

A Colourful Theory of Humans

*A Response to Zaid Hassan and his article
"A White Man's Theory of Colour"*

Dear Zaid,

I write this as a personal response from me to you. It is not my job to convince you of the validity of the Spiral Dynamics model. It is not my job to deny you your feelings of offence. It is not my job to defend myself or a model that I use and identify with. I am writing this as an authentic response to your authentic response. I can only share with you my perspective on this, how I make sense of the points that you make, and why it leaves me no less convinced that Spiral Dynamics is a model and approach that can play an important role in our current stage of evolution.

Firstly, there are two types of critique that tend to emerge in response to SDi. One accepts the general perspective of evolutionary living systems thinking, and argues about the accuracy of this particular map of that particular perspective on the landscape. The other challenges the very perspective of evolutionary systems. Your article falls into the latter.

I therefore feel that I first have to locate Spiral Dynamics into this perspective, as it is not a stand-alone model, but is part of a much wider perspective on life.

Spiral Dynamics is one map of the evolutionary systems landscape. All of the following map the same landscape, mapping relatively more or less of it (i.e. more or less of the levels of development). The point of listing these extensively, is just to illustrate that the idea of different stages of holarchical (nested hierarchies) development is a very common one across cultures and fields (taken from Wilber's *Integral Psychology*).

Basic Structures of Self

- Huston Smith (body, mind, soul, spirit)
- Plotinus
- Buddhist Vijnanas (five senses, manvijnana, manas tainted alayavijnana, nondual)
- Stan Grof
- John Batistas

- Chakras
- James Mark Baldwin
- Aurobindo
- Kabbalah
- Vedanta Sheaths
- William Tiller
- Leadbetter (Theosophy)
- Adi Da
- Piaget
- Kurt Fischer
- Alexander (levels of mind)

Cognitive Development

- Pascaul-Leone
- Herb Koplowitz
- Sri aurobindo
- Patricia Arlin
- Gisela Labouvie-Vief
- Jan Sinnott
- Michael Basseches

Self-related

- Jane Loevinger
- John Broughton
- Sullivan, Grant and Grant
- Jenny Wade
- Michael Washburn
- Erik Erikson
- Neumann
- Scheler
- Rudolph Steiner
- Susanne Cook-Greuter
- Robert Kegan

Moral and Perspectives

- Kohlberg (moral judgement)
- Torbert (levels of action-inquiry)
- Blanchard Fields (socio-emotional development)
- Kitchener and King (reflective judgement)
- Deirdre Kramer (socio-cognitive stages)
- William Perry (self-outlook)
- Turner/Powell (social role-taking)
- Cheryl Armon
- Peck (moral motivation)

- Carol Gilligan (female hierarchy of moral stages)

Spirituality

- Hazrat Inayat Khan (Sufism)
- Mahamudra (stages of meditation)
- Fowler (stages of faith)
- Underhill
- Helminiak (spiritual development)
- Funk (contact with Numinous)
- Daniel Brown (cross-cultural stages of meditation)
- Muhyiddin Ibn ` Arabi (stations of zikr)
- St Palamas
- Traditional samadhis
- Yoga Tantra
- St Teresa
- Chirban (Eastern Orthodox Christianity)
- St Dionysius

Socio-cultural

- Habermas (epochs)
- Jean Houston
- Lenski (techno-economic base)
- Jean Gebser
- A.Taylor (levels of social organisation)
- Jay Earley
- Robert Bellah (evolution of religious systems)
- Duane Elgin (consciousness eras)

What all of the above have in common, is the theory of evolutionary development – stages of development that unfold, one out of the other. What looking at them collectively shows is how this happens both in us as individuals, in our collective cultures and in our social structures.

It seems to me that your main concern is how this might firstly be used as typologies, and secondly how they may be applied in a blanket way to particular groupings. So to deal with those.

Firstly, these are not types of people (like the Myers-Briggs, Enneagram, Big Five etc – which also have their place), but they are systems in people in contexts. The typologies can exist at all the different levels.

Secondly, any group has a level as a centre of gravity for its collective – that which is considered the conventional way to do things for that group. However, within that group, there will always be people who are at levels below and above the conventional – pre-conventional and post-conventional.

What you picked up from the theory about (for example) Turquoise only emerging 30 years ago, is an estimate as to when that level began to appear on our radar screen amongst large numbers of people, rather than just in outstanding spiritual or social leaders. There is therefore no contradiction to your observation of the spiritual teachings on the Ganges thirty centuries ago seeming to come from the same place. They did indeed (probably) come from a level of consciousness around turquoise or beyond (Aurobindo's Illumined Mind, Buddhist Manas / Higher Mind, Plotinus' World Soul, etc.). But these were the spiritual leaders of their cultures, right out there on a limb. The vast majority of people in those cultures did not have the same level of consciousness as these leaders (which is why they were leaders then, and still continue to be recognised as such great people in their times).

Over time, their insights, amongst others, have helped more people to develop that structure of consciousness not as a peak experience (as many may have had in the presence of these leaders) but as their basic structure of consciousness.

