibly for the first time, with a choice about who we are and who we can be, separate from these contexts. There is a freedom and ability to take action that was unavailable before - even familiar actions produce a whole new level of effectiveness.”

This syllabus was evidently written by a Self-authoring Self on the advantages of being a Self-authoring Self. To illustrate only a few of the meta-cognitive examples: “the hidden contexts from which we live” can only be seen from a context of contexts. In order to have “a choice about who we are and who we can be, separate from these contexts” it is necessary to be outside of, or meta to, these contexts. And to want to have “a choice about who we are and who we can be” is to already be in transition from a context embedded Relational Self to a Self-authoring Self that determines her/his contexts.

Modelled in this way, est and The Forum are examples of efforts to accelerate a natural developmental process. As an adult Relational Self interacts with individuals from other cultures, s/he is apt to question their culture of origin and experience a consequent loss of belief. As their culture defines who they are, this belief breakdown is experienced as a loss of self. Depending on pre-existing conditions, this can lead to efforts to recreate the Relational Self - such as evangelical conversion (Assimilation) or efforts to recreate oneself in term of the new knowledge and experience such as est and The Forum (Accommodation). Both terms are from Jean Piaget. Consistent with more gradual developmental change, such programs have to be made up of a number of experiences that are likely to be categorized in a way that facilitates the emergence of a higher category, and with it the next level or stage of self. This new self – the result of a combination of physical receptiveness, cognitive readiness, and the requisite experiences – is at first fragile, likely to breakdown, and often restricted to a specific domain. For example, corporate engineers are often able to think and formulate on an ‘authoring’ level with ease about software and business processes, but not about themselves or the people involved.

There are other difficulties with creating a Self-authoring Self. For example, re-exposure (revision) is a standard learning strategy that increases familiarity and facility. Re-exposure creates more examples of a category of knowledge so it can gain robustness. A difficulty with short courses is that the examples are often very similar to one another. This restricts the differentiation within the category and the ease of application to changing conditions. The new meta-cognitive ability can only be applied in a limited fashion. An Evangelical transformation (Assimilation) and a Forum transformation (Accommodation) are both conversion experiences whose converts often first appear dogmatic and self-limiting – only talking in terms of the new jargon and limiting themselves to people in their new world. This can be understood as an effort to maintain the fragile new stage of cognition by staying close to sources of re-exposure in

order to enrich this category of self. Proselytizing, whether fundamentalist or transformational, becomes a means of generalizing the learning by interaction with a variety of real world situations and objections. Each is an attempt to come to terms with the need for a meta-cognitive structure above and beyond the Relational Self in the face of the breakdown of traditional social, and mostly religious, structures. Other examples of conversions made to resolve this difficulty include nationalism, communism, socialism, fascism and ethnic identifications.

From this multiple level perspective, transformations of our brains, minds and selves from one level or stage to another are natural, but not inevitable. Natural in that there are physiological changes in our brains and the rest of our bodies, successive role changes as we age, and the continuous accumulation of experience in our lives. Not inevitable, the society in which we grow up might have fewer available roles, or social attitudes toward experience might impede or even discourage cognitive development. Limited role opportunities can be found in every society. They are commonly associated with the treatment of women and children in so-called traditional societies. Meanwhile, our so-called modern societies often have rigid role identifications that limit participation based on conformity - as in certain corporations, professions and political parties. Given these conditions, natural meta-cognitive development and transformation to the Self-authoring Self stage is haphazard. At best, certain institutions, acknowledged and unacknowledged, are engaged in the facilitation of this transformation and have a sufficient understanding of the processes to produce a predictable, if not inevitable, results. At worse, these results can lead to selves full of self-adulation and aggrandizement (accommodation) or entire communities condoning bigotry and even butchery (assimilation).

An understanding of the forms, structures and processes of these stages of development, generalization and transformation make it possible to encourage the emergence of a Self-

authoring Self that is inclusive and preference-based. This begins with an appreciation of these stages: their linguistic features, categories, relations, and the recursions among them. My experience leads me to believe that it is possible to coach an individual, or even better a group of individuals, to a robust representation of these meta-cognitive facilities across a range of contexts sufficient so that self authoring selves emerge naturally.

There is much more to be said about all of the topics touched. Some readers will wonder about correspondences with Spiral Dynamics and/or Ken Wilber's 4 Quadrants. Some may already be making connections. My attention is on can we neuro-linguistically identify, model and modify these developmental stages for individuals within their current social setting. I have observed that individuals change cognitive stages based on context, life experience, and many other factors. None of us is only of one mind at one stage. Cognition, like life, is more complex than it seemed only a few years ago. On the other hand, its many expressions are not chaos, but deep and beautiful patterns on patterns.

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