So – no one group of people can be branded with one level. Groups do tend to have a centre of gravity (visible in the way they generally organise themselves, for example), but there will always be people at a variety of different levels. We all start at Beige when we are born, after all!

So we come to the (for many) sensitive question of different societies and cultures in the world having different centres of gravity. I believe it is true that different societies have different centres of gravity. And I also believe that the Scandinavian and northern European countries have centres of gravity which are more complex on the spiral than those of most other countries on the planet.

It is essential to remember that these levels of consciousness are coping mechanisms that respond to our life conditions (our sense of historic time, our geo-physical location, our priorities and our social circumstance (how we see ourselves in relation to others)). So the only reason for a certain level of consciousness to exist is because of

the life conditions people have experienced so far and currently experience around them, as it is their way of coping with that context.

As you have heard me say many times, it is not that one level is better than another. The task is not to get everyone up the spiral. The task is to help to create fit (fit-ness), where the "habitats" which people are surrounded by reflect their inner level of being. This would therefore argue vehemently against the imposition of any kind of system of structure from outside, but emphasise the need to help people to create the habitats that best meet their needs, whilst also taking our responsibility for the whole (currently at the planetary level).

Stress and evolution happens when a critical mass of people outgrows old systems and structures and demand change. If change does not happen, and the old system is held in place by the old order, then evolution may well become revolution.

And we remember that there are always people at all levels in a society, with a critical mass holding a collective centre of gravity.

In reference to some of your other points:

Time – evolutionary systems thinking does not talk about a deterministic linearity to development. There is a general directionality to evolution (greater complexity and wider compassion) but at any one point a current level can transcend itself or breakdown to an earlier level. In times of more intense change, there is a lot of up-stretching to greater complexity and down-stretching to safer places that goes on. Evolution is a messy process and there are never any guarantees. And as the spiral model illustrates, there is also a certain circularity to the development (swinging around between the poles of express-self and sacrifice-self). When you add linearity to circularity, you get a 3-D spiral, or vortex.

This perspective is all about living in the present and working with as much clarity as possible with what is. In that space, we have a rootedness in the past and a sense of the emerging future. We are rooted in the past, because we understand and feel the compound nature of our development – that is to say, without the earlier systems the later ones would not exist (no atoms, then no cells; no purple, then no turquoise). So it becomes imperative to nurture the earlier systems as to do anything else would be both pathological and suicidal.

People and cultures at different levels understand and relate to time in different ways. No-one who really gets any of this theory or feels this perspective would suggest that everyone should think about time in the same way that one does from this perspective. The whole point is to support people being the way they need to be in the places that they are at, for the good of the whole. The purpose is not to get everyone to yellow or turquoise – but to help people be who they are and facilitate emergence when the time naturally comes.

This theory comes from a certain level (yellow). This theory is therefore not going to be useful for people from earlier levels to try and understand (except exiting Green) – although it's application would benefit them (e.g. the street kids we worked with in Utrecht would have appreciated a lecture on Spiral Dynamics, but they did appreciate our understanding that the next step from Red Power Gods is Blue Mythic Order – not Green Pluralism). Theories exist to help us make sense of our context. Different people at different levels therefore need different theories (or maps) to help them to do that. The point is not to get everyone to understand Spiral Dynamics (or any of the other developmental models), but to act on its implications. And those implications are to meet people where they are at, and support them to do what they need to do next – and they are usually the best people to determine that (in the face of huge powers in the world who are demanding that people and societies become something which they are not – which is the nature of first tier systems as they reach their limit).

It is also important to differentiate deep and surface patterns. The vMemos that Graves identified (or any of the levels from the other theories listed above) are deep patterns that manifest in as many different ways on the surface as there are humans that inhabit them. One cannot be sure of someone's current level just by looking at them. One can see patterns in collective behaviour which give one clues, but it is only really by communicating with people where one has some shared language and context that one can begin to get an idea.

Far from SD representing the "death of dialogue", it actually creates space to hear all the different voices. In fact, that is its greatest demand. Enabling people to express themselves as themselves – not demanding they be someone they are not. What this insight does give us, is an explanation for why traditional dialogue approaches to conflict transformation often don't work. If people are coming from different levels, the way they make sense of the world will be very different. If

the insight into this deep diversity is not present, it leads to much confusion and very little progress.

And there is no such thing in this perspective as being “under-evolved” or “under-developed”. People are fine just where they are, and that is the whole point. As long as people’s coping mechanisms are able to deal with the world they perceive around them, then there is no need for anything to change.

Maps and theories are there to provide insight, to help us to see with more clarity. Insight is an important complement to sensing and compassion. They make up an essential balance. So having spent all that time outlining how I see this particular map, if this (or some other) map is not useful to you, then leave it behind and look for another which does help you make sense (such as the map which says “no maps are good”...).

And I agree, let’s get rid of surface labels and categorisations – like “white, middle-class males” - and move on to what life is really about.

With much love and respect,

Peter

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